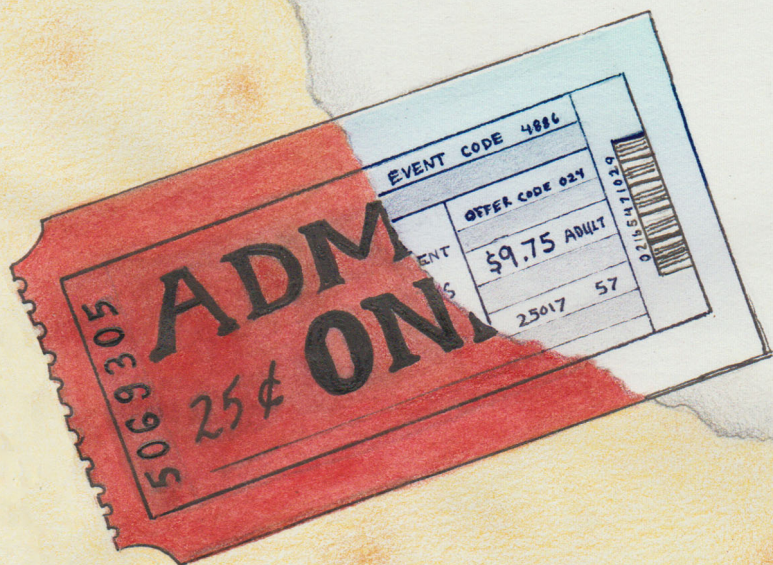


Apocalypse Later Annual A Hundred in 2016



by

Hal C.F. Astell

A Hundred in 2016

Apocalypse Later

Books by Hal C. F. Astell

Annual Series

A Hundred in 2016

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Huh? An A-Z of Why Classic American Bad Movies Were Made

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Velvet Glove Cast in Iron: The Films of Tura Satana

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*Apocalypse Later
Annual Series*

A Hundred in 2016



Apocalypse Later Annual Series
A Hundred in 2016

ISBN-10: 0-9894613-4-3

ISBN-13: 978-0-9894613-4-4

Apocalypse Later Press catalogue number: ALP005

Text by Hal C. F. Astell

These reviews originally appeared in evolutionary form at Apocalypse Later
<http://www.apocalypselaterfilm.com/>

Cover art by Kris Michael

<http://www.krismichael.net/>

Fonts used on the cover are Harrington (by Sam Wang)
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Published by Apocalypse Later Press

<https://www.apocalypselaterempire.com/al/alp/>

Dedication

This book celebrates the careers of thirty-five filmmakers of note who would have reached their centenaries in 2016.

I'm dedicating it to the two who actually made it, especially as they did so in a year that claimed far too many others: Olivia de Havilland and Kirk Douglas. Happy birthday to you both at a hundred years young!

Acknowledgements

No book is ever created by one person, regardless of whose name is on the cover. Many other people deserve credit too, along with my undying gratitude and appreciation, for their parts in bringing this one to print. Thank you, one and all!

As always, that list begins with my much better half, Dee, who watched all these movie with me, a few of them under trying circumstances so I could meet self-imposed deadlines.

Thanks to Kris Michael, whom I still can't believe I haven't met before, for her fantastic cover art and for remaining so cheerful while creating it. Thanks also to Karen Michael for her masterful font work.

Thanks to the various members of the Stamped Herd for keeping me on track and members of the Silver Screen Oasis for commenting on these reviews as I posted them throughout the year.

Thanks to Arizona's western film historian, Charlie LeSeuer, for kindly clarifying a couple of details here and there.

Thanks to all the folk who have bought my books and especially those who keep coming back eagerly for the next one.

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Introduction

Apocalypse Later will turn ten years old on 1st January, 2017. I'd been writing capsule reviews for a full year on my personal website so that I could keep track of little details such as which actress was really good in which episode of which crime series from the forties. Otherwise many just blended together. I didn't just keep up in 2016; I found that I thoroughly enjoyed this sort of writing and as a result my reviews got better and more substantial.

So I decide to launch an actual blog, at Google's Blogger.

My first review, posted on New Years Day in 2007, set the stage ably for what was to come. It was a film called *A Night in Casablanca*, featuring the Marx Brothers, and I was watching it because I'd already seen their first eleven pictures, including such well known classics as *A Night at the Opera*, *At the Circus* and *Duck Soup*, but I hadn't yet seen their final two.

So I was already working through filmographies, trying to track down the titles I hadn't seen. Since then, I've completed some, from Grace Kelly to Jason Statham, and come close on others. I've even published a book that covers every known film and TV episode that Tura Satana appeared in. More similar books will follow.

Beyond being a completist, I've found that the lesser known titles are often the best. Everyone knows Statham from his Guy Ritchie films or various established series: *The Expendables*, *The Transporter* and *Crank*. Yet, how many have seen *The Bank Job*, *Hummingbird* or the thoroughly atypical *London*? And "best" doesn't always equal "most interesting". For instance, Grace Kelly made many classics, from *High Noon* through *Rear Window* to *The Country Girl*, but how many have seen her fascinating debut in *Fourteen Hours*? It's deep diving that tracks down these obscure gems.

The catch, of course, is that focusing on just one person, or even a few of them, can be as limiting in one direction as it is fascinating in another.

Sure, it's eye-opening to explore that particular person and the process does introduce others, especially back in the studio era; work through, say, Jimmy Cagney's career at Warner Bros. and suddenly a dozen regular supporting actors leap into focus.

But there are some actors, writers and directors who are more than deserving of our attention but who work in utterly different circles to those who currently have our focus: in time, nationality or choice of material. I've struggled for a while at *Apocalypse Later* to add some sort of element that allows me to deep dive without losing the bigger picture. In the past, the best I did was to watch as much as I could on channels like Sundance or IFC, but we ditched cable long ago.

What I eventually realised was that the trick involved adding an element that was out of my control. My first book, for instance, had me look at bad movies that had an interesting story behind them. It didn't matter what nationality those films were, what genre they fell into or who happened to make them. That allowed me a lot of variety. I had to do a lot of research, of course, but I came up with a list of films that fit the scope and met many of my needs.

I love writing about classic movies, especially those titles a level of obscurity behind what gets played every month on Turner Classic Movies. I especially enjoy exploring films from the 1920s through to the 1970s, filling in gaps in my viewing history, discovering new interesting pictures and finally catching up with ones I've wanted to see for years.

That project allowed me to do all of those things.

However, I don't just want to write about bad films exclusively. I want to write about good films too and, more importantly, I want to write about interesting films, whether they're good or bad.

It was as I was writing my third book that I finally figured it out. I was exploring the 36 pictures that Charlie Chaplin made in 1914, his first year in film, reviewing each of them on their centennials. The concept relied on me meeting lots of small deadlines; the goal there was to see how he progressed through that year and it made sense to watch those films at the same speed that he made them and that the audiences of the time saw

them.

The bonus I found was that I turned out to be as good with small deadlines as I was bad with big ones. If I tell myself I'll have book seven out by Phoenix Comicon 2018, I'll fail because that's a big deadline and I suck at those; but if I tell myself that I'll post a single review on a single date, I'll do it almost every time. I nailed every one of those 36 small deadlines for my Chaplin project and I had a book to show for it, which is also probably my best yet.

So, I wanted to set myself small deadlines again and I realised that centennials didn't have to be for films; they could also be for people.

I did the requisite research and found 35 people of importance to the medium of film who were born in 1916. In turn, I researched each of them to find one particularly interesting film from their careers that I could review. I kept the selection varied, by era and genre even if nationality wasn't quite as viable. I tried also to pick films that weren't just important for that particular person, but on a wider level too.

And I reviewed each and every one of them at Apocalypse Later a hundred years to the day since that person was born. I was shocked to discover that two of these stars were alive, so these dates weren't only centennials, they were actual 100th birthdays.

This project allowed me to do everything that I wanted to do with my Apocalypse Later reviews. I wrote about interesting pictures and about interesting people, some of whom were old favourites of mine but others were entirely new to me. I covered pictures released as far back as 1936 and as recently as 1988. I explored genres widely, writing about dramas, comedies, thrillers, musicals, westerns, films noir and horror movies. I wrote about movies that I'd grown up with and others that I'd been meaning to see for years. I even included movies from a number of countries: not just the U.S., but a host from the U.K. and others from Italy, Australia and Japan.

I also learned a lot in the process, from little details that were just surprising to more depth about important moments in film history. And, that's why I believe this gimmick works to you, my readers, as much as it

did for me, the writer.

Read on to discover how Hollywood treated actors of colour or with debilitating diseases back in the 1940s, how the Communist witch-hunts affected Hollywood writers and how studios covered subjects as wide as baby farms, faith healing and policing the postal service. Find out about the early days of 3-D, the birth of giallo and the British institution that is the *Carry On* movie. Think about how wild you've seen film comedy and then watch Olsen and Johnson.

And, throughout, watch your favourite actors do things you had no idea they did. Watch Kirk Douglas play Wile E. Coyote, Olivia de Havilland get stuck in a lift for almost an entire movie and Oliver Reed turn into a werewolf! Watch a blind Van Johnson solve a mystery, Sterling Hayden show up to a gunfight with a harpoon and Jackie Gleason drop acid in prison! Watch Peter Finch go walkabout, Vincent Price deploy his gold-digging robots and Gregory Peck play an anarchist Communist terrorist! Watch Clint Walker backhand Ron Ely, Richard Attenborough portray a famous serial killer and Ralph Bates turn into Martine Beswick!

My hope is that you've all seen at least some of the films I cover here but that none of you have seen most of them. May they be the journey of discovery for you that they were for me.

Oh, and see you this time next year for *A Hundred in 2017!*

Hal C. F. Astell
December 2016

美貌の陰に秘められた女心は？手に汗握るサスペンス！



がらみ合い

監督 小林正樹・原作 南條範夫
脚色 稲垣公一・撮影 川又 昂
音楽 武満 徹 主題曲 キング・レコード



製作 若槻繁・小林正樹

宮千滝山 渡 芳川 仲岸
口秋沢村 辺 村津 代
精 美佐 真祐 達恵
二実修聡 子理介 矢子

松竹映画・にんじんくらぶ製作

The Inheritance (1962)

Reviewed on 14th February for director Masaki Kobayashi

Director: Masaki Kobayashi

Writer: Koichi Inagaki, from the novel by Norio Nanjo

Stars: Keiko Kishi, Tatsuya Nakadai, So Yamamura, Seiji Miyaguchi, Yusuke Kawazu, Mari Yoshimura, Minoru Chiaki, Misako Watanabe and Osamu Takizawa

The great Japanese director, Masaki Kobayashi, who would have been a hundred years old on 14th February, 2016, directed 22 films, from 1952's *My Son's Youth* to *The Empty Table* in 1985.

The latter starred Tatsuya Nakadai, who appeared or starred in fully half of Kobayashi's output. Their working relationship began in 1956 with *The Thick-Walled Room*, one of the first Japanese movies to look at what the country had done during World War II, a drama adapted from the diaries of real Japanese soldiers jailed for crimes against humanity. It proceeded through all of Kobayashi's most famous films, including the ten hour trilogy of *The Human Condition*; the samurai drama, *Seppuku*; and *Kwaidan*, his collection of four ghost stories which constitutes one of the twin staples of classic Japanese horror, the other being *Onibaba*. Both *Seppuku* and *Kwaidan* won jury prizes at Cannes and the latter was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. Nakadai also appeared in 1967's magnificent *Samurai Rebellion*, duelling Toshiro Mifune.

The Inheritance comes in between these films, emphasising a rather impressive decade for Kobayashi, as indeed it was for Japanese cinema in general. It's neither a war film nor a samurai flick, but it takes a similarly dark look at humanity as either, an approach for which Kobayashi is justifiably known.

Senzo Kawahara is a rich businessman who lives only for his work,

running a company called Toto Precise Tech. No, the logo doesn't include Kilimanjaro rising above the Serengeti; this is a serious film. In fact, it's so serious that soon into the picture, he discovers that he's dying of cancer and has perhaps six months left to live.

He has a trophy wife: his former secretary, Satoe, who is two decades younger than he is, but he has no heirs; well, not legal ones, anyway. He tells some of his closest associates that he has three illegitimate children, with whom he's had no contact since conception, and he tasks them with finding these kids so that he can judge whether they're worthy to receive a share of his three hundred million yen fortune, not as large it sounds to those who think in dollars or pounds but still a considerable sum.

Now, his wife will receive the "legal guaranteed portion" of a third of the total, but the rest is up for grabs. And that's how these associates take it, immediately scheming as to how they can screw each other over and land the money for themselves.

If it sounds like there are no sympathetic characters to be found in this film, you'd be close to the truth. I usually have trouble with such movies, *Gone with the Wind* being the quintessential American example, because there's nobody for me to root for. Here, we're drawn in by Kawahara's secretary, the first person we see on screen, and she's sympathetic for a while before being inevitably corrupted by the environment she's in.

She's Yasuko Miyagawa and she's a vision from the get go. The film begins like it's a French new wave flick, the camera a loose companion, floating alongside this stylish young lady as her motion decorates a black and white street. A jazz score kicks in and she glances through her cool sunglasses at shoes and jewellery and coats in storefront windows. This could be a Godard or Truffaut movie, or even a Eurospy flick, if only the girl and everyone else around her wasn't so obviously Japanese. It's a light and fluffy way to begin something that's not light or fluffy in the slightest, soon becoming dark and traditional, but it's appropriate because it's the only light scene, from which everything else descends.

That change is obvious. The camera stops moving, for a start, at least for the most part. Most of the picture is shot with the camera entirely

static, movement happening only within the frame as the actors move. Occasionally it deigns to aid them as they do so, but rarely, concentrating instead on imparting something through composition of frame and choice of angle.

This quintessentially Japanese approach isn't too surprising, as the cinematographer was Takashi Kawamata, who had shot many films for Yasujiro Ozu, often regarded as the most Japanese of the great Japanese directors. It's difficult to imagine anything more Japanese than *Tokyo Story*, for instance, an appropriately archetypal title for such an archetypal picture, directed by Ozu and shot by Yuharu Atsuta, with Kawamata assisting.

Even though the camera doesn't move much, the effect is still highly cinematic because the motion ties very specifically to the frame so that, even when characters are talking, they're cleverly choreographed to ensure that the shot is one painting to begin with and a different one when it ends.

The visuals never stop impressing, some shots leaping out for particular attention, but it's always a character-driven piece. The script, which Koichi Inagaki adapted from a novel by Norio Nanjo, explores a tangled web of machinations, as the various people who Kawahara trusts are about the last people he should ever have trusted, playing each and every one of each other to get ahead. I wonder how Toto Precise Tech did any business! Then again, maybe each of these characters were biding their



time all these years, waiting for this moment to pounce.

Miyagawa is the only one of them who seems to care about anyone but herself. She's his current secretary, who cares for her boss and even admits to have had a little crush on him in the past. The others are careful to bow the requisite number of degrees but we're not convinced by any of them, not before Kawahara's disease is announced and certainly not afterwards, when his fortune is dangled in front of their greedy little eyes and they all start to manoeuvre into the best positions to take it.

His wife, Satoe, has the best position throughout, as the law guarantees her a third of it anyway, but of course she wants it all and is more than willing to play everyone against each other to get it. Misako Watanabe plays her as an ice queen, cold and heartless and someone not to underestimate. It's hardly surprising that Kawahara married her for her body and wants little to do with her otherwise.

Of course, that says as much about him as it does about her: the man is dying of cancer, an inherent sympathy point, but we never feel any sympathy for him at all; in fact, we get less sympathetic for him as the movie runs on, because the situation he finds himself in is arguably a much deserved one. We're not quite rooting for him to kick the bucket, but we never find a reason why we shouldn't.

As Toto's secretarial chief, Junichi Fujii, Minoru Chiaki takes the opposite approach to Satoe. He's friendly and engaging, with a mild air of ineptitude that is, of course, highly calculated. He and Satoe are tasked



with finding a seven year old girl, Kawahara's daughter by a maid. Fujii's thought is to take the simplest approach, which is to deliberately not find her at all, but Satoe talks him into the task as she's certain to become the girl's guardian and would thus gain control of her portion too.

The second group is comprised of Kawahara's legal team. His lawyer, Naruto Yoshida, in the experienced form of Seiji Miyaguchi, the most serious of the *Seven Samurai*, is a patient and confident man who feels content nudging others into the directions he wants them to take. One such person is his assistant, Kikuo Furukawa, played by a calm but scheming Tatsuya Nakadai, so insincere that we don't believe any of his promises to begin with, but fully expect him to use them over and over again on a succession of women.

Yoshida remains behind in his inner sanctum of an office while Furukawa goes out and about to achieve their goals. They're tasked with finding Mayumi Kamio, who would be a young woman now, but Yoshida wants Furukawa to search and not find, because his real goal is to set up a Kawahara Foundation. He would sit on the board and direct affairs, while his assistant could manage the day to day operations. However, it doesn't turn out to be remotely as simple as that, because Furukawa's search triggers plenty.

Finally, there's a boy Kawahara fathered in Manchuria twenty years earlier, perhaps an easier person to find as he doesn't just have a name to go on, he also knows precisely who adopted him. He has Miyagawa go to fetch this young man, Sadao Narimune, which gives Keiko Kishi even more opportunity to steal the film.

She's the first and last person we see and, if the story is built on So Yamamura's strong performance as the dying man, it unfolds primarily through Kishi's as Yasuko Miyagawa, especially given that the bulk of the picture takes place through a visualisation of her recollections of a tough time in her life, a time that she describes so evocatively as "the wound I'm so proud of". She's given plenty of opportunity to shine, with that initial glamorous scene in the street being contrasted so strongly with the start of her recollections that I didn't even catch that I was watching the same

girl at first. She's a traditionally submissive but capable secretary and she grows as the picture runs on, being moved into Kawahara's house and eventually becoming closer to him than she ever expects.

Perhaps one reason why this bunch of unsympathetic characters remain so watchable is that we know it won't end well for all of them and we want to see each of them fall. It's phrased rather like a mystery, in the sense that our varied cast of characters manoeuvre their way through the story to end up gathered together for the final unmasking.

In a traditional mystery, one of these characters is usually the perpetrator of whatever crime has been committed and the others mere red herrings, but in this story, they're all perpetrators in their own ways and we watch to see which will be unmasked by a brutal sense of karma. Anyone who has ever planned revenge, even if they never carried it out, will revel in these final scenes! They're easily the most powerful scenes in the picture, because each successful coup makes us happier and leads neatly on to the next.

What we might feel about the eventual outcome may well determine what we might feel about the film as a whole, as there's a poetry to it and a real sense of justice but not one character is able to leave the film untarnished by the events we've witnessed.

I clearly need to watch more of Masaki Kobayashi's films. My first was *Kwaidan*, many years ago, after it cropped up so often in any discussion of Japanese horror. The genre didn't really start with it and *Onibaba*, but



they're as good a starting place as any to find out what else is out there. I've revisited it since and it stands up well. It has to be said that too few of the other Japanese horror classics of this era are available in subtitled versions, but that is a situation that a number of companies are gradually rectifying.

I've also seen *Samurai Rebellion*, one of many pictures about samurai to be overlooked in the west, where "samurai film" is often equated to "Akira Kurosawa". I'm not suggesting that you should ever avoid masterpieces like *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo* or *Ran*, as they are as great as their respective reputations suggest, but I am highly recommending that you don't stop there. Check out Hideo Gosha pictures too, like *Sword of the Beast* and *Three Outlaw Samurai*, a half dozen of the best Zatoichi films and others like *Kill!* and *Samurai Rebellion*.

From what I gather, Kobayashi's *Seppuku*, also known as *Hari-Kiri*, is deserving of that company too, so I should seek it out soon, along with some of his other work from the late fifties and early sixties.

Kobayashi may not be as well known to a western audience as some of his contemporaries but, when talking about any genre of Japanese film, at least one of his films seems to be up there with the best of the bunch. Just as *Kwaidan* and *Samurai Rebellion* resonate in their respective genres, I have a feeling that *The Inheritance* will resonate with me like Kurosawa's films noir, such as *Stray Dog* and *The Bad Sleep Well*. Now I want to know what else he did.





The Brute Man (1946)

Reviewed on 23rd February for actress Jan Wiley

Director: Jean Yarbrough

Writers: George Bricker and M. Coates Webster, from a story by Dwight V. Babcock

Stars: Tom Neal, Jan Wiley, Jane Adams, Donald MacBride, Peter Whitney, Fred Coby, Janelle Johnson and Rondo Hatton

Remembering noted filmmakers on what would have been their 100th birthdays by reviewing one title from their respective careers gives me a great opportunity to select interesting movies. This one, to remember a B-movie actress by the name of Jan Wiley, who would have been a hundred on 23rd February, is just about as interesting as they come and for a whole slew of reasons.

For a start, it's a Universal horror that the studio never released. They shot it in November 1945, taking under two weeks to do so, but its lead actor, Rondo Hatton, died only two months later, before the finish of post-production. Given that Universal were brutally exploiting the, shall we say, unique looks of Hatton, who suffered from the disease of acromegaly, it's very possible that they chose to sell the picture to a "poverty row" distributor named P.R.C. (or Producers Releasing Corporation) rather than just chalk it up as a loss. P.R.C. distributed it in 1946, but it then seemed to become lost, only being rediscovered again in 1982, when it was broadcast on television and released to home video. Officially, of course, it was just poor timing, as Universal backed out of the B-movie business after their merger with International in 1945.

Hatton plays the Creeper, a character with an interesting history, for the third time. His first appearance was in a Sherlock Holmes movie, *The Pearl of Death*, in 1944, the ninth in the series featuring Basil Rathbone and

Nigel Bruce. There, he's the Hoxton Creeper, a dangerous tool used by the villain of the piece, Giles Conover, to destroy his enemies, always by breaking the third lumbar vertebra of their spines. Hatton is hardly in the picture but he's memorable whenever he is, shot in looming shadows and only being revealed at the very end of the film, when Holmes cleverly turns him on his master. Two years later, Hatton made what was intended to be the first in a series of movies featuring the Creeper. This was *House of Horrors*, where the character stalks behind the opening credits and is prominent throughout. He's rescued from a river by a sculptor who is about to commit suicide but who then finds a new lease on life by using his new friend to murder art critics who have savaged his work, all while sculpting a bust of the killer, which he believes will surely become his masterpiece.

It's generally believed that these two Creepers are two different characters, because *The Pearl of Death* is a film set in London while *House of Horrors* unfolds in New York and because the character dies in both of those movies. However, there are strong connections between them.

Obviously, both of them are played by Rondo Hatton, who didn't need make-up because of the disease that had disfigured him; Jack Pierce, who had created such memorable make-up for Karloff the Uncanny in *Frankenstein* had very little to do in *House of Horrors* as Nature had done the job for him. Both of them are murderers who kill with such strength that they can snap the spines of their victims. In *The Pearl of Death*, Holmes picks up on that technique immediately; why should we ignore it? And, of course, they're both called variations of the Creeper. How many such Creepers could there be wandering around American cinema in the forties? It could easily be that the Creeper of *House of Horrors* doesn't die after all and finds his way to London to become the Creeper of *The Pearl of Death*. Stranger things have happened in Hollywood horror.

Certainly, the Creeper in *The Brute Man* is the same Creeper as in *House of Horrors*, but while this is the second in that projected Universal series, it's a prequel rather than a sequel. It gives us some insight into who this murderer was before he started killing and why he started doing so, in

what modern superhero movies would call an origin story.

It turns out that he was a college student called Hal Moffat, the successful captain of Hampton University's football team and a young man in love. He had a rival for the affections of Virginia Rogers, namely his best friend, the more scholarly Clifford Scott, who sets him up with apparent glee. The sneaky Scott gives him a set of incorrect answers for a chemistry test to ensure that Moffat is kept behind after class, making him unable to take Virginia out on a date. Then he walks the young lady past the window of the chemistry classroom to gloat. Moffat was known for his temper; seeing this pair and realising how he was set up prompts him to angrily throw what he's holding at the ground. Given that what he's holding requires careful treatment, the ensuing chemical fog disfigures him. And so, after he's released from hospital and years pass without any explanation, he becomes the Creeper, killing for revenge by snapping the spines of those he feels had wronged him.

Of course, this is hardly a new idea. It's a time honoured theme of the



horror genre that Universal had explored as far back as 1925's *The Phantom of the Opera* with Lon Chaney. Another time honoured theme has a disfigured man horrify all who set eyes on him, such as when the Creeper looks through the window of the Collegiate Café at Hampton, a place which once celebrated his achievements, only for everyone to fall quiet and stare at him. After one murder, he escapes the police by climbing a fire escape into the apartment of a young pianist called Helen Paige, who becomes the very first person to engage with him because she's blind and doesn't see what everyone else did. Of course, this echoes what Universal did in 1935 in *Bride of Frankenstein*, with the Monster and the blind hermit. And so this film feels older than it should be. Ditch Hampton U and this could well be 18th century Europe.

Interestingly, Jan Wiley doesn't play the blind girl, even though that's by far the more prominent female role, but she's still credited above Jane Adams, who does. Wiley was the bigger star at the time, even though she was about to retire at thirty; the only part that she took after this picture



was as an uncredited perfume saleswoman in *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

Before it, she had built something of a minor name for herself in B-movies. A versatile talent, she had appeared in Range Busters westerns like *Tonto Basin Outlaws* and *Thunder River Feud*, Universal horror movies such as *She-Wolf of London* and *The Brute Man*, pulp adventures like *Dick Tracy vs. Crime Inc.* and *Secret Agent X-9*, and other dynamic pictures with dynamic titles that rarely lived up to them, such as *A Fig Leaf for Eve* and *The Living Ghost*.

Most of her pictures were made during her decade-long first marriage, which ended in 1945, the year in which her last movies were shot. She married again in 1947, to Mort Greene, a writer and Oscar-nominated lyricist, and settled in to being a wife and mother, never returning to the screen to act again.

In *The Brute Man*, she's Virginia Rogers during the flashback scenes but Virginia Scott in contemporary ones, having married Clifford Scott and doing very well in the process as the Scotts are well to do when we meet them. While we fully expect the Creeper to wrap up his murder spree with the pair of them, he actually comes to them for money first, to pay for an operation on Helen's eyes that might allow her to see again. After all, redemption had been a key component in Universal horrors ever since the days of Lon Chaney. Wiley gets surprisingly little screen time and spends most of it in a strange sort of style that really shouldn't work but somehow does. Oddly, she reminded me of a female Robert Mitchum, with similarly lazy eyelids and an expression that looks like she doesn't care even when we know that she does. That isn't to say she isn't feminine, because she looks good in her make-up and expensive hairdo, but she's clearly tougher inside than out. The position her character finds herself in also proved to end up rather ironic, given how the film is structured and how real life panned out afterwards.

You see, the Creeper is set up to be a sympathetic killer. For all that characters in *House of Horrors* kept calling him a madman, he appears to be more like a damaged soul, both inside and out, who simply wasn't functioning on all cylinders. All his lines are simple ones, as if he's unable

to string concepts together in layers. He isn't killing people for the sake of it, he's just doing what seems to be right. He's finally found his first friend and he does what he can to make him happy.

He's less sympathetic in this prequel, but he remains a far more sympathetic character than his so-called college buddies, not just because they set him up with an ill-advised trick that leaves him a disfigured man, but especially because they then promptly forgot about him until he comes knocking on their doors to seek revenge. He knows what he's doing here, though, intelligence shining out of Hatton's eyes even if it isn't echoed by his words and actions. The whole subplot with Helen the blind girl sets him up as the classic misunderstood monster, a beast on the outside but a beauty on the inside. At least, that's what Helen sees with her mind.

But Virginia doesn't end up with Hal Moffat; she marries Clifford Scott, who's played by Tom Neal. Surely cast because he was riding high with *Detour*, the classic no budget film noir from 1945, he was a former boxer and a successful one too with a strong record that ran to 31 wins and only a single loss until his last two fights spoiled that somewhat and prompted him to seek a new career in acting. He's rather dashing in *The Brute Man*, though he's surely too young to carry that moustache, which would look much better on a Ronald Colman or a David Niven.

Yet, while Hatton was playing the title character, it was Neal who was the real brute man. When he shot this picture, he was married to actress Vicky Lane, who divorced him in 1949 citing his "mental and physical cruelty". After that marriage was over, he met another actress, Barbara Payton, who continued to date him even after she became engaged to Franchot Tone. The physical fight between the two men in her front yard made easy front page news, as Neal beat Tone to a pulp, leaving him hospitalised with broken bones and a brain concussion.

It didn't end there either. Neal and Payton were blacklisted by the major Hollywood studios and became better known for their violent relationship than for their acting. Payton had married Tone after his recovery, but left him after less than two months to return to Neal; Tone

filed for divorce on grounds of adultery. It didn't last for Payton and Neal either, but at least she got out alive.

Neal married a third wife in 1961, this time a receptionist called Gale Bennett, who was discovered dead only four years later with a gunshot wound to the back of her head. Neal was quickly arrested, convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to between one and fifteen years in prison; he served six.

It's a rather bitter irony that has a man like Rondo Hatton, who was a journalist and army veteran struck down in his prime by a disfiguring disease, be remembered today for performances that only exploited his crumbling visage and crumbling voice by casting him as madmen and monsters, while a man like Tom Neal, who really was a monster, was able to play dashing heroes.

At least Hatton has been honoured in hindsight, not merely by homages in books, comics and films but by the creation of an award in his name, the Rondo Hatton Classic Horror Award, to honour work in the horror genre

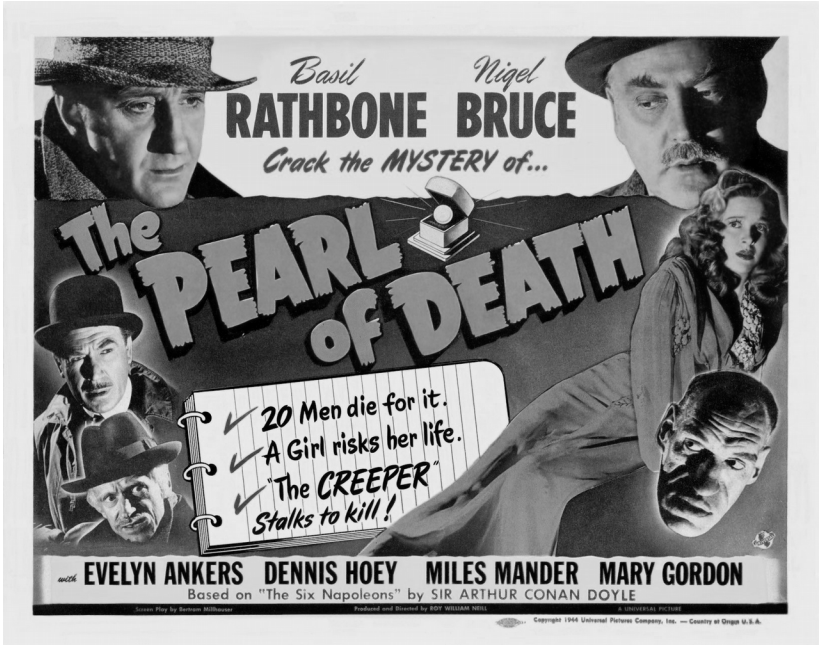


across different media. The award itself was sculpted in the likeness of Hatton as the Creeper in the two 1946 Universal movies.

Neither picture is particularly good, especially when compared to earlier horror films that the studio had made over a couple of decades, but they remain interesting and enjoyable today. Hatton was clearly cast for his looks rather than any acting ability he might have had, not just his face but the ominous shadow he cast with his thin waist but hulking shoulders and neck. He wasn't a great actor but he cast a presence and, ironically, he got a lot more opportunity while being exploited in these two films than in anything else in his earlier career.

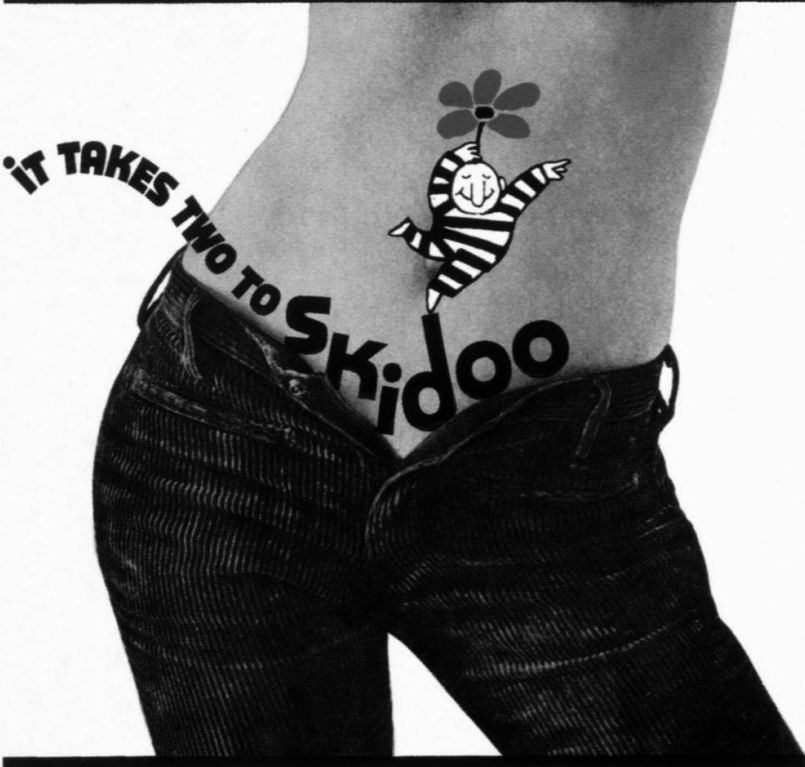
He even smiles here, when giving a gift to Helen, and it's a good smile that we wish we could have seen more of in a better and less neglected story. At least we got to see it here.





A Hundred in 2016

OTTO PREMINGER *presents* "SKIDOO"
starring JACKIE GLEASON · CAROL CHANNING · FRANKIE AVALON · FRED CLARK
MICHAEL CONSTANTINE · FRANK GORSHIN · JOHN PHILLIP LAW · PETER LAWFORD
BURGESS MEREDITH · GEORGE RAFT · CESAR ROMERO · MICKEY ROONEY
and GROUCHO MARX playing "God"



and introducing AUSTIN PENDLETON
ALEXANDRA HAY *and* LUNA
Written by DORAN WILLIAM CANNON
Music & Lyrics by NILSSON · Costumes RUDI GERNREICH
Photographed in PANAVISION® and TECHNICOLOR®
by LEON SHAMROY
Produced & Directed by OTTO PREMINGER

A Paramount
Release



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Skidoo (1968)

Reviewed on 26th February for actor Jackie Gleason

Director: Otto Preminger

Writer: Doran William Cannon

Stars: Jackie Gleason, Carol Channing, Frankie Avalon, Fred Clark, Michael Constantine, Frank Gorshin, John Phillip Law, Peter Lawford, Burgess Meredith, George Raft, Cesar Romero, Mickey Rooney and Groucho Marx

When I started this centennial project, half of the point was to celebrate the contributions to cinema of people who were born a hundred years ago; the other was to be able to watch and review a bunch of interesting films and they don't get a lot more interesting than this one.

It's a 1968 picture from Paramount Pictures and Otto Preminger, a massively important director in the fifties for his taboo-busting features like *The Moon is Blue*, *The Man with the Golden Arm* and *Anatomy of a Murder*; he also made a number of earlier classics, like *Laura*. *Skidoo* can be interpreted as a late entry in that taboo-busting output, but I don't buy it. It's just a chaotic LSD movie that might well have been written on the drug it uses as a plot device.

The scriptwriter was Doran William Cannon, who would go on to write another odd feature, Robert Altman's *Brewster McCloud*; he had assistance here from Rob Reiner, at this point merely a bit part actor and writer for the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, who claims that Preminger fired and rehired him every day. I wish I knew what they thought they were doing.

To me, it works best as a trainwreck, a movie that we just can't look away from, even as we wonder just what could have happened to create such a mess. Groucho Marx, appearing in his last picture as a crime lord called God, described both his performance and the film itself as "God-

awful!” I wouldn’t go quite that far, but he has a point. The film has certainly become a guilty pleasure for some fans of offbeat cinema, but it’s generally regarded poorly by fans and critics alike.

Those who choose to watch the movie are less likely to do so for the picture itself and more for its incredible cast of stars who, like Preminger himself, were most prominent a decade earlier. Jonathan Rosenbaum ably describes them as “a legion of Fifties TV corpses”, with the film itself an “endlessly fascinating aberration”. I share that opinion because I found that I was unable to look away from the screen, even though I was clearly watching a disaster unfold and I had no personal stake in the cast of legends because I didn’t grow up either in the fifties or the United States.

The first one we meet is Jackie Gleason, the star of the film, who would have been one hundred years old on 26th February. He’s one of the few actors here that I did grow up watching, albeit for *Smokey and the Bandit* movies rather than for *The Jackie Gleason Show* or *The Honeymooners*. I knew him primarily as a film actor rather than a television actor, let alone a recording artist. Let’s not forget that each of his first ten albums sold a million copies and his first, *Music for Lovers Only*, still holds the record for the most weeks spent in the Billboard top ten with an amazing 153.

He began the sixties on a high note, deservedly nominated for an Academy Award for playing Minnesota Fats in *The Hustler*; he lost out to George Chakiris in *West Side Story*. Sadly, he ended it on a lesser note, returning to the big screen after half a decade away for three poorly



received comedies: *Skidoo*, *How to Commit Marriage* and *Don't Drink the Water*. This is surely the worst of them and, quite frankly, the idea of watching Minnesota Fats go on an acid trip is still freaking me out, man.

He's "Tough Tony" Banks. No, not the keyboardist from Genesis, this Tony Banks is a renowned hitman who had enough clout to successfully retire from that business and remain so for seventeen years but not quite enough to avoid God pulling him back in, as Al Pacino would say, the moment he thinks Tough Tony is the right man for a particular job.

I couldn't buy him as a tough guy here, not least because he spends an apparently endless opening scene struggling with his wife, Flo, played by Carol Channing, over which channel they should watch on the TV. I enjoyed the odd set of clips and commercials far more than I did the so-called comedy, which is how I realised that one channel is broadcasting a bunch of gangsters appearing before a senate committee, like "Eggs" Benedict, who appears in a swathe of bandages that hide 23 bullet holes; he explains that, "I was cleaning my gun and it went off."

It would seem that Tony can't get away from the life he's left behind. Next thing we know, Hechy and Angie show up out of his chequered past and surely the '37 Rolls outside can only mean that the Puerto Rican mob is watching him. Well, it isn't, but it begins the onslaught of famous faces.

The Rolls contains a hippie by the name of Stash, played by a very different John Phillip Law to the one I know from *Barbarella* and *Danger: Diabolik*, both released the same year as *Skidoo*; he's here to bring Tony's



daughter Darlene home because she's defected to the counterculture. He simply can't grasp the world of her parents: "Violence is the sign language of the inarticulate," he suggests.

Hechy and Angie are a father and son pair of gangsters in the wild combination of Cesar Romero and Frankie Avalon. Romero was an established, versatile and well-respected actor, and we'll return to him later in *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend*, but at this point he was easily best known as the Joker on *Batman*; we'll meet two of his fellow *Batman* villains here too and should note that a third, Mr. Freeze, was portrayed by Otto Preminger, this picture's director. Avalon was coming to the end of his run of Frankie and Annette beach movies, but was still a major name. They're here on a mission from God: to summon him to take care of a job, surely tied to the news on the TV, that George "Blue Chips" Packard, who used to be Tough Tony's best friend, is missing.

So far, the feature has been interesting. Gleason seems eager to be flustered as Tough Tony, Channing has a wide collection of the most outrageously awful outfits I've ever seen and we're starting to see a flood of recognisable names and faces.

Yet the picture was supposed to have been sparked by Preminger's fascination with his son Erik's life as a hippie dropout in Greenwich Village; when a sample of writing by Doran William Cannon showed up on his desk, featuring hippies tripping out on LSD, he leapt at the chance to shoot just that sample. This film never really focuses on that and, when



the trips begin, they're not being taken by the counterculture characters who steal all the early scenes. I needed to avert my eyes from Flo's outrageous wardrobe choices and the bevy of topless hippie chicks being bodypainted were easy targets. Law is consistently entertaining and there's a cool, if overdone, section in wild split screen that recounts a flashback in the style of an old silent slapstick comedy, right down to the outrageous facial hair. But the film's about to lose focus.

I was never quite sure if it was supposed to satirise the old guard playing old guard characters or the new pop culture icons playing new characters. Maybe it was supposed to do both, exploring the obsolescence of gangsters (ironically, only a year before Mario Puzo published *The Godfather* and three more before Francis Ford Coppola's film adaptation did insane box office) and highlighting how ridiculous modern life had become, whether through the hippies or the firm reliance on the "Age of Electronics" which Avalon demonstrates through his remote controlled bachelor pad that would make Quagmire jealous.

The problem is that none of this fits at all well together, with the eventual collision of subplots feeling like precisely that: a collision caused by nobody having the faintest clue where they're going. Late in the film, Harry Nilsson and Fred Clark play a pair of prison tower guards, tripping unawares on LSD, who look out over their domain to disbelieve everything they see. I felt like that merely watching the movie and I wonder how many of the actors shared that feeling as they were making it.

And there are plenty of them. The one who gets away with his reputation most intact is probably Mickey Rooney, playing Packard, whose nickname of "Blue Chips" is easily explained by the ticker tape machine that helps him manage his stock portfolio from his private prison cell in Alcatraz. He's turning states evidence in an attempt to take down God, who believes that Tough Tony is the only man who can get to him, given that Packard is his best friend and his daughter's godfather, with all those seventeen years of retirement as icing on the cake.

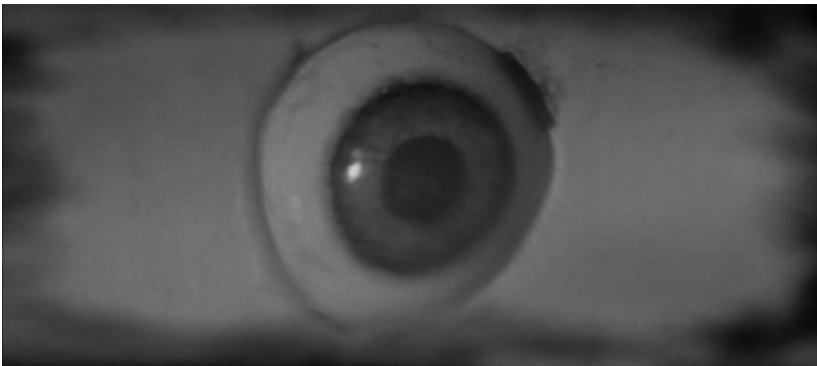
So into Alcatraz goes Banks. He's bunked with an old con, soon to be Emmy-winning Michael Constantine playing Leech, and new fish Austin

Pendleton as a draught dodger called Fred the Professor, who turns out to be the spark behind the only thing that this film really achieves. Of course, it was never really going to be about Packard challenging God or Tony taking down Packard or Flo taking in a hippie collective. It was always going to come down to the LSD that the Professor smuggled into Alcatraz as envelope glue.

We find this out when Tony finds it out, namely right after he's licked one of those envelopes to send a letter to Flo. "I'm on a trip!" he mutters and the Professor guides him through it. If there's any structure to this film at all, I think that it's here that we find it and I can see three directions.

The first has Tony strung out on acid, which is an easy excuse for Preminger to call in his 1968 special effects team to conjure up a wild journey. Tony's cellmates shrink and talk to him from purple pyramids; numbers proliferate, punctuated in bullet holes; a loose screw flies around the room with God's head mounted on it, cigar and all; and Rooney does a musical number in a striped convict suit. Does it mean anything? No, but it looks agreeably out there for the mainstream Hollywood of 1968.

The second was hinted at by the earlier flashback scene crafted into the form of a silent movie reel. This is a stereotypical Keystone farce comedy, with a bunch of gags that sound funny in isolation thrown together and mixed with improvisation until everything turns into a chase. It's just feature length and in colour and half a century too late.



The third and last is the one that might resonate as the point of the picture. While Tough Tony initially resisted the call of God, capitulating only when his friend, Harry, played by Arnold Stang, is murdered as a warning, he goes on to do everything that God asks, but only up to this point. After he comes down from the acid trip, though, that's all over. He's not going to "kiss" (ie kill) Packard any longer and he's not going to rot in Alcatraz either. He's going to put a plan together to get out of there and take care of God.

Surely this is Otto Preminger, through his scriptwriters, telling us that acid is better than therapy and it'll help us focus our lives to discover what's really happening, man. Does he need half a movie to build up to this? Not in the slightest. Does he need the other half to bring it all home? He can't be bothered. All I believe he had in mind for this picture was an effects-ridden acid trip, a subsequent reinvention and a madcap rush to the end. We lost the opening credits when Tony changed the channel, but the end ones are sung, in entirety, by Harry Nilsson.

