

FILM | SHORT CUTS | IN THEATERS

Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy

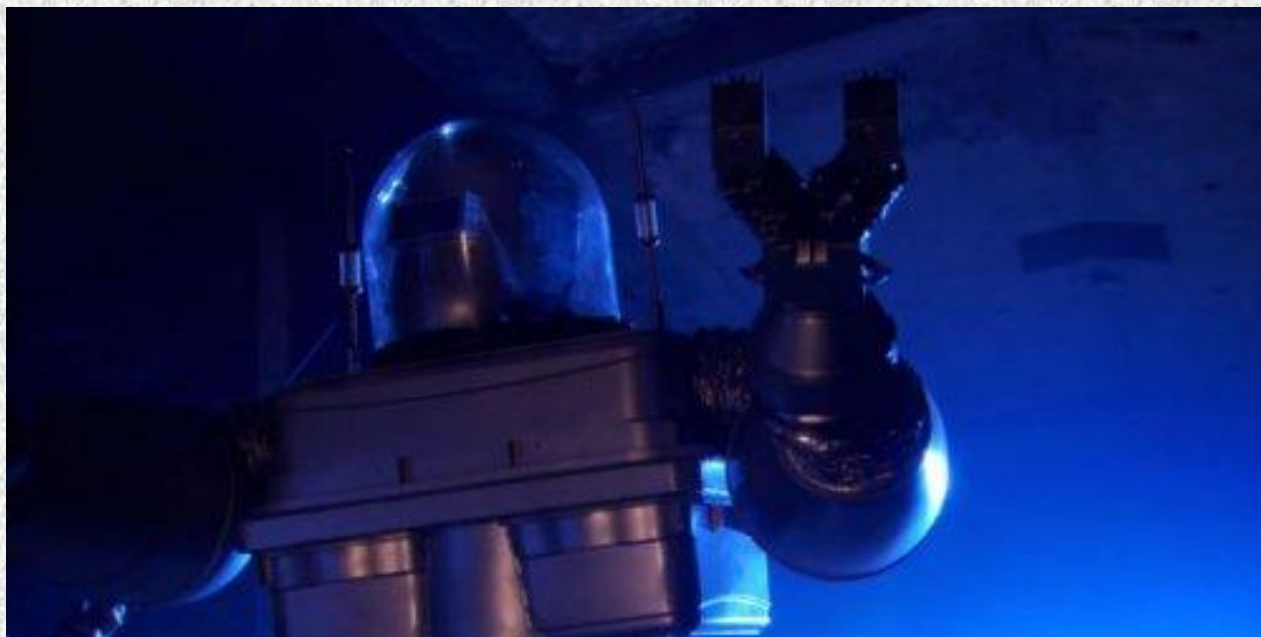
aka Mil Mascaras: Resurrection

by Bill Gibron



They stand as titans, not just in their area of expertise, but in the hearts of their fellow faithful countrymen. Foreigners scoff at such devotion, chalking it up to a lack of cultural sophistication and an allegiance to outdated tradition. But when you look around the world, you see them everywhere. Japan has its kaiju, while India enjoys those bigger than life Bollywood gods. Yet no one can top Mexico and its worship of all things wrestling. Under the lucha libre label, a number of unstoppable heroes have managed to become media superstars - and none are bigger than the man mountain himself, Mil Mascaras. Returning to movies after years in semi-retirement, the suplex sensation reminds us that, no matter how comical they appear to the outside world, masked marvels like El Santo, Blue Demon, and himself stand as wonderful symbols of universal morays - and amazing movie entertainment like his latest offering, *Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy*.

With his love life in tatters and his professional career under scrutiny, it looks like things can't get much worse for grappling Renaissance man Mil Mascaras. But when the local police chief asks for his help in solving several blood bank robberies, our hero can't say no. Indeed, he discovers a link between the crimes and an ancient temple just outside of town. Sure enough, the Aztec Mummy is back, and he has a date with destiny - and Mil's maybe girlfriend (and daughter of his learned science associate) Maria. As he calls on his minions to undermine the wrestler's reputation with the public, the law begins breathing down the fiend's reanimated neck. Before long, the professor has figure out the Mummy's plan - he will use Mil Mascaras' fame to take over the world, and then he will marry Maria and reestablish his kingdom on Earth.



