

UNDER GROUND

ODDITIES

EVE'S NECKLACE [www.ericksonfilms.com] (2010). Creating a 80-minute feature with an all-mannequin cast (yes, that means *no* live actors!) might sound like little more than a goofy gimmick, but Austin, Texas-based director-writer-cinematographer-producer Daniel Erickson plays it all astoundingly straight with this black-and-white thriller. Unfortunately, while its technical aspects are often fascinating, the biggest weakness is its unimaginative story... Originally from Mexico, Eva longs for the white-picket-fence suburban dream, which husband William (voiced by DEADWOOD's John Hawkes, who also starred in Erickson's 1991 debut, SCARY MOVIE) works hard to achieve. Alas, Eva's secret, South of the Border porno-past resurfaces when her old boss Ramon pops up and tries to blackmail her for twenty grand, with horrified hubby scrambling for a solution. Meanwhile, sadistic Ramon lurks outside their home and sends William samples of his wife's old X-rated work. When pushed to one's limits, to what extremes will an ordinary man go? (FYI, the title refers to a rare tree found in Eva's backyard.) The script is boilerplate neo-noir, lacking any fresh thrills or trope-upending twists, but Erickson's mannequin manipulation

keeps it consistently amusing. Ingeniously approximating human movements with his fiberglass cast (and only cheating its more complex maneuvers, like handling a circular saw), we get mannequins fighting with each other, spitting up blood, taking showers, getting their head run over by a car, and in a reflective moment, perusing an old album filled with photos of two mannequins enjoying various holidays. Its creepiest scenes involve 'coitus interruptus' and a glimpse of Eva's porn skills. The downside here is that we ultimately spend more time admiring how specific scenes were constructed instead of actually caring about its drawn-out, pedestrian melodrama. Though often exceedingly clever, EVE'S NECKLACE remains stiff and uninvolving.

WNUF HALLOWEEN SPECIAL (1988). Need a good reason to dust off your old VCR? Check out this 1988 TV-rarity, videotaped on Halloween evening off New Jersey's WNUF-TV, Channel 28. Sure, it's a wobbly, glitchy, 6th-generation copy but there's plenty of spooky nostalgia to be had, with local anchors Gavin Gordon and Deborah Merritt dressing up in costume for the evening news and their broadcast followed by a live Halloween special, direct from the haunted, long-vacant Weber House. 20 years earlier, an ax-wielding son slaughtered his parents after becoming obsessed with a "Spirit Board," and now reporter Frank Stewart is heading in to search for ghosts. Sounds silly? Well, if you don't mind SPOILERS (!)... *none* of this is real. Instead, it's a savvy 2013 recreation courtesy of director Chris LaMartina. What begins as a lighthearted on-location lark sprinkled with silly pranks, costumed bystanders and a husband-and-wife team of paranormal investigators (accompanied by their "sensitive" cat), soon turns sinister once this

crew enters the Weber abode, with unsettling vibes, eerie occurrences, a jittery priest, and a call-in séance that goes horribly wrong. Is this cut-rate GHOSTWATCH totally believable? Not especially. Some of its early segments are too broadly played, but what makes this 82-minute project so much fun are its skillfully executed embellishments, with the spooky shenanigans interspersing with faux retro-commercials — local businesses, 3rd-rate TV-shows, a Tarot hotline ("Fate Talk"), plus new-fangled computerized tax preparation — as well as election ads, police public service messages, Halloween-themed news segments, and lots of barbed humor targeting '80s-era religion, guns and drug paranoia. From its deliberately degraded visual quality to how the person who 'bootlegged' the program impatiently fast-forwards through early, tedious moments, WNUF HALLOWEEN SPECIAL is an ingenious and inspired romp. Even the packaging is perfection, with my copy arriving in a generic VHS sleeve and its title hand-written on the cassette's spine.

THEY WILL OUTLIVE US ALL [www.theywilloutliveusall.com] (2013). Cockroaches. Ick! New Yorkers loathe them, but it's impossible to avoid these resilient critters, as our lead pair soon learns in this entertaining, creature-feature indie-comedy from director Patrick Shearer and writer Jessi Gotta (who does double-duty as one of its leads). In the year 2016, New York City is a bigger shithole than ever, thanks to massive hurricanes destroying low-lying chunks of the Big Apple. With all bridges and tunnels closed, food scarce and a nighttime curfew in effect, only idiots would willingly stick around. Meet Brooklyn roommates Margot (Gotta) and Daniel (Nat Cassidy), who ignore the fact that three neighbors in their dingy Brooklyn apartment building have mysteriously died, and instead go about their normal routine — drinking, getting stoned and watching horror flicks. But their slacker complacency is soon put to the test when their building's super starts twitching oddly, something in the sealed-off next-door bathroom is struggling to get out, and they face a major cockroach infestation. But unlike your standard variety, this involves a foot-long, incredibly-strong super-bug! Let's not forget that tainted water is also turning humans in zombies! And whatever you do, don't fall asleep on the toilet! With most of its 73 minutes set inside this one building, there's plenty of black humor to be found in the couple's plight, with Margot and Daniel getting on each other's nerves and finally fighting back against this 'cockroach of unusual size,' armed with a frying pan and baseball bat. The film's physical schtick gets a bit broad at times (such as Margot repeatedly, albeit accidentally, walloping Daniel), but the convincing chemistry between Gotta and Cassidy keeps the film engaging. Anyone who's ever lived around New York City has undoubtedly met people like their characters (heck, you might actually *be* them), and their winning performances bring an unexpected emotional jolt to the final act's most disgusting moments.