And so we focus on the stars, most of whom are dosed with LSD when Tony's escape plan really gets going. I'd argue that Burgess Meredith, the Penguin in the *Batman* TV show, was born to play someone unwittingly dosed with acid. He's the Warden of Alcatraz, showing up with Senator Peter Lawford, formerly of the Rat Pack, who probably owned a bachelor pad in real life like the one Frankie Avalon has here. LSD finds his ambition: "There are only three great Americans", he memorably orates,



‘Washington. Lincoln. And me!’ Frank Gorshin, the Riddler in *Batman*, is the Man here, God’s right hand inside Alcatraz. Richard Kiel, just as easy to recognise as ever, is a dim-witted prisoner called Beany who gets a memorable scene on acid where he grabs each prisoner in reach in turn to see which of them is Loretta. There’s Slim Pickens, singing *Home on the Range* as a switchboard operator so high that he even puts God through to Packard to unintentionally explain his hit on him. None have a lot of screen time, but they’re more entertaining than the odd scenes back at Tony’s with Flo and Darlene and the hippie contingent. Only Geronimo’s wild translation of a cryptic message is worthwhile there.

Meanwhile, on God’s yacht, which had been loaned to Preminger for the shoot by John Wayne, who must have watched this with a look of disbelief, the famous faces keep on coming.

Groucho Marx, wrapping up a legendary career at 77 years of age, is so awful here that we wonder how he can fail to believably play himself. Preminger wanted him to just be his old self but he can’t do it. He’s more like a caricature played by another comedian, but not so well that I could figure out which. He isn’t as fast and he isn’t as funny as we remember; madcap comedians shouldn’t age. The only aspect that he really nails from God’s character is his confusion, as he’s firmly at the top of the Tree, the hierarchy of the protection racket, but is so wanted that he can’t even leave his boat. He’s stuck playing bumper pool with a giraffe of a supermodel and hurling orders at his captain. The former is Luna, the first



black model to appear on the cover of *Vogue*, and the latter is George Raft, almost unrecognisable from his heyday as an actual mob-connected actor playing believable gangsters in thirties Warner Brothers pictures.

The underlying impression of the film is that everything's wrong. What are all these fifties television legends doing in a 1968 movie about acid? Why is Jackie Gleason tripping? Was Carol Channing as high as a kite as she shot her scenes and was her character just as high when she bought her wardrobe? How come Groucho Marx can't even play himself? What are all the villains from Adam West's *Batman* doing inside Alcatraz? Who in this picture hasn't slept with Flo? Who's Darlene's father, really, and, hey, did the scriptwriter honestly forget that he even set up that subplot? Where did Stash land himself a '37 Rolls and if possessions are like, yesterday, man, can he sign the title over to me? Why does the most striking female presence in the film have a smaller bust size than I do? Why do the Green Bay Packers play naked?

And who thought it would be a great idea for Harry Nilsson to sing the end credits, right down to such hardly singable sections as "Copyright MCMLXVII by Sigma Productions, Incorporated"?

Well, the answer to all these has to be LSD. It's the only answer, it seems. Man.





Death Car on the Freeway (1979)

*Reviewed on 29th February for actress Dinah Shore
(who incidentally was married to August 27th's George Montgomery)*

Director: Hal Needham

Writer: William Wood

Stars: Shelley Hack, Frank Gorshin, Peter Graves, Harriet Nelson, Barbara Rush, Dinah Shore, Abe Vigoda, Alfie Wise and George Hamilton

The fourth centennial I celebrated in 2016 was that of Dinah Shore, who was a leap year baby, born on 29th February, 1916 in Tennessee. She died at 77 in 1994, but technically she only saw 19 birthdays, so she was forever young.

Like Jackie Gleason, Dinah Shore was an important name across a variety of media and it's open to argument whether she was better known for music, radio or television. As a vocalist, she was the highest charting female in the 1940s; one of her songs, *Buttons and Bows*, sat at number one for ten weeks; and *Blues in the Night* was only her first of nine singles to sell a million copies. On radio, she starred in seven different series of her own and guested on many others. She had appeared on television as far back as 1937 but got her own show in 1951 and racked up a string of successes that led to eight Emmies and a Golden Globe. Her film career never quite took off, ending with the awkwardly titled *Aaron Slick from Punkin Crick* in 1952, but she did make more for television, including this odd melding of genres from CBS in 1979.

Its reputation, surely emphasised by its title, is as a thriller, a late TV movie rip-off of Steven Spielberg's masterful *Duel*, which was almost eight years old when this was first broadcast. While there are clearly moments of tension on the California freeways, the most suspenseful scene takes place off the road and the film plays out more as a journalism drama than

it does a thriller, albeit one set in television news rather than print news.

There are points where the film seems to be deliberately attempting serious drama, far beyond what might be expected for a *CBS Tuesday Night Movie*, but none of them are really explored, so it ends up far less substantial than it clearly thinks it is.

Shelley Hack's performance doesn't help, as this was early in her career and, while she certainly looks cute and lights up well when she smiles, she's understated and rather careful with her dialogue. She does have her moments, but the "newest Charlie's Angel" failed to give her character, Janette Claussen, the gravitas needed to really make the difference that she so aches to make.

When the story begins, she's an up and coming news anchor at KXLA, but she's still new to the business and very green. In fact, she seems a little too green for someone who was hired out of college by an experienced newsman, Ray Jeffries, who mentored her and married her. They've been divorced for a few months, but he's still after her, both romantically and professionally. She's polite and plays along, but she needed out from under his reputation, wanting to establish herself on air rather than just as his writer.

We see her manage it too, discovering a possible link between two separate cases of apparent road rage, investigating them and building the story on air as it grows. Jeffries brings her flowers on the night that her ratings exceed his for the first time, but he's much too much of a male chauvinist pig to actually mean it.

While Hack isn't emotional enough, her character does squeeze plenty of emotion out of her ex, played unsympathetically by a suitably smarmy George Hamilton. I may not have been entirely on her side, but I certainly wasn't on his! He'll be back later in this book for *Angel Baby*.

The news story is the thriller angle and we're thrown into it right after the opening credits. Becky Lyons is driving to Van Nuys to be the first victim on an episode of *Barnaby Jones*. Instead she becomes the second victim of a driver with apparent anger issues. After she cuts in front of a blue van to make her exit, the van's driver wipes down his steering wheel,

pulls on a pair of gloves and slides in an eight track tape of wailing bluegrass to accompany his quest to run her off the road. He blocks her exit, attempts to bounce her into a collision and, eventually, shoves her little yellow Honda powerfully enough to leave it hanging over the guard rail of a bridge.

Jan's co-workers are cynical, one highlighting that Becky is in showbiz and probably won't ever get a better chance at fame than her on-air interview at the scene, but Jan sees similarities to an earlier news report that her ex had covered of a tennis pro, Dinah Shore's character, and she follows up with her to discover that she had experienced almost exactly the same thing. The cops don't buy it yet but we're clearly now chasing the Freeway Fiddler, named for the music he plays rather than any sexual deviance.

If this was trying to be *Duel*, it fails pretty miserably. Spielberg had Dennis Weaver terrorised for over an hour, unable to get away from a mysterious truck that's set on killing him, but *Death Car on the Freeway*



replaces this tight approach with a set of much looser ones.

That grimy and characterful Peterbilt 281, a model deliberately chosen by Spielberg because its needlenose front suggested a face, was replaced by an everyday Dodge van. The hellish suggestion that perhaps it was the truck rather than its driver that wanted to kill is ignored entirely here, with this man being given a serial killer's moniker. The suspense of one driver inexorably pursued along an increasingly claustrophobic freeway is defused here by having the Freeway Fiddler rack up a growing collection of victims in separate vignettes.

Shelley Hack isn't even one of them, not getting to duel with the Dodge until the finalé. And, of course, we keep on cutting away from the freeway action to watch her cover the case, which is more important to the film because of what it means to her than for what it actually is.

It's surprising to discover that *Death Car on the Freeway* hasn't yet been released on DVD, given that the impressive cast list alone would endear it to many fans. For now, we have to settle for grey market VHS rips or a low



resolution version on YouTube. I had to attempt a few different copies, the best of which was still far from pristine with the blue van being more black and the “one car on green” light being more blue.

The opening credits list a set of “cameo stars”, some of whom get a lot more screen time than cameos ever provide. George Hamilton is the “and” at the end of that list, suggesting that he’s really in the film as support for Hack, whose show this clearly is, but there are seven others in the list too and only two of them really count as cameo appearances.

Those are Abe Vigoda, who gets an ephemeral scene languishing in a hospital bed to establish his cute nurse before she becomes a victim, and Harriet Hilliard, the Harriet of *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, who plays a blind landlady during a late but important scene as Jan closes in on the Freeway Fiddler. Those are clearly cameos.

However, Jan’s co-workers at KXLA are supporting roles. She anchors with Ace Durham, a name that sounds a heck of lot more dynamic than the character really is; he’s played by Alfie Wise, a regular in Hal Needham pictures who bolsters her capably. Rosemary is the older and already established female anchor, whom the underrated Barbara Rush plays with knowing cynicism. The man in charge is Ralph Chandler, in the form of Frank Gorshin, who gets a little more to do here as a supportive authority figure than he did in my previous centennial review, *Skidoo*.

Peter Graves, right before his return to fame in *Airplane!*, plays Lt. Haller, the one and only cop we really see in what could easily be described as a serial killer story. Sure, there are a couple of police cars giving chase late in the film with their sirens blaring but he’s the only cop who has a face and the chance to speak. It’s hardly a challenging role and he could do this in his sleep but he does his job decently enough and doesn’t phone it in.

That leaves Dinah Shore, who was clearly enjoying the chance to actually act again outside the variety format that she was firmly known for at the time. She’s one of three victims whom we’re able to get to know a little before they start to blur into mere statistics.

As tennis pro Lynn Bernheimer, she was the first victim of the Freeway

Fiddler, back when he hadn't quite mastered a suitable killing technique, so she's also the first survivor. Jan interviews her early on, of course, but she also gets other scenes later when the reporter has further questions or, in one instance, quite possibly because she just happened to be still on set looking chipper and being available for Needham to shoot some more footage.

The other two early victims were both up and coming actresses who became something more substantial later. Becky Lyons, whose near death experience kicks off the picture, is Morgan Brittany, a Hollywood moniker so glitzy that it's hardly surprising she ended up on *Dallas*. Jane Guston, the nurse whose cuteness pleasantly tormented Abe Vigoda, is Tara Buckman, who would get her most memorable role in another Hal Needham movie, playing Adrienne Barbeau's navigator in *The Cannonball Run*. Well, either that or for her murder at the hands of Santa Claus in *Silent Night, Deadly Night*.

As much fun as it is to watch all these famous names and faces, the story can't get by on star power but it tried and failed to do that throughout. Part of it is the fact that nobody except Hack and Hamilton get a real chance to endow their characters with depth. Part of it is the unimaginative cinematography which is restricted to in car, next to car and helicopter. Outside those terror on the freeway scenes, it's simple back and forth stuff that hardly inspires.

Much of it is the fact that the script has a habit of setting up more powerful directions, but refusing to actually commit to any of them. There's the angle where Jan's attempt to take on macho car advertising prompts pressure on her network from Detroit. There's a feminist angle which sees her phrase these crimes as anti-women. There's an angle that has Jan's reporting publicise a psychological profile of the killer as being dominated by his mother and having a strong need to be hurt or killed for being a bad boy. All these are valid and interesting approaches, but instead of developing them, we're given seventies clichés like cars that explode at the slightest touch and freeway ramps under construction in the right place for us but the wrong place for those drivers trying to

escape up them.

The best scenes to my mind come late in the picture, when Jan finally discovers the confidence that her ex-husband is hell bent on chipping away from her and decides to follow up on what might be the most ill-advised lead I've seen anyone attempt to investigate in a thriller. Sure, the Freeway Fiddler is targeting attractive women and Jan has set him up to hate her with a passion, but when she receives an evasive phone call from a car club on the wrong side of the sticks, why would she just wander on down to see the Street Phantoms without taking anyone along or even letting anyone know that she's even going? What, as they say, could possibly go wrong?

Well, it turns out that the folk at the car club and the collection of bikers next door are very good at making her uncomfortable while still helping her out in a neatly abstract way. Both Robert F. Lyons and Sid Haig shine here, in small parts dwarfed by those star cameos. Roger Aaron Brown is decent too, even hindered by a very poor make-up job, his



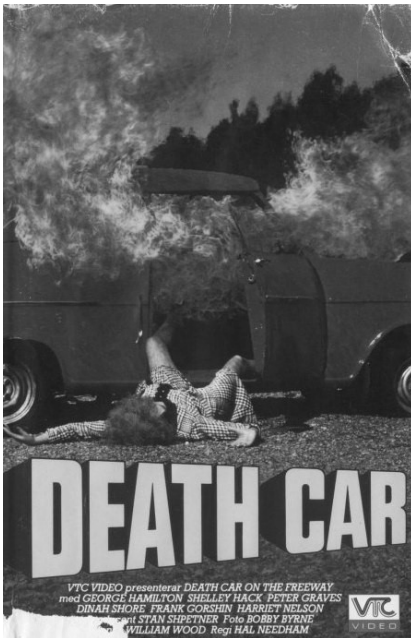
horrific scar looking like someone just threw a ball of plasticine at him.

The worst scenes are more uninspired than they are actually bad. For a film that advertises in its very title a death car on the freeway, the scenes which place the death van into action could have been improved in a hundred ways. The stunts are well handled, but I've seen California drivers up close and personal and don't remotely buy their utter lack of response to attempted vehicular homicide here; they honk their horns harder when they get out of bed. It would also have been good to not recognise certain cars across multiple scenes.

I liked the idea of Jan taking a defensive driving class, from the director of this film, Hal Needham, who used to be a stuntman (as we'll cover later in this book in another Needham film, *The Villain*), but it makes no sense. Cars weren't so insanely cheap in 1979 that a little money down could cover any possible damage they might cause on the road. I seriously doubt that dangerous driving can legally extend past the school's grounds to an 80 mph chase down narrow rural roads with Needham in hot pursuit inside a suspiciously recognisable Dodge van. There's no way that any insurance company would cover this school!

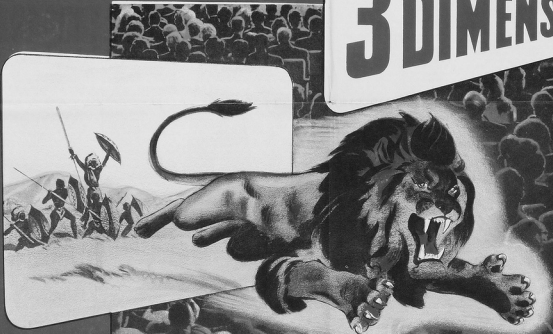
But hey, this was the seventies. With a better script and a better villain, this could have been something. Instead, we just got wild VHS covers like those opposite.

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Bwana Devil (1952)

Reviewed on 6th March for producer Sidney W. Pink

Director: Arch Oboler

Writer: Arch Oboler

Stars: Robert Stack, Barbara Britton and Nigel Bruce

Time was that I knew the name of Sidney W. Pink only from the cheap and astoundingly awful 1961 monster movie known as *Reptilicus*, which he produced and directed, as well as contributing the original story which Ib Melchior adapted into a screenplay. As epitaphs go, being the man behind *Reptilicus* is really not a good one.

It's much better to be remembered as the pioneer of 3-D movies, having kickstarted the 3-D craze of the early 1950s with this movie, which he also produced. It was his first major credit, having only been an uncredited assistant production manager before this, on *Lost Horizon* fifteen years earlier, but it launched his career. After this, he'd move on to write, produce and direct *I Was a Burlesque Queen*, then follow up with *The Angry Red Planet*, which applied a reddening effect during film processing to simulate the Martian environment, a memorable technique which he named CineMagic. His last credit was in 1970, as the producer of *The Man from O.R.G.Y.*, four years after he had "discovered" Dustin Hoffman off-Broadway and cast him as the lead in *Madigan's Millions*.

He would have been a hundred years old on 6th March and that's enough reason for me to take a look at *Bwana Devil* in his memory.

It wasn't the first 3-D movie, that honour going to *The Power of Love*, released as far back as 1922, when Sid Pink was only six years old, utilising a process invented by a man named Harry K. Fairall. It was previewed in Los Angeles, then booked to play in Newark, NJ, but it didn't make much of an impact and, only a year later, the picture had been renamed to *The*

Forbidden Lover and released flat. Today, it's a lost film.

Bwana Devil, on the other hand, was a massive success which sparked a brief revolution in filmmaking, a period of only two years which the 3-D Film Archive calls "the golden age of stereoscopic cinema". It began with *Bwana Devil*, which premiered on 26th November, 1952 and ended with Universal's *Revenge of the Creature*, the sequel to *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, which premiered almost 28 months later on 23rd March, 1955 (and also debuted a new actor by the name of Clint Eastwood). This "golden age" comprises fifty English language 3-D features, all but two of which were shot in a short subset of time between January and October of 1953.

Sadly, *Bwana Devil* is worth watching more for its importance to history than for any inherent quality, but it's still an interesting feature. In fact, the story that it fictionalises is interesting on its own merits, which perhaps explains why it's been told and retold. *Bwana Devil*, with Robert Stack playing Bob Hayward, was sourced from the same historical events as 1996's *The Ghost and the Darkness*, which saw Val Kilmer play John Henry Patterson, and 2007's *Prey*, with Peter Weller as Tom Newman.

Lt. Col. John Henry Patterson was the real historical figure who, in 1898, led a British project to construct a railway bridge over the Tsavo River in Kenya. Over nine months, two male lions terrorised the site, killing scores of locals and Indian workers and eating at least thirty of them. Patterson eventually killed both and published a book called *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo* in 1907. He kept the skins and used them for a quarter of a century as floor rugs before selling them to the Chicago Field Museum in 1924. They're still there on display today.

This first fictional adaptation, written by director Arch Oboler, changes Patterson into Bob Hayward, who is only in Kenya because his father-in-law is running the entire project from back in London and he gets to be the man on the ground. He clearly hates every second of it; in fact, he arrives in the picture in rather memorable fashion: drunk driving the train from Mombasa into camp that also carries the mail and a new cook. He remains drunk too, as if the liquor will somehow spirit him home to good ol' Blighty where he wouldn't have to deal with the heat, the Hindu

workers and especially that traditionally cool cucumber in a pith helmet, Maj. Parkhurst, who commands the camp. I've had enough of you," he slurs at the major, "and my father-in-law's railway. I want to go home."

Even when he hears about a lion that's spooking the camp, he blithely heads out with a gun to chase it off. He can't find it but he fires off a bunch of shots anyway and expects that it'll do the job. No such luck, of course. Fortunately, after the first victim is found, that new cook killed not by "those Masai devils" but by a lion, he sobers up and becomes the lead the film deserves.

Thus far, we've had an intriguing opening credits sequence, in which the names stand out superbly from the background, even if the African chanting just repeats over and over on a loop. We've had very bright footage for 1952, because the picture was shot in Ansco Color; it was much cheaper than Technicolor but apparently holds up well, the copy I watched looking notably brighter than some of the faded Technicolor features that I've seen over the years. We've seen an elephant filmed in completely different colour, as if Arch Oboler had no concern that viewers



might see through such transparent shenanigans. We've met the glorious Nigel Bruce as the camp's medical man, Dr. Angus McLean from Balloch, who is very much as Scottish as that name and origin might suggest.

And we've had a whole lot of nothingness. What's oddest here is that nothing happens for quite a while. It's all shot capably enough, if without much imagination, but the wild monkeys steal most of the early scenes until the film remembers what it's supposed to be doing, kills someone off and focuses us back on the supposed man-eating lions.

It does get better, mostly because Hayward grows substantially as a character and because Robert Stack is up to the challenge, even if he occasionally appears to be wondering as much about what he's doing in Kenya as his actual character does.

Ramsay Hill, who plays Maj. Parkhurst, vanishes from the picture in annoyingly cheap fashion, his off screen death in Mombasa by scorpion bite being merely reported to us and the characters both by the Commissioner. It means that Hayward is now in charge and he'd better sober up.



The Commissioner is sourced from the grand old tradition of stiff upper lip English gentlemen, throwing out glorious dialogue which alternates between his blissful ignorance of the seriousness of the situation and his wild overconfidence about what he can do about it. He could easily have been a character in *Carry On... Up the Khyber*, which I cover later in this book, instead but that film's a comedy. Here, he decides that he'll simply trap and kill the lion at large, because, well, the Indian coolies are ignorant savages or some such. "Great sport this, eh?" he suggests to Hayward. "It'll be a trophy by morning." Of course, it doesn't go quite how he expects; he bags a hyena instead.

If much of this adaptation plays completely into cliché, not to mention melodrama, there are some positive aspects beyond just the historical reasons to watch.

For a start, unlike most Hollywood productions, many of the Indians (and here that means subcontinental Indians rather than Native Americans, though the Hollywood problem applied just as much to the latter) are actually played by Indians, with the film's technical advisor, Bhogwan Singh, leading them. What's more, the two lions are actually played by lions too, albeit rather polite ones who seem to want to play with the two legs a lot more than they want to rend them asunder.

These lions do interact with the cast, unlike the many elephants, hippos and ostriches that Oboler shot footage of separately, but there's most definitely a plushie stunt double thrown at actors at points, which is frankly hilarious. It's jarring to be shown Stack clambering into a kayak and paddling into a river, taking pot shots at stock footage hippos, falling in and swimming out and appearing miraculously dry on the river bank to find the commissioner dead at the paws of one of the rather playful lions (if you ignore the screams), who couldn't be more laid back without being horizontal. Believability is not one of this film's strong points.

The best scene with a lion, however, is notably suspenseful, as Hayward decides to hire a set of wannabe warriors from the Masai tribe to hunt down the lions. Apparently, they have a traditional rite of passage that conveniently involves a boy not becoming a man until he's killed a lion

while armed with nothing but a spear. Just as a majority of the Indians are apparently played by Indians, so the Masai appear to be played by Masai.

The picture does announce at the outset, rather proudly, that it was “photographed and recorded in the Belgian Congo, Kenya, Uganda and California.” Just how much was shot in the latter as against the former, I don’t know, but it looks much more authentic than most Hollywood jaunts into the dark continent; sometimes I wonder if Tarzan ever found his way out of Los Angeles.

Anyway, these Masai surround one of the lions and close in the trap, surrounding it with shields and spears. The lion runs around in ever decreasing circles until making its escape out of the trap, leaving one of the warriors dead in its wake. While attack scenes are mostly poor, this scene was powerfully done. It does look believably dangerous and that’s precisely what this picture needed.

Of course, I watched *Bwana Devil* in 2-D, but there are scenes that leap out as obvious shots for the 3-D audience. Sadly, the one that Pink and Oboler want us to remember isn’t at all a memorable one. Perhaps the native hurling a spear at the audience would have sold well to folk in 3-D glasses but it’s nothing but underwhelming without them. Even worse is the kissing scene, which tasks Stack and Barbara Britton with leaning romantically toward the camera with lips pursed in anticipation. After all, the film’s tagline was, “A lion in your lap! A lover in your arms!”

