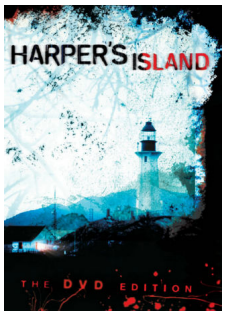
Airing in the summer of 2009, HARPER'S ISLAND gave genre fans a horrific way to spend the sunny season. Now, beginning Saturday, June 4, Chiller is re-airing the single-season slasher, and we thought it'd be a fine time to re-post Michael Gingold's review of the series’ disc release.

Viewing the CBS slasher series HARPER’S ISLAND one episode after another on the recently released four-DVD set, as opposed to waiting week by week to catch the next installment, has an unusual effect. It makes the 13-episode show’s earlier, weaker parts more tolerable, while somewhat diminishing the effectiveness of its later, stronger episodes.

Mixing elements of nighttime soap opera into its murder mystery, HARPER’S ISLAND gathers together a large crew of friends and family members to attend the wedding of Henry Dunn (Christopher Gorham) and Trish Wellington (Katie Cassidy) at the titular locale. Henry is working-class and Trish comes from money, so the ensemble necessarily includes Trish’s equally well-to-do bridesmaids and Henry’s party-hearty buddies, though the central character is Abby Mills (Elaine Cassidy), Henry’s best friend from their childhood growing up on Harper’s Island. Abby has long been absent from the place, ever since her mom was one of several folks murdered there by serial maniac John Wakefield, who was subsequently—supposedly—dispatched by her sheriff dad Charlie (Jim Beaver).



Her blood-spattered past isn’t the only time-honored convention stirred in the mix. There’s Trish’s dad Thomas (Richard Burgi), who disapproves of his daughter marrying below her station and schemes to bring an old boyfriend back into her life. There’s Henry’s ne’er-do-well brother J.D. (Dean Chekvala), who provides a handy suspect when the bodies start to fall. There’s even a spooky preteen girl, Madison (Cassandra Sawtell), who seems to have wandered in from a more supernaturally oriented project (and indeed, on the DVD

supplements, the creators reveal that her inclusion was intended to keep viewers guessing about possible occult elements). And there’s the familiar face (Harry Hamlin as rowdy Uncle Marty) who’s bumped off early on to set up that anyone-can-die-at-any-time vibe.

After his demise, however, the first several episodes dispatch mostly expendable supporting characters one hasn’t gotten to care much about (it doesn’t help that the entire series’ most imaginatively conceived death is the very first one, inflicted on a guy who never even gets a line). This meant that viewers of the original run—in addition to the frustration of seeing it shifted from its original Thursday-night slot to the Saturday-evening wasteland—had to wait through the first month or so of HARPER’S ISLAND’s broadcast for a little emotional connection to the victims. At the end of the fifth episode, however, a key character is showily done in before the eyes of several others, and things heat up. More suspense is generated as everyone faces the dual challenges of trying to survive and figuring out who the malefactor is among their group. Could someone be copycatting John Wakefield’s rampage, or is Wakefield still alive after all, continuing his killing spree?

After that question is answered (well, partially), a couple of the subsequent murder scenes are genuinely moving, carrying a sense of loss one doesn’t see in many big-screen killathons. Yet while the who-will-die-next? tension was well-sustained when one had to wait seven days for the answer, viewing the final episodes all at once makes the series’ final “act” seem drawn out. With the survivors constantly running from one place to another and only one or two demises per installment, it has the feeling of two or three episodes’ worth of plot drawn out to four or five. And the very last episode features a villain who tiresomely overexplains his motivation when it has already been much more eloquently established by an opening flashback.

Maintaining viewer sympathy throughout is dark-eyed Irish beauty Cassidy, doing a flawless American accent and providing a compelling center among all the mayhem and assorted digressions. While HARPER’S ISLAND doesn’t avoid certain network-TV weaknesses (functional, on-the-nose dialogue, too many sequences backed by pop ballads), it bears the lush production values of a feature (captured very well on the DVDs’ 1.78:1 transfers) and a little more gore than one might expect. A few splattery moments that got trimmed for broadcast can be seen amidst the set’s deleted scenes, along with a couple of steamy clinches and a snippet that attempts to cast suspicion on an additional minor character.

The package is well-stocked with such special features, including a quartet of audio commentaries by the creators and cast. On the pilot, “Whap” (all the episodes have been amusingly named after the sounds of the kills they showcase), creator/co-executive producer Ari Schlossberg, writer/executive producer Jeffrey Bell and co-executive producer Dan Shotz

provide plenty of detail about how the show was launched and address the challenges of establishing the many characters and the tone—particularly when it would be broken by commercial breaks. There’s a lot of emphasis on the team effort that went into HARPER’S ISLAND, and it’s expressed by the trio’s track as well. The jokey commentary on “Sploosh” by co-executive producer Karim Zreik and actors Chekvala and Matt Barr is a disappointment, though. While they note the importance of this episode to the overall story, they have precious little of substance to say about it.

Much better is the discussion on “Splash” by Shotz (who also penned this one), Barr and actress Cameron Richardson, the latter of whom is the track’s secret weapon. She’s got a wicked sense of humor, and poses two questions that were begging to be asked: Why would Standards and Practices give this show’s gore a hard time when she’s seen worse on CSI, and do people stabbed in the stomach really start to immediately bleed from their mouths? At the same time, there’s plenty of good info here, as we also learn about the heavy confidentiality program designed to keep the series’ participants from spilling its beans and lots of other fun facts. Finally, Bell, Shotz and Gorham team up on “Sigh” for a worthwhile, in-depth examination of how the show was wrapped up.

Knowing what genre fans want, the half-hour behind-the-scenes piece “One by One: The Making of HARPER’S ISLAND” puts a good deal of its emphasis on the staging of the death setpieces. At one entertaining point, the crew is seen trying to get a severed head to roll into frame correctly (a gag unseen in either the series or the disc’s deleted scenes), and they’re also glimpsed dealing with issues both hot (burning a church on a fireproof set) and cold (having to melt snow for an exterior shoot). It’s good stuff, as is the audition footage seen in the “Casting HARPER’S ISLAND” segment, which individually addresses each role in the ensemble—specific types that, the creators admit, are akin to those on a reality show. The one disappointment here is the lack of excerpts of Cassidy’s tryout, as it’s revealed that she was the first series lead in CBS history to be cast based solely on a tape. Rounding out the featurettes are a couple of amusing quickies: “Guess Who?”, in which the cast and crew offer midproduction speculations on the villain’s identity (which quite a few pick correctly), and “The Grim Reaper,” reflecting on Zreik’s role as the man who broke the news to the actors when their next episode would be their last.

The set also offers on-air promos and HARPER’S GLOBE, a 17-episode web series that loses something without the interactivity it possessed during its on-line run. It’s set up as a series of video blogs by Robin, newly arrived on Harper’s Island to work at the local paper, and a voyeuristic baddie who calls himself “Dangerous Wreck,” though the gimmicky editing of both diminishes the impact of the juxtaposition between the heroine’s and villain’s postings. Robin is eventually revealed to have dark secrets in her past, and the ending unpersuasively tries to turn John Wakefield into a Jigsaw-esque character—an unnecessary gesture for the tie-in to a

series that otherwise harks back to more nostalgic stalker-movie standards.

SERIES:

DVD PACKAGE: