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## BUBBA HO-TEP (2003)

A Review

by **Neil Karassik**

28 September 2004 | 909 words



### The Film

Good news everyone: Elvis Presley, the King of Rock 'n' Roll, lives! He may not be alive and well, but he's alive nevertheless. You see, the King (Bruce Campbell) now resides in an old, decrepit East Texas nursing home where he lays bed-ridden, tending to a cancerous growth on the tip of his penis. One of the home's nurses assigned to take care of Elvis's "puss-filled crankshaft" claims that his name is really Sebastian Haff, an ex-Elvis impersonator who broke his hip falling off a stage and went into a deep coma only to come back with "a few... problemmmms." Of course, this was all part of a clever ploy by Elvis to switch places with the best impersonator in the country and live the life he truly desired, away from the hassles of fame and fortune and the pettiness of his so-called friends and associates. All was well until the catastrophic spill, and now we join Elvis here, in a run-down home chock-full of old loons.

***“Ask not what your rest-home can so for you, but what you can do for your rest-home.”***

Things are looking pretty grim for Mr. Presley/Haff, that is, until we are introduced to his only believer and best friend John F. Kennedy (Ossie Davis). Of course, if we've made it this far we already know that this isn't going to be your typical Kennedy; in fact this Kennedy is an old, Ding-Dong loving black man who says he's black because "they dyed me this color! Can you think of a better way to hide the truth than that?" When the two senile American icons discover an ancient mummy dressed in cowboy duds who is sucking the souls of the home's residents through their assholes and writing hieroglyphics ("stick pictures") in the toilet stalls ("shit-house walls"), they decide that they must put an end to this ancient evil and save the souls of these poor old folks.

It is fascinating to wonder how *BUBBA HO-TEP* (2002) may have turned out had it had a slightly bigger budget. Of course, many fans of the film would dismiss such a thought as unappreciative of the film's camp value. Perhaps Bubba Ho-Tep's scarabs are meant to look like some sort of Cronenbergian hybrid from the likes of *NAKED LUNCH* (1991). CGI would have killed the aesthetic of those pesky cockroaches and probably would have taken the enjoyable artificiality out of the proceedings. Director Don Coscarelli, well aware of budgetary constraints, makes smart, economical choices in setting up shots and delivering suspense. One debatable directorial choice of note is the use of a sped-up/slowed-down time continuum and a distorted space, where we see Elvis watch the janitor clean his room, leave, re-enter, the nurse enters, leaves... They all jump around the frame with disorienting, stop-motion movements and a loud (whooshing) sound. Scenes composed in this fashion feel arbitrary and clichéd, having been done repeatedly in a number of low-budget films like *CABIN FEVER* (2002) briefly, *DONNIE DARKO* (2001) excessively, *MAY* (2002) briefly and *REQUIEM FOR A DREAM* (2000) on overkill, just to name a few.

**Video:** The picture is uniformly grainy. This intentional effect, accomplished by shooting on high-speed film (800 ASA), is used by the director to set a specific tone and feel. Once sped up, the picture is noticeably softer and the artificiality of the make-up less noticeable. While many films employ this look sporadically, it is used all throughout *BUBBA HO-TEP*.

### DVD Extra Highlights

**Audio Commentary by Don Coscarelli and Bruce Campbell:** Rather than sounding like the traditional commentary in which the director gives the usual speech and promotes the film, this is a conversation between two friends as they watch the picture live. Campbell, as always, is very amusing and spontaneous, asking a lot of valid questions with Coscarelli gladly giving his input.

**Audio Commentary by the King:** Here is where a typical feature like an audio commentary really spruces up a release. Those who appreciate Bruce Campbell or this picture should not hesitate to listen to this commentary; it is frighteningly well played and laugh out loud funny. **Joe R. Lansdale Reads from *Bubba Ho-Tep*:** Cult author Joe R. Lansdale, who wrote the short story that inspired the film, reads an excerpt from his original story. While similar to the screenplay in many ways, the excerpt has many more four letter words than the film and displays a crudeness and morbidity of descriptive that the filmmakers did not elect for. This extra feature is quite useful, especially for the purpose of comparing the literary and cinematic versions of specific scenes.

**Packaging:** The DVD (contained in a stylish limited edition slipcase cover) also comes with a ten-page booklet with a letter by Bruce Campbell, production stills, conceptual designs, and comments on these by Coscarelli and Campbell. The sharp menu designs thankfully don't give away crucial information or contain annoying quotations (until you arrive at the special features, but by then you've probably seen the film).

### Parting Words - T.C.B. Baby

*BUBBA HO-TEP* is certainly not your run-of-the-mill B-horror movie; in fact it confounds the very notion of genre itself. Is this comedy, horror, drama? These questions are brought up by the film's director and even he admits to having had serious trouble classifying the film for the festival circuit. But for anyone who can appreciate originality, *BUBBA HO-TEP* stretches its genre boundaries to nearly absurd lengths. This film and DVD are both highly recommended and should be coveted by any lover of B-movie slash horror slash comedy slash drama slash coming-of-age cinema.

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[Decasia \(2002\)](#)

Next entry :: >>>  
[Fahrenheit 9/11](#)

[ [Back to Top](#) ]