I haven’t mentioned Britton until now as she’s shoehorned into the script with no subtlety, just to provide a love interest where there doesn’t need to be one. She’s Alice Hayward, Bob’s wife, and she shows up late in inappropriate clothing for the climate to perform in dumb scenes like the one where she bathes a native boy then walks him over to where the men are digging a ditch. Little Mukosi actually has more reason to be in the picture than she does, as he does at least spark one plot point. She doesn’t.

Of course, nobody is going to watch *Bwana Devil* today to see Barbara Britton. To be fair, we don’t really watch it to see Robert Stack either, but at least he has opportunities and he does grow his character substantially as the film runs on.

He's the only actor in the picture who's willing to even attempt to highlight in fiction just how long the Tsavo lions terrorised the real life equivalent of Hayward's camp; he does so by losing himself in the quest to kill them. It's not hard to see them as personifying the entire continent for him, an albatross around his neck that he's unable to lose and which is slowly but surely driving him mad. He has to kill these lions, not only because it will end the suffering of his men but because it will also end his own suffering through the assignment that he hates. It's hardly surprising to find that, once he finally does so (and that really can't be seen as a spoiler), the film has no remaining purpose and wraps up in what must be less than ten seconds. It's literally a blink and you'll miss it finalé, one of the quickest I've ever seen on screen.

While I'd argue that the location shooting and the inclusion of natives and actors of appropriate ethnicities is a draw, with Robert Stack's performance a secondary reason to watch and the presence of Nigel Bruce an extra incentive, the main reason anyone watches *Bwana Devil* today is its historical importance to the technology of the cinema.



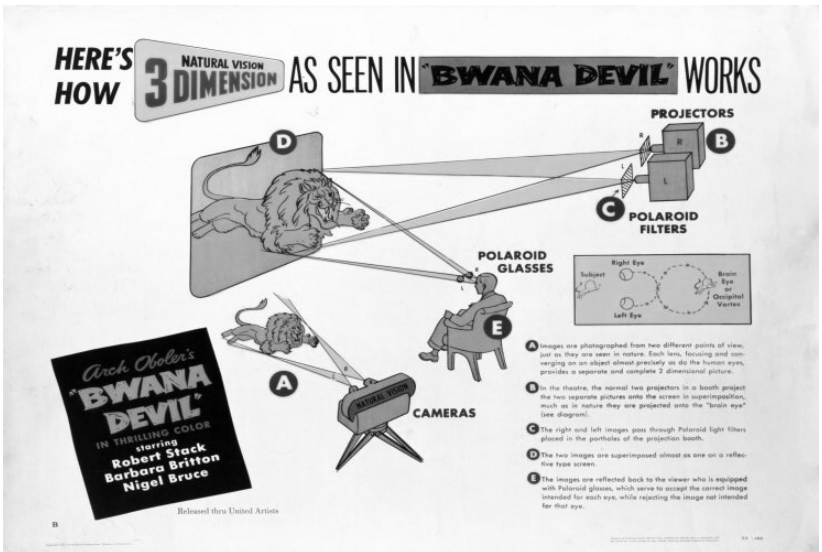
It was the first colour 3-D feature and the gimmick succeeded in drawing audiences back into theatres from their television sets. Everyone else threw 3-D films into production, though it took five months for the next ones to reach theatre screens: first up in April 1953 were *Man in the Dark*, a film noir from Columbia, and the one picture that springs to most people's minds when thinking about classic 3-D movies, *House of Wax* from Warner Bros., with Vincent Price firmly establishing himself as a horror icon in a film that also featured a stereophonic soundtrack.

Both these films and the rest of the "golden age of stereoscopic cinema" followed in the wake of *Bwana Devil*, which achieved its effect through a pioneering technique known as Natural Vision. It was designed by Milton and Julian Gunzburg and it impressed Pink and Oboler enough that they scrapped ten days of footage on a film that was then called *The Lions of Gulu*, and started over afresh with Natural Vision instead.

You won't be shocked to discover that critics hated it, though it isn't as bad as many of them have made out. It's dull for much too long and takes a long while to really get going. It's full of docile monsters and pointless subplots. It has plot convenience issues up the wazoo (which really should have been but wasn't the name of a river featured in the movie) and even the 3-D bits are cheesy and embarrassing to modern eyes.

It's hard to understand what it meant to audiences in 1952 but they adored it and continued to enjoy 3-D for a brief couple of years before the craze wore thin. Maybe they really thrilled to the spear being thrown at them through the camera just as audiences had supposedly reacted to the train in *Train Pulling into a Station*, the 1895 Lumière Brothers short which has fallen into legend.

In fact, it's notable that the Lumières, even at the tail end of the Victorian era, made a number of attempts to create films in 3-D. In fact, Louis Lumière reshot that very film with a stereoscopic film camera and screened it to the French Academy of Science in 1935. In many ways, *Bwana Devil* was history repeating itself yet creating something new in the process.



A Hundred in 2016



Dance of the Vampires (1967)

Reviewed on 11th March for actor Ferdy Mayne

Director: Roman Polanski

Writers: Gérard Brach and Roman Polanski

Stars: Jack MacGowran, Sharon Tate and Alfie Bass

Dance of the Vampires, the original British title of what soon became known instead in the United States and elsewhere as *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, either with or without the subtitle of *Pardon Me, But Your Teeth are in My Neck*, is a rather strange picture.

The original title might suggest an artistic European vampire tale in the style of Jean Rollin with the usual abundant nudity. The new one clearly plays up the comedic angle and the subtitle hints at *Carry On* levels of farce. It's most commonly described either as a comedy horror film or a horror comedy, as if the order of those words suggests a priority, but it's really neither. Yes, it's humorous, but it's done in an old fashioned style of humour that isn't going to have you laughing out loud or rolling on the floor. Yes, it's about vampires, but there's very little plot and what there is plays so archetypally that the easiest description is as cliché. It stuns me that few people seem to describe the film as what it really is, a fairy tale, especially as it's truer to that ancient form than anything that Tim Burton has yet conjured up with a billion dollars of combined budget.

It's especially odd to me because, to my mind, this fails either as a straight comedy or as a straight horror movie, but it does succeed with magnificent style as a fairy tale. Watch it in the wrong way and you're going to think something is missing. Everything here is fairy tale in its truest sense: a story full of folklore, mythology and hand-me-down knowledge, all phrased as the usual cautionary tale.

You can see Roman Polanski, director and co-writer, start in on this

immediately, with the arrival of Professor Abronsius and his assistant, Alfred, in the snowy wastes of Transylvania. It's easy to see the Brothers Grimm in the opening shot of their sleigh beset by wild dogs, which Alfred beats away with an umbrella while his master sits motionless because, as we quickly discover, he's been frozen stiff. It's obvious when they arrive at an inn that everyone has their own particular remedy for his condition, whether that be hot beer and cinnamon or just planting his feet into a hot bath. Some completely disagree as to which approaches to take; one wants to rub snow on his nose, while another says to leave it alone.

And, of course, it's impossible to miss how all the locals clam up when Abronsius recovers and asks about the garlic hanging from the walls and the ceiling. No wonder he comes alive at this point, because it's his life work finally showing some promise.

He's been travelling all around central Europe trying to find evidence of vampires, but to no avail. This quest has already lost him his chair at the University of Königsberg and it'll lead to him losing a lot more. Without providing spoilers, there's a Lovecraftian message in play here, that old faithful that seeking knowledge for its own sake is an inherently dangerous act which will surely lead to bad things, usually insanity; the ending to this movie endows that message with a delicious irony. The Professor has been set on that path for decades, though he's taken nothing but wrong turns until now, collecting vast amounts of knowledge but finding no practical experience. Finally, his persistence has paid off and, as he eagerly tells Alfred, "We are nearing our goal."

Before they reach it, though, there's more ritual and folklore, always introduced lightheartedly. We watch Alfred place heated bulbs onto his master's back using the old Chinese technique of cupping. The innkeeper, Yoine Shagall, has a daughter, who likes a good soak; her father even spansks her because of it. "No baths!" he repeats like a mantra and goes as far as to sneak his way through the bedroom of our intrepid heroes at night in order to board up the bathroom door with a hammer and nails, then tiptoe right back out again. The next day, the inn's maid hides under Alfred's table when a hunchback with club feet and buck teeth walks in

and a patron spits on the floor after he leaves.

Everything has rules in a fairy tale because that's what it's for: follow the rules provided and you'll be safe, but break the rules and outrageously awful things will happen to you. Amidst all this, it becomes easy to read hidden meaning into everything, surely the reason how much folklore gets started in the first place. Suddenly, the snowman Alfred constructs in front of the inn seems like a guardian for the innkeeper's daughter, Sarah Shagall, who watches him evocatively from an upstairs window.

Not that it works, of course, because people are good at breaking rules. Sarah keeps on sneaking baths and her father neglects to hang copious amounts of garlic in the bathroom, thus leaving the way wide open for the local vampire lord to breeze on in through the window in the roof.

In a wonderful little touch, Sarah first notices the danger she's in when she opens her eyes and realises that it's snowing inside the bathroom. This sequence is an archetypal one, over quickly but with every component needed: a naked girl and a caped vampire, neck biting action, discovery too late, voiceless terror and pursuit in vain. It's well shot too, with a memorable shot of the Professor breaking into the bathroom to discover an empty bath with blood stained bubbles.

While I'm watching for Ferdy Mayne, the actor who plays Count von Krolock, the vampire who snatched Sarah from her bathtub and who lives in the inevitable castle on the hill, it's worth mentioning cinematographer Douglas Slocombe here too, who had sadly died the previous month at the



ripe old age of 103.

Slocombe was a legendary British cinematographer, having shot many of the great Ealing comedies like *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, the latter of which included a legendary shot which assembled together eight different characters, all played by Alec Guinness. Today, he's probably best known for shooting the Indiana Jones trilogy, the first of which landed him his third Academy Award nomination. He never won an Oscar, even though his work on *Raiders of the Lost Ark* could easily be regarded as a textbook on cinematography. By that point, though, he'd won three BAFTAs out of nine nominations, his wins for films as diverse as *The Servant*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Julia*. The British Society of Cinematographers eventually honoured him with five awards, the other two being for *The Lion in Winter* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and, in 1995, with a Lifetime Achievement Award. I'd highlight other titles of his too, such as *Circus of Horrors*, *The Italian Job* and *Rollerball*.

Ferdy Mayne was even more prolific, though he rarely played lead roles in his his half century in film. He made over 130 pictures and appeared in innumerable television shows, but surprisingly few capitalised on his European heritage. A German Jew, his family had the foresight to send him to England in 1932 to keep him safe from the Nazis and he became an informant for MI5 during World War II.

After a couple of brief early appearances, one in a sleigh that's shot from behind and the other while he seizes Sarah from her bath, he gets a



glorious introduction inside his castle which ably highlights both the serious and frivolous nature of the picture. Perhaps inevitably for 1967, he plays the count like a sort of cross between Christopher Lee and Bela Lugosi, easily the two most recognisable vampires at the time. He aims more at emulating Lee, but his 6' 1" frame was the same size and shape as Lugosi's and his voice shifts during the film from the deep resonance of the former into the accented enticements of the latter.

That's not to say that his performance is merely a combination of influences. He adds details to the role, not only the grey hair that neither Lee nor Lugosi would countenance. Most obviously, he adds a timeless patience that's different to what either previous star had brought to their equivalent roles. Lugosi endowed Count Dracula with the politeness inherent in a noble upbringing, but Mayne adds ennui to that. He's lived a lot of lives and has settled into a routine that bores him; the arrival of the Professor, whose works he's read, is a welcome distraction from what could well be centuries more of nothing but repetition.

He seizes this opportunity with what Abronsius describes, in a neatly clever double conversation, as "the mechanical need to fight against the torpor of hibernation". The professor is talking about an imaginary bat to talk his way out of a slip of the tongue, but his entire spiel clearly has a double meaning and so applies to von Krolock as well. Among the Count's more blatant lines, such as "I'm a nightbird. I am not much good in the daytime," it's easy to miss clever details like Abronsius's monologue, but



they're still there nonetheless.

Along with Slocombe and Mayne, the other big winner at this point is the team who designed and built a gothic castle to the specifications of convention but without skimping on scale. It's a delight in every way, a huge stone construction packed full of vast four poster beds, wildly drooping candles and antique furnishings, whether on the floor or the walls, along with a dusting of cobwebs which decorates the abundant wooden panels. The geometry of the place is dreamlike, as the combination of presumably unconnected sets and Slocombe's floating camera raises an appropriate sense of disconnection as we try to figure out what leads where.

Abronsius and Alfred get to explore far more during the day than perhaps they'd like but needs must. At one point, because Koukol, the hunchback servant, in the suitably bulky form of Terry Downes, a recent middleweight boxing champion of the world, is blocking the door to the crypt, our intrepid duo take to the snow-covered roofs to find a way in. The professor gets stuck in the window and Alfred has to go the long way around to free him.

Again, this is the sort of thing that we read about in fairy tales. There's so much of this, more overtly with the progression of the film, that it's hard to read it any other way, but then perhaps some viewers had little background in that sort of literature, imbibing their fairy tales at the juice bar of Disney rather than the wine cellar of Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm.

There are some glorious scenes towards the end of the film that run on the sort of logic only found in fairy tales. One has Alfred being chased around a colonnade by the Count's effeminate son, Herbert, only for the vampire to stop and Alfred to run all the way round to end up right next to his pursuer. Another has our intrepid heroes talk to Sarah in snippets during the grand vampire ball which provided the film's original title, as if none of the vampires with their enhanced vampire hearing could hear them. Best of all is their escape from the dance, which features a bevy of vampires following them in procession towards a large mirror, in which

only three figures are visible: Ambronsius, Alfred and the girl they're attempting to rescue.

Incidentally, in reality, this wasn't really a mirror. Polanski found three body doubles for the principal actors and tasked them with mimicking the actions of the stars in reverse. It's a clever scene shot in a clever way.

I've seen this film before and enjoyed it, but watching late one night while I was sleepy, I missed much of the detail and found it surprisingly slow. Watching afresh in the morning, it was back to the speed that I'm used to and I caught the many little details that I liked so much in previous viewings.

My favourite is surely still the moment when Yoine Shagall, as a new vampire, climbs into the bedroom of the serving wench with whom he's been attempting to sneak around; she reflexively holds up a crucifix and he, being Jewish, laughs at her and points out that she has the wrong cross.

I love the use of colour, especially during the ball, which is full of agreeably faded vampires in agreeably faded outfits. When Sharon Tate is revealed, dressed in a bright red dress, she stands out fantastically. I'd call out Jack MacGowran for his iconic showing as Professor Ambronsius, the vastly experienced Irish actor overdoing things gloriously, but it's Koukol who sledges down a hill in a coffin and Alfred who's pursued by a gay vampire. The latter is played by Polanski himself, refusing a credit until the very end.



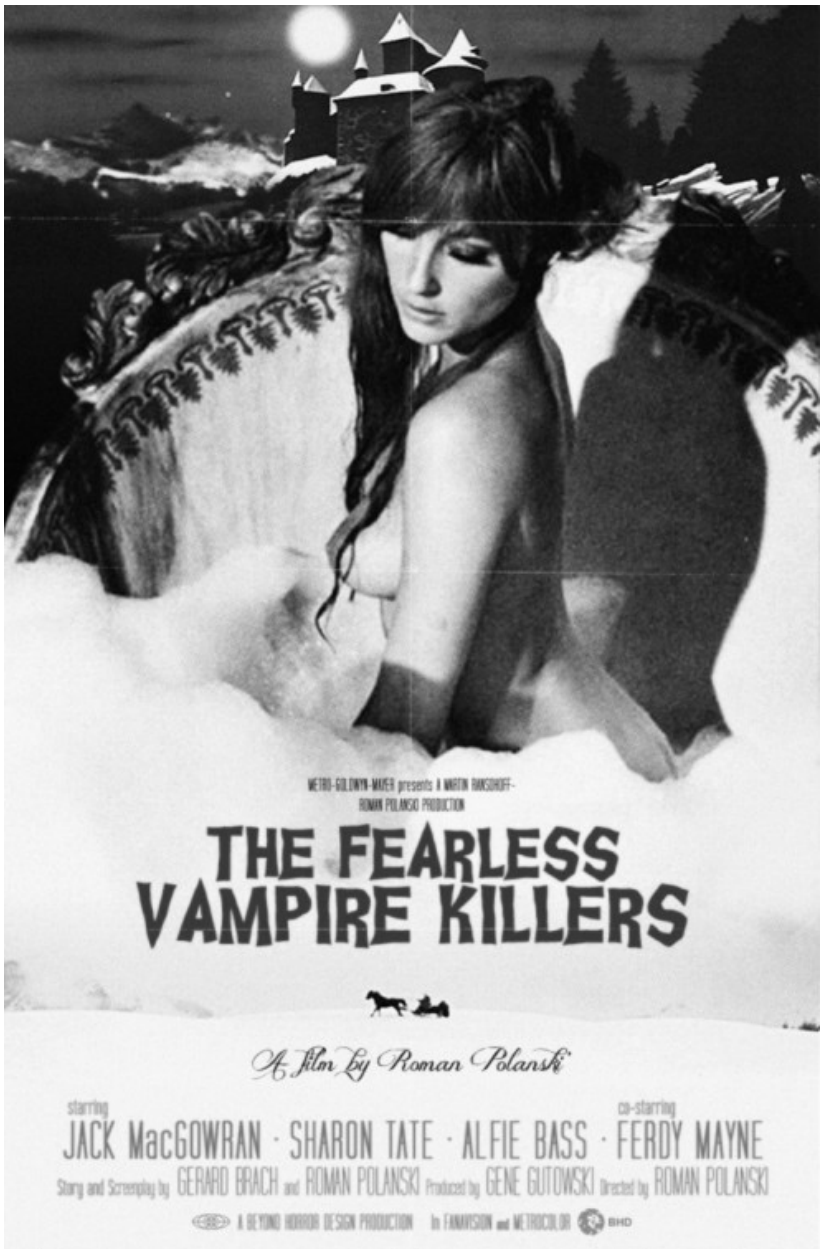
At the end of the day though, it's surely Sharon Tate who shines brightest. This wasn't her first lead role, but I'm much more fond of her work here than in *Eye of the Devil*, even if the latter was more of a substantial part. To my mind, she was perfectly cast here, even though Polanski was set beforehand on Jill St. John. She's so desirable that it's believable that Count von Krolock wants her and Polanski got her, the two marrying a year later. Their marriage lasted just over a year and a half until Tate, along with their baby, which was almost due, was murdered by the Manson Family at their house in Los Angeles.

She left behind only nine movies and a few TV appearances, including a run on *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Sadly, she's remembered mostly for the circumstances of her death, but we can watch her talent grow through three major films: *Eye of the Devil*, *The Fearless Vampire Killers* and *Valley of the Dolls*.

For his part, Mayne would continue to be prolific, even going on to play Count Dracula in a German TV show called *Teta*. He would have been a hundred years old on 11th March.

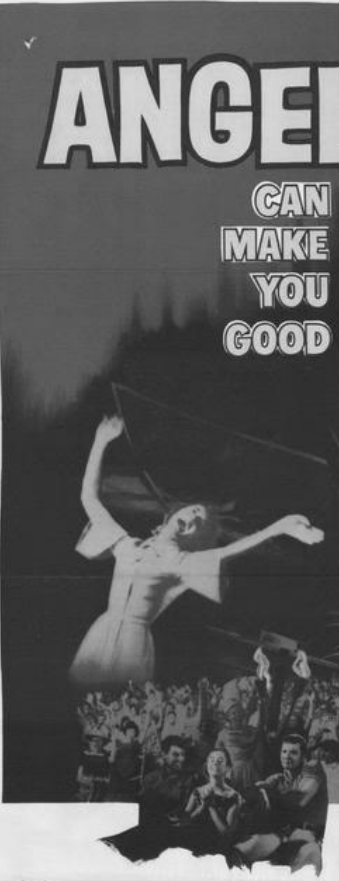


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DUCING **JENS**

AN ALLIED ARTISTS RELEASE

Screenplay by **ORIN BORSTEN, PAUL MASON** and **SAMUEL ROECA** • Based on a novel by **ELSIE OAKES BARBER**

Associate Producer **FRANCIS SCHWARTZ** • Directed by **PAUL WENDKOS** • A **THOMAS F. WOODS PRODUCTION**

Angel Baby (1961)

Reviewed on 17th March for actress Mercedes McCambridge

Director: Paul Wendkos

Writers: Orin Borsten, Paul Mason and Samuel Roeca, from the novel *Jenny Angel* by Elsie Oakes Barber

Stars: George Hamilton, Mercedes McCambridge, Joan Blondell, Henry Jones, Burt Reynolds, Roger Clark and Miss Salomé Jens

Sometimes reading up on a film before watching it, even just a synopsis at IMDb which ought to be free of spoilers, can be rather misleading. *Angel Baby* kept me on the hop, as it does a lot more than what I was expecting and it does it in different ways to how it intends.

For a start, there's an opening text which recommends (rather late, I should add) that filmgoers "consider carefully this picture's suitability for viewing by impressionable children." That hints at a salacious exploitation picture, albeit not too salacious as it was released in 1961, especially as IMDb plays up the clash between a woman "who believes she has been chosen by God" and a "greedy promoter and his shrewish wife".

Well, you can safely ignore all that. This isn't exploitative at all, playing out instead as a routine melodrama with some serious underlying themes. There is certainly a clash, in fact there are a few of them, but not of the sort that you might expect from that synopsis. Also, while we do have both a greedy promoter and a shrewish wife, they're not married to each other and they feature in separate plot strands. Whew.

So, how to begin fixing this so you can watch without getting confused? Well, let's kick off with the young lady who's the title character.

She begins the picture as Jenny Brooks, who has been mute since the age of eight, after her father hit her. Her devout mother, who's poured all her money into medical treatments to no avail, brings her to a travelling

evangelical preacher, Brother Paul Strand, in the hopes that she can be healed in a revival tent. Jenny is happy fooling around with bad boy Hoke Adams outside but Ma drags her in and, to her own amazement, Brother Paul manages to stir her into speech. It's a miracle, ladies and gentleman, a genuine miracle! And so when the show packs up to get back on the road, Jenny is there too to go along for the ride and dedicate her life to serving the Lord.

Now, if you're imagining Brother Paul Strand as being that "greedy promoter", you'd be leading yourself astray. He's a good man, just one who spreads the gospel by whooping and hollering in summer revival meetings all across the deepsouth.

