



GANJA & HESS

A film by Bill Gunn

1973 / U.S. / 113 min. / In English

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Synopsis

Flirting with the conventions of blaxploitation and horror, Bill Gunn's revolutionary independent film *Ganja & Hess* is a highly stylized and utterly original treatise on sex, religion, and African American identity. Duane Jones (*Night of the Living Dead*) stars as anthropologist Hess Green, who is stabbed with an ancient ceremonial dagger by his unstable assistant (director Bill Gunn), bestowing upon him the blessing of immortality... and the curse of an unquenchable thirst for blood. When the assistant's beautiful and outspoken wife Ganja (Marlene Clark) comes searching for her missing husband, she and Hess form an unexpected partnership. Together, they explore just how much power blood holds.

Later recut and released in an inferior version, this edition represents the original release, restored by The Museum of Modern Art with support from The Film Foundation, and mastered in HD from a 35mm negative.

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GANJA & HESS

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GANJA & HESS

"To remember a man's name is to give him eternal life."
—Bill Gunn



Foreword

The man who wrote those words also wrote and directed **GANJA & HESS**—one of the most literate, allegorical, and evasive of all horror films. Chances are, if you live outside New York City and its immediate environs, you've heard of this Black vampire film before; maybe you've always wanted to see it, but never had the chance. You may have also heard about **BLOOD COUPLE**, a shorter, bearded version, but figured you'd skip it until you caught up with the original. Made almost twenty years ago, **GANJA & HESS** has spent most of those two decades unprojected, due less to a lack of interest than to a concerned determination to preserve the only extant 35mm print. In recent years, rumor circulated of the film's official loss, after this last print was formally withdrawn from exhibition. Fortunately, the film was saved from extinction through the efforts of a modern underground railroad of well-intentioned cineastes, but it is still not widely

Duane Jones as Dr. Hess Green.

The Savaging and Salvaging of an American Classic

By David Walker & Tim Lucas

available. Its fight for survival is far from over, but now the fight to save **GANJA & HESS** is more than a fight to preserve a motion picture; since the premature death of Bill Gunn on April 5, 1989, it's become the collective determination of anyone who's seen or been touched by his work to have his name remembered.

He was born William Gunn Jr. in West Philadelphia in 1929 (or 1934, he pled both). The only child of Bill and Louise Gunn, a couple steeped in the Arts, Bill Jr. preferred the company of his parents to that of other children and became an aloof, uncommunicative student. Accustomed to reading on an adult level at home, Bill Jr. found it difficult to focus on the elementary materials at school. His White educators blamed his inattentiveness at first on his color; his favorite teacher told him that "natural laziness" was a racial heritage he must fight against, which he later said was the point when he learned that he would



Marlene Clark as Ganja Meda.

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Bill Gunn, circa 1982.

always be Black before he would be considered as anything else. This traumatic confrontation stifled his natural creativity for many years, which shifted the blame to his mentality; at the 5th Grade level, he was placed in a Special Education program, where the majority of students were mentally retarded. By the time he reached high school, Gunn spent so much time staring out the window that he was asked to leave. His parents removed him from school and signed him into the Navy. Gunn served a year and a half at sea and, upon completion of his duty, moved to New York to focus on acting and writing for the stage.

Bill Gunn made his Broadway acting debut in a 1954 production based on André Gide's **IMMORALISTE** at the Royale Theater, in a company which included James Dean. Ten years later, after appearing in several other plays and television shows—including **THE OUTER LIMITS**'s "Nightmare" and **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.**'s "The Double Affair"—he joined that elite group of actors who also

wrote novels, with **ALL THE REST HAVE DIED**, published by Delacorte Press in 1964. In the period 1969-1970, Gunn experienced the most dramatic upward curve of his career, selling two screenplays that were made into **THE ANGEL LEVINE** (by Jan Kadar) and **THE LANDLORD** (Hal Ashby's first feature, both 1970) and receiving the go-ahead from Warner Brothers for his own directorial debut, **STOP** (also '70), which made him one of the first Blacks ever to be entrusted with a film for a major Hollywood studio; the breakthrough had been made by Gordon Parks, whose **THE LEARNING TREE** was made only one year earlier (also for Warners). Ironically, while Parks' debut was among the first 25 inductees to the National Registry of the Library of Congress in 1988, Gunn's was shelved by Warners without release until it was unearthed for a Gunn retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art twenty years later. (The film—which was immediately reshuffled—now exists only in rough cut form.) Gunn bounced back with his original NBC teleplay **JOHN HANS**, which won him an Emmy Award for Special Individual Achievement in 1972. After nearly another decade of work, hardship, pain and intermittent glory in other arenas, Gunn's second novel appeared under the imprint of I. Reed Books: **RI-NESTONE SHARECROPPING** (1981), based on his bitter experiences as a "Blackman" trying to vault the White-washed walls of Hollywood screenwriting.

Ironically, it was encephalitis ("Inflammation of the brain") that took Gunn's life on the eve of his last premiere, **THE FORBIDDEN CITY**; an incendiary play which Joseph Papp directed for New York's Public Theater. Were Gunn's loss not so dear to his audience, one might be tempted to regard his early death as a gift from God, as a buffer from Beyond, because this final work was greeted—the obituary pages notwithstanding—with the kind of notices known to silence playwrights for years, if not forever.

But what else could anyone expect? As Greg Tate expressed the facts in his obituary of Gunn in **THE VILLAGE VOICE**, "The attempt to bury Bill Gunn began in his life."²

Part I Victim

Without question, the most notorious chapter in the premature burial of Bill Gunn concerns the release and fate of his most celebrated work: the 1973 film, **GANJA & HESS**.

Its story can be broken down very simply. Dr. Hess Green—a wealthy, Black anthropologist studying an extinct blood-addicted Nigerian culture—is stabbed by one of its surviving artifacts,

a wooden knife that bestows immortality and a need to consume human blood. His would-be murderer commits suicide in remorse, leaving behind his wife Ganja, a woman of natural regal bearing who quickly falls in love with her husband's victim. The immortal Hess years to love as well as live forever, and so defies her with three plunges of the wooden dagger. But love makes the ugliness of their predatory existence too plain to endure. Hess betrays his primal contract by bowing his head and opening his heart to the influence of the Cross—suicide as a denial of ethnic identity. But Ganja cannot follow his example and join him in Death, because of the very qualities of personality that made her desirable to him as his Queen.

The film is a heady balance of themes and interests. Alienation, anomie, religious and cultural identity, hunger, addiction, power—it's about all of these things, often in ways better felt than articulated. Indeed, the film is about sensual experience to such a degree that its narrative seems most linear in its use of music and dissociated images, the message being that, if you try to engage this movie with your brain—with anything but the pagan instincts of your blood and your bowels—you're crashing the wrong party. The cinematic energy on display throughout the movie nets an occasional awkward effect, but this is quickly forgotten in the overall rush of filmmaking enthusiasm. That a film about death and about dying-out should be so pregnant with an embracing appreciation of life's bounty and beneficence, makes it all the more precious. Critic James Monaco—who tends to react indifferently to horror films—described **GANJA & HESS** perfectly as the "great underground classic of Black film and, I think, the most complicated, intriguing, subtle, sophisticated, and passionate Black film of the Seventies. If **SWEET SWEETBACK'S BADASS SONG** is (Richard Wright's) **NATIVE SON**, **GANJA & HESS** is (Ralph Ellison's) **INVISIBLE MAN**."³

If his 1934 birthdate is correct, Bill Gunn wrote and directed **GANJA & HESS** at the age of 38. There is a telling passage in **RI-NESTONE SHARECROPPING** which offers insight into the possible motivations behind this story and its choice of metaphor:

"At the age of thirty-eight, one realizes that talent is quite capable of turning on itself. Feeding on its own sieve in a desperate attempt to continue. It feels out your inability to support it. When you can no longer feed it, it will feed itself on its own blood." (p. 109)

RI-NESTONE SHARECROPPING contains another instructive sentence: "We are both Black and there-

fore in constant danger of starving." **GANJA & HESS** is only obliquely a vampire film; the word "vampire" isn't uttered once during its nearly two-hour running time. The film may be an allegory (as Gunn indicates above) about midlife, its gnawing disappointments, and the consolation a little ganja can bring. Most obstinately, however, it is about the devouring of Black culture by a dominant White Christian society, the absorption of Black artifacts by White institutions, and the residual effects of emotional withdrawal or depletion on survivors of distant or depleted cultures. Hess' climactic "salvation" is chillingly double-edged; his African-infused immortality is stolen away at precisely the moment he places his faith in the Cross. It's a traditional death for the Undead, but never filmed before or since with quite this intonation.

