

The Monster of Phantom Lake

CAST:

Josh Craig
Leigha Horton
Deanne McDonald
Lindsey Holmes
Rachel Grubb
Justen Overlander
Brad Tracy
Mike Mason
Michael Kaiser
Dustin Booth
Mike Cook
M. Scott Taulman

This is my first article/review of the seven Christopher R. Mihm films. I am doing these in chronological order. As stated in the introduction article, they will make up what I am calling the Christopher R. Mihm Summer Reading Festival. Chris and I will be very pleased if you will stay with us through this summer of 2012 and, if you are not already a member of the Mihmiverse, we hope you soon will be.

This article may be a little lengthy as I establish a little more background on Chris and the creation he has lovingly named, "The Mihmiverse." Just for fun, I have also included here and there a few blurbs of my favorite dialogue.

The Monster of Phantom Lake was filmed in the summer of 2005, with a release date of 2006. As with all of Chris's films, it is very low budget, which is not to infer that his films look cheap or poorly made. Indeed, just the opposite is true. It was filmed in the Minnesota area near his home and in this; his first effort at filmmaking, Chris started a tradition of using trustworthy actors and actresses repeatedly in subsequent works. (Can you say, Roger Corman?) You may also say that, in large part, the Mihmiverse was born at Phantom Lake!

Chris also has a cool tradition of premiering his films at The Heights Theatre in Minneapolis. This, and the fact that I have placed on my "Bucket List" a desire to attend one of these premieres sometime in the near future, is a story for another time.

But, Chris's films are not "films" at all. Rather, they are recorded digitally and marketing efforts are directed at DVD sales. I LOVE the modern-day DVD format because so many interesting extras can be included and in this Chris does not disappoint. *The Monster of Phantom Lake* DVD is excellent. It contains trailers for two of Chris's other films, *Attack of the Moon Zombies*, (2011) and *Terror From Beneath the Earth*, (2009). There is an introduction by horror host Dr. Ivan Cryptosis plus a deleted scene, several minutes of bloopers, and audio commentary by Chris and leading man Josh Craig.

All of Chris's DVDs are packaged very well. He may be a guy working with extremely limited budgets but, I must tell you, the big studios in Hollywood cannot do it better than his St. Euphoria Pictures!

So, to the "film." It begins with the announcement, "in association with All for George Productions Saint Euphoria Picture proudly presents . . ." and the fun has started! *The Monster of Phantom Lake* was written and directed by Christopher R. Mihm, is 97 minutes in length, and is presented in glorious black and white. We are told at the outset that the story starts in "The Present Day," which is obviously a salute to the 1950s sci-fi films that are being honored here.

The story concerns the dumping of several drums of toxic atomic waste in a local lake. In the very first scene, we see a restored Ford fat fender pickup truck pull up by the water. A couple of country boys get out and proceed to dump the toxic waste into the lake. One of the good old boys is Chris Mihm himself, in a Hitchcock style cameo role. (Someday I hope to meet Chris in person. When I do, I need to remember how easily he handled a "full" 55 gallon drum of deadly atomic waste!). Of course, a "monster" is created when an unfortunate individual falls in the water where the toxic waste is concentrated.

We are presented with two story lines. First, Professor Daniel Jackson, portrayed by the much underrated Josh Craig, and his graduate assistant Stephanie Yates, arrive in the lake area to do scientific research. The good professor is seemingly an impressively high-minded man who is oblivious of anything other than his ever-present pipe, (which he never lights), and scientific research; he certainly has time for nothing as frivolous as a dalliance with the lovely Stephanie, delightfully played by Leigha Horton.

Josh Craig brings back fond memories of Richard Carlson and Whit Bissell, two of the most popular of the 1950s science fiction film scientists. He is perhaps the only person in the Mihmiverse who knows how to use an Evolutoscopic Spectronolizer. It is just as well as he comments that it is worth a huge sum of money, almost "a hundred dollars!"

