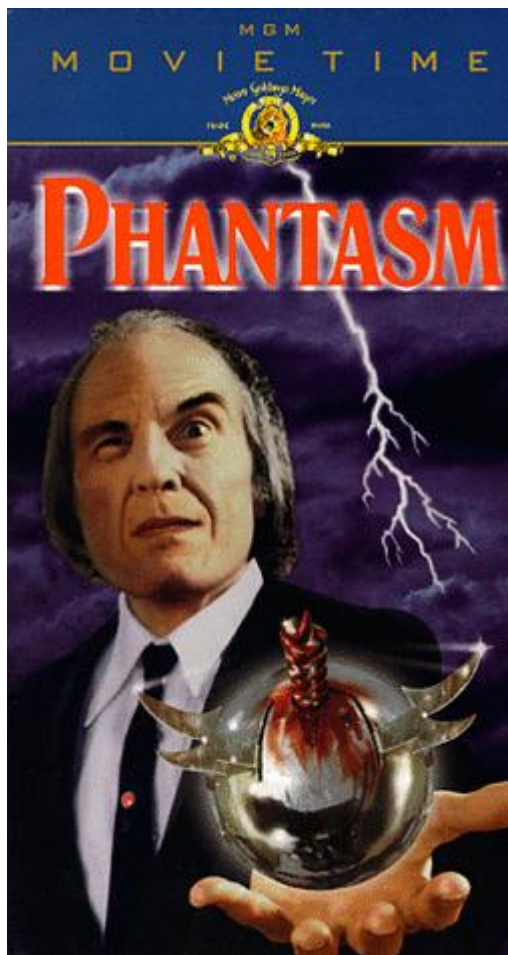


Phantasm

US : 1979 : dir. Don Coscarelli : Avco Embassy : 90 min
 prod. Don Coscarelli : scr: Don Coscarelli : dir.ph.: Don Coscarelli
[Michael Baldwin](#); [Terrie Kalbus](#)
 Bill Thornbury; Reggie Bannister; Angus Scrimm; Kathy Lester; Ken Jones; Susan Harper;
 Lynn Eastman; David Arntzen; Ralph Richmond; Bill Cone; Laura Mann; Mary Ellen Shaw

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Kbytes	Ω	□	€	Z	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
3126a	5½	12	6		-	7	7	-	7	Yes	Feb 2001

"IF THIS ONE DOESN'T SCARE YOU, YOU'RE ALREADY DEAD!"



Source: Amazon.com

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Two dull brothers take on a flying object that punctures skulls and a creepy cemetery worker whose ties are so thin he belongs playing "Louie, Louie" at a 1964 prom. Followed by two sequels. *½ "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A 16-year has nightmares which seem to come true¹. Cleverly assembled horror comic with many nasty moments. Not for the squeamish, and with no real merit except the power to frighten. Writer/producer/director/cameraman/editor Coscarelli was 20 at the time."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
 review:

"Don Coscarelli wrote, directed, photographed and edited this ragged, low-budget horror entry about a flying fiend.² * "

¹ he's 13, and nightmares are the least of his worries
 - apart from that, spot on

² he hadn't seen the film, evidently

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

“Wildly imaginative scare tactics and bloody gore dominate this ragged but frequently amusing horror story about strange happenings in a suburban mortuary. The plot is short on logic, but horror fans will appreciate the film’s peculiar energy. Director/writer Don Coscarelli – in his early twenties at the time – has yet to live up to the promise indicated here. **1½ ”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“A film that somehow manages to disregard all known standards of suspense and narrative without paying the price. For twenty minutes it’s recognisable horror pic stuff, with a flimsy youngster-discovers-shady-doings-up-at-funeral -parlour plot. But that’s before the revelation that the local morgue is actually an assembly line for some incredibly mixed-up creatures who stop living, get crushed to a height of 3ft 2in, packed in garbage cans, and shipped off as dwarf slaves to somewhere in outer space. Simply has to be seen to be (dis)believed.”

