

UNHOLY ROLLERS

Director: Vernon Zimmerman. Script: Zimmerman and Howard Conin. Photography: Mike Shea. AIP.

Unholy Rollers originated as an attempt by American International Pictures to beat MGM's *Kansas City Bomber* to the anticipated roller derby box-office bonanza. "But can we get it out before *Kansas City Bomber*?" executive producer Roger Corman reportedly asked writer-director Vernon Zimmerman—and this after *K. C. Bomber* had already been in production six months. "Sure," Zimmerman replied. And a film was born.

Unholy Rollers didn't make its deadline—*K. C. Bomber* came out several months ago—but it still shows the marks of haste and slapdashery. And that may be one of the reasons it's so much better than MGM's multimillion dollar turkey.

Unholy Rollers is so bad it's good. The film flaunts its uninhibited love for everything decent folk call Bad Taste: traveling salesmen jokes, tufted velvet sofas, STP decals, greaser rock, suede hot pants, vinyl boots—and roller derbies. Zimmerman's treatment of the derby subculture is realistic in spirit and zest—but not in detail. *Unholy Rollers* is an exuberant, rococo, preposterous exaggeration of the skating lifestyle. "Reality was an inspiration to be tampered with," Zimmerman said in a recent interview.

The exaggeration isn't surreal, but it isn't subtle either. *Unholy Rollers* follows the fortunes of Karen Walker (Claudia Jennings), a ballbusting (literally), gun-toting young lady ready to

trample over everything that stands between herself and glory—even if she has to go out of her way to do it. Her life is one extended hyperactive frenzy; she clobbers employers, insults strangers, abandonedly vandalizes and carouses. Karen soon gets her Rise in the thrill-oriented world of the roller derby—and her all-too-predictable Fall.

Every bit character is a freak, and every freak tells a story. Like the early *Dragnet* shows, *Unholy Roller* is populated with odd types, each more eccentric than the last: a crackbrained team physician, an eye-popping used car salesman (a Cal Worthington take-off), an ex-high school basketballer now sporting a shriveled arm, and so on.

The dialogue, sound track and photography are similarly excessive. The sportscaster's commentary is riddled with little jokes about the beer that's "ecologically correct" and the TV camera lens "specially treated to ward off insects." The music is provided by an oldies group called Louie and the Rockets—all leather, rivets, and white socks—who would make ShaNaNa wince, and who sing delightfully bad renditions of Fifties hits like "Sincerely" and "Sweet Little Sixteen." And the colors! Zimmerman, formerly a painter, has photographed the film in garish, bright colors—all of which clash with each other. If a character is wearing an outfit, odds are none of the pieces match; and one character, a bearded black heavy, wears a pink T-shirt, lavender scarf, and yellow mask.

Zimmerman's approach is that of a physician giving electroshock treatments to a cadaver. He keeps hyping the trite and familiar exploitation plot with jolts of gratuitous sex and violence, vulgar wisecracking, incongruous actions, riotous sounds and colors. And in the end Zimmerman's shock treatments are much more exciting than the forgettable story line, and, in fact, give the film a unique personality.

Unholy Rollers stands in the tradition of Hollywood B pictures of the late forties and early fifties. It was made for under \$500,000 on a 20-day shooting schedule, and, like B films, compensates for a tired storyline with a flashy and energetic style. The manner in which Zimmerman

turns every bit character into a freak is reminiscent of Robert Aldrich's 1953 *Kiss Me Deadly*, a film where if a new face appeared on the screen, you knew you were going to get a new schtick. Claudia Jennings's character in *Unholy Rollers* is a psychopathic exaggeration of an already psychopathic character—Peggy Cummins's murderess in the 1949 *Gun Crazy*. (I'm not just imagining these similarities. Zimmerman recently said the inspiration for much of *Unholy Rollers* came from a film noir series shown at Filmex last year—a series which included both *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Gun Crazy*. "What I really wanted to make," Zimmerman went on, "was *Gun Crazy* on wheels.") Of all the B gangster crime films, *Unholy Rollers* reminds me most of Phil Karlson's 1955 *Five Against the House*, a film whose cheapness, expediency, and bluntness had a similar charm.

If Zimmerman's film is not as good as the B films it emulates, it is not only because of the overintellectualized nature of his concept, but also because of the nature of the beast it is dealing with, that is, Roger Corman—but first I'd like to say something good about Zimmerman's dealings with Corman. Over the years Corman has employed many of the best young directors (Monte Hellman, Martin Scorsese, Andy Meyer, Curtis Harrington, Peter Bogdanovich), yet somehow their films usually come out looking like Roger Corman films. His influence is absolutely pervasive; he could make *Aida* look sleazy. Zimmerman, I think, has found the most successful way to deal with Corman. Instead of trying to defeat vulgarity with sincerity (as Martin Scorsese disastrously attempted in *Box Car Bertha*), Zimmerman out-vulgarizes the Master himself. *Unholy Rollers* regularly features the flaunting of nubile breasts—which, as any AIP director will tell you, is a Roger Corman trademark. But Corman didn't even have to require Zimmerman to inject any gratuitous nipples in *Unholy Rollers*, because Zimmerman had already injected them. Where Corman is crass, Zimmerman becomes crasser; where Corman is cheap, Zimmerman becomes El Cheapo. By pushing Corman an inch further than even Mr. Pop-Schlock Taste would normally go, Zimmer-

man manages to create a film world apart from his producer—a very rare achievement.

But, in the end, it is the Corman-esque exploitation elements which do Zimmerman in. There is just some kitsch you cannot redeem, Pauline Kael to the contrary. The mandatory Corman exploitation scenes, the cheap AIP look are almost impossible to transcend. Try as you might, it's hard to beat the Devil at his own game.

For example, Zimmerman's treatment of women—and *Unholy Rollers* is a film about women—is absolutely dense, worthy of such other Corman exploiters as *Women in Cages*. When a crude exploitation scene such as the poolroom stripdown comes on screen one realizes that the film is not only a clever artistic mannerism, but is also a vulgar film which exploits its female lead character—something *Gun Crazy* never did.

Nevertheless, *Unholy Rollers* is a delightful antidote to the artsy-fartsy lap dissolves and soft-focus photography of *Kansas City Bomber*. It's hard, fast, and vulgar, full of life and personality. It will be loved by the very people it exaggerates, and by those others who realize that its exaggeration is based on love rather than contempt.

—PAUL SCHRADER