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Despite being made during the heyday of "blaxploitation" film production, **GANJA & HESS** was probably not commissioned as an exploitation picture, though its vampire theme may have been a concession to marketability. Its New York-based executive producers, Quentin Kelly and Jack Jordan, were genuinely interested in cultivating a serious Black cinema. Their only previous release was **GEORGIA, GEORGIA** (1972), an interracial love story scripted by playwright Maya Angelou, which starred Diana Sands (who died in 1973). According to James Monaco, Kelly-Jordan Enterprises, Inc. had also signed contacts with novelist James Baldwin to adapt all his books for the screen.⁴ Had Kelly-Jordan intended **GANJA & HESS** to be nothing more than an imitation of **BLACULA**, it is unlikely they would have hired a triple-threat man (writer-actor-director), especially not one with the extraordinary and uncompromised accomplishments of Bill Gunn; with such conspicuous laurels preceding him, it seems unlikely that Kelly-Jordan would have expected **GANJA & HESS** to be anything but a serious, artistic production.

GANJA & HESS was filmed in Croton-on-Hudson, New York in the Spring of 1972. It was produced by Chiz Schultz, a longtime friend of Gunn, and photographed by James E. Hinton in Super 16mm, who gave the film a radiant, smoldering, diffused look. Assigned the title roles were Marlene Clark—a striking actress whose genre credits (before and after) include **NIGHT OF THE COBRA WOMAN** (1972), **BEWARE THE BLONDI** (1972), **THE BEAST MUST DIE** (1974), and **LORD SHANGO** (also '74)⁵—and Duane Jones, the reclusive talent

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who found instant screen immortality as Ben, the hapless hero of George A. Romero's original **NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD** (1968). It is Bill Gunn himself, however, who delivers the film's most haunting performance, as Ganja's charismatic and deranged husband, George Meda. One of the movie's many pleasures is watching the unpredictable, complicated performances these actors give, performances which seem tightly-scripted – even literary – yet spontaneous and improvisatory at the same time.

The film had its theatrical premiere in New York City in April 1973. Sparsely advertised, it lasted in theaters less than a week before negative reviews, coupled with its distributor's insecurities and mounting financial woes, aborted the release. Against the wishes of Kelly-Jordan, who was already murmuring about having the picture re-edited, Gunn took **GANJA & HESS** to the 1973 Cannes Film Festival, where he arranged for it to be screened during *Critic's Week*.⁷ Exceeding even Gunn's desperate expectations, **GANJA** won a standing ovation from its audience – legend has it, the applause started long before the film ended. French critics lavished the film with praise, but the response from American representatives continued to be condescending and derisive. Pioneering Black actress-singer Josephine Baker reportedly spent nearly half an hour singing the film's praises and chiding the American critics for not supporting Gunn's vision, but of course it was too late. The film had already had its chance in America.

Soon after, Kelly-Jordan sold **GANJA & HESS** to a second distributor, Heritage Enterprises, who promptly hired post-production specialist Fima H. Novack to re-edit the lengthy film to more exploit-

able, double-bill proportions. The film's ensuing fate was exactly what Gunn had worked so hard to avoid: it was completely reworked and sold as *grit* for the exploitation mill under the title **BLOOD COUPLE**. This new incarnation played the grind circuit, received little attention, and disappeared until the December success of William Friedkin's **THE EXORCIST** and its plethora of imitators inspired Kelly-Jordan (who somehow reacquired the property) to reissue the shortened version as **DOUBLE POSSESSION** ("...THE STORY OF A MAN AND WOMAN POSSESSED BY THE DEVIL"). This tactic might have worked, had such a plan been put into effect before July of 1975, by which time the projectile pea-soup sweepstakes was clearly at an end.⁸

Neither **GANJA & HESS** or **BLOOD COUPLE** is quite what it seems. The existing literature on Gunn's film, while varied in value, is unanimous in its ignorance of his own immense contribution to the film's alternate version. Earlier articles, attempting to document the history of **GANJA & HESS**, have unfairly portrayed Novack as the villain of the piece, a celluloid mercenary who compromised Bill Gunn's film and its original intentions beyond rescue with outtakes and new footage until only a choppy exploitation film remained. The limited availability of **GANJA** for viewing, combined with the purists' lack of interest in **BLOOD COUPLE**, have secured this opinion in too many history books. The unvarnished truth is that **GANJA** is a vampire film that appears to have willfully ellipsed all its references to vampirism, while **BLOOD COUPLE** (which contains only footage shot and written by Gunn) rescues from oblivion a number of intense and masterful scenes, shots, and moments that any director would be proud to claim as his work. While **BLOOD COUPLE** could not

seriously be called a masterpiece, as **GANJA** often is, the two films support and fortify one another in unexpected and valuable ways. In essence, anyone who utterly dishonors **BLOOD COUPLE** is either ignorant, or hiding his honest opinion of **GANJA & HESS**.

Much that has been written about **GANJA & HESS** appears to have been based on information found only in **BLOOD COUPLE**, the assumption being that all of **BLOOD COUPLE** had previously appeared in **GANJA & HESS**. This same misinformation has led to a stubborn prejudice against **BLOOD COUPLE** by Bill Gunn's most hard-line supporters, although the film in fact renders the considerable service of rescuing precious fragments of Gunn's work which, without it, would never have been seen, preserved, or appreciated.

In preparing for this article, we learned that ownership of **GANJA & HESS** is now claimed by two separate companies, Pearl Bowser's African Diaspora Images, and the Brooklyn-based company Third World Newsreel. We were also amazed to discover that Bowser had never seen or made any attempt to see **BLOOD COUPLE**, that Third World Newsreel's Ada Griffin had never even heard of this alternate version, and that neither owner was aware of its proliferation under alternative titles on public domain videocassettes!

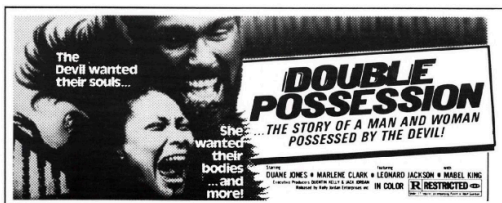
Any investigation of the story behind **GANJA & HESS** and its fate brings one face-to-face with some very significant questions. First of all, was the film's near-loss the fault of insensitive businessmen or an artist who made the mistake (fortunate or not) of delivering to his producers more than he promised? Also, why hasn't **BLOOD COUPLE** been accepted as a separate draft of Gunn's film in the sense that **STEPHEN HERO** (an alternate draft of **A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST: AS A YOUNG MAN**) is now accepted by scholars as a separate work of James Joyce?

Thanks to the cooperation of Third World Newsreel, we were given the privilege of comparing **GANJA & HESS** and **BLOOD COUPLE**, side by side, for the first time.

The synopses of **GANJA & HESS** and **BLOOD COUPLE** are essentially the same. To chart the editorial variations between the two films, we have opted to present a detailed synopsis of **GANJA & HESS** (hereafter **GEH**) – which we feel is also necessary in view of its present rarity – italicizing those scenes and shots which appear only in Gunn's original cut. By reading this synopsis minus the italicized passages, the reader can trace the editorial decisions made by Fima Novack for **BLOOD COUPLE** (hereafter **BC**). Novack's larger embellishments will be discussed after the synopsis.

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GEH begins with a printed introduction spread over nine consecutive intertitles: "Doctor Hess Green.../ Doctor of Anthropology Doctor of Geology.../ While studying the ancient Black civilization of Myrthia.../ was stabbed by a stranger three times.../ one for God the Father one for the Son.../ and one for the Holy Ghost.../ stabbed with a dagger, diseased from that ancient culture whereupon he became addicted and could not die.../ nor could he be killed." (These intertitles appear in **BC** approximately halfway through its running time, after the events it describes have already been played out on the screen.) A portion of the main titles appears over four shots of angel statuary (a Gunn motif), which bridge our passage to a church service, with Reverend Luther Williams (Sam Waymon, who composed and performs the superb music score). The first of many voiceovers accompanies this footage and continues over succeeding footage of a Rolls Royce travelling down a highway: "My official title is Reverend Luther Williams. I also work as a chauffeur and stable man. I work for Dr. Hess Green, and he's an addict. He's not a criminal; he's a victim. He's addicted to blood." (It should also be pointed out here that Rev. Williams' voiceover stands out in **GEH** as a rather jagged flaw; at this point in the film, Hess is not yet "addicted to blood.") Under the latter portion of the voiceover, we see Hess in the sumptuous backseat of the Rolls.⁹ Over this shot appears a subtitle: **PART 1 VICTIM**. This is followed by brief shots of Hess aiding the survivor of a bloody car wreck in the city.