Mil Mascaras vs. The Aztec Mummy is fantastic. It's the answer to a prayer you didn't even know you required. So inherently cheesy that it makes Jarlsberg jealous, and yet firmly rooted in the camp crazy creature features of Mexico's monster mythos, it's entertainment as only students of the cinematic species could create. With a stellar script by Jeffrey Uhlmann that expertly balances homage with humor (not to mention some of the best over the top dialogue this side of a certain Santo) and a bevy of perfect performances, it marks a welcome return for the larger than life Latin American miracle. Mil Mascaras ("the man of a thousand masks") is an amazing character - part James Bond, part Stephen Hawking, and far more fierce than Hulk Hogan or Tyra Banks (whose fashion sense he often outdoes). And after a 15 year absence from the big screen, this return to form is nothing short of outstanding.

At first, it seems that the forces behind this film will mistake kitsch for creativity. As a slinky, scantily clad babe does her version of the watusi, there's lots of preening and pomp. The head priest shouts out some ritualistic rot. Blood is spilled. But then Mil's main nemesis, the famed Aztec Mummy arrives, and he sets the tone for the rest of the film. He's all ego and Egyptian jive. With the added excellence of Willard Pugh as a no nonsense police chief and Kurt Drennen Mirtsching as a scientific sidekick who's a wealth of information - mostly expositional - the entire company is top class. It bears mentioning that *Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy* has several giggly cameos, including turns by PJ Soles (as a wrestling judge?), Richard Lynch (as the President of the United States??) and Harley Race (as himself???). But the best bit is saved for last, when several noted luchadores, including El Hijo Del Santo, Neutron, La Torcha, and Blue Demon Jr, among others, show up to kick some undead zombie butt.



Between the schlock scary premise and the occasional lapses into satisfying surrealism (gotta love the killer robot which appears to be built out of old steam table parts), *Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy* rivals any super hero movie made in the mainstream. It provides enough fun to satisfy a schoolyard full of genre geeks, while never once looking down on or mocking its famed figurehead. Anyone who knows the luchador films understands that these are examples of pure hero worship, idolatry without a lick of irony or self-imposed satire. Throw in a few flying drop kicks and you've got yourself a franchise. Besides, the audience believes in these men and they are not afraid to show their adoration. That's why *Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy* often feels like a religious experience. Our lead is the Messiah of the squared circle, a man beloved for his ability in the ring, and ethos outside of it. And his followers love every barrel-chested moment.

In fact, the lack of legitimate violence (there are a couple of minor gore effects) and the constant recounting of Mil's moralistic code makes a movie like this appear greater than its goofball parts. After all, you wouldn't expect a narrative that features a ranting pile of bandages to offer up sound personal principles. And yet that's the key to the entire category's endearing timelessness. These films are really aimed at kids, lobbing life lessons over their head while keeping them on the straight and narrow. Someone like Mil Mascaras offers up the valuable tutorials on such important issues as fair play, education, clean living, and the benefits of an unlimited sparkly wardrobe. Sure, this could seem like reaching, especially when many of the old school storylines seemed to regress into good guy/bad being dullness. Thanks to the careful consideration of Uhlmann and his collaborators, *Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy* reestablishes the real legacy of the luchador.



Unlike so many other attempts at recapturing a once prime motion picture format, this latest adventure for the masked marvel feels as familiar and friendly as a visit with an old childhood chum. Just because the associate wears several dozen sequin-draped façades doesn't lessen our love, right? If you've never seen a luchadore film, or would like to experience the singlet sensation anew, *Mil Mascaras vs. the Aztec Mummy* is a great place to start. It's faithful without being turgid, immensely charming without going overboard or obtuse. After decades as one of the leading lights in Mexican wrestling, Mil Mascaras has a great deal to be proud of. He can add this post-millennial update of his image to the long list of successes.

© 1999-2010 PopMatters.com. All rights reserved.
PopMatters.com™ and PopMatters™ are trademarks
of PopMatters Media, Inc. and PopMatters Magazine.

PopMatters is wholly independently owned and operated.