He's also played by a young George Hamilton, so it's no surprise to find young Jenny falling hard for him, especially as they're of much closer ages than he and his wife, Sister Sarah, who serves as the gatekeeper for their show. And, for all the exuberant praising of the Lord's name, this is at heart a much more down to earth story, a good old fashioned love triangle which merely has Jesus hovering behind each of the three corners like a little angel on these folks' shoulders, or perhaps a little devil because, of course, we're not going to leap headlong into a happy ending.

Hamilton wanted a happy ending of his own, deciding after four prior pictures to make "better, more serious movies", entirely to impress his girlfriend's family. I'm not sure how that story ended up, but he's decent here as a holy roller with passion and verve, if not as a fighting man.

The actor debuting as Hoke Adams, however, later commented that, "George Hamilton beat me up in this film. Does that tell you something?" That actor is Burt Reynolds, a sexy muscled beast even if he hadn't grown into himself yet. He was the top box office draw for five years running between 1978 and 1982, but this was 1961.

Reynolds is surprisingly impressive for a supporting role in his first outing, but for all the testosterone on display in his scenes, this isn't about the guys; it's about the girls. It was named for a woman, based on a book by a woman, *Jenny Angel* by Elsie Oakes Barber, and it stars three women, each of whom is far more interesting than their male colleagues.

Jenny is played by “Miss Salomé Jens”, who gets an “introducing” credit, because her future should clearly start here with a serious lead rather than her two previous titles, *Showdown at Ulcer Gulch*, a comedy short made by Chico Marx’s Disney animator son-in-law, Jimmy ‘Shamus’ Culhane, and *Terror from the Year 5000*, a cheap sci-fi flick from Robert J. Gurney Jr. She’s well cast here, pretty but plain, with the ability to look lost one minute but then let her eyes come alight and steal the show the next. It’s the exact combination that she needs to play Jenny and she does it well. She’d go on to a lot of television work, with recurring roles on *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, but she made surprisingly few films of note. Her most prominent film role other than this may be as the narrator of *Clan of the Cave Bear*.

She’s the lead, so we watch more of her than anyone else, but I couldn’t keep my eyes off her two female co-stars whenever they’re on screen, which is hardly surprising given who they are.

One is Joan Blondell, a vivacious thirties actress who progressed to more serious roles as she got older and larger. She’s Mollie Hays here, older but not yet much larger, and she’s Brother Paul’s pianist who’s a little too fond of the juice. “Whiskey undid me,” she tells Jenny, and it’s whiskey that surely prompts her drunken vision of something floating



around the girl which she interprets as being an angel; and that's how Jenny Brooks becomes Angel Baby.

As won't be surprising to anyone who's enjoyed Blondell's early movies, like *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Union Depot* or *He Was Her Man*, she's the one with all the character here. Jenny is more notable for what she represents, but Mollie is more notable for who's giving her life. Blondell works well with Henry Jones, who plays her husband Ben, and she steals her fair share of scenes, whether drunk or sober. She also drives many of the key direction changes and stays on top of everything. She was more vibrant early in her career (and exactly half of her 96 movies were made in her first seven years on screen) but more interesting as time went on (she only made seven films in the entire decade of the 1950s, but that's when she was nominated for an Oscar).

And that leaves Mercedes McCambridge as Sister Sarah Strand. As she would have been a hundred on 17th March and her screen husband here is currently a dashing hit on reality TV, we can safely say that there was an age difference and not in the usual direction for classic Hollywood. She had no less than 23 years on George Hamilton, who, making his fifth film, was even younger than the debuting Burt Reynolds, who also has three years on him.



McCambridge was also by far the biggest star in the picture, having won both an Oscar and a Golden Globe for her own screen debut in 1949, as Best Supporting Actress for *All the King's Men*. She's known for her classic Hollywood roles in *Johnny Guitar*, *Giant* and *Suddenly, Last Summer*, not to mention an uncredited spot in *Touch of Evil*, whose auteur, Orson Welles, had already described her as "the world's greatest living radio actress", which is beyond a high compliment given that he'd founded the Mercury Theatre on the Air with Agnes Moorehead. Yet her filmography is wildly versatile, as highlighted by her wrapping up her sixties output with films as far from classic Hollywood as *The Counterfeit Killer*, *Women's Penitentiary XII* and *Marquis de Sade's Justine*. Of course, her most abiding role is one in which she only lent a voice, providing one to Pazuzu, the demon who possessed young Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, making her role as a preacher's wife here a neat contrast.

There's further contrast between the Strands too: Brother Paul is a New Testament kind of guy, healing the sick and believing in positivity in his outreach; Sister Sarah, though, is Old Testament to the core, preaching hellfire and damnation with Lucifer never far from her tongue. All her monologues are productions, perfect for a seasoned radio actress able to wrap her considerable talent around lines like those following their first contretemps over Jenny.

"Oh, the devil has you in his grip," she mutters to him. "I know how swiftly Satan moves to coil his evil web around the heart." She escalates. "Why doesn't God rain fire and brimstone down upon these women?" she asks. "Show him the raging fires of Hell that burn in this woman's eyes! Show him the damned! Show him the fallen angels writhing in torment!"

Finally she gets to the point, as simple a message as, "You must exorcise this devil, Paul." And so Angel Baby hits the road, along with Mollie and Ben in tow to help run a new revival show: Jenny Angel, Miracle Girl, Preacher of the Ages.

It's here that we meet that "greedy promoter" from the synopsis, albeit one who isn't remotely as outrageous as that suggests. He's Sam Wilcox, a successful pharmacist and apparently a devout man, who witnesses Jenny

in action as she persuades a murderer into a confession, then protects him from the mob until the police can take him. He proposes to manage and finance her with the spiritual line, "Are you cutting me in, Miss Angel?" He's no crook, he simply understands how money works and he sees her as just another product. Well, at least until temptation comes a-knockin' and some commandments are ready to be broken. There is a story here, after all, and Roger Clark gets to contribute plenty to its growth until the Strands inevitably rejoin it and we can move towards the finalés, one that follows Sister Sarah's beliefs and one that follows Brother Paul's. The very end could have gone a few different ways that I saw but the one they chose works well.

From what I can tell, not having read Elsie Oakes Barber's 1954 novel, this doesn't follow it with any real zeal. For a start, the book is about Giannina Angelina who leaves a Boston slum for a mission, where she's renamed to Jenny Angel and marries a Kendall Wyatt, before setting out as an evangelist. The Strands and the Hays both appear to be the product of the scriptwriters; while Sam is in the novel, he seems to be rather different here; and a further subplot not in the film would appear to be the most important in the book.

So this is a very loose adaptation and I wonder what it really aimed to accomplish. It appears to be pro-religion, pro-evangelist and even pro-faith healer, but it sets up awkward questions for the faithful in 1961. How did Sister Sarah pluck the 23 years younger Paul out of a choir to marry her and yet remain chaste? Are we supposed to see their different approaches to faith as equally valid or make a judgement call and call one false? And what of a love triangle between preachers? Marriage as purgatory doesn't seem particularly biblical. This is the realm of salacious TV movies that don't remotely pretend at substance.

I'd suggest that this picture sits a little uncomfortably between the passionate dramas of the fifties and the social exploration of the sixties. It's late for the former and early for the latter, but it tries to do both and doesn't quite succeed at either.

It's often compared to *Elmer Gantry*, an earlier novel by Sinclair Lewis

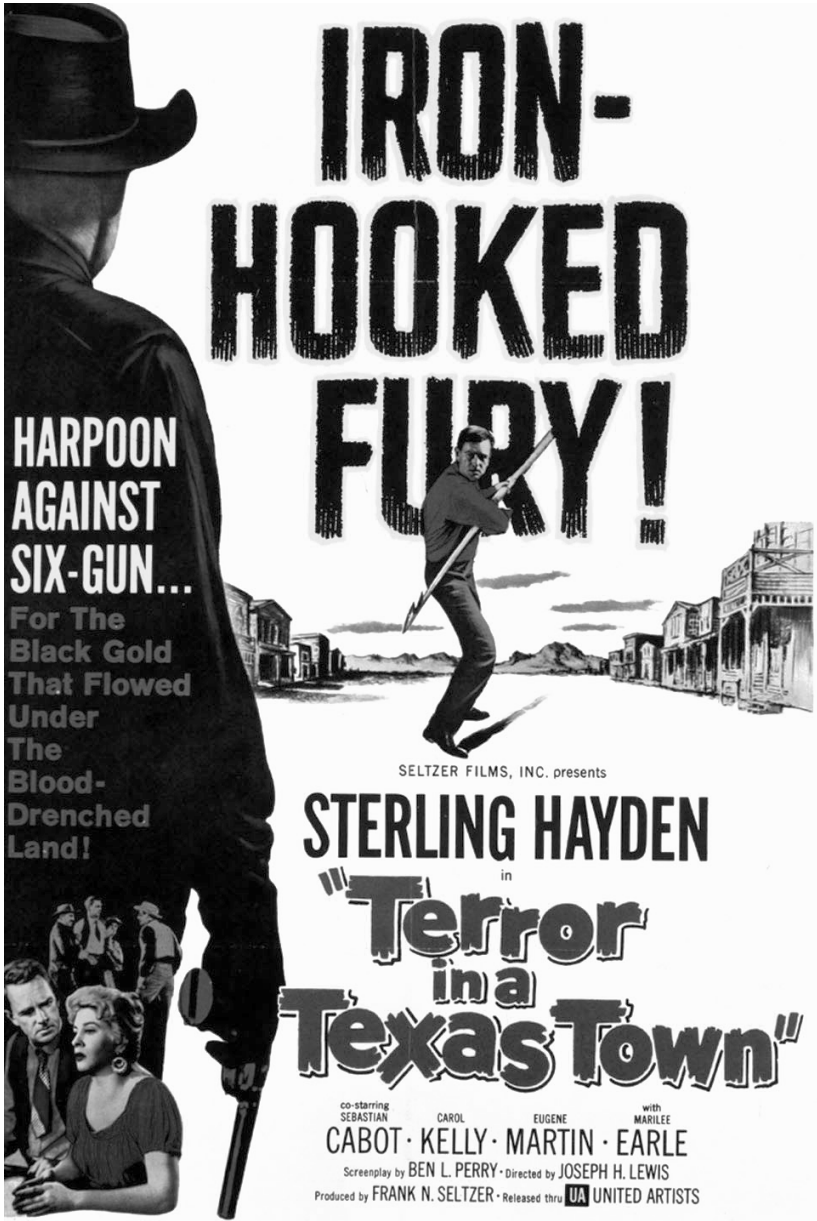
which was adapted to the screen in 1960, a year before this picture, with Burt Lancaster and Jean Simmons. Given the many differences between *Angel Baby* and *Jenny Angel*, it's no stretch to see *Elmer Gantry* as frequent a source as the credited one.

It does well though, with its strong performances and confident camerawork, courtesy of Emmy-winning Jack Marta and double Oscar-winning Haskell Wexler, who died last December. The story remains the weakest link, because it doesn't quite know what it wants to be. It's engaging but predictable; traditional but modern; ambitious but careful. There are too many incompatible goals for it to truly stand out but it does remain an interesting member of the crowd.

Hallelujah! Can I get an amen?



A Hundred in 2016



**HARPOON
AGAINST
SIX-GUN...**
For The
Black Gold
That Flowed
Under
The
Blood-
Drenched
Land!

IRON- HOOKED FURY!

SELTZER FILMS, INC. presents
STERLING HAYDEN
in
**"Terror
in a
Texas Town"**

co-starring
SEBASTIAN CAROL EUGENE
with
MARILEE
CABOT · KELLY · MARTIN · EARLE
Screenplay by BEN L. PERRY · Directed by JOSEPH H. LEWIS
Produced by FRANK N. SELTZER · Released thru **UA** UNITED ARTISTS

Terror in a Texas Town (1958)

Reviewed on 26th March for actor Sterling Hayden

Director: Joseph H. Lewis

Writers: Ben L. Perry, a front for Dalton Trumbo

Stars: Sterling Hayden, Sebastian Cabot, Carol Kelly, Eugene Martin and Marilee Earle

This archetypal story is so familiar that what it reminds you of will vary depending on how old you are or which fresh take you happened to see first. To me, this is an early version of *Nowhere to Run*, starring Jean-Claude van Damme and Rosanna Arquette. For others, it might be *Road House* or every other episode of *The A-Team*. Each generation has a dozen versions because it's a timeless story that cuts things down to the basics: good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, one man vs. the establishment.

Terror in a Texas Town is just one more take on that old chestnut about a town, the powerful man who owns it and the stubborn man who stands up to fight for what's right. Usually, only the names are different and here the town is Prairie City, Texas, the affluent landowner is Ed McNeil and the Swedish whaler who takes him on is George Hansen, but there's an additional level to this take here because what we see on screen also tells a story that resonates off screen too because the people making the film were fighting the system as much as any character in it.

The script was credited to Ben L. Perry, who was acting as a front for the real writer, Dalton Trumbo, whom few were aware had already won two Academy Awards. His first was for *Roman Holiday* in 1953, but he'd been fronted for there as well, that time by Ian McLellan Hunter; his second was for *The Brave One* in 1956, which was credited to a pseudonym, Robert Rich, which he'd borrowed from the nephew of Frank King, the picture's producer. Of course, all of these shenanigans were to keep

Trumbo, one of the very best in the business, working after he'd been blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee.

He was named as a Communist sympathiser in *The Hollywood Reporter* in 1947, refused with nine others to testify in front of Congress and served eleven months in a federal penitentiary for being in contempt. These were known as the Hollywood Ten and they were promptly blacklisted from being able to work in the industry. Trumbo moved to Mexico with his similarly blacklisted wife, Cleo Beth Fincher, and churned out scripts as pseudonym after pseudonym.

The reasons why filmmakers worked with blacklisted writers in such a roundabout way varied, but in this instance, director Joseph H. Lewis didn't care because this was to be his last film.

He'd shot a full forty features before this one in a variety of B-movie genres: westerns, adventures and horror flicks, but perhaps most notably, films noir like *My Name is Julia Ross* and *Deadly is the Female* aka *Gun Crazy*. He'd continue on for another seven years shooting western shows on television, but he was already done with theatrical features and so really didn't care where his script came from, just as long as it was good; Trumbo had written Lewis's most noted film, *Gun Crazy*, so was the logical choice.

This one is hardly original but it does everything it needs to do and Lewis was able to build well upon it. I was impressed with his work from the very outset, as it uses great camera movement from cinematographer Ray Rennahan and just as good placement to have us watch Sterling Hayden walk down a dusty road towards us and a gunfighter, shot from behind that gunfighter's holster.

We don't watch it immediately, of course, as it's our finalé. Trumbo just sets up where we're going and then backtracks through highlights of a number of other scenes which we haven't seen yet until the opening credits end and we watch the burning of Brady's farm, barn and livestock.

As you'll be stunned to realise, this was a deliberate act of arson aimed at clearing Brady off his land and the rest of the folk in town have been threatened too. It would seem that a rich man by the name of Ed McNeil breezed into Prairie City and claimed to own it all, with land grants to

back up his story. At least so he says, but we don't quite believe him.

The townsfolk, most of whom have lived there for years, are resisting the claims so he's trying various tactics to make these "squatters" leave. He's paid a few off with cash and now plans on scaring the rest into hitting the road. And, if the Brady fire doesn't do the job, he has a dangerous new card to play: Johnny Crale, an old school gunfighter doing an old school job, even in changing times. His era is ending but his bullets kill all the same.

And here's where we leap right back to the Hollywood blacklist, because Dalton Trumbo was not the only man involved in this film who was named on it. Nedrick Young was an actor who had been branching out by writing scripts, like Elvis Presley's *Jailhouse Rock* in 1957. His screenplay a year later for *The Defiant Ones* won him an Academy Award, though his original story, which was adapted by Harold Jacob Smith, was credited to Nathan E. Douglas (note the initials), because Young had been blacklisted.

He plays Johnny Crale in this picture like the industry he and Trumbo, as well as so many others, were suffering from. He's a bully, an intimidator and, if that doesn't work, an assassin. His ways are old ones that are out of place in the modern world but he can't retire even with a broken shooting hand. His girlfriend Polly tells him that he can't walk into a town and walk



out again the way he used to, with state police and rangers and the like now at work, but he is what he is and he can't be anyone else. It's clever writing and clever acting too.

For a blacklisted screenwriter about to win a Oscar, Young is a rather interesting actor and Lewis knows exactly how to capture him. We meet him in McNeil's plush suite above the local saloon, where the boss hires him over lobster, even if his right arm has been mangled and he's learned to shoot with his left. An acerbic conversation between the two includes McNeil's "secretary", who often remains silently in shot as the camera moves around the room and between the speakers. McNeil is a cheerfully controlling swine who doesn't trust anybody, even with Sheriff Stoner in his pocket. As Johnny Crale, Young roils overtly, even if his physical movements are kept to a minimum; he's like Humphrey Bogart in a back brace. And Marilee Earle as that secretary, Mona Stacey, seethes silently at her invisible leash. The camera knows exactly where to go and it elevates the scene magnificently. The banter is summed up by a telling line: "As long as there are people like you," Crale tells McNeil, "there'll be work for people like me."

This isn't a Nedrick Young film, though, even if he's the villain's villain. It isn't a Sebastian Cabot picture either, even though he's the Boss Hogg of



the piece. It's a Sterling Hayden movie and I'm watching for him, as he would have been a hundred years old on 26th March, coincidentally my birthday too.

He's George Hansen, the son of the example that McNeil has Crale set to the town after Brady's fire doesn't dissuade them from opposition to his landgrabbing schemes. Sven Hansen used to be a Swedish whaler and so did George, who arrives to help his dad run their farm, only to receive the news of his murder on the way into town, from no less a person than Johnny Crale.

"Did you know him?" Hansen asks the hired gun in his Swedish lilt. "Not very well," replies Crale truthfully. "Not for long." This is brutal stuff but it underlines who Crale is because this is what he does and it's the one and only thing he truly understands. "How did he die?" Hansen asks. "Somebody shot him," calmly replies the man who did the deed.

And so George discovers the lay of the land, which is that he's very likely to get screwed out of the farm he's been sending money over for after every voyage because, well, justice. Sheriff Stoner is a dead end; "How can I get in trouble claiming what is mine?" asks the whaler, finding that if he sets foot on his land, he'll be promptly arrested for trespassing. McNeil tries to buy him out and, getting nowhere, tries threats instead but Hansen's stubbornness, honesty and neat ability to crunch any new scenario down to the simplest question is a new experience that he can't handle. He has a line on everything except honesty and that flusters him.

There's no real suspense to how the film progresses. We know he's going to go to the farm anyway. We know he's going to meet José Mirada, his father's friend who witnessed his killing but kept quiet in order to keep his pregnant wife out of harm's way. We know he's going to get beaten up and thrown out of town. We know he'll return because we saw it already in the opening scene, with him bringing a harpoon to a gunfight.

We know all of this because the story is ruthlessly predictable, but it's elevated by some neat character development in scenes that echo the struggle of the Hollywood Ten and the many other filmmakers who were blacklisted by the industry.

Hansen tries to find others to stand with him and finds none, albeit for a variety of different reasons. Some are scared, more feel powerless, while others, such as their leader, a deacon called Matt Holmes, want to fight on legally.

Trumbo and the others in the Hollywood Ten did the latter, believing, as Americans, that they had the right to freedom of speech and could belong to any political party they wanted, even if it was the Communist Party. They appealed to the Supreme Court but lost their fight, an unexpected loss that's clearly echoed in how the script deals with Deacon Matt. He's probably right, the one man doing things according to the book, but he's ignored and his belief in the law derided. Instead, the film calls on an old fashioned hero with old fashioned guts whom the Hollywood Ten surely needed.

Sterling Hayden plays a good old fashioned hero with good old fashioned guts. While we know what McNeil is after, he doesn't for quite a while so his fight is entirely on moral grounds. "The truth," Hansen tells Polly, Crale's long suffering girlfriend, in a blistering scene. "That is not so difficult to understand."

If the writer and his compatriots believe that they're George Hansen but were treated like Deacon Matt; Ed McNeil is the corrupt United States



government; and Johnny Crale, the old fashioned bully, is HUAC personified, then it's not difficult to read Polly as the American people at the time.

"Why do you stay with a man like this?" Hansen asks her at one point, because she's clearly not happy with her boyfriend who won't listen to her, won't do anything she asks and will continue to work his wicked ways until someone else takes him down. There's a lot of pent-up frustration in her reply. She needs him, pure and simple, because she knows that she's low and Crale is the only person who's lower than her. How's that for a bitter take on the Communist witchhunts?

It's those parallels to real life American politics that render this a blistering western morality tale, but it's done really well even outside that. No, I don't buy Hayden's inconsistent Swedish accent, though he is a lot better at it than I would have expected, had I realised he was going to attempt such a thing. He's the tall, strong, principled hero that the story calls for right down to a tee, just as Ned Young is superbly cast as the hired gun. "They all came here to see blood," he sneers and we can't help but hate him with every fibre of our being, even if we don't know what he represents.

Sebastian Cabot is spot on as McNeil and I thoroughly enjoyed Carol



Kelly's deep self-hatred as Molly. The rest of the cast provide capable support, even if actors like Victor Millan perhaps overdo the simplicity, but it's the solid combination of script, direction and camerawork that really sells this picture which, because of its dark undertones, transforms the new lands of possibility into a trap of corruption and deceit. It sits well with *The Ox-Bow Incident* and *High Noon*.

I have to come back to the camerawork of Ray Rennahan, the director of photography. He was massively experienced, having pioneered colour in Hollywood as far back as sequences in the 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments*. He had two Oscars under his belt, for *Gone with the Wind* and *Blood and Sand*, but it could easily be argued that he should have won more. There are a string of amazing shots in this film that are worthy of being highlighted but, to avoid spoilers, I'll only mention a couple. One is that opening shot where we're positioned behind Johnny Crale's holster to watch Hansen approach, shot from the bad guy's perspective. A second accompanies the murder of Sven Hansen; Mirada was there with his son, Pepe, but, with Crale riding towards the farm, Hansen has them stay in the barn to keep them safe and Rennahan's camera follows them right in to watch the whole thing unfold through the window. *Terror in a Texas Town* is a forgotten gem, made by a bevy of Oscar winners, and Rennahan is prominent among them.

Of course, I'm watching this to celebrate the centennial of Sterling Hayden's birth and he does fine work here too, even if he never won an Academy Award of his own; the closest he got was a nomination for a BAFTA as Best Foreign Actor for *Dr. Strangelove*.

He was well cast here, with the exception of that accent, as he had been promoted by Paramount as "the beautiful blond Viking god". At 6'5" he certainly towered over most of his co-stars and that helped him here. He was well established at this point, with films like *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Johnny Guitar* and *The Killing* behind him, though he hated acting, accepting roles to finance his sailing habit, and he despised the industry.

