

DVD Select: The devil, you say - "Ghost Rider"™

by Robert_J_Hawkins

There is an especially terrifying scene in the fantasy/thriller "Ghost Rider" (Sony, 3 stars) during which Roxanne (Eva Mendes), stood up at a restaurant the previous night by Johnny Blaze (Nicolas Cage), is looking for an explanation.

'GHOST RIDER' - Nicolas Cage and Eva Mendes star in the sci-fi thriller 'Ghost Rider.' CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures Imageworks. Johnny, to his credit, is searching for a way to say anything other than the truth.

Roxanne, all wide-eyed and innocent, coos "You can tell me anything." She sits there expectantly.

Johnny inhales. My, god! He's going to tell her the truth! Don't go there, Johnny! Don't go there! That's like walking down into a dark basement in the first act of a horror slasher movie.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin He exhales. "I sold my soul to the Devil."

"Mmm hmm."

"And," Johnny plunges ahead into the dark, "you know, I have to spare you."

"Mmm. Hmm. Spare me from what?"

"The Devil," says Johnny weakly. "On account of I work for him. And that's why I couldn't make it to dinner."

"Because ... you were working ... for the Devil?"

Naturally the conversation and their relationship heads south from there.

OK, maybe it isn't terrifying. But it sure is funny. Only hours before, this reluctant bounty hunter for the Devil is riding around on a flaming chopper, his body turned into a flaming and maniacal skeleton, wielding heavy chain like a leather whip and destroying renegade messengers of Satan.

Now he's weakly trying to stave off the wrath of a woman.

That's the kind of goofy stuff that keeps "Ghost Rider" close to its birthright, which is the Marvel comic books of the 1970s and 80s. This is a summer evening's entertainment: all full of iconic popcorn cinematic imagery, smart dialogue and wry knowing grins.

For once, Cage's Elvis-is-everywhere persona actually works in his favor as the good-hearted Johnny Blaze, a kid who gave his soul to the Devil to save his father from cancer. Johnny is the world's greatest stunt motorcyclist. He sips red and yellow jelly beans from martini glasses, he listens to Karen Carpenter songs and he watches the Discovery Channel with great enthusiasm.

Not exactly complex, but multi-faceted?

His childhood sweetheart, Roxanne, re-enters his life as a local TV news reporter - and what do you know, the flame still burns. Among other flames in Johnny's life.

Peter Fonda is appropriately callous and menacing as Mephistopheles and Wes Bentley makes for a nasty character as the devil's rebellious off-spring Blackheart. Sam Elliott puts in a grizzled appearance as a Ghost Rider from an earlier era.

It is pretty clear that "Ghost Rider" writer/director Mark Steven Johnson is a huge lifelong fan of Saturday afternoons at the movies. He cheerfully and irreverently crams scads of his favorite images and set shots from epics past into the film. Go ahead, put on the popcorn, rent it, have some laughs, then forget all about it.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Breach" (Universal, 2 1/2 stars) Robert Hanssen had a long and distinguished career with the FBI, during which he sold off truckloads of state secrets to enemy agents. True story. A devout Catholic and family man and patriot - Hanssen (the always fabulous Chris Cooper) had them all fooled. And just because you know how this one ends doesn't mean you know the story. Plenty of twists and turns. Ryan Phillippe, Laura Linney and Dennis Haysbert also star.

"Days of Glory (Indigenes)" (Genius products, 3 stars) They say this fact-based war film shamed the French government into recognizing the many Algerians who fought for France in World War II, and the soldiers from other colonies with full benefits and pensions. It is that powerful. The Cannes Film Festival awarded the best actor award to the entire ensemble cast of this film.

"The Bridge" (Koch Lorber, 2 stars) The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco is known for many things including its extraordinary popularity as a platform for suicide. For this extremely controversial documentary, Director Eric Steel filmed the bridge for a year, and captured on film almost two-dozen people who jumped, and numerous "unrealized attempts." Steel talked with families and friends of suicides, among others, and found similarities in the arcs of their lives. To be fair, Steel and his crew tried to halt every attempt that they could. This is a tough, difficult film to watch but it does indeed shed light into societies darkest corners.

"Glastonbury" (ThinkFilm, 2 stars) The Glastonbury Festival actually takes place in nearby Pilton, just as Woodstock wasn't in Woodstock. In recent years it has drawn up to 150,000 people, filling 900 acres of the Worthy Farm for nearly 400 performances of pop music but also theater, dance, comedy and other artful expressions, including circus acts. Julien Temple's documentary came during a hiatus for the festival last year. It returns June 22-24, however, completely sold out. This documentary combines Temple's footage with that of festival fans and archive material.

"American Masters Atlantic Records: The House that Ahmet Built" (Rhino, 2 1/2 stars) He was the unlikeliest of record moguls, and his kind have had their day, but Ahmet Ertegun and his Atlantic Records undoubtedly had a massive impact on popular music right up to his death on Dec, 14, 2006, at age 83. Bette Midler narrates and such greats as Robert Plant, Aretha Franklin, the late-Ray Charles, Eric Clapton, Mick Jagger and Kid Rock were interviewed.

"An Unreasonable Man" (Genius Products, 2 stars) Filmmakers Henriette Mantel and Steve Skrovan get an inside look at the greatest consumer advocate of this past century, Ralph Nader. Even if this DVD is seen only by the people whose lives were saved or improved because of his tireless efforts on behalf of seat belts, air bags, product labeling, airline responsibility and against nuclear power - it will be a massive success.

IT CAME FROM TV

"Welcome Back, Kotter: The Complete First Season" The publicist said Ron Palillo (Horshak) is available for interviews. No thanks, think I. I want to remember him and all his sitcom offspring - Urkle, Screech, etc. - as they were on television: Within close reach of the off button.

Season 2 of "The Rat Patrol" when desert wars were glamorous and fought in the dunes, not city streets.

Volume one of David E. Kelley's "The Practice" which is actually season one plus the pilot - and we haven't been able to escape quirky law offices since.

FROM THE VAULTS

Two of Paul Newman's best, the 45-year-old "The Hustler" and "The Verdict" get special two-disc treatment with features, commentaries and back stories.

"Raining Stones" (Koch Lorber) Director Ken Loach's light drama about a working stiff trying to buy a costly First Communion dress for his daughter will pull at your heart, put a smile on your face and poke at your smug self-satisfied outlook on the working poor.

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