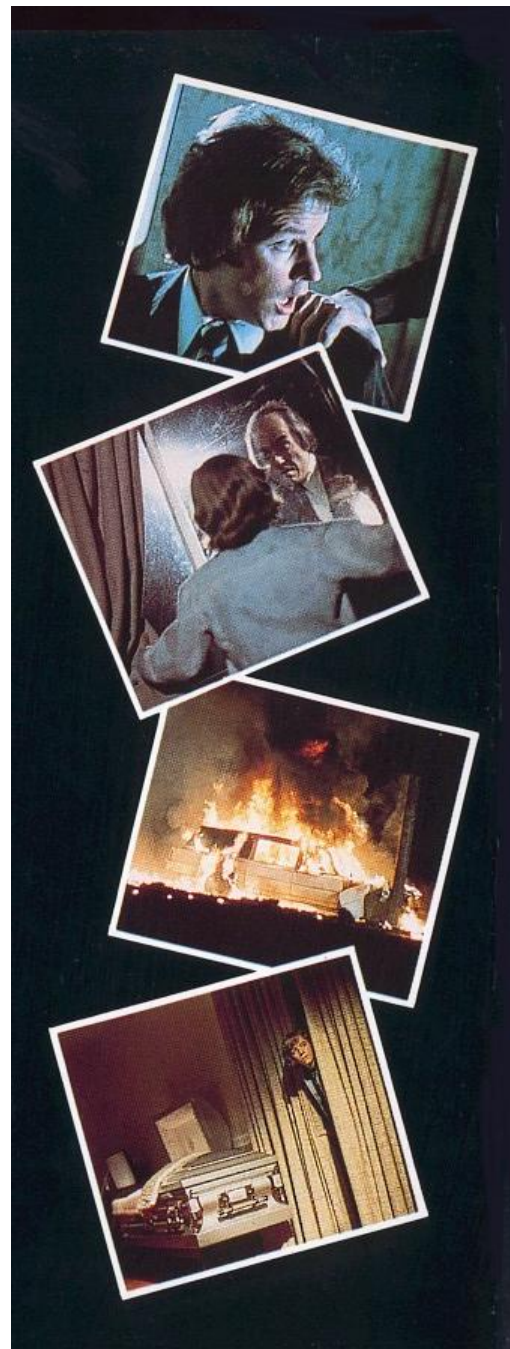
Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Pic opens with 13-year old Mike Pearson (Michael Baldwin), who foolishly disobeys his older brother’s orders not to attend the funeral of a close friend who, unbeknownst to everyone, was really stabbed by a woman after the two made love in a cemetery. Mike hides in the bushes during the ceremony and later happens to eye the villainous tall man (Angus Scrimm) loading the casket into a car.

Once inside the mausoleum, the fun begins, with Mike treated to a quite grisly murder courtesy of a futuristic flying silver sphere and the wrath of the tall man, who doesn’t cotton to the kid’s curiosity. Film then follows Mike, brother Jody (Bill Thornbury) and company as they attempt to unravel exactly what is going on. Strong point of the feature is that it’s played for both horror and laughs.”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“This strange mixture of horror and science fiction, while not an outstanding film by any account, does provide viewers with several thrills and unexpected twists. If you like to jump out of your seat, watch this alone with all





The only shot of Michael Baldwin located to date. He's investigating the mortuary by night – and things are about to get weird with a capital WE.

the lights out. "R" rated after scenes were cut from the original "X"-rated version. **1½"

Videocassette - **CINEMA CLUB VHS CC1141** - sleeve notes:

“ THE CLASSIC TALE OF TERROR. Morningside Mortuary. Nighttime. Moans of passion break the eerie silence of the graveyard. The full moon reveals a young man caught in the embrace of the mysterious lady in lavender. Their act of love culminates in his gruesome death. And so the nightmare turns into reality. The strange and horrific story of Morningside Mortuary is about to unfold... ”

Amazon.com review:

“Jody is the kind of guy that every 1970s teen looked up to. He's in his early 20s, has a cool car, splendid '70s hair, leather jacket, plays guitar and (naturally) snags all the girls. His little brother, Mike, in particular, admires him and emulates him at every turn. Things start to go astray, however, when the two brothers and their friend Reggie attend a funeral for a friend. Mike notices a tall man working at the funeral home; in the course of his snooping, he sees the tall man put a loaded coffin into the back of a hearse as easily as if it was a shoebox.