The Rolls pulls up to the Brooklyn Museum and Hess steps out. Intercut with this, a man soon to be introduced as George Meda (Bill Gunn) is shown pointing a revolver at a mirror somewhere inside the museum. Jack Sargent (John Hoffmeister), a White curator for the museum, greets Hess inside and accompanies him down a hall. Only a brief snatch of their dialogue can be heard before a voiceover of Rev. Williams supplants it. (In **BC**, this dialogue survives, although probably not in its original form, considering that Jack Sargent's voice is dubbed here by a different actor. The two colleagues exchange comments on Hess' work-in-progress, a book about Nigeria and the Myrthian culture. They also discuss two things which a "Mr. Woods" has for Hess: a dagger made of petrified wood; an authentic Myrthian relic, and a research assistant named George Meda.) Over a closeup of Meda, Sargent says, "Dr. Green, I want you to meet your new assistant, Mr. George Meda." Hess, Meda, and Rev.



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Williams (acting as chauffeur) return to the Rolls Royce, and the remainder of the credits appear over shots of the men travelling from the city to Hess' lush estate in the Hudson River Valley. (All of the main titles appear over this transitory footage in **BC**.) The musical accompaniment here is a song about the addition to blood which wiped-out the ancient Myrthian culture, represented as a spiritual by Waymon; this song is used elsewhere in the Novack version, and is replaced by moody, cheap-sounding synthesizer noodlings.

Meda and his introspective host are finishing dinner in Hess' living room, well-stuffed with fabulous art pieces and anthropologic bric-a-brac ranging from European Christian art to African masks and fetiches (a clear indication of the clashing religious-cultural influences in Hess' life). As if to draw Hess out, Meda (so-called because he hates "George") tells a raunchy anecdote about a friend who once directed a film in Holland, where he was obliged to call "Cut!" at the end of a take, because "Cut!" means precisely that obscenely in Dutch. Hess offers little response.

Cut to Hess, lying in bed, studying the Myrthian dagger. A dream montage begins: Jack Sargent, wearing an elegant party mask, greets Hess at the museum; we see that Hess too is masked; the symbolic Queen of Myrthia (Mabel King) stands in a field, beckoning – an awesome, startling figure, weighted in beads and plumed with a looming head-dress of radiating, fern-like strands, she is the film's most indelible image. She moves in slow-motion through tall grasses, followed by two native subordinates. Hess wakes with a start and goes to the living room. Meda is gone.

In one of the picture's most inspired scenes, Hess wanders into the pitch of night and in his yard finds Meda, above his head, straddling a tree limb. To a parallel branch, he has tied a noose. Meda is drunk, gazing at the moon, considering suicide. (**BC** includes three cutaway shots of the full moon during this scene, **GEH** only one.) Hess eventually talks him down. Back inside, Meda monologues to Hess about his sense of being "a victim on the one hand, and on the other... a murderer." This confession catapults us to a later point in the night, when Meda attacks Hess (asleep in his bed) with what appears to be an axe. Hess dodges this, but their ensuing struggle ends with Meda grabbing the Myrthian dagger and stabbing Hess three times in the chest. During the stabbing, there is a brief cutaway to a framed photograph of jazz saxophonist Stanely Turrentine. (Novack here substitutes a hazy closeup of the Queen of Myrthia, lest the viewer have too many allusions to keep up with.) Immediately dis-

traught, Meda collapses on the bed.

Meda sits at a table, typing. Sunlight is streaming in through a window behind him. He peels his page from the roller and reads aloud, in a voice trembling with sensibility, formality, and marijuana, what he has written – a kind of suicide note:

TO THE BLACK MALE CHILDREN

Philosophy is a prison:
It disregards the uncanny things about you.
The result of individual thought is applicable only to itself.

There is a dreadful need in Man to teach;
It destroys the pure instinct to learn.
The Navigator learns from the stars.
The stars teach nothing.

The Sun opens the mind and sheds light on the flowers.

The Eyes shame the pages of any Book.
Gesture destroys Concept.
Involvement mortifies Vanity.

You are the Despoiled of the Earth;
That is as if you were water in the desert.
To be adored on this planet is to be a symbol of Success.
And you must not succeed on any terms, because Life is endless.

You are as nameless as a flower.
You are the child of Venus, and her natural affection is Lust.

She will touch your belly with her tongue,
But you must not suffer in it;
For Love is all there is, and you are Cannon fodder in its defense.

Cut to Meda kneeling in a tiled bathtub. He brushes his teeth in the bath water, takes a revolver from the edge of the tub, steps out and kneels on the bathroom floor, and puts the gun to his mouth. In the bedroom – to his own surprise – a very-much-alive Hess examines his chest in the mirror. No wounds. Meda, having instinctively moved the gun to his heart, fires and falls forward onto the checkered floor. Hess hears the shot and dashes to the bathroom, where he sees blood pooling out from under Meda's body. He falls to his knees and begins

Opposite: Gospel and blues singer Mabel King as Queen Helga of Myrthia.



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Hess tries to dissuade George Meda (Bill Gunn, background) from suicide.

lapping it up. (As seen in BC, this scene features snippets of footage not used for GGH—and vice-versa. No new action, just different camera angles and cutaways. More significant are their musical differences, with Noveck using a minimum of synthesizer stings to naked effect, replacing Gunn's original knock-out use of Mabel King—the Mythrian Queen herself—singing “March Blues.” The mournful piece plays as naturalistic, ambient music until Meda’s shot is fired, at which point it increases in volume and anguish and distortion, echoing in more than one way the scene’s parallel distortions of editing rhythm.)

Next we see Hess moving through a tall grassy field near his home, much like the Queen’s stomping grounds seen earlier in fantasy cutaways. For an instant, we cut back to Meda’s bath, where a wooden crucifix (previously hung on the wall) has fallen and is floating. Hess prays aloud in the field, then emits two intense screams of pain and grief, followed by a brief shot of him wearing an African robe, standing calmly with his head inclining forward as if in deference to a royal presence. (BC makes use of some slightly different footage in the field sequence—most significantly, shots of Hess shouting himself repeatedly in the chest to no mortal effect, presumably filmed by Gunn as a suicidal rebellion against his vampirism, and reinstates a Hess voiceover.)

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Suddenly (with Sam Waymon’s excellent theme song “You Got to Learn to Let It Go” making its first bright appearance on the soundtrack¹⁰), we see Hess—in Gunn’s disguise—donating to a blood bank. The subtitle PART II: SURVIVAL appears. The nurse leaves the room. Hess causes a small explosion in a wastebasket. He raids the bank’s refrigerator of its blood supply. Cut to an elegant lacon party on the grounds of Hess’s estate. In attendance is Hess’s pre-teen son, Rico (Enrico Fale), who we learn attends a boarding school. Father and son converse briefly in French. Hess wanders away from his guests as the soundtrack swells with the “Bungeli Work Song”—an authentic, African chant-song, which the film often uses to indicate a coming-on of the blood thirst.¹¹ Inside his house, Hess pours the bottled blood into a glass, and drinks it (in BC, with some inserted “hesitation”).

Later, Hess visits a seedy city bar. In the restroom, a milling group of locals call him “a slick brother.” Hess buys time with a small-time hooker, in whose bedroom her pimp ambushes him, hungry for this dandified John’s money roll. Hess is stabbed in the back to no avail, but both the pimp and hooker wind up dead. In closeup, Hess punctures the hooker’s neck with a pocket knife. Blood squirts from her throat in regular intervals. Hess stares at the spectacle, becomes ill and runs down the hall to retch over an already filthy toilet.



“In sickness and in health”—The newlyweds drag Meda’s blood body to its final resting place.

