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THE LITTLE MOVIE THAT COULD

Fri Mar 10, 2006



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"The Monster of Phantom Lake", 2006. Written, directed, edited and cameo'd by Christopher R. Mihm. Starring the local talents of Josh Craig, Leigha Horton, Deanne McDonald, Brad Tracy, Lindsey Holmes, Justen Overlander, Rachel Grubb, Mike Cook, M. Scott Taulman, Dustin Booth, Mike Mason, and, walking around stiffly in a ridiculous algae suit, Michael Kaiser.

So last night at the [Heights Theatre](#), my wife and I took in the World Premiere of "[The Monster of Phantom Lake](#)", a little local film, an homage to the 'classic' horror garbage of the 1950s. It was quite a show. For the first time in my life, I can say that I sat next to one of the well-dressed and fetching stars of a movie I was about to see. The place was packed. People applauded at every name on the credits, and belloved with laughter at all the right spots.

The only problem: "The Monster of Phantom Lake" is not playing anywhere in town this weekend. That's a shame, because it's really the best thing playing right now.

Does "Monster" have the quality of Michael Winterbottom's "Tristram Shandy"? No, but it also lacks that director's smugness and utter lack of interest in telling a story. Does it have the power and intensity of "Tsotsi"? No, but it also doesn't have that movie's relentless sentimentality, not to mention forcing the viewer to suffer through advertisements for a contest in which you enjoy "Tsotsi" and then hope to win an all-white vacation in the Cape Town suburbs. Does it have the crowd-pleasing fun of "Failure to Launch" or the edge-of-your-seat terror of "The Hills Have Eyes"? Oh, sweet Jesus, those films suck: "The Monster of Phantom Lake" is a joke, it's cheap, it's far from frightening, but it's the most fun I've had in a movie in a long time.

To be crass: Hollywood can go fuck itself this weekend.

As the stoic Professor Jackson, hero of "Monster", would say, in his ham-fisted way: We must... examine... the facts: A shell-shocked former World War II veteran, who mumbles to himself, eats from cans, and lives in the woods searching for Germans, stumbles into Phantom Lake after Atomic Waste has been dumped there. He soon becomes a google-eyed algae-monster, looking very much like something created in the last minute by a C-grade art student looking to avoid summer school. This monster begins to terrorize the

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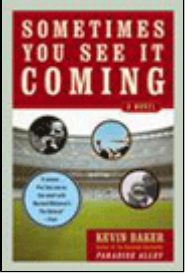
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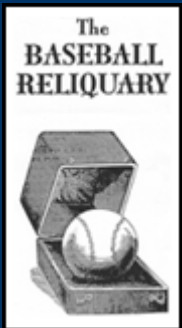


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unfortunate students who have come to camp by Phantom Lake, killing them in pairs, reducing two of them to "Nothing but bones! Uh-hah-hah-awww!" At the same time, Professor Jackson and his lovely graduate assistant Stephanie, work to stop the beast, analyzing samples with weirdo machines that buzz and blurrp. In the end, all the teens but one are dead, the one being a dead-ringer for the monster's (and former shell-shocked vet) former wife that he killed in a psychotic rage years ago. For whatever reason, the beast can't seem to harm her. Being part algae, he is unable to dip himself back into the contaminated water, blocked as it were by the girl, and dries up to die. The human race is saved!

The film is campy, blurry at times, but has a sharp script and some wonderfully hammy thespianship. Tim Pawlenty look-alike and producer Josh Craig is great trying to beat William Shatner at his own game, and the girls and guys do their level best to act dopey and innocent and then terror-ified at the beast. The beast simply walks around, arms out, opening and closing its hands. There's talk of Science! Of The Future! Of Atomic Waste! It's a bit long in the tooth, and could use more editing, and sometimes the background noise makes dialogue hard to hear (though I admit I don't believe any film I've ever seen has captured the magical sound of cicadas quite so well, though unintentionally). I would argue that there could actually be more screaming.

But like a community play, there's a real charm in the earnestness of people, friends and family, trying to whip together a production that aims to please and fondly recall a larger art form that means something to its creator. According to the website, the director's father absolutely adored B-grade sci-fi films. Christopher R. Mihm, the director, was baffled by his father's love of this trash, but when the old guy passed away at a young age (51, and of stomach cancer) Christopher returned to these 'classics', no doubt in order to achieve some sort of catharsis. As any filmgoer knows, even sludge like "Them!", a story of killer ants, can help heal a wounded soul.

"The Monster of Phantom Lake", then, serves as both homage to the horror films of long ago and a tribute to Mr. Mihm's father. This is not a good reason to go: go because "The Monster of Phantom Lake" is a fun two hours, is a horror movie you can haul your kids to (and allows you to explain just what it was that made watching these types of films so much fun, for they're sure to be baffled), a popcorn film of the first order. And so perhaps "Monster" can also serve as an introduction to the pleasure of B-grade film.

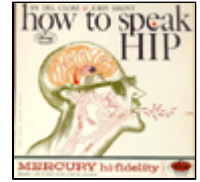
If you can find it. The Monster of Phantom Lake should be available soon on DVD, though it's much more fun guffawing with a full audience in a darkened theater.



Posted by: [Peter](#) on Mar 10, 06 @ 6:24 am | [Link to this article](#)  
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by Kevin Baker

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Del Close & John Brent

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New York Tribune

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