He had a political side too. As Lt. John Hamilton, he served in the O.S.S. in World War II, supplying Yugoslavian Communist partisans with what

they needed to fight Nazis. His admiration for them led to a brief membership in the Communist Party; unlike Trumbo, though, he cooperated with HUAC and named names. He regretted that deeply and perhaps it prompted him to accept this role.

His life really didn't help his career, beyond not actually wanting to act unless it paid for his sailing. What he cared about most was the sea, having discovered it at sixteen, when he dropped out of school and joined a schooner's crew. He fished the Grand Banks off Newfoundland and worked as a mate or fireman on a variety of vessels in a similar variety of places, sailing around the world more than once. At only 22, he captained a square rigger from Gloucester, MA to Tahiti. No wonder his autobiography in 1962 was entitled simply *Wanderer* rather than some clever reference to one of his many memorable characters.

His co-operation with HUAC meant that he was never blacklisted, but problematic custody battles with a wife he married three times and an awkward tax situation meant that he lived outside the U.S. because he'd have been arrested on his return; he missed out on roles like Quint in *Jaws* because of that. Whether he liked it or not, most know his name as an actor, though, and this underrated film is worthy of mention alongside his many classics.



A Hundred in 2016



Behold a Pale Horse (1964)

Reviewed on 5th April for actor Gregory Peck

Director: Fred Zinnemann

Writer: J. P. Miller, from the novel *Killing a Mouse on Sunday* by Emeric Pressburger

Stars: Gregory Peck, Anthony Quinn and Omar Sharif

I picked *Behold a Pale Horse* for this project because it's the sort of film I have trouble believing exists and I have no idea why anyone thought it would be a good idea to make.

My previous centennial review of *Terror in a Texas Town* talked about an notorious era of American cinematic history dominated by Communist witch-hunts, the Hollywood Ten and how tough it was for the blacklisted artists to find work. So, a mere six years later, it feels completely surreal to watch Peck, a huge Hollywood star riding high after *On the Beach*, *The Guns of Navarone* and *Cape Fear*, *How the West Was Won*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Captain Newman, MD*, to mention just the previous six movies he'd made over the previous five years, playing a hero who happened to also be a Communist, a terrorist and a vehement anti-Catholic.

Could there possibly be a more unlikely role for a Hollywood star in 1964, especially the year after he won an Academy Award for playing the iconic American hero, Atticus Finch, the character who the American Film Institute would later call the greatest film hero of the previous hundred years? I'm a blank and I wonder if it's why this marks the line between what I know Peck from and what I don't.

Today, almost everything about the picture sets off a red flag (no pun intended) that could have stopped the production in its tracks.

It's based on a novel by Emeric Pressburger. He was a Hungarian-born British filmmaker known for a set of quintessentially British films he made

with his long-time collaborator, Michael Powell, such as *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, *A Matter of Life and Death* and *The Red Shoes*. These are great classics, but they're not commercial Hollywood in the slightest.

What's more, that novel, *Killing a Mouse on Sunday*, was loosely based on the life of Francisco Sabaté Llopart, or El Quico, a Catalan anarchist who lived outside the law from the age of seventeen, helping fight a guerrilla war against the Second Spanish Republic, the Vichy government and the fascist regime of General Franco, none of which Americans knew or cared much about. They would surely care much more that he was an anarchist, a murderer, a deserter, an assassin, a bank robber, a political exile and a public enemy number one. Compared to El Quico, Clyde Barrow wasn't just an amateur, he was a boy scout.

Even if somehow director Fred Zinnemann could manage to tap into an early vein of counterculture anti-hero worship, he had to get the film made first and, utterly unsurprisingly, Franco refused permission for Columbia Pictures to shoot a film that was clearly going to place him in a very negative light in his own country! In fact, in response to the mere proposal, his government blocked distribution of all Columbia's output within Spain and forced them to sell their Spanish distribution arm to boot. M. J. Frankovich, a vice president at Columbia, estimated months prior to this film's release that it had cost them millions of dollars in lost revenue, even discounting its production cost. Later, following an official request from the Spanish government, they found themselves unable even to screen their movie on American television.

But they continued on with the production nonetheless, shooting exteriors across the border from France, and filming ran a full month over schedule. Yet, for all their trouble, when they first previewed the picture to U.S. audiences, they found that nobody had the remotest idea what it was about, so they had to add in an introduction, which they cut from *To Die in Madrid*, a documentary on the Spanish Civil War, with overlaid narration in English.

"These were the men who lost," that narration explains of those lined up at the French border, stripped of weapons and sent into exile. Manuel

Artiguez gets to that line, only to turn round and try to walk his way back in to Spain. “The war’s over,” say his compatriots. “Why don’t you give up?” Sure enough, off he goes into France whether he likes it or not.

Even in this unspeaking scene, it’s odd to see Peck in this role, not only for the reasons already mentioned but also because his co-star is Anthony Quinn, who could play Artiguez in his sleep. In fact, Quinn had asked to play the guerrilla, but Zinnemann wanted to avoid typecasting him and cast him instead as Viñolas, the corrupt but capable captain in the Civil Guard who’s the other player in this game of cat and mouse. And cat and mouse this promptly becomes, as the captain is set up to the Tom to Artiguez’s Jerry.

“Everyone who loves Spain and freedom should know who that is,” little Paco is told about Artiguez, whom he sees as a folk hero. “Manuel will always come back when he’s needed.” This is Paco Dages, a young orphan who travels over the border to Pau to track down “the great leader of the guerrillas”, so he can ask him to kill Viñolas. After all, the captain apparently beat his father, José Dages, to death in an attempt to drum Artiguez’s location out of him. Surely he owes him!

However, Paco doesn’t find the hero he expects, even asking him, “Are you his father?” This supposed “great leader” has become a slouchy and grouchy man rotting in his garret with a smoker’s cough; he’s also quick



to anger and he promptly throws the kid out on his ear.

By comparison, Captain Viñolas is bursting with life. We meet him on horseback warming up a bull for a matador, after which he goes to romp away the day with his mistress. Quinn wasn't the star that Peck was; though he already had a pair of Oscars under his belt and Peck only ever won one, his were awards for Best Supporting Actor. However, he was still thoroughly well established over a decade since *Viva Zapata!* He plays the captain with ease, but for a plastic tricornio that looks like the headgear of an alien race in a cheap sci-fi movie, while Peck consciously tries not to play Artiguez like his co-star would have done.

So, as we become introduced to Pilar Artiguez, the catalyst of the story, we find ourselves sympathetic to Viñolas but indifferent to Artiguez. The captain enjoys who he is, even if he takes bribes, cheats on his invalid wife and can't see the irony in taking his mistress on a pilgrimage to Lourdes. His exiled opponent, however, is a frustrated, bitter and angry man who's relinquished his fight because twenty years have taken his heart out of it.

Discovering that Pilar, Manuel's mother, is seriously ill and not expected to live long, Viñolas has her placed into the San Martin hospital and locks it down. He uses a double agent to smuggle word to Artiguez that she's there, as the exile will surely try to come and see her in her last days, thus giving him a long-awaited opportunity to take him down in a



carefully orchestrated sting operation.

The guerrilla has two things going for him. One is that Paco knows the hospital well, as he snuck in to see his father before he died. The other ties to the third star of the film, a young Omar Sharif as a Catholic priest called Fr. Francisco. Without his usual moustache, he reminds of Tony Curtis.

While Peck and Quinn are both given opportunity to build depth into their characters, Sharif is gifted with a peach of a part that's full of complexity and, once he's introduced, over forty minutes in, it's hard to see anyone else as the lead.

Pilar Artiguez, played with a surprising amount of passion by character actor Mildred Dunnock, given that she's bedridden and immobile for the entirety of her small part, has no love for the clergy. She tells a priest who attends her, "Go bless the rifles of the firing squad, Father." But, when she hears that he's substituting for Fr. Francisco, so the latter can travel to Lourdes, and knowing that the latter will have to go through Pau, she requests his presence by name and, right before she dies, asks him to fulfil her last wish. She knows that Viñolas has set a trap for her son and she knows that he'll walk into it, so Fr. Francisco should personally take the news of her death to him and thus save his life.

The priest thus finds himself in the horns of a dilemma, torn between duty to his God, to his country, to the law and to the last wish of a dying woman. And it only gets more complex from there because the script refuses to take all the easy ways forward.

This could easily have been a predictable ninety minute picture, one of Hollywood's routine hagiographies, if an unexpected one, but J. P. Miller, who adapted Pressburger's novel to the screen, knew what had to be predictable and what didn't and his script takes a winding route to get to its relatively predictable ending, a winding route that constricts like a snake on characters like Paco and Fr. Francisco.

What's odd is that while the story pits Artiguez against Viñolas, and star against star, in a battle to the death that's twenty years overdue, neither of them is remotely as interesting as either the priest or the child. Both of them have competing loyalties to confuse them and complicate

their actions. Both of them struggle to do what they believe is right and what they go through in this picture challenges their beliefs.

Marietto Angeletti, appearing in his last of eleven films at the ripe old age of fourteen, before growing up to become a physician, performs an accomplished job as Paco but Omar Sharif's believably tortured showing as Fr. Francisco truly dominates the picture, especially when we leave San Martin and Capt Viñolas behind.

This loss of screen time hampers Quinn even more than his freaky sci-fi tricornio because, as capable as he is as Viñolas, we find that we just don't miss him when the story takes us on to Pau and Lourdes. Peck, on the other hand, has more resonance when he's offscreen than when he's on it, because he's clearly miscast as Artiguez and he struggles continually to sell the role to us.

As an actor of serious talent he does give it his best shot, but he's just too inherently morally upright to carry a role that has him kidnap a priest and slap him across the face. We don't buy it, even as we utterly buy Omar Sharif's lack of similarly violent response. Peck is surely at his best when Artiguez begins to think, as there's some of that admirable subtlety we know well from Peck in his body language, but the louder he gets the less credible he becomes. The moment an actor of the subtlety of Gregory Peck has to shout to steal a scene back from a fourteen year old Spanish kid, we can't fail to notice that there's something seriously wrong.

I presume Peck took the role as a challenge and an opportunity to diversify his filmography, but it didn't work. Fortunately for him, if not for anyone else involved in the picture, few people saw this film in 1964 and he remained as popular as ever.

Quinn, of course, walked easily between heroic and villainous roles so this didn't hurt him in the slightest. He was also Mexican, so maybe a safe step past any undue association with a part from a patriotic standpoint. It's hard to be seen as un-American when you aren't an American.

To my mind, Omar Sharif steals the show and it makes me realise that I've seen a lot fewer of his movies than I have of either Peck or Quinn. Even those I have seen, such as *Juggernaut*, *Top Secret!* or *Oh Heavenly Dog*,

are ones that I doubt he'd see as his most memorable roles; I was knee high to a grasshopper when I last saw *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Doctor Zhivago* and they were too long and too artistic for my tastes at the time. So, homework for me is to delve back into Sharif's career.

Outside the cast, it's the names of Jean Badal and Maurice Jarre that I'd commend over more obvious ones like Fred Zinnemann's as director. The former was responsible for the stark black and white camerawork, the latter for his score which relies on unusual instruments for a thriller. Zinnemann, an important and versatile director with a pair of Academy Awards already to his name, for *Benjy* and *From Here to Eternity*, recovered surprisingly well from this misfire because his next picture landed him two more. That was *A Man for All Seasons* and it was as clearly appropriate a title to shoot in 1966 as this wasn't in 1964. So this remains an oddity, out of time and place even before it was made.

I really do wonder what might have happened to Peck's career had this film been more widely seen. I speak, of course, not of his able if misguided performance but of his role as Artiguez. The Communist witch-hunts were ongoing in 1964, even if they were finding themselves taken less seriously as time went by, but it still stuns me that a studio like Columbia, a director like Zinnemann and an actor like Peck could team up in such a political climate to bring someone like Manuel Artiguez to life.



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Then again, it wasn't the only unlikely role that Peck would leave to posterity. He'd already played a wild and lustful gambler, Lewt McCandles, in David O. Selznick's spectacular misfire, *Duel in the Sun*, and he would go on to play the infamous Nazi, Josef Mengele, in *The Boys from Brazil*. At least, at that point, he was an older actor at a time when he could get away with varying his roles. In 1964, he was one of America's screen heroes, standing up for what is right in the face of overwhelming odds.

Fortunately for him, we still think of him that way, thirteen years after his death, even after *Behold a Pale Horse*.



A Hundred in 2016

COLUMBIA PICTURES presents

a **FRED ZINNEMANN** production

GREGORY ANTHONY OMAR
PECK · QUINN · SHARIF

BEHOLD A PALE HORSE



CAST STARRING

MILDRED DUNNOCK · RAYMOND PELLEGRIN · PAOLO STOPPA · DANIELA ROCCA · CHRISTIAN MARQUAND
and **MARIETTO ANGELETTI** as **PACO**

Screenplay by J.P. MILLER - Based on a novel by EMERIC PRESSBURGER - Music by MAURICE JARRE
Associate Producer and Production Designer: ALEXANDER TRAUER - Directed by FRED ZINNEMANN

ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK LP (ON CELER)

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4-F-1023

Printed in Switzerland and Germany
Photographed in Switzerland

Produced by Fred Zinnemann
Columbia Pictures Corporation
6-F-270



Babies for Sale (1940)

Reviewed on 1st May for actor Glenn Ford

Director: Charles Barton

Writer: Robert D. Andrews, from a story by Robert Chapin and Joseph Carole

Stars: Rochelle Hudson, Glenn Ford and Miles Mander

May Day marks a hundred years since the birth of Glenn Ford and he left behind a whole string of worthy pictures to review. He won awards for *Don't Go Near the Water* and *Pocketful of Miracles*, but most will remember him from *The Big Heat*, *Blackboard Jungle* or the original *3:10 to Yuma*. He concentrated on westerns in his heyday but also found time to play Clark Kent's father in the 1978 version of *Superman* and followed that up with what may be the strangest picture of his career, the Italian all-star horror/sci-fi hodgepodge originally released as *Stridulum* but re-titled to *The Visitor* for the American market.

I picked out an early film of his instead, *Babies for Sale*, which was so early that he's not even top-billed. I picked it in part because I'm trying to avoid the obvious choices and in part because it looked rather interesting. It remained interesting afterwards too, because it seems out of place. In particular, it feels like it wants to be a pre-code, one of those astonishingly free films released after the advent of sound in the late twenties but ahead of the imposition of the Production Code in mid-1934, but it can't because this was 1940 and the Code was very much enforced.

And, as we can't fail to notice as it begins, it's a message movie with a message so overt that we're surprised that it's a studio picture rather than a cautionary film financed by a church group with good intentions but produced by an exploitation filmmaker who skirted the censorship of the time by phrasing it as an educational piece. There were plenty of those

and they're fascinating too.

But no, it was made by Columbia, who made their position crystal clear in the opening text. 95% of charitable organisations dealing with adopted children are "honest and worthy of all support," they explain, adding, "This picture is presented as a warning to all parents, and to all who plan to adopt children, that some unsupervised private institutions do exist where babies are sold for cash, where helpless mothers are victimized, and where foster parents may find lifelong tragedy instead of happiness." And yes, "this is the story of one such institution – and its victims." Fans of cautionary films everywhere know what's coming next and, sure, here it is: "What happens in this story could happen to you."

The film proper begins in the same vein, with Steve Burton, a crusading newspaper reporter, visiting Dr. John Gaines, a physician and surgeon who's so upstanding that he doesn't even charge some of his clients because he knows they can't afford his services. Perhaps that's why his office is situated upstairs from Joe Tonelli's grocery store, but it's also why Burton comes to see him. He's heard a lot of good things about the man and, now that he's writing a series of exposés for his paper, he wants to ask about the "babies for sale" the good doctor has given speeches about.

Burton is Glenn Ford, of course, and he comes over as a capable enough newspaperman, a great deal slower and more cautious than the mile-a-minute reporters played in the thirties by Lee Tracy, Pat O'Brien or even Clark Gable, but no less sharp for that. It just means that, instead of bedazzling Dr. Gaines with questions, he just leans gently forward to light the man's pipe and suggest, "Care to tell me about it?"

And he promptly does, in a protracted spiel that feels intensely scripted but delivered by Joe de Stefani with appropriate passion anyway. It's the movie's message, of course, thrown out at the very outset to be further underlined by the action which will soon be very real for our characters.

Here's how it goes. There were two million babies born in the U.S. the previous year. Some were put up for adoption but many thousand others were sold over the counter for cash. "Who sold them?" interjects Burton on our behalf and Dr. Gaines has the answer: "A few unscrupulous men

and women who pose as public benefactors, operating just inside the law, making capital of the great reputation honestly earned by hundreds of men and women who really are doing something worthwhile.”

Does that sound at all preachy to you? Oh yeah, it sounds very preachy because, well, because it is. This is a thinly disguised crusade by Dr. Gaines, complete with a set of poignantly effective soundbites, such as “Human tragedy is their bread and butter” and “They take their profit on human heartbreak”. Naturally it promptly becomes a thinly disguised crusade by Burton on the *Star Dispatch*’s front page too, because Burton is our avatar in this story and we need to care, dammit!

I should add that we aren’t even five minutes in yet but we’ve already been bludgeoned over the bonce by Gaines’s story about “heartbreak merchants” and now it’s time for them to bludgeon back. So an “unofficial committee” of luminaries from leagues, homes and associations come to harangue Burton’s editor to publish a retraction but, as he agrees, Burton promptly quits and goes searching for the real facts behind the story.

Enter one of the proud, ashamed women that Gaines told him about,



walking out of the darkness into the light of the Mercy Shelter with a baby bump to see Dr. Wallace Rankin, who had been one member of that “unofficial committee”.

We know that this is a bad idea, because Rankin is played by Miles Mander, who is justifiably well known today for playing slimy villains with crisp British accents. He was a versatile actor who was just as able to play upstanding characters, but he was so dashed good at being a cad that we tend to automatically assume he will be one in everything. Here, he plays the epitome of that, a despicable creature masquerading in the clothes of respectability.

The young lady is Ruth Williams, played by a capable Rochelle Hudson, a major name in the thirties whose career was tailing off at this point. After no less than 85 pictures during the thirties, she made ten more by 1942 but then only four more during the rest of the forties. She was the lead here, credited above Ford, with whom she'd made two prior movies at Columbia in 1940: the similarly crusading *Convicted Woman* and *Men without Souls*. At least she had things to do while her screen career slowly



declined. In 1941, she took holidays in Mexico with her husband, Harold Thompson, the head of Disney's storyline department, that were actually fronts for their espionage activity seeking out German activity. She returned to the big screen only once in the fifties, but at least that was for a picture as timeless as *Rebel without a Cause*, where she played Natalie Wood's mother. A decade on, she wrapped up her career with three horror pictures in the sixties: *Strait-Jacket* and *The Night Walker* for William Castle and an anthology called *Gallery of Horror*.

She's good here too, though she's quickly outshone by an acerbic Isabel Jewell in the sort of role that Una Merkel tended to play in the thirties. They're in similar circumstances, Edith merely a little further along the road than Ruth, their respective pregnancies conveniently acceptable to the public: Ruth's husband died in a car accident and Edith's left her.

Because this isn't a pre-code, none of the many single mothers to be would ever dream of something as socially unacceptable as sex before or outside marriage but, of course, they all end up in the same situation. Some, like Ruth, want to keep their babies but can't afford the associated cost. Others, like Edith, want the babies gone quickly because they know they can't bring them up and they don't want to bond first.

Dr. Rankin can meet all needs, or that's what he says. What he really does is make money. The girls pay him over time to handle the medical side of things and they staff the Mercy Shelter for him too. Then they have to pay him again to keep their children. But don't pay quickly enough and those babies will be sold on to adopting couples instead.

If that wasn't enough, and we see Gerda Honaker's anguish up close and personal at losing her baby to such an adoption, even though she's been paying her \$5 a week and working twelve hour days for months at Mercy, we're given the Andersons to stir up our outrage.

This scene plays oddly today, as it has to do with their adoption from Dr. Rankin of what they assumed was a "perfectly healthy baby" eight months earlier for \$1,000. "And now it's like *that*," says Howard Anderson, because we can't talk in a 1940 studio picture about whatever it is that the baby has. As he doesn't cry or talk, he could well be a deaf mute or it could

be something on the autistic spectrum. Whatever it is, they want a refund, but Rankin tells them to get lost and Mrs. Anderson promptly leaps in front of a train with the baby in her arms. This is a particularly brutal underline to the wickedness of Dr. Rankin, but it serves well to put Burton on his trail and he shows up under the assumed name of Oscar Hanson so he can get a tour from the matron, Iris Talbot, who's clearly in on all that Rankin does.

There's a lot in here for a B-movie that runs only 65 minutes. It might seem that I've just outlined all that, but the quintessentially shaky voice of John Qualen as Mr. Anderson leaves the film after only fifteen minutes and Burton's tour of Mercy Shelter follows on immediately. And that's just the set-up!

This film begins with its definition as a crusade by Gaines and Burton, then introduces us to Ruth and her fellow ladies in trouble to demonstrate why we should care but it has more places to go yet before our heroes can orchestrate the inevitable fall from grace of the oily Dr. Rankin.

Even with Glenn Ford showing potential early in his career, this works



best as a tragic drama. Ford was only on his sixth film, his fifth to reach the screen in only eight months after he debuted in 1937, under his real name of Gwyllyn Ford, as the MC of a musical short, *Night in Manhattan*. Given that, he does especially well, but he has to fight for prominence with Miles Mander, a professional cad, to face off against and a powerful Isabel Jewell who's more than willing to steal scenes left, right and centre.

In fact, the cast here is very capable for a B-movie and it gets better in later scenes with Selmer Jackson and Mary Currier as a well-to-do couple who adopt a baby from Mercy Shelter, only to get caught up in a bigger story. They're hardly prominent actors, especially when cast alongside major talents like Hudson, Ford and Mander, but they're both solid, better vocally than physically but still able to hold their own in this company and even dominate towards the end.

Jackson was a character actor who eventually racked up almost four hundred films as a variety of authority figures. Currier had a much shorter career, lasting a decade and a half before she retired from the screen, but she crammed 88 films into that time. I've seen both of them many times



before without them registering, but they certainly did that here.

To be fair, they had opportunity, this being a real ensemble piece. Edith gets as much time as Ruth, who's the lead, Talbot as much as Rankin and the Kingsleys are prominent at the end. Ford is absent for whole swathes of the film as Hudson's co-star.