Later at home, Hess receives an insolent, demanding phone call from Ganja Meda (Marlene Clark), George Meda’s wife. She insists on speaking to her husband. Hess leads her to believe that her husband has disappeared after “going crazy again.” Having just flown in from Amsterdam, without enough money for a decent hotel, she asks Hess sharply to put her up for a few days, till Meda reappears. Hess sends a limousine to pick her up. After arriving and changing clothes, Ganja joins Hess in his living room. Hess pours drinks. Here, the Noveck version includes a short but revelatory dialogue segment, in which Hess tells Ganja that his own wife is dead; also, the Noveck scores this scene with Bach’s “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring,” whereas Gunn scores it with “March Blues.” While smoking a joint, Ganja tells Hess about a friend who smuggled grass back from Mexico in a condom suppository, whom she admires for his ingenuity. The two gradually embrace on the well-cushioned living room floor. Hess’s bloodlust is inflamed along with his libido, and he dashes away from Ganja to the attic for a covert glass of blood. She waits but eventually joins him there, and they make love.

Cut to Hess’s veranda, where he and Ganja are dining, attended to by Hess’s stiffly—and amusingly—“correct” butler, Archie (played to perfection by Leonard Jackson). In this, the movie’s funniest segment, Ganja deliberately baits Archie

with orders and condescending remarks. (In BC, this segment is shorter and is edited differently, with two shots of Archie’s face awkwardly inserted; in GGH, Archie’s face is not shown at all. Furthermore, BC begins the segment with a lovely and telling poetic voiceover, in which Hess asserts that Ganja’s beauty did not evolve easily, but that thousands had to die to lead to such perfection. These lines never appear in GGH.)

Next, Hess and Rev. Williams have a brief conversation outside; Hess is heading to his parked convertible and Rev. Williams, carrying saddles, is presumably heading to the stables. (Here, in BC, Rev. Williams says to Hess, “I gave my life to God, and you’re living in sin”; no such line appears in GGH.) Hess gets into his convertible, has a brief conversation with Ganja—standing on a ledge above him—about his feelings about marriage (and greasy cooking), and drives off. (At this point in BC, a shot of Rev. Williams adjusting the saddles in a shadowy stable appears; he is alone and singing a hymn; this shot is unique to BC.)

Cut to Hess approaching a white welfare mother (Tara Fields) and her baby, on the outside steps of a run-down tenement building. Hess follows her inside. Meanwhile, Ganja continues to tease and thwart Archie while unpacking the groceries they’ve bought for the dinner she intends to cook for Hess. (This scene is slightly shorter in BC and is accompa-

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nied by a rhythm-and-blues instrumental. In GGH, this scene has no background music.) Ganja has forgotten to buy wine and, after being informed by Archie that “Dr. Green keeps a very good wine cellar,” pays a visit despite the manservant’s objections. In a walk-in freezer, she finds Meda’s frozen corpse and screams.

Back to Hess, at the apartment house. He is sitting on the bed next to the bloodied body of the woman. The loud crying of the woman’s baby can be heard as Hess dresses and leaves. Throughout this scene, the camera slowly tilts right and left as though it is the eyes of the baby rocking in its cradle. (BC retains only the final frames of this scene and wipes the baby’s crying from the soundtrack, reducing the scene’s impact immensely and its subtext of hunger completely.)

That evening, at the dinner table, Ganja confronts Hess with the fact that she has discovered her husband’s body in his freezer. She informs Hess that Archie cooked the dinner, because she couldn’t “get it together.” Hess offers little reaction. Ganja gets up from the table and paces back and forth in an adjoining room. Then she returns to the dining room and sits down next to Hess. To him, she delivers an eloquent monologue about childhood snobball fights in Boston, growing up with a mother who did not want and misjudged her, and determining to “take whatever steps had to be taken, but always take care of Ganja.” In an impressively swift and startling change of tone, we cut to Ganja and Hess lovingly cavorting about the house, having their own snobball fight with Hess’s furnishings, with Sam Waymon’s upbeat jazz in the background. The music continues as we cut again, to the postlude wedding of Ganja and Hess. (In a remarkably understated and rather innovative bit of symbolism, the Queen of Mythria can be seen in attendance at this Christian ceremony. Look closely at the background of the scene’s very first shot: over Hess’s shoulder, standing far back under a tree, alone, the Queen of Mythria can be seen in full native regalia. Thankfully, this brilliant moment appears in both versions of the film.) As vows are exchanged, there is a powerful flash cutaway to Ganja and Hess dragging Meda’s cellphone-shrouded body through a field at night to a hidden resting place, accompanied ironically by Bach’s “Jesu...” This juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane seems to wed the couple on both fronts.

We cut to Hess and Ganja in bed together on their wedding night. They kiss and Hess says, “You know I want you to live forever... I mean, I really want you to live forever.” They embrace and the classical music gives way to the “Bungeli Work Song.” Dissolve—without violence—to Hess, naked, head

bent down, sitting on the bed next to Ganja’s bloodied body. Cut to: Ganja inside, looking at herself in a mirror, grimacing. Cut to: Ganja kneeling outside on the grass, lapping water from a stream or puddle. The “Bungeli Work Song” ends. Ganja and Hess, wearing African robes, walk slowly side-by-side in an area of grassy fields and trees that might as easily be Hess’s property or an African veldt. In voiceover, Ganja says “I had a strange dream last night. I dreamed you murdered me.” (In BC, this voiceover is longer and becomes a dialogue between Ganja and Hess.) As the two walk languorously along, there are nice shots of the camera pointing toward the sun, tracking under tree limbs. Soon, there is a voiceover of Hess speaking: “The only perversions that can be comfortably condemned are the perversions of others. I will persist and survive without God’s or society’s sanctions. I will not be tortured. I will not be punished. I will not be guilty.” Ganja and Hess appear to enact a minimal ceremony with recitations and an offering of flowers, which culminates in Hess stabbing Ganja three times with the Mythrian dagger. (In GGH, Gunn depicts this violent “ceremony” like a positive, even joyous, event—due in part to the exuberant version of “You Got to Learn to Let It Go” that accompanies it on the soundtrack; in BC, this music is omitted in favor of distorted screams, giving this second marriage an intensely negative connotation.)

Cut to: Ganja lying in bed, gasping. The “Bungeli Work Song” plays. Hess comes up into the room on an elevator and gives Ganja a pill to help her to sleep. Dissolve to Ganja, later, being administered a glass of blood by Hess, which she accepts. He then tells her, “We’re having a guest for dinner. I think you need a little distraction.” (These lines appear in BC, but are reversed; a guest examination reveals that an alternate take was used, with Duane Jones speaking his lines in reverse order.) Next we see Ganja and Hess at the dinner table with their guest (Richard Harrow), a fairly young, bearded Black man. He tells Ganja about his volunteer work with a community recreational center. (In BC, no dialogue can be heard in this scene, only music.) Dissolve to an elaborate, elegant sequence—filmed in artfully fragmented style—in which Ganja and the dinner guest make love in a room of the house. (This sequence is a bit shorter in BC and somewhat less explicit.) Eventually the lovemaking gives way to blood drinking as Ganja begins to lick from scratches on her partner’s back (see the “Bungeli Work Song”). Interact flash shots of Ganja smelling a flower, with blood on her lips, a distorted face on a statue or vase crying real blood, and Ganja

screaming in the wind with blood flowing down her chin. Cut back to the lovemaking room for a surreally beautiful shot of Ganja’s lover/victim rolling inertly off her body, his body literally sparkling with a covering of blood. Hess stands at the door to the room looking down at Ganja and the body on the floor. Ganja, anguished and ashamed, runs out of the room and Hess goes in, saying nothing, closing the door behind him. (In BC, Hess asks Ganja, “You save any for me?”)

Daylight. In long shot, Hess and Ganja drag their guest’s body, bagged in transparent polyethylene, through a tall field. As they are about to leave the body behind in the middle of the field, Ganja notices that it appears to be breathing. She tells Hess the body is alive, but he denies it and pulls her away from it. (In BC, this scene is slightly abbreviated and the sound of the body’s breathing is muffled.) Dissolve to Ganja and Hess sitting in near-darkness in front of a blazing fireplace. Ganja asks Hess what it is he’s reading, and he replies, “It’s a guide to our destruction. A solution. Helga, Fourth Queen of Mythria: ‘If you worship any god whatsoever... and if this god in which you trust be destroyed by forces dangerous to the survival of love, and if the implement by which this god was destroyed... does cast a shadow on the heart, then he shall be released into the bosom of his creator.’” Ganja asks, “If the shadow of the cross is against our hearts, I’ll destroy us?”