Jody doesn't believe his little brother's stories, though, until he brings home the tall man's severed finger, still wriggling in what appears to be French's mustard [sic]. From there, the

film picks up a terrific momentum that doesn't let up until the sequel-ripe twist ending.

“PHANTASM” was one of the first horror movies to break the unspoken rule that victims were supposed to scream, fall down, and cower until they were killed. Instead, Mike and Jody are resourceful and smart, aggressively pursuing the evil inside the funeral home with a shotgun and Colt pistol. Furthermore, the script has a great deal of character development, especially in the relationship between the two brothers. The film even has a surprisingly glossy look, despite its low-budget origins, and little outright gore (except for the infamous steel spheres that drill into victims' heads).

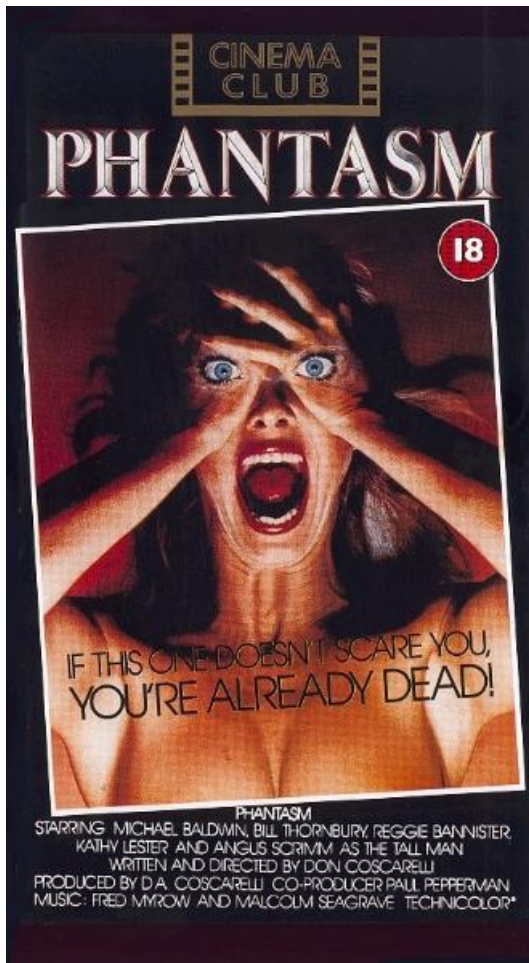
This drive-in favourite was a big success at the time of its release, and spawned three sequels. Little wonder; it includes an inventive story, likable characters, a runaway pace, and, of course, evil dwarves cloaked in Army blankets. The end result is one of the better horror films of the late 1970s. Hot-rod fans take note: Jody drives a Plymouth Hemi 'Cuda, the pinnacle of 1960s muscle cars, rounding out his status as a Cool Guy.”

- Jerry Renshaw

Blackhawk film & video catalogue note:

“A horror story of murder and mystery revealed in nightmare reality when two brothers find the living dead. Rated "R". Beta: 502-86-5123 VHS: 515-86-5123 \$59.95 ”

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]



*Beware film poster and video jacket art which resorts to images totally unconnected with the film itself! Beware sleeve notes which are at pains to give a misleading impression of its themes and content. Reliable indicators that the film itself is **junk** – there are exceptions however...*

Radio Times review:

“In director Don Coscarelli’s fantasy horror with a science-fiction twist, Angus Scrimm impresses as the demon who sends human victims into another dimension where they become slave dwarves. Don’t even ask! As wildly imaginative as its totally illogical, this film’s main concern is to shock you senseless. With its unforgettable flying sphere that drills out brains, Coscarelli’s lurid chiller easily fulfils that lofty aim. Contains violence, swearing, a sex scene and brief nudity. *** ”

“Horror starring Michael Baldwin. A recently orphaned teenager’s morbid fascination plunges him into a terrifying battle against a sinister undertaker. *** ”

TV Times review:

“A horror film - about strange goings-on in and around a mortuary - that purposely draws no line between nightmare and reality. This eventually works against the film, however, as it gets sillier and sillier and ends in desperate need of a punchy climax that would bring everything together with a sickening crunch. Nevertheless it does have its shock moments, carried off with considerable style and editing skill by director Don Coscarelli. ** ”

“Horror fantasy. After the death of his parents, 13-year old Mike Pearson develops a macabre fascination with the Morningside Mortuary. His curiosity is rewarded with a grisly discovery. ** ”

A true auteur film, written, produced, directed, filmed and edited by 20-year old Coscarelli, it's not actually scary at all. The intention, plainly, was to make a weird and creepy comedy, and in this Coscarelli succeeds pretty well. Ripping off everything from “Dune” to “**THE THING FROM ANOTHER WORLD**”, he packs more twists and gore effects into his 90 minutes than any three Hammer films. Halliwell's description of it as “a horror comic” is quite apt, but rather than a horror film, “**PHANTASM**” is best characterised as a humble antecedent of “**Twin Peaks**” and “**Eerie, Indiana**”. The *strangeness* of small town America enjoys an early outing.

At first sight “**PHANTASM**” does seem just another no-budget straight-to-video exploiter, with some decidedly dodgy acting and a John Carpenter-style soundtrack wheedling endlessly on. But then the laconic humour catches us off guard, and the plot builds from bizarre and incongruous to full-blown David Lynchville. And what recommends it strongly to this archive is that dead centre of the proceedings is a feisty pro-active 13-year old ghostbuster orphan who refuses to be sidelined by muddle-headed adults bent on “protecting” him. He is the arch boy-detective first to unravel the mystery, a natural survivor amid all the major league weirdness, and his attachment to elder brother Jody (his parents died two years earlier) is

fiercely possessive and very unusual for a film of this kind. That dimension is one of Coscarelli's distinctive signatures, setting him apart from Dario Argento, Lynch, or the Fangoria school of cheapie gore-fests.

Brace yourselves then. The indestructible Tall Man at Morningside Mortuary (who shows up in antique photos of the establishment) is also the strumpet in lilac who screws young men in the cemetery and stabs them to death afterwards. The dismembered dwarf in the back of the ice-cream van is not "a gopher on heat" after all, but actually the reanimated corpse of Tommy, the strumpet's most recent victim, who played in a music combo with Mike's brother Jody and ice cream man Reggie. When Mike breaks into the mortuary by night *he* doesn't get screwed – the janitor does – by the flying steel ball with cranium-drilling attachments, however he *is* given the finger by the Tall Man, and said digit does not die when he hacks it off, but metamorphoses next day (as severed fingers will) into a small black flying killer bug, which has to be wrestled – *twice* – into the garbage disposal unit at home. And why are the dead being reanimated, compressed into midgets, dressed in monkish hoods and shipped through a dimensional warp to a silvery desert planet? *Because of the heat!* Of course!

It would spoil the fun of a film like this to retail the absurdist plot in detail, or to give away the twist ending, but you have a sense of the general havoc now. It is worth, though, drawing attention to one or two of the curious subtexts – even so modest a film can have *subtexts* – which set it apart from the teen slasher movies it so resembles in structure. Firstly, *no-one* in "**PHANTASM**" lives in a conventional family set-up. Thirteen-year old Mike lives alone with elder brother Jody. The only other kid we see lives with her grandmother, a chair-bound fortune teller (who never speaks, but has a very sinister wheezing laugh). The antique shop in town is run by two young women of undisclosed relationship. And Reggie the ice cream man is a bachelor. Can you identify *one* other small-town American film where a married couple is nowhere to be seen? Perhaps Coscarelli scripted things that way to lay the bedrock for the incongruities to come – nothing is "normal" around here – but it's a refreshingly subversive backdrop in itself.