Professor, (joking with Stephanie. We have learned there IS a sexual tension between the two!): *"I'm only fooling with you, Miss Yates. You do like to fool around, don't you?"*

Miss Yates: *"I would love to fool around."*

The other storyline concerns the presence of a group of teenagers, another favorite 1950s theme. In the first scene in which they appear, we see a very small transistor radio belting out studio-quality music while they dance! This is the thing I love so much about B films, and Chris realizes the value of this sort of thing very well. (We see this again a little bit later when the professor is playing his guitar, supposedly solo, in the woods. Multiple instrument accompaniment comes from who knows where!). I am certain you realize by now that we get to the heart of the story when the professor and Stephanie meet up with the teens to flesh out the monster.

Special attention must go to Deanne McDonald, who portrayed the nerdy and nervous Elizabeth. With all due respect to the other players, she pretty much

stole the show for me. Her whiney voice and constantly changing facial expressions were simply awesome!

Elizabeth, (freaking out when being threatened by the Monster): *...that murderer is out there!*

Penny (a teen friend played by Lindsey Holmes): *Put a sock in it, Elizabeth! This is just another one of Jonathan's stupid jokes. That's all!*

Elizabeth: *How do you know?*

For comic relief Chris put in a couple of guys he calls the "Canoe Cops." At a certain point in the story, a couple of law officers come rowing up to the professor and Stephanie as they are standing at the edge of the water. Obviously, law-breakers are more easily captured when a two-man team is on the lookout in a fast-rowed canoe! Mike Cook and M. Scott Taulman are fun to watch in their short time onscreen.

More fun stuff: Upon awaking from a night's sleep in small tents, the boys do not need a shave, no one is in wrinkled clothes and all look to be at their mid-day best. Also, when the professor finds an eight legged frog, obviously deformed courtesy of the atomic waste, it is obviously a very cheap plastic dime store toy. So cheap that I am certain Chris did this on purpose to poke gentle fun at the 1950s films. Finally, I love the sound of her beating tell-tale heart when the cowardly Elizabeth confronts the monster.

Trust me; this is a monster you must see to believe! Part algae, part man and all terrible beyond further description!

Professor, (arriving unannounced while the girls are talking): *Don't worry, I didn't hear anything. Besides, I don't have much interest in what women talk about.*

Amy (another teen, played by Rachel Grubb): (Low voice) *You might if you knew what we were talking about!*

But, all things, including *The Monster of Phantom Lake*, must come to an end. I won't give away the ending: you must view it yourself to learn the fate the professor, Stephanie and the kids. I will say if you are a fan of 1950s science fiction, and I assume you are or you would not be reading this, you will not be disappointed.

Players I have not yet mentioned: Michael Kaiser as the monster in a very over-the-top performance -- one can tell he enjoyed himself. I like Justen Overlander's screen presence. Dustin Booth, Brad Tracy and Mike Mason round out the cast. All were outstanding.

Sadly, I have to bring something to light that is not very pleasant. I am certain Chris did not intend for this to happen, but even the best of us make mistakes. In his newest release, *House of Ghosts*, Chris includes an item he has named the

“Fear Shield.” This is a device included with the DVD for a person to block from his or her sight frightening scenes within the story. No doubt this will protect sensitive persons from suffering permanent emotional scarring when viewing a Christopher R. Mihm film. It is a pity this device was not available for all his previous offerings. The potential psychological damage to members of the Mihmiverse is, without a doubt, enormous.

But, maybe not, for members of the Mihmiverse are persons made of stern stuff. For us, the normal rules of life often do not apply. Indeed, Sid Korpi, another member of Chris’s fine repertory of performers, has asked me to point out that, of all of the millions of people who did *not* appear in *The Monster of Phantom Lake*, hers was the best non-performance. In the Mihmiverse, anything can, and cannot, happen!

I leave you with a last exchange between the professor and the lovely Miss Yates. (Again, there is no special reason for including these exchanges. They are simply enjoyable and provide a little bit insight into the story):

Professor, (apologizing after uttering a swear word): *“Excuse my language. Sorry you had to hear that. I’m a scientist and I know I should be held to a much higher standard than most. I apologize if I’ve offended you.”*

Miss Yates: *“It’s just that I’ve never heard you so . . . forceful!”*

Professor: *“Forceful? I don’t think I’ve ever thought of myself as forceful!”*

The End (Maybe. Remember, this is the Mihmiverse!)