Cut to a church service in session. A children’s choir sings “You Got to Learn to Let It Go.” There is an exterior shot of Hess approaching the church. Inside, Rev. Williams says, “I ain’t gonna let evil in here. Evil is not coming between those doors back there.” There are several shots of their feet as Rev. Williams and some of his congregation dance on the stage. Then Rev. Williams says, “If there’s anyone that would like to be prayed for, would you come?” Led by the Reverend, the church segues into “Just As I Am.” We see Hess walking toward the aisle and standing in front of the stage, below the Reverend. Asking Hess to give his life to Jesus, Rev. Williams places his hand on Hess’s head. As the singing goes on, Hess seems more and more overcome by emotion and eventually raises his hands, turns, and walks out, looking up, smiling. (BC intercuts Hess’s salvation with solarized flashes of all his victims, as if his sins are being burned out of his mind and soul.) Cut to a sustained slow-motion shot of Hess spinning joyously through a field, his clothes loose and flowing.

Next we see Hess sitting in a darkened room, eyes closed, breathing deeply. A long shot reveals that he is sitting in the shadow of a large wooden cross that he’s suspended from the ceiling. We hear

the sounds of a male voiceover singing or chanting intensely, possibly in a foreign language. Ganja stands beside the cross, watching silently and warily. Hess pleads with her, “Come with me. Please, please, come with me.” Staring at the cross, wide-eyed, he gets up, smiling, and approaches it. The chanting gets louder and more intense and then is replaced by a series of jagged wheezing or moaning sounds that give way to a blood-curdling, shrill crying sound as Hess reaches out toward the cross and falls to the floor. (These disturbing wheezing and screaming sounds are replaced in BC by mild, almost melodic synthesizer music, shading Hess’s self-eccentricism with feelings of positive release, not the pain and horror of expansion Gunn intended.) The camera pans the length of Hess’s prostrate, unmoving body, followed by an evocative shot of leaves blowing across the floor of the room. (This appears in BC as the final shot, suggesting Ganja’s unseen departure through a door left open.)

Cut to an arresting shot of an ambulance arriving, with the camera inside the ambulance, looking out. Ganja, wearing an overcoat, stands outside waiting. (The enticed Fiat A12 cross on the windshield of the vehicle ironically positions itself over Ganja as it comes to a halt.) The attendants bring Hess’s body out of the house on a stretcher and ask Ganja some routine questions. Ganja stands alone in the drive as the ambulance leaves. Cut to inside the house. Ganja still wearing the overcoat, opens a window and gazes out. Cut to a high exterior shot of Hess’s sunning pool. As the camera zooms in, we see that the pool’s waters are churning. In slow motion, the dinner guest emerges from the pool, completely nude, and runs across the lawn toward the camera. He leaps and the frame freezes. The film ends with three discontinuous exterior shots of Ganja looking out the window; her expression unworkable. In the second of the three shots, she looks directly into the camera; in the third she seems to smile slightly.

Cut to: a children’s church choir about to begin singing a hymn, “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood.” The end credits begin to appear over this footage. After a short time, Gunn’s panning camera catches a little boy in an inadvertent mugging glance and freezes frame on him. At this point, a studio group version of “You Got to Learn to Let It Go” comes up on the soundtrack and the screen fades out. The remainder of the credits are presented in a crawl, after which the song continues to play over a black screen for another two full minutes.

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Fima Noveck Interviewed

By David Walker

Under his true name F.H. Novikov, Russian-born Fima Noveck is the credited director of *BLOOD COUPLE* (aka *DOUBLE POSSESSION*), the revised 1974 edition of *GANJA & HESS*. Noveck was early enamored of movies and broke into the film industry as an editor and director of photography, later immigrating to New York, where he established himself as a one-man postproduction house specializing in tailoring imported features to suit the American palate. In addition to *BC*, Noveck has "doctored" numerous imported features. His most noted success was his postproduction supervision of several Lina Wertmüller films, from *THE SEDUCTION OF MIMI* (1972) to *BLOOD FEGD* (1979). Noveck has resided in Los Angeles since 1966.

This interview was conducted by telephone on September 22, 1990.

In the last several years, *BLOOD COUPLE* has started turning up on several video labels under several different titles.

That I didn't know about. As a matter of fact, I had completely forgotten about this film until you approached me for this interview. It's not even on my résumé.

Your work on *BLOOD COUPLE* shows a lot of creative energy; did you

Part II Survival

To anyone privileged to have seen *GANJA & HESS*, seeing *BLOOD COUPLE* can be a strange and perplexing experience.

"...the Queen. It seems she needed such huge quantities of blood that her slaves were bled to death."

The film starts thusly, in mid-sentence, with the story's protagonist Dr. Hess Green reading aloud—pensively—from a book, smoking, his rich voice resonating with inflections of authority and bewildered pity over the ambient ticks of a grandfather clock. (A furnishing of heritage, the pronouncement of blood, a stabbing sound: It's all there, the horror to come.)

The intricate opening scenes of the original cut, in which Gunn managed to interweave perhaps four different narrative points-of-view within the space of a minute, are fully unwoven in *BLOOD COUPLE*, pruned with surgical precision to a state of uncomplicated lucidity. No sloppy hatchet job, this. The opening credits are reorchestrated over different music, with unfamiliar names appearing, and the direction is newly credited to one F.H. Novikov (aka Fima H. Noveck, then a NYC-based film doctor).

Bill Gunn was understandably upset about the film being taken away from him, and did not assist in the re-editing. Apart from the shock of seeing Gunn's film totally interpolated, it is reasonable to say that Noveck, for better or worse, put a great deal of care and creative energy into *BLOOD COUPLE*. Of course, the irony is that, while the devoted intensity of Noveck's reassembly of the film denotes a certain degree of respect for Gunn's work, a cross, uncaring cut-and-slash job might've retained more of the original's flavor. (This despite the fact that Noveck made a special effort to retain many of the unusual narrative techniques of the director's cut, such as voiceovers, cutaways to paintings and statues, and intertitles.) Nevertheless, *BLOOD COUPLE* does constitute a reduction of the real work, which it has essentially replaced in a market drastically undernourished for mature and intelligent works of fantasy, not to mention talent and daring.

BLOOD COUPLE is 33m shorter than the director's original cut, but this should not be taken as an easy index to the revised version's shortcomings. In fact, *BLOOD COUPLE* incorporates approximately 15m of footage shot for (but not used in) *GANJA & HESS*. Six major outtakes, detailed here, seem particularly noteworthy. In general, this once-jettisoned footage enhances the film's exposition to remind the viewer that this is a vampire film, as the word "blood" figures prominently in the restored scenes. Also, much more information is provided about the Myrthian dagger, the entire point of which would have been entirely lost in Gunn's version without its opening intertitles.

While the supplementary material in *BLOOD COUPLE* does much to clarify the elliptic storytelling in *GANJA & HESS*, the viewer should take this with a grain of salt. In a lecture he gave when presenting his film at the University of the District of Columbia in the early '80s, Gunn claimed to have peppered his original screenplay with a fair amount of traditional horror-movie subterfuge, simply to get the project made, thinking that the presence of such pages might discourage production interference, and knowing that he would be free to eliminate such scenes during post-production. Gunn's intention was to make a film about cultural displace-

ment—not vampirism. Therefore, although the following scenes do reinforce *GANJA & HESS* and each stands as a further confirmation of Gunn's talent, it is probably a mistake to think that Gunn didn't know what he was doing by deleting them. The vagaries of Gunn's intentions regarding the content of his screenplay may soon be clarified, since his original script is scheduled to be included in *SCREENPLAYS OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, an anthology edited by Phyllis Klotman, which Indiana University Press will publish in the Winter of 1990-91.

Until then, here—briefly described—are the six major additional scenes to be found in *BLOOD COUPLE*:

• After Hess has been greeted in the Brooklyn Museum by Jack Sargent, we see the two of them, George Meda, and a "Mr. Woods" (uncredited, a middle-aged White man) meeting in Woods' rather dark office.