Secondly, Mike is not at school, has no discernible friends his own age, rides a motorbike, repairs cars, and swears in an offhand, un-macho seventies style. He is one of the most resourceful, independent, and unencumbered thirteen-year olds to hit the screen – compared even with boys of that age at the centre of other horror films: Corey Haim in "**SILVER BULLET**" and "**THE LOST BOYS**", Lance Kerwin in "**SALEM'S LOT**", or Joey Lawrence in "**PULSE**". The violence and gore make no concession to his youth, and nor should they. The intimacy of his relationship with Jody (Bill Thornbury in a very appealing performance) echoes the very strong fraternal bond in Coscarelli's earlier film "**JIM, THE WORLD'S GREATEST**" (76), which he started at the age of 17. That film concerned a youth who protects his smaller brother (Robbie Wolcott) against an alcoholic father. The theme returned again in Coscarelli's sword & sorcery extravaganza "**THE BEASTMASTER**" (82), in which Josh Milrad plays a disinherited prince who proves to be the hero's kid brother.

Deadly straight weirdness is a tricky combination to pull off ("**ERASERHEAD**" must be the best yardstick for that), so "**PHANTASM**" (wisely) is underpinned by a nice line in throwaway humour. When Mike, sneaking about the mortuary at night, is first cornered by the Tall Man he announces "Ahmmm...!" – fumbling frantically for a plausible reason to be there - "Aww shit!" – abandons the effort and takes to his heels. When he escapes with the finger in a box he confronts Jody next morning with the whole ludicrous tale. Jody, patience strained to exhaustion, stares at the slightly rocking box and says sarcastically "Yeah, and the finger's in the box, right?". He takes it up, opens it, peers inside, closes it gently again and hands it back to Mike. "Okay, I believe you. (pause) Jeesus!". Toward the climax of the film Mike,

Jody and Reggie the ice cream man find themselves locked in a vault with stacks of cartoned-up midgets ready for shipment. Then the lights go out. We hear, in pitch darkness, Reggie's voice call out: "Jody? Mike? ...is anybody there? - the snarl of a midget answers – Aww shit!" It is self-guying humour, nicely judged, without wading into full-blown self-parody.

To wrap it up, "**PHANTASM**" is a quirky, inventive little feature shot on a shoestring, with modest visual effects work but some atmospheric sound effects, and bubbling with ideas. Angus Scrimm makes an agreeable low-rent bogeyman – "You play a good game, boy, but now it's your turn to die" – and even if the door is left wide open for a follow-up, it's not quite in the crass way of many such titles (when, at the end of "**CRITTERS**", for example, the camera pans left to discover – well surprise surprise – a hidden clutch of critter eggs. Or at the end of "**THE CHANGELING**" the camera roves the demolished haunted house to alight on – surprise surprise – a rocking chair rocking by itself). For all its imperfections, nonetheless **RECOMMENDED**.

Inevitably for this genre, three redundant sequels followed, as Coscarelli converted one original story into a repetitive audience-milking "franchise". Michael Baldwin missed the first one in 1988, but showed up, very much older, in "**PHANTASM: LORD OF THE DEAD**" (95 – aka "**PHANTASM III**"). More money for the special effects budget equalled – as it generally does – less investment in the ideas department. Nothing else is known about Baldwin. He's not listed in *The Moving Picture Boy*. Terrie Kalbus played the fortune-teller's granddaughter.

See subject index under **HORROR, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, SCIENCE FICTION** and, in point of fact, **KIDS OUTWIT THE CROOKS**.