The consistent quality of the production is notable. This is clearly an overblown and somewhat inevitable B-movie written at speed that stars a mix of actors on the way in and on the way out, backed up by a host of character actors who are mostly forgotten today. It was released some seven or eight years after its time, as it would have fit so much better as a pre-code, able in that world to illustrate rather than merely hint at. It's no great film and would have been seen as run of the mill at the time, except for Mrs. Anderson's unexpected suicide and baby murder, which would be startling whatever the year of release, but it's consistently decent because the studios knew exactly what they were doing. This was 1940, right after Hollywood's golden year of 1939, and they could seemingly do no wrong.

It's interesting to travel back to the golden age because it's hard to find truly awful movies. They do exist (hello *Life Returns*, my old friend), but they're thin on the ground and even the worst films are often watchable and enjoyable today, as flawed as they are. Average movies like this one simply tend to be interesting more for the who and what and why that comes with the passage of time rather than for their own sakes.

They're also fascinating beginnings, as this one was for Glenn Ford. He was born in Quebec, but moved with his family to Santa Monica when he was eight, so he was in the right place to become a film actor and he was noticed relatively quickly. After a couple of years at Columbia he was lent out to director John Cromwell, who had been impressed by his work on an independent feature called *So Ends Our Night*, released in 1941. He wasn't the only one; his performance as a young exile on the run in a Europe under the Nazi jackboot brought him praise from people as diverse as critic Bosley Crowther and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, not to mention a horde of female fans. Yet, the quality of his films at Columbia did not improve.

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That didn't happen until after World War II, when he was cast opposite Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*, one of the early masterpieces of what would later become known as film noir. That was 1946 and his star gradually rose until his heyday in the fifties. We remember him today primarily for *The Big Heat* in 1953, *Blackboard Jungle* in 1955 and *3:10 to Yuma* in 1957, but he was a bigger box office draw around those latter films, topping that list in 1958 and making the top ten in 1956 and 1959. He was nominated for a Golden Globe in 1956 and 1957, for *The Teahouse of the August Moon* and *Don't Go Near the Water*, but didn't win until *Pocketful of Miracles* in 1961.

For an actor who kept busy on the screen for over half a century, it's odd to me to see so many titles in his filmography that I don't recognise at all. It highlights to me that he's the perfect actor for a project like this, someone that most people know and have seen in a couple of movies but who did so much that we've never even heard of. Hopefully this triggers a reader or three to delve into his career and explore those lesser known pictures.





Postal Inspector (1936)

reviewed on 20th May for actress Patricia Ellis

Director: Otto Brower

Writer: Horace McCoy, from a story by Robert Presnell and Horace McCoy

Stars: Ricardo Cortez, Patricia Ellis, Michael Loring and Bela Lugosi

I've tried to select interesting films throughout this project, but they really don't come any more interesting than this curiosity. It's a 1936 picture from Universal that runs a skimpy 58 minutes but still manages to cram more in than most TV shows manage in an entire season. It starts out as a drama, turns into a musical, then becomes a mystery. It's a romance, of course, a thriller, a comedy, a gangster flick and, eventually, a disaster movie.

More than anything, it's a real slice of history. Yes, we had postal inspectors; in fact, we still do. They're U.S.P.I.S., the United States Postal Inspection Service, and they're not just the oldest of the various law enforcement agencies in the United States, they even predate it! Back in 1772, Benjamin Franklin, the colonial Postmaster General, appointed a surveyor to regulate and audit the mails. The service has changed over time, dealing with mail fraud, terrorism (remember when media companies were sent anthrax?) and the transportation of contraband. The latter tasked postal workers with being censors, as the Comstock Law of 1873 barred the sending of erotica, sex toys, contraceptives, even sex education material, not to mention any personal letters that might reference any of the above. Fortunately, times have changed, though more recently than you might imagine.

Of course, they're also tasked with protecting the mail and the people who transport it, which is what comes into play here, when it's threatened

by both thieves and a natural disaster. The value it provides is personified in the form of Ricardo Cortez, who plays U.S.P.I.S. Inspector Bill Davis who, as the film begins, is one of a number of inspectors the U.S. President is thanking over the radio for their work in moving gold reserves to inland cities.

Yes, this does play out rather like U.S.P.I.S. propaganda and Davis is a saintly action role for Cortez, who was a matinee idol in the twenties, the last actor to be billed above Greta Garbo (for *Torrent* in 1926); a leading man in the thirties (his most important role was probably playing Sam Spade in the original version of *The Maltese Falcon* in 1931); but a fading name in the forties (playing support in films as forgotten as *Romance of the Rio Grande* and *I Killed that Man*). He retired after *Bunco Squad* in 1950, but returned to the screen once final time, for the aptly named *The Last Hurrah* eight years later, before retiring to become a stockbroker.

1936 was around the time that he was still top billed but starting to fall out of fashion. He demonstrates here, however, that he was up to any challenge that the studio could throw at him; for some reason, they just rarely chose to do so.



A running time of less than an hour means that the story unfolds quickly and, as soon as the President finishes talking, he's off to Millstown on a plane that's something out of a different age. It's not just that it's tiny with only a single seat either side of the aisle, it's that Davis can wander into the cabin to chat with the pilot, there's a no smoking sign that clicks on with the bad weather and, because the turbulence is unnerving the few passengers, he persuades the young lady on the other side of the aisle to sing something as ludicrous as *Let's Have Bluebirds on All Our Wallpaper* to avert panic, accompanied by little Billy on the harmonica.

This young lady is Connie Larrimore, a nightclub singer who's returning to her home town to sing at the Golden Eagle nightclub. She's played by Patricia Ellis, who would have been one hundred years old on 20th May.

In many ways, she's the lead in a story that unfolds next to Cortez's and continues to cross over into it, not least because Bill's little brother Charlie went to school with her and had a big crush on her that never went away. That's understandable, as she's both the girl next door and the next big star; and I'm talking there about both Connie Larrimore and Patricia Ellis.



Sadly though, stardom is an elusive creature and it continually danced around her during a busy decade that saw her appear in 44 films in a mere eight years. A WAMPAS baby star, she started out in pictures at sixteen and worked her way slowly up from uncredited secretaries to leading ladies, only in second tier pictures that led her to call herself “the Queen of B-movies at Warner Brothers”.

I knew her best from *The Case of the Lucky Legs*, in which Ellis played the lucky legs (and the rest of Margie Clune as well) while Warren William played Perry Mason (coincidentally, Cortez would inherit that role in his very next film, *The Case of the Black Cat*), but she didn't have that much to do there. She's much busier here and she clearly enjoyed it.

In case we think this picture is about her, we shift quickly back to Cortez to explain why we should care about a postal inspector, a job so unlikely for an action hero that we fully expect it to go to Steven Seagal. But no, they do serious work!

Mr. Ritter was scammed by a conman who put his life savings into gold mine stock; Davis can't help until he points out that he paid that money by cheque, sent by registered mail and he has the receipt. Others have been



ripped off too, ordering a host of unlikely gadgets from advertisements, such as nose-straightening devices, hair-growing machines and vision improving drumsticks.

“There’s one born every minute,” Davis tells Charlie, but he adds a major caveat. “When the crooks use the mails,” he says, “they make Uncle Sam a party to their transactions” and that means that he can get involved to do something about it. He wraps up his job satisfaction survey with a quick summation of the U.S.P.I.S. ethos: “You know, there’s something pretty comforting about the thought that, with no more insurance than a mere postage stamp, a man may entrust his life savings or his most personal secrets into the hands of absolute strangers.”

In case we think this picture is about him, we shift quickly back to Ellis because there are a number of angles going on. One is the fact that she’s the singer in this show and she gets a couple more chances to prove it: one in the shower, with the fantastic Hattie McDaniel joining in (and that’s the song, not the shower) as her maid, Debbie; and another up on stage at the Golden Eagle.

It’s obvious that there’s a real story developing here, for a number of reasons. For a start, the nightclub owner, Gregory Benez, is played by a suave Bela Lugosi, we soon discover that he’s heavily in debt and Insp. Davis emphatically dislikes him. Another reason is the fact that Charlie is clearly falling for Connie and she could well be falling for him right back. A third to tie these together is the revelation that Charlie collects old banknotes and works with them at the Federal Reserve. In fact, he’s about to escort three million bucks of them to his brother at the Post Office to ship back to Washington, DC. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to connect those dots!

In case we think this picture is about her, we shift quickly back to Cortez. You see what I mean about intersecting storylines in an hour long movie? One minute it’s all about Connie the romantic lead, the next it’s all about Bill the dedicated postal inspector.

And that angle is about to get particularly topical. Lt. Ordway shows up at the Post Office to demand that Davis open a letter that’s important in a

murder case, only to find that he refuses. Only the recipient can open it, he insists, bringing to mind the recent affair in which Apple refused the F.B.I. about breaking encryption on a terrorist's phone or the current one in which a Florida court reversed a finding to say that an alleged pervert must provide the passcode to unlock his iPhone.

Of course, Davis distracts neatly from this moral issue by handing Ordway the file the Post Office has built on a clever insurance fraud ring so that the lieutenant can take the credit. If only it was that easy to figure out a complex point of law! And anyway, it's about time this became a disaster movie.

Are you keeping up with these genre shifts? Mystery, romance, drama, thriller, musical... well, we can add comedy to that, given that someone just dropped a pair of guinea pigs off at the Post Office, whose employees had already refused to send them through the mail. What will they feed them? One employee retrieves a little bottle of pills from the Medical Frauds cabinet. "It's the scientist in me," he laughs. We can also add gangster flick because, get this, the mail truck carrying those three million in old notes promptly gets robbed, using a car stolen from one of our leads. Was that a shock? And now, we start the disaster movie, with stock footage floods overwhelming the state; Yarborough Post Office is underwater and Davis flies up to help out. "We'll keep the Post Office open, flood or no flood," he tells the local postmaster, but, by the time he gets back, Millstown is flooding too and he's really up against it.

Which way will he turn? Watch the next thrilling episode of *Postal Inspector* to find out! Well no, this is a feature but it did often feel like it was condensed from a 12 part serial.

What's most impressive is that screenwriter Horace McCoy, working from a story he wrote with Robert Presnell, stays focused on the little details.

Remember Mr. Ritter, who lost his money to a gold mine scam? He gets a second scene in which he provides some new information that's critical to the plot and gets an opportunity to develop his character at the same time, even though he has less than a minute of screen time in the entire

movie. That's impressive and it helps us to realise that this movie isn't just about Postal Inspector Bill Davis and night club singer Connie Larrimore, it's about a whole bunch of characters who have their own stories unfolding alongside theirs.

Novelists talk about being able to imagine the story from the perspective of every character in their books. I don't often get to see that on screen and never in an hour long B-movie. Suddenly, it's not surprising to find that McCoy was actually a novelist. He had just published *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* in 1935, even though it wasn't filmed until 1969. Other novels followed.

And that's why this feels so schizophrenic. Cortez is the star of one of those odd propaganda pictures that Hollywood made back in the thirties about federal law enforcement officers; the same year saw Grand National release *Great Guy*, which had Jimmy Cagney battle corruption as an investigator for the Bureau of Weights and Measures! Yet Ellis is the lead in a romantic musical, while her love interest, Charlie, played by Michael Loring, is both the hero and the sidekick in a gangster movie and Bela Lugosi is his villain. Lesser characters like Mr. Ritter and Lt. Ordway have



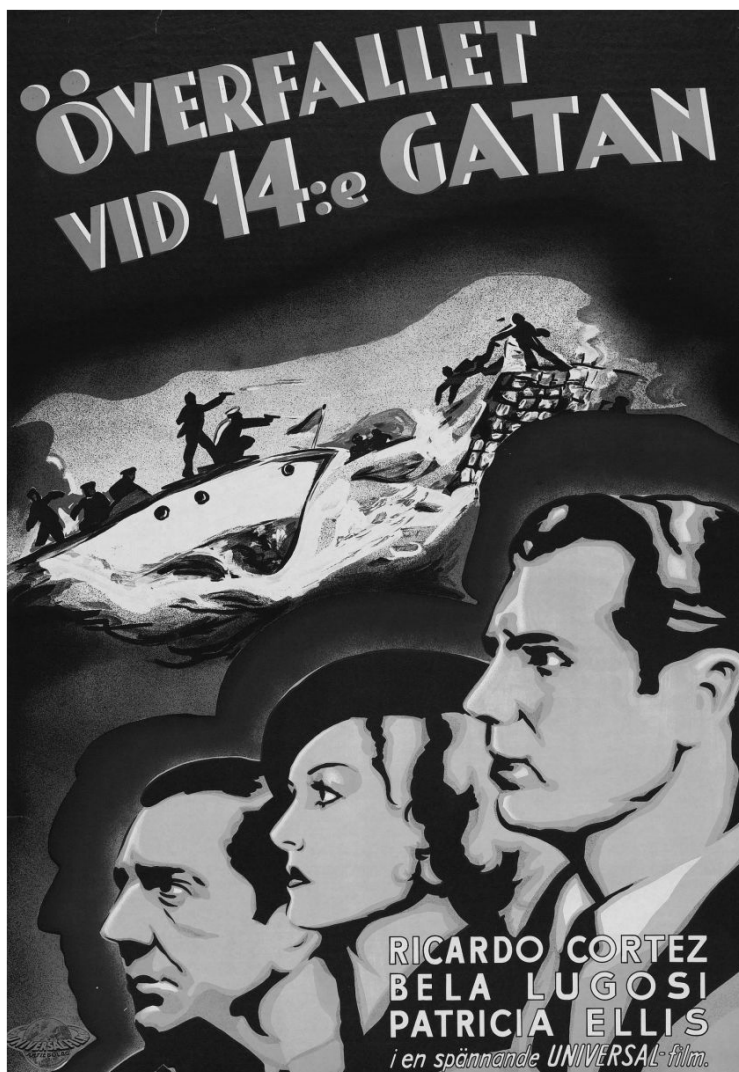
their own human interest stories and even the guinea pigs get their little subplot wrapped up by the end. That's not to say that any of these stories are particularly deep, because the sheer balls of McCoy to cram all of them into a sub-sixty minute movie means that none of them are, but they certainly keep us on the hop! There's even time for odd little historical comment, such as when KWZZ radio cancels their programming to allow people to send personal messages.

I've lost count of how many Bela Lugosi movies I've seen and I've watched a bunch starring Ricardo Cortez too, but this is a riot I'm happy to have discovered because of Patricia Ellis. She was never the greatest actor in the world, coming off here like a Myrna Loy stand-in, but she's enjoyable to watch and even to listen to and it's sad that she couldn't find her way up the ladder to act in better and better distributed material.

The biggest film she made was *42nd Street*, but she was just an uncredited secretary. However, she did get to play Jimmy Cagney's love interest in both *Picture Snatcher* and *The St. Louis Kid*; an underage target for Adolph Menjou to attempt to seduce in the notorious lost pre-code *Convention City*; and backup for Laurel & Hardy in the Oscar-nominated



Block-Heads. She was even top-billed in *Down the Stretch*, above Mickey Rooney, and *Hold 'Em Yale*, above both Cesar Romero and Buster Crabbe. She retired in 1939 to become a wife and mother, but did leave behind a sizeable if brief filmography, “the Queen of B-movies at Warner Brothers” indeed.



If you're a ghost
then I want to be
haunted!

The two stars of "The Cat and
the Canary" find love and
laughter in a haunted house!

BOB HOPE

PAULETTE GODDARD in

**"THE GHOST
BREAKERS"**

A Paramount Picture with
**RICHARD CARLSON · PAUL LUKAS
ANTHONY QUINN · WILLIE BEST**

Directed by **GEORGE MARSHALL** · Screen Play by Walter Nelson · Based on a Play by Paul Sluby and Charles W. Goddard

PAULETTE SETS BOB'S HEART A-DANCING WITH SOME VERY UN-GHOSTLIKE ROMANCING!

The Ghost Breakers (1940)

Reviewed on 27th May for actor Willie Best

Director: George Marshall

Writer: Walter DeLeon, based on the play *The Ghost Breaker* by Paul Dickey and Charles W. Goddard

Stars: Bob Hope and Paulette Goddard

This well regarded horror comedy from Paramount looks like it has a rather stunning cast, but most of them weren't quite so well known at the time (Robert Ryan, for instance, debuted here as an uncredited intern). It's arguable that the leading lady was better known in 1940 than her leading man, though there's no question that he eclipsed her soon enough.

She's Paulette Goddard, a former Ziegfeld girl who had become famous in 1936 when Charlie Chaplin cast her in *Modern Times*. He married her the same year too and they were still married, albeit separated, when she shot this picture. Her leading man is no less a name than Bob Hope, who had won a prize a quarter of a century earlier for impersonating Chaplin, when Goddard was only five years old; then again, Hope was only twelve himself.

They starred together in *The Cat and the Canary* for Paramount in 1939 and followed up the double act here, but were about to be much more famous apart: Goddard with *The Great Dictator* and *So Proudly We Hail*, which landed her an Oscar nomination, and Hope with the Road movies with Bing Crosby. He hadn't even hosted the Academy Awards at this point, his first stint imminent in 1941.

In support are names as prominent as Paul Lukas and Anthony Quinn, two actors at opposite ends of their careers. Lukas was most of the way through his, having started out in the teens, though his biggest films were still to come: an Oscar-winning performance in *Watch on the Rhine* in 1943

and a memorable role as Prof. Arronax in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* in 1954. Quinn was only five years into his and wouldn't find his way into a really good lead until *Viva Zapata!* in 1952. He does get two roles here, but neither is much of an opportunity.

And then there's Willie Best, who would have been a hundred years old today. I don't know if Hope really called him one of the finest talents he ever worked with, but it would have been true if he did. Best was certainly an accomplished performer stuck in an era when coloured actors were rarely given anything of substance to do. Amazingly, to a 21st century mindset, his first six credits had him listed as Sleep 'n' Eat (and that's the "actor's name" rather than the character he played), mirroring the screen image his studio built for him of an actor who only wanted "three square meals a day and a warm place to sleep."

I chose this film to celebrate his career because it highlights his talents much better than most of the roles he was given, while still showcasing the inherent racism of the time.

Nobody thought it was inappropriate in 1940 for Bob Hope to tell him, for instance, "You look like a blackout in a blackout." Nobody felt bad in 1940 when Hope dares to explain that, "He always sees the darker side of everything; he was born during an eclipse." Nobody had second thoughts about giving him a whole conversation about spooks. Yes, both meanings of the word.

Today, each of these instances is cringeworthy, but it's notable that Best, while he's still playing a subservient role, does get a part of real substance here and at points even manages to dominate the scene, with Hope relegated to being his straight man rather than the other way around. Sure, he's yet another character with big eyes, sleepy voice and malformed vocabulary, not to mention the inevitable streak of cowardice, but he also gets to figure things out that Hope's heroic lead can't because at least he's not stupid.

He goes by Alex and he works for Larry Lawrence, who's a radio personality through being a sort of gossip columnist for organised crime: "the man who knows all the rackets and all the racketeers." That's Hope,

of course, and it's one of his reports that prompts him to be summoned to Frenchy Duval's hotel room. When he believes he shoots a man dead in the hallway, he finds his way into the room of Mary Carter and the other half of the story.

Miss Carter has just inherited Castillo Maldito, a castle off the coast of Cuba, and she's just signed the paperwork before a cruise to Havana to formally take ownership. However, there's a lot of pressure on her to not do so, much of which trawls old dark house clichés: the film begins with a terrific storm, during which she's warned that no human being has survived a night in the castle, due to the ghosts who want vengeance for the treatment they received from her great-great-grandfather, who was a notorious slave trader. A man named Parada brings her an anonymous offer of \$50,000 for the castle. A stranger promptly rings her to suggest she say no. Strange things are certainly afoot!

I remembered *The Ghost Breakers* positively, but a rewatch did highlight how creaky it really is. The acting is decent, which isn't surprising given the cast, and the cinematography is strong too, courtesy of Charles Lang,



emulating the Universal horror classics from the preceding decade (he had won an Academy Award in 1932 for *A Farewell to Arms*, though a second consistently escaped him, even though he racked up no less than 17 other nominations).

There's one scene late in the movie where a zombie stalks Mary within Castillo Maldito and it's wonderfully handled. A character trying to climb out of a glass coffin is another spooky highlight. This is no horror movie though, it's firmly a comedy first and an old dark house mystery second. The horror aspects, which are done in what would soon become known as the Val Lewton style, are a notable bonus!

We're here half to figure out why someone doesn't want Mary to take ownership of her inheritance and half to laugh at the light banter of Hope, whether that's in partnership with Goddard, Best or anyone else. After he broadcasts his latest show, his secretary acerbically tells him, "You were wonderful, if you're any judge." There are many clever lines of dialogue here and most of them aren't racist at all.

The script was written by Walter DeLeon, adapted from the 1909 play,



The Ghost Breaker, by Paul Dickey and Charles W. Goddard. It had been filmed twice before, firstly by Cecil B. DeMille in 1914 with H. B. Warner and Rita Stanwood, and then in 1922 by Alfred E. Green with Wallace Reid and Lila Lee. Both pictures, named for the play (so singular rather than plural), are sadly lost today, leaving this version as the earliest extant. It was also oddly remade as a musical in 1953 by this film's director, George Marshall, as a Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis vehicle. That's best known today as Carmen Miranda's final picture, regarded as inferior to *The Ghost Breakers* in every other regard.

It's hard to see why Paramount felt it appropriate to remake it in the fifties, given that the haunted house setting was already passé and only the mix of horror and comedy, especially coming hot on the heels of *The Cat and the Canary*, had given it a fresh edge. By the fifties, the formula was firmly in the hands of Abbott and Costello, who had already done it to death, as it were.

Mostly it's content to run along at a decent pace, with snappy lines arriving fast enough to keep us laughing and spooky scenes to keep us on our toes. Bosley Crowther, writing in *The New York Times*, praised its ability to make "an audience shriek with laughter and fright" simultaneously.

A great example of this shows up almost immediately. The power is out at Mary Carter's hotel, caused by the storm raging outside. "Nice night for a murder," she tells a forward neighbour, lighting a cigarette on the candles brought up for her. He's taken sharply aback. "How do you know?" he replies? Especially so early in the picture, this delivers a laugh and a thrill all at once.

The same goes for the various reactions to the storm itself. Mary revels in it, throwing her window open to the elements and crying, "Exciting, isn't?" Larry, who's somewhere else in town entirely, merely quips, "Basil Rathbone must be giving a party!" He's the overt comedian here, throwing out 1940 pop culture references with abandon, except when he forgets to be that overt comedian and Alex takes over in his stead.

Whenever *The Ghost Breakers* has legs, it's worth seeing. Sure, some of the laughs have dated as much as the racism, but it's funny enough

throughout and it often reaches laugh out loud stature. There are down points though, where the script seems distracted from its proclaimed intentions and we wonder what we're actually watching.