WOODS: Dr. Green, it's so good to see you at last. Would you like to see what we've found? I think these may be the finest of relics to date of the Myrthian age. This is a piece of petrified wood. Notice the curious markings on the wood. Absolutely magnificent.

As this somewhat awkward dialogue does not seem to match Woods' lip movements, it seems possible that it was re-written (by Fima Noveck?) and redubbed. (30s)

• Hess' dinner with Meda—although shorter than it appears in *GH*—continues past the point where Gunn cuts it off.

HESS: Blood has a dreadful connotation, more like a passion for soiled underwear, or urine... desiring and drinking blood is a very anti-social act.

MEDA: I don't know. Suppose that we lived in a blood society.

HESS: We do live in a blood society. Nevertheless, if the idea ever caught on here, it would probably be considered a perversion. A blood sucker. A degenerate. (45s)

• Immediately after the scene described above, Meda and Hess relax together in Hess' living room. Meda is painting a watercolor of a suffering figure in front of a cross. Hess is scrutinizing the Myrthian dagger.

HESS: In analyzing this, it was found that even though it's obviously wood, it contains elements of human bone. Calcium, gelatin...

take a special interest in this project?

I take an interest in every project. I don't, shall we say, divide my energy into different points of intensity. When I take something on, that's it. In other words, I don't accept projects that I don't want to work on, because I put all of my energy into everything that I do; I live with it, for whatever period of time it takes.

How much time did you spend working on *BLOOD COUPLE*?

Six, maybe eight weeks. This picture was not only cut; the music was applied differently. It was re-edited, effects were added, all kinds of things. It was not a question of re-structuring the picture; it was a complete postproduction process.

Did Bill Gunn assist you with any of the re-editing?

No, but he liked what he saw when I showed it to him.

He was complimentary?

Yes. I'm always given *carte blanche* by directors. Then I come back and show them what I did.

What was your personal opinion of Gunn's cut?

Well, my own storytelling style is one of simplicity. I like a beginning, a middle, and an end—in that order. Of course, you're asking me what my feelings were 17 years ago, and I remember only impressions. My first impression was that I didn't quite know what the picture was about. It was confusing to me. If I remember correctly, my feeling was

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that it was an attempt at being esoteric for the sake of being esoteric. In other words, the message that had to be conveyed to the audience demanded to be simplified. I remember having a feeling that the story was going somewhere, but that I couldn't see where it was going until I thoroughly analyzed it. So that's what I did.

You reinstated a considerable amount of Gunn's outtakes.

Usually, when a picture comes to me to go through a second postproduction, I discover that the best takes were not used originally. I invariably find gems in the outtakes of any film, so I always examine the outtakes, and I also print the B negative if it wasn't done before.

I assume there was no new footage shot for *BLOOD COUPLE*.

No, there wasn't. I noticed that alternate takes were used, and some of the footage was solarized.

I always look at all the outtakes and, in this case, I found some stuff that I thought would fit the picture better than what was there before. The solarization I think I created. Now I remember: it was a negative/positive effect. It was done at an optical house.

Did you make a special effort to retain the original film's flavor?

In this case, yes, because the flavor was the thing that



Gunn the actor (background) watercolors at Hess' lectern in this scene, which appears only in *BLOOD COUPLE* (1975).

Then, Hess accidentally pricks his thumb with the knife.

MEDA: Well, I have to confess that this assignment was my second choice. My first was a trip to Alexandria. The only reason why I accepted this assignment is because I'm reading your book on Nigeria.

Hess excuses himself, saying he has some work to do before he sleeps, and they agree to have breakfast around nine the next morning. Interestingly, Meda is more composed and low-key in this scene than in any that appear in the Gunn version. (2m 12s)

• After the scene with Meda sitting in the tree, Hess and Meda are back in Hess' living room having a drink.

MEDA: Tell me, are you more interested in the blood of Christ than in his body?

HESS: I've lost all interest in the flesh, if that's what you mean.

MEDA: All right, so much for what you've lost. Tell me what you've gained.

HESS: That's none of your business.

MEDA: (Reading aloud from something on a table) "Explosions of light that signal—this is the



Gunn the filmmaker, with Duane Jones (left), directs the Brooklyn Museum exteriors for the main titles sequence.

beginning of death." Why do the Myrthians refer to it as the beginning of death rather than the end of life?

HESS: I suppose they knew something we don't.

MEDA: Do you think that it would be a terrible thing to drink blood?...

HESS: Well, I suppose it would be less of a sacrifice to drink blood than to spill it. What do you think?

MEDA: I don't know. I just wanted to work with you on this project, that's all. (2m 8s)

• After Ganja tells Hess at the dinner table that she knows her husband's body is in the basement, her important "snowball" monologue is replaced by this understated, powerful exchange, the best of the restored outtakes and perhaps the one most worthy of inclusion in the original cut. We see Ganja sitting in a chair with Hess standing behind her, leaning on the chair slightly.

GANJA: Why did you kill him?

HESS: I didn't kill him. Your husband committed suicide. I swear to you that's the truth.

GANJA: I believe you.

was so good about it. The flavor of the storytelling was the same. I always try to maintain the director's vision. I try to take a bird's eye view and see what the director wanted to say—something that maybe his editor, or whoever it was, wasn't able to tell very well—and I try to produce on the screen the director's vision as concisely and clearly as I can. I'm always faithful to the director.

That's your first loyalty.

Absolutely. Well, that's not completely true. My first loyalty is to the audience, actually, and then to the director, so that his work can be shown and be entertaining. But from a purely creative point, yes, it's the director.

What factors influence the billing you receive on a film? For example, you are credited on Mauro Bolognini's *THE INHERITANCE* [Eredliá Ferramonti, 1976] as editor and creative consultant, yet you are billed on *BLOOD COUPLE* as being its editor and director.

I don't remember how or why I got that director's credit. I do remember changing my name so that it wouldn't appear twice. Well, I didn't really change it; my real name is Novikov, and I shortened it for use in the country. I suppose somebody thought I deserved it because I re-directed the film so completely. I guess that's what it was.

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HESS: I didn't expect you would.
GANJA: I'm full of surprises... Why is his body in the freezer?

At this point, the screen goes black. We can hear the exchange as it takes place in the dark.

HESS: (mock dramatically, with a tone of irony) When I tossed your husband's body, I took his blood.

GANJA: What did you do with it?

HESS: I drank it.

GANJA: I think you're as crazy as he was.

Archie brings a candelabra which lights up the scene.

ARCHIE: It's the power, sir. They'll have them back on in a few minutes.¹²

Hess, still standing behind Ganja's chair, lets down her hair and kneads it.

GANJA: Marry me.

HESS: Do what?

GANJA: Marry me. (1m 35s)

● Immediately after Hess succumbs to the shadow of the cross, there is a haunting shot of Ganja running around the room, recoiling against the wall, in panic, unable to escape the all-encompassing shadow of the cross, which follows her reproachfully back and forth across the room. The shot ends with Ganja clinging in the corner, leaving her fate ambiguous. (22s)

In terms of personality, **BLOOD COUPLE** is quite different from **GANJA & HESS**. Noveck's cut flows along on a sustained somber note, asserting a ponderous atmosphere of tension at all costs, while Gunn's film—with its sudden and exhilarating modulations in tone and rhythm (as when Ganja's

intense soliloquy at dinner is followed by her cavorting happily with Hess through his dark and deathly still house)—is ebullient and mercurial, ever aware that the magic which an ancient Myrthan dagger can bring into a home is neither more or less than that which the presence of the right person at the right time can also ignite.

In the years since it was released to general indifference, **BLOOD COUPLE** has become one of the most retitled motion pictures in the brief history of home video. With the film discovered by Gunn, presumably ensnared in ownership limbo between Kelly-Jordan and Heritage Productions, and blindly revived by the saviors of **GANJA & HESS**, this most orphaned of horror videos has been adopted by a different company virtually every year.

Its first video appearance was as **BLOOD COUPLE**, on the now-defunct Video Gems label in 1965. Though no longer active as a distributor, Video Gems licensed **BLOOD COUPLE** and other titles last year to the North Carolina-based United American Video Corporation, whose LP-speed copies can be found for sale between \$9.95 and \$14.95.

