

■ **Forgotten film**

Head of a school of 'Jaws' wannabes is a vengeful killer whale

"Orca" beats out alligators and piranhas with its existential battle between whale and fisherman

BY RYAN NYBURG
PULSE EDITOR

Through much of the 1970s (and some of the early 1980s) theaters were stuffed with cheap rip-offs of "Jaws." It was not surprising, considering that film's phenomenal success. Producers were practically scouring the waters for anything that swam that they could put on a poster to draw the summer crowds. "Alligator," "Alligator II: The Mutation," "Crocodile," "Piranha," "Piranha Part Two: The Spawning" and so on and so forth. There were of course also the three "Jaws" sequels, which pretty much count as rip-offs of the original because they lacked any of the suspense ("Jaws 2"), often descended into camp ("Jaws 3-D") and were often just plain mediocre ("Jaws: The Revenge"). This trend even developed into some modern incarnations, such as the two "Anaconda" movies, as well as "Deep Rising" and other forgettable claptrap.

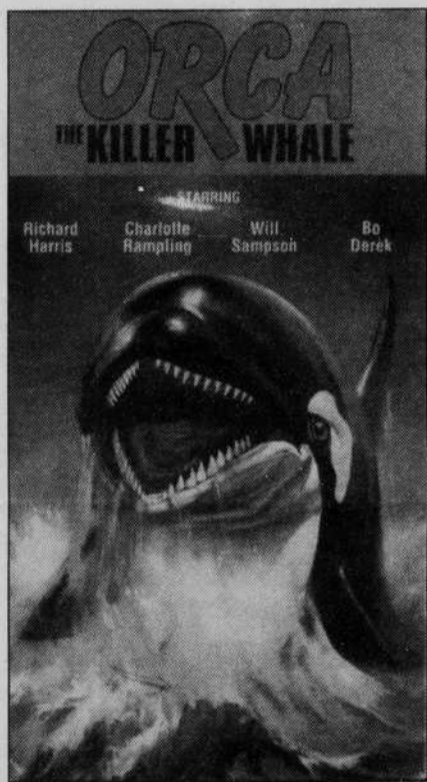
Like any small niche genre, this one did produce some interesting variations, despite the reels and reels of crap. One such variation was a little-known 1977 film about a man's desperate fight with a killer whale, entitled "Orca." You can imagine how this film was pitched just from some of the poster art, which depicts a large whale rising out of the water, its teeth looking menacingly at the viewer. But while the film sets itself up as a standard "Jaws" wannabe (it even opens with a killer whale slaughtering a great white shark) it ends as something more interesting.

The story concerns a professional fisherman Nolan (Richard Harris) working to pay off the mortgage on his boat. He makes an ill-conceived attempt to capture a live killer whale and ends up killing a pregnant female one. The dead whale's mate follows him to shore to seek revenge, beginning by jumping out of the water and swallowing the first mate. The whale then takes its vengeance to shore, sinking ships, smashing gas pipes and destroying harbors.

The whale's mental capacity would come off as hard to believe if the film didn't have the whole thing narrated by a local professor of marine biology (Charlotte Rampling), who explains that orcas have a remarkable intelligence, mate for life

and have a sophisticated communication system. It makes for some clumsy exposition, but gets the point across. (Though this doesn't help in a sequence where the whale causes a major explosion ashore. The film is probably giving the whale's brain a little too much credit there).

Soon the local fishermen have turned against Nolan because he refuses to go out and kill the whale, which is driving away all the fish, and he finds himself slowly being run out of town. When the whale maims



COURTESY

another of his crew members, he resolves to hunt it down. This leads to the film's finale, which is when things really get going. The story has slowly stripped itself of its exploitation film elements and becomes a stark existential battle between Nolan and the whale. The fishermen chase the creature far into the frozen north for a final battle. Here the movie finally strikes a consistent tone, ending on a grim, thoughtful note.

Had the entire film kept this tone, it would have been a small classic in its own right. As it stands it is a good, though uneven, piece of 1970s suspense film making.

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IN BRIEF

Lane ARTS Council will offer guided gallery tour

Lane ARTS Council is gearing up for the monthly First Friday Art Walk — a tour through five different art galleries in downtown Eugene on Friday, August 5. The non-profit community organization supports this free event, as well as Lane County art and artists.

Cultural Services director for the Hult Center Robb Hankins will host

the tour, which begins at 5:30 p.m. at the Jacobs Gallery, located on the lower level of the Hult Center.

From there the tour will continue to White Lotus Gallery at 767 Willamette St., Tibet's Fine Design at 80 E. Broadway, New Zone Art Collective at 975 Oak Alley and DIVA at 110 W. Broadway.

For more information contact Lane ARTS Council at 485-2278.

— Nicholas Wilbur

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