

Herpetological Horror No. 2

By Russ Case

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Sssssss movie poster. To those of you just joining us, I'm writing a series of blogs about horror films that feature reptiles. Most, if not all of the films I'll be writing about are quite cheesy. Yesterday I wrote about *Frogs*, a 1972 movie in which a nasty family on an island gets besieged by nature, including herps such as lizards, snapping turtles and toads (and if you watch the trailer that accompanies yesterday's blog, it seems that the movie probably should have been called *Toads*, since the only anurans on view are toads).

Today let's look at yet another early 70's exploitation classic: *Sssssss* (and always remember, there are seven S's in the title). In this one, Strother Martin plays Dr. Carl Stoner, a mad scientist snake expert who's especially infatuated with king cobras. Martin was a character actor for many years, and is probably best known for his portrayal of the chain gang boss in the Paul Newman movie, *Cool Hand Luke*. One of his lines is now one of the most famous movie quotes in history: "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

Dr. Stoner gives snake demonstrations and conducts snake research. He hires an assistant, played by Dirk Benedict, who unwittingly becomes a crucial component of one of Stoner's experiments. The good doctor, see, wants to turn people into king cobras.

I forget exactly why he wants to do so. I don't see how a society comprised of king cobras could be fully functional. I think he believed that humans were doomed to face extinction, so they'd be better off turned into snakes to survive in the long run. Or some such drivel. Although all the details of this crucial plot element evade me as I write this, suffice it to say that Stoner is quite committed to the idea of turning people into king cobras, and he begins injecting Benedict with a serum toward this end.

There is a pretty creepy moment in the movie that features one of Stoner's previous test subjects, a half-man, half-snake creature he sells to a carnival sideshow. The makeup for the "snake man" was created by John Chambers, who had previously won a special makeup Academy Award for his monkey makeups for the original *Planet of the Apes* (this was before a regular Best Makeup award category was created several years ago). It's pretty weird, and the most interesting aspect of the movie, unless you count the numerous real reptiles that are on display.

Due to the injections Benedict's skin begins peeling, turning scaly and demonstrating the usual side effects one might expect if one were turning into a large snake. In the meantime, various people snoop around the true intentions of Stoner's experiments and are rewarded for their efforts by getting bumped off. The only one I remember is a detective who gets constricted by a large python, probably a Burmese. Poor pythons, once again being maligned in the media.

Does Dr. Stoner succeed in turning Dirk Benedict into a king cobra? Does Benedict end up marrying Stoner's daughter, even though he may be part snake, with whom he strikes (no pun intended) up a romance? Would you want to be turned into a king cobra? What exactly would happen to your legs? Would snakes also have a failure to communicate?

You'll just have to watch a DVD of *Sssssss* to find out the answers to these questions and more. Of course, one question that might come to mind is, "Why am I watching this?" The answer to that one, of course, is because there are snakes in it! Do you need any more reason than that? But even so, remember the warning that accompanied the movie's ad campaign: Once this movie sinks its fangs into you, you will never be the same. Don't say you weren't warned.

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