Other companies have released the film on tape under a variety of different (and rather offensive) titles, including Lettuce Entertainment's **BLACK EVIL**, Impulse Productions' **BLACK VAMPIRE** (the same company releases the Amicus film **THE BEAST MUST DIE** as **BLACK WEREWOLF**), and Fantasy Video's **BLACK OUT: THE MOMENT OF TERROR**. The packaging of these retitled releases tends to be equally tacky and fraudulent. The box designed for **BLACK OUT** sports a photograph of an African warrior that could easily have been clipped from an old back number of **NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC**. Its liner notes wrongfully promise a running time of 92m. **BLACK VAMPIRE**'s box painting features the prominent silhouette of a Lugosi-like figure, in a billowing cape with preposterously erect collar, straddling (God knows why) a railroad track! The alternate universe credits on the box read "Produced by Allan Kelly" and "Directed by Lawrence Jordan."

In an ironic twist of circumstance, the film has not yet been released on tape as **DOUBLE POSSESSION**, although this is the best-known of all its later titles among fans of the genre.

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But what of **GANJA & HESS** and its survival?

As the original negative of **GANJA & HESS** was being submitted to Firma Noveck for re-editing, Gunn managed to obtain a single 35mm print of his

original cut and arranged for the safekeeping of his banished aristocrat child in the castle vaults of the Museum of Modern Art. Thus Gunn's film, desperate to survive, became a voluntary captive in an ebony tower of its own pretensions to art, an ironic parallel to the identity crisis of the film's withdrawn intellectual hero, Hess Green. Throughout the '70s, **GANJA & HESS** was screened several times for the public; it quickly became one of the most demanded titles in MOMA's permanent collection. In 1980, Gunn was one of 10 filmmakers invited to present his work at the Independent Black American Film Festival in Paris, and showed **GANJA** to a whole new generation of French admirers. By this time, however, **GANJA**'s popularity began to inflict serious damage on this only extant print. Footage became scratched and the print was stretched.

Pearl Bowser, one of the film's staunchest admirers, became aware of this deterioration and brought it to Gunn's attention. It was from him that she learned that the film's original negative had been cut and destroyed during the preparation of **BLOOD COUPLE**. Gunn arranged to have the print withdrawn from public access until sufficient funds could be collected to strike a new 16mm internegative. For many suspenseful months, this meant the virtual extinction of **GANJA & HESS**.

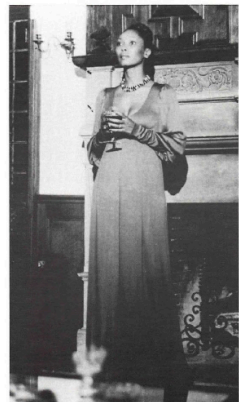
The film's ownership had drifted into legal ambiguity with its rejection by (and the later dissolution of) Kelly-Jordan Enterprises Inc., and no one seemed willing to pay the \$10,000 tab for restoring the most ambitious and lavishly praised Black film of its era. No one, that is, until Bowser went to Gunn with a fund-raising strategy, which involved sending the director and his film on the road, screening and discussing it at colleges, media centers, libraries and museums. In less than a year, the film's restoration costs were covered by pre-paid bookings arranged by Bowser, and Gunn was able to travel across the country with a brand-new 16mm print under his arm.

Thankfully, MOMA has made **GANJA & HESS** available again for public screenings and, last summer, New York's Whitney Museum of American Art offered seven screenings of the film during a retrospective of Gunn's work. **STOP** was also featured, unaltered after a twenty year depository to receive its first **VARIETY** review, more than a year after its director's death.

Epilogue

After **GANJA & HESS**, Bill Gunn's greatest successes were the productions he wrote for the stage. His play **THE BLACK PICTURE SHOW**, produced by

Joseph Papp in 1975 and later published, was based on Gunn's bitter experiences in the movie world and received critical honors and two Audelco Black Theater Awards (Best Play, Best Director). Gunn's bad experiences in the film business didn't discourage him from seeking his place in it; he went on to write several screenplays, including uncredited work on Tom Griest's **THE GREATEST** (1977), which is explicitly detailed in the confessional novel **RENE-STONE SHAVENROPPING**. In 1980-81, Gunn directed **PERSONAL PROBLEMS VOLUMES 1 & 2**, a four-hour pair of videotaped experimental soap operas conceived by his friend and publisher, the novelist Ishmael Reed. His final work as a director was 1982's **THE ALBERTA HUNTERSTORY 1900-1950**, a five-hour biography of the American blues singer produced for the BBC. The same year, he acted in a few films, most notably a large role in Kathleen Collins' well-received **LOSING GROUND** (1982), which reunited Gunn with Duane Jones) and a recurring stint on NBC-TV's **THE COSBY SHOW** as one of Cliff Huxtable's kitchen-table poker partners.



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NOTES

¹ The onscreen title makes use of an ampersand ("&"), not the word "AND" as most articles about the film have maintained.

² Tate, Greg; **VILLAGE VOICE**, April 25, 1989, p. 98.

³ Monaco, James; **AMERICAN FILM NOW** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁴ Monaco, *ibid.*

⁵ Sources like Michael Weldon's **THE PSYCHOCHRONIC ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FILM** and Phil Hardy's **ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HORROR MOVIES** credit Marlene Clark with appearing in "several" Russ Meyer films, but this statement appears to be unsubstantiated and insupportable. According to David K. Frasier's **RUSS MEYER: THE LIFE AND TIMES**, an indispensable and all-embracing bibliography of the filmmaker (\$39.95, McFarland & Company, Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640), only two Black actresses have starred in Meyer's work: Lovell Robie in **FINDERS KEEPERS, LOVE-ERS WEEPERS** (1967) and Marcia Millican in **BEYOND THE VALLEY OF THE DOLLS** (1970); neither is a pseudonym for Clark. Incidentally, Clark also briefly appeared in the Gunn-scripted **THE LANDLORD** (1970), which may have been her earliest screen appearance.

⁶ Unfortunately, Jones died at age 51 on July 22, 1988, having spoken only once to the press about his brief but forlunate career in fantastic films. The result, Tim Feneally's heartfelt "A Farewell to Duane Jones," appeared in **VISIONS** #80 (February 1989), pps. 14-18, 64.

⁷ Tate, *ibid.*

⁸ Kelly-Jordan survived long enough to produce and distribute one other film, **HONEYBARY**, directed by Michael Schultz, which has likewise faded into obscurity. It was Diana Sands' last film, released posthumously.

⁹ In **RENE-STONE SHAVENROPPING**, Gunn makes the following confession, pertinent to the somewhat unrealistically comfortable biography of this scholar's lifestyle: "When I was a child, my father taught me to believe that in a prior life I had lived in a palace." (p. 42) These words not only establish Gunn's personal identification with

This rare still affords a glimpse of the bloody demise of Archie (Leonard Jackson), a scene found in neither **GANJA & HESS** or **BLOOD COUPLE**.



Hess, but also identify the film as a fabulist description of how the past (in this case, racial memory) can inform or complicate one's illusory present.

¹⁰ BC scores this scene with a reprise of Waymon's Myrthan spiritual.

¹¹ The "Burgell Work Song" is first heard in **GBH** at the close of Hess' dinner with George Meda, when he says "I don't know what hunger is." During the Work Song's second hearing at the lawn party, the recording is played (faintly) with the electronic distortion heard over "March Blues" when Meda shoots himself and bleeds onto the floor. The combining here of these two soundtracks conveys, for the first time in the film, the subliminal message "hunger/blood." The two recordings remain inseparable for the remainder of the film.

¹² It should be noted here that this is Archie's last-positioned appearance in either version of the picture. Though his sudden and unexplained disappearance coincides with the marriage of Ganja and Hess, it is unlikely (considering Ganja's haughty demeanor) that he would have been dismissed from his duties. Curiously, a still in the **DOUBLE POSSESSION** novel shows Archie (Leonard Jackson) lying dead on the grassy grounds of Hess' estate, his glasses knocked off. Gunn and Noveck may have agreed, while assembling their successive cuts, that audiences wouldn't cotton to

such a likeable character being killed, but the oversight of a suitable farewell or exit for Archie is a grave flaw in both versions of the film.

¹³ Tate, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Monaco, *ibid.*

AVAILABILITY

GANJA & HESS—1973, 112m 47s—Distributed on 16mm and Videocassette by Third World Newsreel, 335 W. 38th Street, NYC, NY 10018 (212/947-9277), and by African Diaspora Images, PO Box 3517, Brooklyn, NY 11202 (718/ 852-8353).

