

THE WORLD IS DEAD. ONE SURVIVOR. THEN THE OTHERS. CRAWLING IN DARKNESS. HIDING FROM LIGHT. THE STRANGEST SECT OF ALL. HUNTING THE LAST MAN ON EARTH.



THE OMEGA MAN

...a mediocre, uneven mishmash of mealy-mouthed social consciousness...

THE OMEGA MAN A Warner Bros Release. 7/71. In Panavision and Technicolor. 98 minutes. Produced by Walter Seltzer. Directed by Boris Sagal. Screenplay by John William and Joyce Corrington based on the novel by Richard Matheson. Director of photography, Russell Metty. Edited by William Ziegler. Music by Ron Grainer. Art direction, Arthur Loel and Walter M. Simonds. Set decoration, William L. Kuehl. Sound, Bob Martin. Assistant director, Donald Roberts.

Neville Charlton Heston
Matthias Anthony Zerbe
Lisa Rosalind Cash
Dutch Paul Losio
Zachary Lincoln Kilpatrick
Richie Eric Laneuville

Some stories are probably cursed to be persistently redone in films, only to be persistently mutilated by one thing or another. One such story is Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, a short, swift, disturbing after-doomsday chiller, which was abortively made into the AIP film *THE LAST MAN ON EARTH* in 1964, ineptly directed by Sidney Salkow.

Now, once again Matheson's work is attempted, and the results may be far better, but the film is a mediocre, uneven mishmash of mealy-mouthed social consciousness, heavy-handed characterizations, sloppy development, and erratic style. It is titled *THE OMEGA MAN*, and it bears very little resemblance to its source.

There are some wonderful things in the film, but it just doesn't add up to anything as good as its potential. The early scenes of the lone man, driving around New York's deserted streets, reminds one of Harry Belafonte's eerie wanderings in the opening moments of *THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL*. They are beautifully, awesomely achieved scenes, the loneliness and hidden terror conveyed with such absorbing, devastating impact that one is prepared for the best. Charlton Heston is superb in evoking this quality of affecting solitude, his talks with himself, his single-handed combat against pasty-faced germ warfare survivors, and the personal drive and conviction that is not too dissimilar from his Taylor of *PLANET OF THE APES*.

Alas, one's hopes diminish as the film progresses. Heston meets up with human survivors like himself, including a radical black girl who eventually falls for him, lending a falsely achieved note of racial harmony. We discover that the plague victims are a group of religious fanatics called The Family, anti-social, anti-materialistic, and anti-human. Their scenes would be laughable if they weren't played with such ludicrously grim solemnity. As it is, John William and Joyce H. Corrington's sloppily episodic, fa-

Anthony Zerbe as Matthias.



Scenes from *THE OMEGA MAN*, based on Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, now in release from Warner Bros. Top: Members of The Family capture Neville (Charlton Heston) in his apartment. Bottom: Richie (Eric Laneuville) becomes a victim of The Family. Warner Bros is attempting to key its appeal to black audiences.

tuously smug screenplay makes them merely an annoyance rather than a disturbing evocation of pure spiritualism.

Director Boris Sagal has none of the feeling or compassion for social conscience or character relationships that Franklin J. Schaffner displayed so intensely in his *PLANET OF THE APES*. His visual sense is curiously uncertain and only occasionally evokes a quality of fear and loneliness that Heston achieves, especially in the opening scenes.

Photographer Russell Metty helps Sagal achieve some dazzling, strangely powerful visual qualities and, possibly if not for him, the film would have been as ugly visually as it is in its conceptual attitudes and realization. Chase and action sequences are unevenly paced and sometimes truly effective.

For the most part, Sagal uses Heston's unique strength and passion of character very well, but his loss of control over the other actors is all too evident. Anthony Zerbe remains one of the most misused of all film actors, and his rampagingly theatrical, overbearing performance as Matthias, The Family leader, is truly embarrassing. He is a marvelous actor, as he showed in *THE MOLLY MAGUIRES*, but things like this are beneath his talents.

Even with its earlier virtues, and an occasional witty throwaway, *THE OMEGA MAN* is one of the most unfortunate failures of science fiction in recent years. Script, direction, and most of the performers manage to deflate a powerful, intriguing concept, and whether or not people of genuine talent will make anything definitive or memorable out of *I Am Legend* has yet to be seen.

Dale Winogura