

script writer/director team to produce a quality horror film that is also a good horror flick. They may find that having interesting characters, good acting, excellent creative cinematography, creative special effects, and a thoughtful script is not antithetical to having a fun movie experience. The bottom line is that if horror audiences start demanding more in horror film, and show their displeasure with not getting more by staying away from the dogs like Beck's *Thir13en Ghosts*, they will ultimately be treated to better movie experiences. As for Beck's first horror film, it will, to quote one IMDB reviewer, "evaporate like the apparitions that are the movie's only real stars."

Necropsy: The Review of Horror Fiction, Volume III (Fall 2001)

eventually force Arthur to sacrifice his life to save his children, the selfless act of love necessary to bring Uncle Cyrus' machinations to a successful conclusion.

In an ironic turn for a badly made horror film, the acting (at least that of some of the principals) is actually the best part of Beck's film. Matthew Lillard steals the screen as Dennis Rafkin, bringing a type of manic intensity to the role of the unwilling psychic reminiscent of Brad Pitt, or of Brad Dourif in one of their bad guy characters. F. Murray Abraham was delightfully evil as Cyrus, and no one portrays bewilderment as well as Tony Shalhoub, who adds a little class to the role of Arthur. However, the three have almost nothing to work with in the way of dialogue, other than a few really funny exchanges, such as when Rafkin explains to Arthur that his Uncle Cyrus "hunted ghosts." Shalhoub, like any normal person, is sure he misunderstands and tentatively asks Lillard, "he hunted goats?" But the fun exchanges are few and far between, and almost none of them are given to the female characters, other than a couple that are reserved for the sarcastic babysitter, played by Rah Digga in her first role. Unfortunately for Digga, she is an African-American actress in a predominantly white horror flick (even the ghosts were all white), so she is there for comic relief (although in an interesting twist, rather than being killed off, as minority characters usually are, she saves the day). More unfortunately, she is burdened with hackneyed token black lines like, "I am stuck with a bunch of crazy white people." Neither Shannon Elizabeth nor Alec Roberts fares any better as Arthur's children. Certainly neither of them is a fine actor, but then again, they had very little to work with since their roles were nothing short of one-dimensional.

In what has to be the ultimate statement as to how bad this film is, the ghosts managed to be uninteresting as well. Given the effects team of Beck/Manex's usual work in action-adventure, it should come as no surprise that these wraiths are menacing, but with the exception of "The Angry Princess," they were in no way eerie. In essence, most of the ghosts are little more than noisy and hideously deformed from their final fatal encounter with the physical world, an effect which works well only with the maniacal tendencies of the "Jackal," some sort of foul-tempered revenant sporting a type of headgear popular in 19th century lunatic asylums. This is not to say that the make-up, set design and effects crews didn't do an outstanding job; the ghosts looked disgustingly wounded, but that's about the *only* thing they had going for them. However, *Thir13en Ghosts* fails miserably in supplying ANY background for either the ghosts or the human characters.

The haunted house, a machine actually, for opening the eye of hell, should also be singled out as a triumph of special effects. The all glass house with containment spells etched on the walls and run by its fabulous contraptions of oversized gears and knobs can be best described as Frank Lloyd Wright meets steampunk. But then again, we always know a movie is in trouble if we must derive our amusement from oohing and aahing over the sets.

Granted, some moviegoers will find *Thir13en Ghosts* to be "a fun movie" produced for the sole purpose of entertainment. These people argue that audience members enjoy going to the theatre to relax and just be entertained for a couple of hours, drawing a false dichotomy between entertaining films and thoughtful films. To those people, we suggest they give films like *The Sixth Sense*, *The Cell*, *Hannibal*, *The Others*, *Bones*, and *From Hell* a chance. They may be surprised to find out that it is not only possible, but (recently) relatively commonplace for a

Ghosts (and Unfortunate Actors) in the (Hollywood) Machine: A Review of Steve Beck's *Thir13en Ghosts*

by Tony Fonseca and June Pulliam

What do you get when you allow a visual effects expert to direct a horror film? You get a visually stunning, yet loud, 90 minutes of juvenile silliness. This is what happened when Dark Castle Entertainment, the production company that brought us the absolute turkey *The House on Haunted Hill*, teamed up with director Steve Beck (*The Hunt for Red October*, *The Abyss*, *Indiana Jones* and the *Last Crusade*) to produce one of the worst horror films we have seen for some time, *Thir13en Ghosts*. Granted, Manex Visual Effects, which has done some quality work in the past in films like *The Animal*, *The Matrix*, *Starship Troopers*, and *Michael Jordan to the Max*, produces some interesting visuals in *Thir13en Ghosts*, but the company fails to produce anything remotely original; the film is rife with rip-offs of much better horror flicks, such as *The Cell* and *The Shining*. In addition, Manex utterly fails to produce (unless moviegoers are the type to be scared by someone jumping at a glass and saying "boo") anything remotely scary.

The plot is loosely based on a story by Robb White, which was made into a movie of the same name in 1960 by William Castle. The general idea is an old, but tried and true one: a family down on its financial luck inherits a mansion haunted by tormented spirits. Like other Castle films, it is fun and campy, and Beck's *Thir13en Ghosts* is no different in that respect. In fact, in the remake, the haunted mansion comes equipped with special glasses that allow the characters to see the ghosts for themselves, echoing the Castle gimmick where theatergoers were given special glasses that would allow them to "see" the ghosts. Unfortunately, Beck's film could have used a cheesy interactive gimmick; at least then the audience could have stayed remotely interested in the movie.

Thir13en Ghosts begins in a junkyard, where in a gruesome, and extremely loud scene, the audience is introduced to Cyrus Kriticos (F. Murray Abraham), the film's villain, an adventurer who traps ghosts, and Dennis Rafkin (Matthew Lillard), the psychic who unwillingly helps him. A ghost is captured, and Cyrus is apparently killed. Then the film switches to a scene that introduces the film's hapless victims, Arthur Kriticos (Tony Shalhoub) and his family (Shannon Elizabeth and Alec Roberts). The family finds out from Cyrus's sleazy lawyer (talk about predictable; can *you* guess who is the first to be killed?) that in Cyrus's last will and testament, he left Arthur, his estranged nephew, a gorgeous mansion and the money to maintain it.

In a development so ill-conceived as to be moronic, Arthur, his two kids, the sleazy lawyer, and the babysitter (Rah Digga, the token African-American in the film) go to check out the mansion that same night. They eventually discover, thanks to a surprise visit from the psychic, Dennis, that Uncle Cyrus has enslaved the spirits of his captured ghosts in the mansion's basement. What ensues is an over-the-top silly plot wherein we find out that Cyrus is using the ghosts to open the "Eye of Hell," and that part of his plan involves releasing the ghosts in the house, in an effort to