BLOOD COUPLE—(aka **DOUBLE POSSESSION**)—1975, 79m 19s—Video Gems (OP), United American (\$14.95)

BLACK EVIL—Lettuce Entertainment, \$39.95, OP

BLACK OUT: THE MOMENT OF TERROR—Distinctive Movie Network/Fantasy Video, \$59.95, OP

BLACK VAMPIRE—Impulse Productions, \$59.95, OP



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Screen: Gunn's 'Ganja &

By A. H. WEILER APRIL 21, 1973

As a black-oriented, contemporary horror study, "Ganja & Hess," which arrived at the Playboy yesterday, is dedicated to what is obviously meant to be a serious theme. The artistry for which it strives, however, is largely vitiated by a confusingly vague mélange of symbolism, violence and sex.

Bill Gunn, the talented black writer ("The Landlord," etc.), who makes his debut as a screenwriter-director with "Ganja & Hess" (in which he also appears), leaves a compassionate viewer with a pressing need for fuller explanations. He is recounting in decidedly clouded, episodic style, the Grand Guignol-like adventures of a black anthropologist (Duane Jones), who, after killing his neurotic associate (Bill Gunn) in a sudden fight, becomes immortal and addicted, for some arcane reason, to a passionate yen for blood.

Our plagued researcher also takes up with his late assistant's willing, amorous widow, Ganja (Marlene Clark). And, between bouts of lovemaking and angst, he manages to satisfy that gory compulsion through a series of murders (a prostitute, her pimp, etc.) before freeing himself by death (with the aid of a friendly minister) of his addiction.

Mr. Gunn's elliptical approach to the sanguine subject is ineffectually arty and does little to conceal the film's accent on blood and nudity. As an actor, he is merely given to pointless philosophizing. As our latterday Dracula with a chauffeured Rolls-Royce, Duane Jones robs a bloodbank between slayings and sex, which must be a

new wrinkle in this genre. But he is, essentially, a dour, laconic type who rates little sympathy.

Dressed or nude, Miss Clark is an arresting presence as the enamored Ganja. Also, she occasionally invests an unbelievable character with style and humor. "Everybody is into something," she calmly replies when Mr. Jones asks her if she thinks he's "psychotic." whi Which is about as funny and rational as "Ganja & Hess" ever gets to be.

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'To Be a Black Artist'

SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES MAY 13, 1973

TO THE EDITOR:

THERE are times when the white critic must sit down and listen. If he cannot listen and learn, then he must not concern himself with black creativity.

A children's story I wrote speaks of a black male child that dreamed of a strong white golden-haired prince who would come and save him from being black. He came, and as time passed and the relationship moved forward, it was discovered that indeed the black child was the prince and he had saved his friend from being white. That, too, is possible.

I have always tried to imagine the producers waiting anxiously for the black reviewers' opinions of "The Sound of Music" or "A. Clockwork Orange."

I want to say that it is a terrible thing to be a black artist in this country — for reasons too private to expose to the arrogance of white criticism.,

One white critic left my film "Ganja and Hess," after 20 minutes and reviewed the entire film. Another was to see three films in one day and review them all. This is a crime.

Three years of three different people's lives graded in one afternoon by a complete stranger. to the artist and to the culture. A. H. Weiler states in his review of "Ganja and Hess" that a doctor anthropology killed his as sistant and is infected by at blood disease and becomes immortal. But this is not so, Mr. Weiler, the assistant cornmitted suicide. I know this film does not address you, but in that auditorium you might have heard more. than you were able to over the sounds of your own voice.

Another critic wondered where was the race problem. If he looks closely, he will' find it in his own review.

If I were white, I would probably be called "fresh and different." If I were European, "Ganja and Hess" might be "that little film you must see" Because I am black, I do not even deserve the pride that one American feels for another when he discovers that a fellow countryman's film has been selected as the only American film to be shown during "Critic's Week" at the Cannes Film Festival, May, 1973. Not one white critic from any of the major, newspapers even mentioned it.

I am very proud of my actors in "Ganja and Hess." They worked hard, with a dedication to their art and race that is obviously foreign to the critics. I want to thank them and my black sisters and brothers who have expressed only gratitude and love for my effort.

When I first came into the "theatre," black women who were actresses were referred to as "great gals" by white directors and critics. Marlene Clark, one of the most beautiful women and actresses have ever known, was referred to as "a brownskinne looker" (New York Post). That kind of disrespect could not have been cultivated in 110 minutes. It must have taken at least a good 250 years.

Your newspapers and critics must realize that they are controlling black theater and film creativity with white criticism. Maybe if the black film craze continues, the white press might even find it necessary to employ black criticism. But if you can stop the craze in, its tracks, maybe that won't be necessary.

BILL GUNN Author and director of "Ganja and Hess" New York, 1973

Bill Gunn, Playwright and Actor, Dies at 54 on Eve of Play Premiere

By C. GERALD FRASER

Bill Gunn, a playwright, screenwriter, novelist and actor, died Wednesday in Nyack (N.Y.) Hospital, one day before his play "The Forbidden City" opened at the Public Theater. He was 59 years old and lived in Tappan, N.Y.

Joseph Papp, the head of the New York Shakespeare Festival and director of Mr. Gunn's new work, said the playwright had been hospitalized with meningitis and had died of encephalitis.

The current play is one of several Mr. Gunn wrote over the last 29 years. His first creation was "Marcus in the High Grass," in 1960. His other dramas include "Johnnas," which was made into a telefilm and won an Emmy award in 1972, and "Black Picture Show," which Mr. Papp produced in 1975.

Mr. Papp said yesterday that Mr. Gunn was "one of the great black writers."

"He understood the kind of psychological relationship of blacks to whites more than anybody," Mr. Papp said. "He sort of knew both sides of the story in an emotional way." Mr. Papp said he would probably produce two remaining plays by Mr. Gunn, and he added that the writer had "left all his manuscripts and plays and all of his writings to the New York Shakespeare Festival." Started as an Actor

Mr. Gunn, a native of Philadelphia, began his theatrical career as an actor. He had roles in the feature film "The Sound and the Fury" in 1959, made his Broadway debut in 1954 in "The Immoralist" and performed in the Off Broadway drama "Take a Giant Step" in 1956. He also toured with "A Member of the Wedding" in the late

1950's. Mr. Gunn appeared on "Look Up and Live" on CBS Television and wrote plays for live television anthology series.

Mr. Gunn also wrote and directed feature films. His best-known work was "Ganja and Hess," a vampire story that developed a cult following. He directed "The Alberta Hunter Story," for the BBC.

Mr. Gunn had definite ideas about his work. "I've liked every script I've ever written," he told an interviewer in 1971, and "I've hated every movie made from them."

Mr. Gunn wrote two novels, "All the Rest Have Died," about a black man's success in the theater, and "Rhinestone Sharecropping," on a black screenwriter's humiliation in Hollywood, which he also reworked for the stage.

Audreen Ballard, the executive editor of Lear's magazine and a friend of the playwright, said yesterday that Mr. Gunn "had a wonderful sense of the moods and nuances that texture many of our lives, and he never explored anything in an ordinary way. Being taken with the mystery, secrets and one's emotional inner sanctums, he explored them with a verve and imagination that refused to be hemmed in and confined by traditional stereotypes and judgments."

Mr. Gunn is survived by his mother, Louise, of Philadelphia.

Crew:

Director
Writer
Director of Photography
Composer
Producers

Editing
Production Design
Costume Design

Cast:

Duane Jones
Marlene Clark
Bill Gunn
Sam Waymon
Leonard Jackson
Candece Tarpley
Richard Harrow
Betty Barney
Mabel King
Betsy Thurman
Enrico Fales
Tommy Lane
Tara Fields

Bill Gunn
Bill Gunn
James E. Hinton
Sam Waymon
Chiz Schultz
Jack Jordan (executive)
Quentin Kelly (executive)
Joan Shigekawa (associate)
Victor Kanefsky
Tom John
Scott Barrie

Dr. Hess Green
Ganja Meda
George Meda
Reverend Luther Williams
Archie
Girl in Bar
Dinner Guest
Singer in Church
Queen of Myrthia
Poetess
Dr. Green's Son
Pimp
Woman with Baby