

FILM

Cold comfort

According to Punxsutawney Phil, we're looking at six more weeks of winter. These DVDs should help you through.

BY GARY MORRIS



TWO BROTHERS AND TWO OTHERS
TLA Releasing

DVD has been the salvation of nonmainstream queer cinema. Features, documentaries and even shorts that would otherwise be forgotten after making the film festival circuit get a second chance thanks to this handy medium.

Richard Bell's *Two Brothers* is a case in point. Made for an unbelievable \$545 Canadian (about \$350 U.S., aspiring filmmakers), this short film is an emotionally resonant story of the intersecting lives of the title characters—one gay, one straight—after the death of their mother.

Cute Riley (Norbert Orlewicz) heads for Vancouver to stay with his even cuter but troubled brother Chad (Cody Campbell) and the latter's girlfriend, Tobie (Karen Rae), a consummate fag hag.

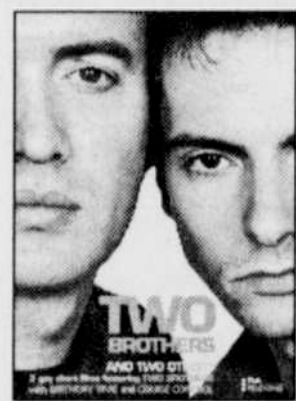
Based on Bell's one-act play, the film plumbs some strong emotions and gets extra points for a wonderful sequence in which the lovemaking of hetero couple Chad and Tobie is intercut with similar scenes of Riley and his new lover, Gavin (Kevin MacDonald). In portraying queer and straight love as equivalent, this sequence does what society doesn't seem able to do.

The film introduces a few too many elements for its 60-minute runtime, but finely honed performances and a pervasive sense of a grim past always threatening the present make this a worthy entry in the queer indie genre.

Included are two documentaries about the making of the film, a director commentary and outtakes. The DVD's "two others"—accompanying queer shorts by Lawrence Ferber—are pretty disposable, though *Cruise Control* is a diverting six minutes about a hunky bar boy who dazzles Everyqueen until his face begins to twist into bizarre contortions.

VEGAS IN SPACE
Troma Entertainment

Who wouldn't want to go to Clitoris, an "all-girl pleasure planet" where the girls are style-drenched drag queens who patronize "black beauty markets" and hoard girlinism, "a rare crystal found only in the Cavems of Girlina"?



You won't find it on the usual maps, of course; you'll have to rent *Vegas in Space*. Directed by Philip R. Ford and starring famed San Francisco trannies Miss X and Doris Fish (who also wrote and designed the film), this legendary drag-camp epic cobbled together between 1982 and 1992 is now available on DVD.

The film opens with a montage of gaudy images that set the tone: a tinselly galaxy, brightly colored miniature rocket ships on strings, neon marquees and drag queens—lots of drag queens.

Fish and his rocketship crew are headed for Clitoris to "save the universe" but are forced to have sex changes before landing. (In this tranny dream world, you only have to pop a pill.) Once they arrive at the capital, Vegas (an "oasis of glamour in a universe of mediocrity"), the adventurers brave earthquakes, skyrocketing crime and the theft of the royal jewels. The plot quickly collapses into chaos as the Misses Fish and X try to find the thieving Queen of Clitoris.

A loose structure allows for plenty of amusing scenes, such as a "traditional mid-20th century lounge act" and a witty film noir parody sequence reminiscent of an old Joan Crawford movie (if you can picture Joan as an intergalactic drag queen).

The major influence here is the candy-colored 1958 sci-fi epic *Queen of Outer Space*—along with, of course, John Waters, whose spirit hovers over the production in the glitter walls and lime-green fleece doors as well as the actors' screaming, declamatory style.

The DVD has a lot of extras, including audio commentary, a teaser reel, scenes from the 1991 premiere at San Francisco's Castro Theatre and interviews with the director and cast.

OSSESSIONE
Image Entertainment

The late Italian film director Luchino Visconti is rightly revered for his operatic studies of decadence among the upper crust, but homo audiences have found in him a particularly simpatico soul. Gay imagery in his later work—Auerbach's hopeless pursuit of the ideal in the form of a young boy in *Death in Venice* and Helmut Berger's devastating Dietrich imitation in *The Damned* come to mind—has become iconic in the world of queer culture.



Gino (left) and Spagnolo exchange furtive glances and more in Luchino Visconti's *OsSESSIONE*

What's less known is that Visconti quietly proclaimed his queerness and the lure of the homoerotic from the very beginning of his career. This can be savored now thanks to a new DVD release of his first feature, 1942's *OsSESSIONE*.

Based on U.S. novelist James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the project was passed on to Visconti by French film great Jean Renoir. Happily, Renoir's lack of interest paid off big for Visconti and for cinema fans.

This *Postman* almost single-handedly ushered in Italian neorealism—and didn't stint on the homo subtext, either. No wonder the powerful Catholic Church and the Fascist censors tried to suppress it. (And, in the case of the censors, destroyed what they thought was the only negative; the savvy filmmaker had squirreled away a duplicate that became the basis for later prints.)

Visconti was an irrepressible Marxist who could present the lives of the poor and exploited with enormous authority. *OsSESSIONE*'s wandering hero, Gino (Massimo Girotti), travels what would become well-trod territory through the next decade—the bleak road of the "neoreal" marked by themes of impoverishment, despair, murder, sexual candor and, of course, a femme fatale who leads him far astray.

But *OsSESSIONE* also presents a near-queer romance that resonates almost as powerfully as

the driving hetero "obsession" of Gino and Giovanna (Clara Calamai).

Gino is the first of many Visconti hunks, a gorgeous, dreamy-eyed drifter lovingly surveyed—indeed practically cruised—by the camera. Giovanna is sick to death of the older fat man she married to escape poverty, so when Gino arrives she (along with certain audience members) lights up with lust. Visconti perfectly captures this

mutual longing in furtive, steamy encounters barely out of view of her hubby.

But something's not quite right. Giovanna's desperation is too extreme, while Gino seems too weak to resist her

and the dangers she represents. Visconti offers an unusual alternative possibility in the form of handsome stranger Spagnolo (Elio Marcuso), who subsidizes Gino's first escape from Giovanna, offering to pay his train fare. The two become friends and fellow travelers. Spagnolo's homosexuality is blatantly portrayed considering the time and circumstance (Fascist Italy).

The relationship ripples with loving glances but goes further. In one scene they're in bed together and Spagnolo lights a cigarette, holding the match over Gino's face and studying it with unmistakable adoration.

Visconti presents Spagnolo as an superior alternative to Giovanna, though historically the time was not right for Gino to make such a choice. Visconti would be more upfront in later films; still, there's much electricity between these two potential male lovers.

A homo subtext is far from the only lure of *OsSESSIONE*. It's a wrenching study of a doomed romantic triangle, played by a superb cast against gorgeous northern Italian locations. The queer icing just makes this already tasty cake that much more satisfying. [F]



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