These slower scenes, such as many of those on the cruise to Cuba, could easily have been cut and probably should have been; this would have made a much better 75 minute movie than it is an 85 minute one. Then again, we wonder if some scenes already were cut. I wondered why Lloyd Corrigan was even cast in the movie, for instance; he shows up on three completely distinct occasions, bumping into Mary each time and clearly setting up some sort of angle that never gets addressed. Was he really just there to distract Anthony Quinn's second character away? That seems like a real stretch. I expected much more at the Castillo Maldito too, but we take too long to get there and don't spend enough time there once we do.

Somewhat surprisingly, given that this picture, even at just over three quarters of a century old, is a throwback to an earlier time, I wondered at how forward looking it actually was. How many horror comedies do we see made nowadays, with plots that aim to combine laughs and scares over a grounding of special effects that are rarely as capable as they want to be and some gratuitous but welcome exposure of female flesh? We get all that here.

The effects vary considerably, from the highly effective local zombie to the poor double exposure of a ghost who climbs out of a chest and walks around, only for us to ponder as to why the chest is transparent rather than the ghost. As to female flesh, Mary realises that Larry and Alex have rowed over to her island, so she swims over to join them. While she does cover up an enticing bathing suit for a while, it's promptly ripped half open by a stubborn banister as she tries to escape the zombie. It's easy to see what drew Chaplin to her: Paulette Goddard had a very nice pair of legs indeed!

And so to posterity. At the time this was a Bob Hope and Paulette Goddard picture, in many ways a thematic but otherwise unrelated sequel to the previous year's *The Cat and the Canary*. Today, it's not hard to see that they don't get the strongest characters in the story. Larry Lawrence

(“My middle name is Lawrence too; my parents had no imagination.”) starts well but fades away once we get to Cuba.

In fact, the generation of today, who didn’t grow up watching Bob Hope host the Academy Awards ceremony (on 19 occasions, just in case you didn’t keep count) or have a clue what a U.S.O. tour is, may not realise that he’s even the lead. Some might see him as the romantic interest for Paulette Goddard. Others might consider that he’s the other half of a double act with Willie Best. Many, especially after we land on Mary’s island, may find this picture so reminiscent of a live action *Scooby Doo* cartoon that they’ll translate the characters into the ones they know and love; I wonder how many will see Hope as Fred and how Best Shaggy because those roles change on occasion and both actors get to play both roles.

And that’s much of why I chose *The Ghost Breakers* to celebrate Best’s career on what would have been his hundredth birthday. The thirties and forties, not to mention the following string of decades too, were really not good for actors of colour.



It wasn't that they weren't given roles, it was that they weren't given good ones. The uproar over the lack of diversity on ballots at this year's Academy Awards is nothing new and, in fact, things used to be much worse indeed.

There were many actors of colour in the golden age of Hollywood and their talents were often substantial. Nobody is going to talk down Paul Robeson or Hattie McDaniel, but even given as many wide-eyed maids that the latter found herself stuck playing (and I've already covered one of them, *Postal Inspector*, in this book), she was regarded better than Stepin Fetchit, Mantan Moreland and Willie Best, to name just a trio of talented actors given consistently stereotypical roles that became more and more embarrassing culturally as the years passed.

Eventually, these actors found themselves decried by their very own civil rights movement for enforcing stereotypes through their roles, even though opportunities to play other, less stereotypical, more substantial parts were almost nonexistent. Hollywood simply wasn't interested in having black characters appearing with white ones and the Production Code prohibited miscegenation, so there could be no intermingling of the races anyway.

So powerful comedic talents like Willie Best carried on playing porters, waiters, elevator operators and what have you, while running away from everything except dice games behind the building. In 1934, while Best was shooting *The Nitwits*, he told an interviewer, "What's an actor going to do? Either you do it or get out." He did it, making 119 movies in just over two decades. This may well be his finest role.

A Hundred in 2016



A Hundred in 2016

150,000,000 YEARS AGO OR TODAY?



SIR
ARTHUR
CONAN
DOYLE'S

THE LOST WORLD

AN
IRWIN
ALLEN
PRODUCTION



20
Century-Fox
presents

**MICHAEL
RENNIE**
**JILL
ST. JOHN**
**DAVID
HEDISON**
**CLAUDE
RAINS**
**FERNANDO
LAMAS**

PRODUCED and DIRECTED by IRWIN ALLEN SCREENPLAY by IRWIN ALLEN and CHARLES BENNETT

CINEMASCOPE
COLOR BY DELUXE

The Lost World (1960)

Reviewed on 12th June for producer Irwin Allen

Director: Irwin Allen

Writers: Charles Bennett and Irwin Allen, from the novel by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Stars: Michael Rennie, Jill St. John, David Hedison, Claude Rains and Fernando Lamas

Irwin Allen, who would have been a hundred years old on 12th June, is a rare example of someone who is still remembered by two utterly different audiences.

Anyone who grew up watching movies in the seventies surely knows him as the “Master of Disaster”, the man behind the biggest of the disaster movies, such as *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Towering Inferno*, not to mention lesser pictures with less catchy titles that followed inevitably in their wake, like *Flood!*, *Cave-In!* and *The Night the Bridge Fell Down*. However, audiences a decade older are more likely to remember him for sci-fi shows he produced for television like *Lost in Space*, *The Time Tunnel* and *Land of the Giants*, many of which I saw on British TV in later re-runs.

The source of both of these aspects of his career, though, is really Victorian adventure fiction, as highlighted by the trio of films he directed between 1960 and 1962, his first serious efforts in the director’s chair after a few movies that he created mostly out of stock footage with a few new scenes spliced in that featured major stars late in their careers.

I’ll mention these films in reverse order. Last up, in 1962, was *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, which was based on the novel by Jules Verne, a cornerstone of Victorian adventure. Before that, in 1961, was *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, an original story but one which could easily be mistaken for a Verne adaptation too, given what it does and where it boldly goes. It’s notable

that the Seaview, the nuclear submarine at the heart of the story, was based on the real USS Nautilus, which was in turn named for the fictional Nautilus of Jules Verne. Kicking off the thematic trio was this picture, *The Lost World*, adapted in 1960 from another novel by another pivotal author in the Victorian adventure genre, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes. I should emphasise that not all connections are valid. The real bottom of the sea is the Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench, but it was no nod to Doyle's legendary explorer, Professor Challenger, introduced in *The Lost World*; it was named for HMS Challenger, the survey ship that recorded its depth, as the ship came forty years earlier.

What is obvious from this trio of films is that Irwin Allen was clearly a big fan of Victorian adventure fiction and he felt an urge to adapt it to the big screen. He wrote each script in collaboration with Charles Bennett, who is best known today for his early work with Alfred Hitchcock on pictures like *The 39 Steps*, *Sabotage* and *Blackmail*, the latter of which he adapted from his own original play. Incidentally, Bennett's final picture took him back to Victorian adventure with *City Under the Sea*, loosely adapted from a poem by Edgar Allan Poe.

What's also obvious is that this material fed both the sci-fi shows Allen made for television and his disaster movies. *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* was successfully adapted to TV and Allen pitched *The Lost World* for similar treatment but it wasn't picked up, even though this film is as episodic in nature as any season of any of his shows. The final scenes of the source novel, with a live pterodactyl escaping into the skies of London presage the entire disaster movie genre, but Allen didn't have the budget at this point to conjure up one of those.

What he did have was some star power, though I do have to question some of his casting choices. Claude Rains is a favourite of mine, an accomplished actor with a range that lent him success in classic films as diverse as *The Invisible Man*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Casablanca*. I'm not buying him with ginger hair and beard as Professor Challenger though. He has the irascibility down pat, of course, and his banter with fellow scientist, Professor Summerlee, ranks as the most faithful this film

gets to the original material. However, Conan Doyle's original Challenger was an imposing man, a real physical specimen with broad shoulders, a barrel chest and head and hands of remarkable size; Rains, at a mere 5' 6½", really doesn't fit that bill in the slightest. It unfortunately defuses his angrier scenes and shifts them far too far towards comedy. I took a while to buy into Michael Rennie as the big game hunter, Lord John Roxton, too, but because of his soft spoken voice rather than his size. He certainly has the composure, surety and height to be the leader of this party, but he's a different sort of authoritative.

The best scenes are actually the early ones, as the script adheres closest to Doyle's novel then. We meet reporter Ed Malone as he tries to interview Prof. Challenger on his return to London Airport from the "headwaters of the Amazon". He's belted over the head with an umbrella for his troubles and left in a large puddle.

David Hedison, four years away from his most famous role as Captain Lee B. Crane in Allen's TV show, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, is clearly a better actor than Jill St. John, who rescues him and whisks him on over to Challenger's presentation at the Zoological Institute that night.

She's Jennifer Holmes, who serves mostly as the glue between the other characters. When Challenger is laughed at for proclaiming that he's seen living dinosaurs in South America, the expedition spun up right there on the spot to find out for sure is financed by her father and includes Malone, whom she rescued, and Roxton, whom she aims to marry. It's no shock to find that her own adventurous soul joins the party too, complete with



younger brother, pink wardrobe and little poodle. I don't remember that from Conan Doyle!

At least St. John is easy on the eyes, because she isn't tasked with doing much except being inappropriately independent for a girl early on and then conventionally useless once actually thrown into adventure. While her lines are too carefully delivered, she's a surprisingly good tomboy and her sass is believable. Unfortunately, all her early promise is wasted by a script that sees her as half eye candy and half damsel in distress.

To be fair, nobody is written well here, surprisingly given Bennett's history in scriptwriting. Each and every character is a cartoon take on Doyle's originals, not even interested in struggling to escape their one dimension. It falls to debate only to decide who is worse. Perhaps its the girly girl with her poodle but perhaps its the skeptical scientist, brash reporter or greedy coward. Maybe it's the smouldering helicopter pilot, silent native girl or quietly tough hunter. Not one of them fails to escape their respective stereotypes and it's fair to say that some of the actors are better than others at hiding it.

Once the company arrives on top of Challenger's mysterious plateau by helicopter, thus marking a notable departure from the novel and cutting out a good chunk of it in the process, the film begins to be notable for other unfortunate reasons too.

I like the matte paintings a lot but that doesn't mean that they don't look like matte paintings. The waterfalls look amazing but they're major landmarks and not all from this neighbourhood. The extra characters



taken to the plateau quite clearly have no viable purpose to be there and the new romance angle is a weak one indeed. And, worst of all, but perhaps most spectacularly of all, there are the dinosaurs.

Willis O'Brien, the originator of animating dinosaurs with stop motion techniques, had crafted amazing footage for the silent film version of *The Lost World* in 1925 and Allen brought him back for this revisit to the same territory. O'Brien shot nine minutes of animated dinosaur footage with his most notable successor, Ray Harryhausen but, sadly, that wasn't for this movie; it was for Allen's 1956 documentary, *The Animal World*. His talents were reduced here to merely sketching concept art and his animation skills were sorely missed. The hearts of everyone reading who has seen the original *The Lost World* (or the original *King Kong* for that matter) just sank and took a mental note that they don't need to see this.

At the end of the day, while Doyle's *The Lost World* contains both thrilling adventure and social commentary, any film adaptation of the novel is surely going to be accepted or laughed at on the strength of how believable its dinosaurs are. These dinosaurs are clearly not believable by anyone over the age of four, because they're not stop motion animations, they're real animals in disguise. We aren't even shown a dinosaur until the 34 minute mark, around a third of the way into the film. And just because Prof. Challenger identifies a brontosaurus rubbing up against all the miniature greenery, it doesn't stop us from identifying a monitor lizard with stegosaurus scales glued to its back. Like most kids, I'd fallen in love with dinosaurs young and I wouldn't have bought this as a brontosaurus at the age of five. A gigantic iguana wearing a pair of fake horns in a standoff with Frosty the poodle is no more ludicrous. Neither is the neon green superimposed giant spider that Malone shoots while chasing a scantily clad but somehow entirely decent young native girl.

It's the battle of the behemoths that leaves the worst taste in the mouth though. In the red corner is the returning monitor lizard, flicking its tongue like there's no tomorrow and roaring like a beast on heat. With Malone and Holmes evading its attentions, it has to face off against a caiman with horns and spikes added everywhere that they wouldn't fall

off. As you can imagine, this disqualifies the film from the familiar disclaimer we see on any movie nowadays that features even one living creature: “no animals were harmed in the making of this film.”

The American Humane Association has been monitoring the filming of Hollywood movies since 1940, a remarkable tally that includes a couple of thousand productions a year, but that’s only about 70% of animal action and this film was clearly part of the exception. I can’t help but describe the monitor lizard vs. caiman battle as a cockfight in lizard form, similar to the real life battles that are captured on African safaris by tourists with cameras, merely set up by filmmakers and staged for our entertainment. I doubt either animal survived their tumble off a cliff.

The one thing that I can say to the many animal lovers cringing at the previous paragraph is that there really aren’t a lot of dinosaurs in this film, if we count these real life reptiles as dinosaurs. There’s no T. Rex to be found, no pterodactyls, none of what readers of the novel might expect. That’s sad but explainable given that *Cleopatra* was already bleeding 20th Century Fox’s coffers dry three years away from eventual release.

What’s saddest of all, though, is that there’s nothing else of value to replace them. We’re given cardboard characters whose clichéd attributes are mirrored by the clichéd situations into which they’re placed. The natives are crafted from the purest exotica, little more than an unwelcoming collection of facepaint, tiki statues and tribal drums. Doyle kept his adventure as scientifically sound as he could for the time; Allen and Bennett don’t seem to know what science is. They don’t even allow



anyone to get dirty in the jungle, even when running for their lives in white suits from giant frickin' lizards. At least they're not running in high heels, but that's a story from a different dinosaur movie in another generation, one that looks like it was shot outside. Almost everything here was obviously shot on the Fox lot, inside with as much dry ice as was needed to hide how fabricated the sets were. Frankly, it's embarrassing.

A five year old might get a kick out of the cliffhanging nature of the piece: here a roaring dinosaur, there a carnivorous plant; here a vicious betrayal, there an honourable self sacrifice; here certain death and there a magnificent way out. Older audiences will find all of these a stretch, especially as the story had been adapted before and relatively capably, by Harry Hoyt in 1925 with the believable casting of Wallace Beery and Lewis Stone as Prof. Challenger and Lord Roxton, as well as the glorious stop motion animation of the master, Willis O'Brien.

Here, older audiences are far more likely to thrill at the frequent sight of Jill St. John's camel toe than any of what they're actually supposed to be watching. The supporting cast is strong, Richard Haydn and Fernando Lamas both acquitting themselves well in support of Rains and Rennie, even if David Hedison clearly didn't want to be in the movie but stuck it out anyway.

Only Irwin Allen got any momentum out of this and that was a career in episodic shlock, forged from *The Lost World* and presented weekly on ABC.





The Spiral Staircase (1945)

Reviewed on 14th June for actress Dorothy McGuire

Director: Robert Siodmak

Writers: Mel Dinelli, from the novel *Some Must Watch* by Ethel Lina White

Stars: Dorothy McGuire, George Brent and Ethel Barrymore

The name of Ethel Lina White isn't one particularly remembered today, even by aficionados of the crime genre in which she wrote, let alone fans of film who got to experience her work only through adaptation to the big screen. However, back in the thirties, she was a highly successful Welsh novelist and fans of her work would have devoured those novels and sought out those movies.

She wrote seventeen novels, most of which fell into the crime genre; three of that number were adapted to film and each of those adaptations were major motion pictures, though all were retitled for the screen. So, while we may be excused for not recognising novels like 1933's *Some Must Watch*, 1936's *The Wheel Spins* and 1942's *Midnight House*, also released in the U.S. as *Her Heart in Her Throat*, film fans ought to recognise what they became: *The Spiral Staircase*, filmed a number of times but first by Robert Siodmak in 1945; *The Lady Vanishes*, whose many adaptations include an outstanding one by Alfred Hitchcock in 1938; and *The Unseen*, released in 1945 as a thematic sequel to *The Uninvited*, a hit for Paramount a year earlier. All of them are highly recommended and well worth seeing.

I'm reviewing that original version of *The Spiral Staircase*, the most recent of those three pictures but the earliest of the source novels, as Dorothy McGuire would have been a hundred on 14th June.

She had a highly successful career, nominated for an Academy Award for *Gentleman's Agreement* and worthy in films as varied as *A Tree Grows in*

Brooklyn, *Old Yeller* and *Three Coins in the Fountain*. She even played the Virgin Mary in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, but I chose this personal favourite to celebrate her career because she gets to lead a truly fantastic cast, above Elsa Lanchester and an Oscar-nominated Ethel Barrymore, all while portraying a character who has been stricken mute because of a childhood trauma. It's a fantastic opportunity and she gives a strong performance without the benefit of dialogue, reaching superb on occasion and never failing to depict her character as a delightful young lady, sadly also an appropriate target for a killer who happens to have it in for girls with disabilities or afflictions. Because she has no voice, he literally sees her with no mouth.

And yes, we see him, early and periodically throughout, though we don't see who he is until the grand reveal towards the end. We just see small parts of him, mostly his eye, and the camera plays up his voyeurism beginning with his murder of a young lady with apparent issues walking. It floats around in her hotel room as she opens her closet to collect her nightgown, but as she walks away, it zooms into that closet to locate the



killer hiding behind her clothes, zooming all the way into his voyeuristic eye. She's his third victim, after a girl with a scar on her face and another who was simple.

It's no stretch to imagine mute young Helen as his next target, as everyone else clearly does, because of her psychological inability to speak. Through the power of coincidence, she's downstairs from the murder as it happens, watching the 1914 version of *The Kiss* in an auditorium. It's worth mentioning that she's comfortable with the characters in this silent film because they can't talk either but, the moment it ends, her terror back in the real world begins.

Most of the film unfolds at the Warren mansion, where Helen works as a companion to the bedridden Mrs Warren, the matriarch of the family who has moments of lucidity but others of apparent confusion. Ethel Barrymore is stunning in the role, another one with a set of inherent limits as she literally can't get out of bed. She steals her first scene merely by opening her eyes and she repeats that feat at a later point in the film too. It's no wonder that she was nominated for another Academy Award



(she had won two years earlier for *None But the Lonely Heart*), but she lost to Anne Baxter in *The Razor's Edge*.

She came much later than her famous brothers, John and Lionel, to a screen career but she was nominated four times in six years. She's only the most prominent of an astounding female cast that also includes Elsa Lanchester as Emma Oates, her housekeeper, who happens to be a little too fond of the brandy; Sara Allgood as Nurse Barker, whom she loathes; and a young Rhonda Fleming as Blanche, her stepson's secretary, building on her showing in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* earlier in the year.

With ladies of this calibre in the cast, it's an uphill struggle for their gentlemen colleagues to enforce their own presence. George Brent is most prominent as Prof. Albert Warren, that stepson, but he's soft spoken and continually in the shadow of Steve, his screen brother, played by Gordon Oliver, the one major cast member I didn't recognise from elsewhere.

He plays a good sleazeball, trying it on with Blanche with misogynistic glee, womanising with a knowing smirk and becoming in the process the overt first choice for our serial killer; it's notable how Albert looks over at



Steven every time anyone talks about leaving. He had a smaller role in *Jezebel*, which co-starred Brent, and some others in pictures such as *San Quentin* and the first *Blondie* movie, but he never really found stardom and this arrived close to the end of his career.

There's also Kent Smith, trawling the ground in between Glenn Ford and James Garner as Dr. Parry, who wants to help Helen recover her voice, and Rhys Williams as Lanchester's husband, the everyman of the house.

While some get better opportunities than others, and the women a lot more than the men, this is still a glorious textbook entry on how to build atmosphere.

Cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca was surely blessed with fantastic set decoration and his work is enhanced by a great score by Roy Webb that's almost symbiotic, but he makes it look far too easy. His name is unjustly neglected today, given that he, arguably, did most to shape the aesthetic of what would become known as film noir by bringing German expressionist techniques to his work on *Stranger on the Third Floor* in 1940, a year after he worked with the legendary Karl Freund on *Golden Boy*. We remember Val Lewton fondly today for the subtle horror movies that he produced in the forties, and we remember his directors, but we should also remember the contributions Musuraca made to many of these films, including *Cat People*, *The Seventh Victim* and *Bedlam*. His film noir resume includes an enviable collection of classics like *Out of the Past*, *Clash by Night* and *The Hitch-Hiker*.

Each of these component parts helps *The Spiral Staircase* towards being not just a good picture but a great one, but the script had to be up to scratch too. Mel Dinelli may have been the least qualified member of the crew, given that he hadn't previously written even one movie of any description and, in fact, wouldn't write another for four more years, but he enhances the claustrophobia apparent in the Warren mansion through Musuraca's camera by pitting each of the characters against each other tighter and tighter, just like the spiral hinted at in the title. He notably uses a whole slew of emotions to do this, not just fear but also love, hate, lust and envy. As a result, we feel sure that Helen is going to be the next

victim too, even as we realise that the absence of extra characters hints that the killer is surely already within the household in which she works. Never mind those windows that open mysteriously to the consternation of Mrs. Oates, the killer is already inside and he has to be someone to whom we've already been introduced.

The final piece of the puzzle is director Robert Siodmak, one of those German auteurs who fled the Nazis during the Second World War and found a career in Hollywood. Already important for his debut film, *People on Sunday*, made with others who would become key names in the film noir era, like Edgar G. Ulmer, Billy Wilder and his own brother, Curt Siodmak, he moved on to direct cult hits like *Cobra Woman* and *Son of Dracula* before moving into film noir and helping to enforce how good the Germans were at it because they'd invented many of its techniques back in the silent era. This heady mash up of mystery, horror and film noir wasn't even his first, but it built on *The Suspect*, starring Elsa Lanchester's husband, Charles Laughton, and paved the way for *Criss Cross* and the picture that finally landed him an overdue Oscar nomination, *The Killers* with Burt Lancaster.

Put all of these names together and it would be hard not for *The Spiral Staircase* to be good, but it's truly a great picture and it plays better each time I see it.

Now, it's not the deepest mystery in the world, because there's a really short list of suspects for us to evaluate; it really comes down to whether we expect the killer to be the obvious candidate or not. However, we can't fail to be drawn into Helen's growing despair, not by the mystery but by the Warren mansion itself, which almost usurps McGuire's role as the lead character because of Darrell Silvera's set decoration and Musuraca's eye for memorably dark visuals. As focused as we are on the lovely Helen, there are shots where she's just a set decoration herself, like one where she walks past the iron railings outside the house or another where she's framed in a huge mirror that, through reflection and deep focus, provides fantastic views of the inside of the mansion. We're never reliant here on clichéd old dark house trappings; there are no secret passageways or

paintings with their eyes cut out. Instead, the place merely looks creepy and gets creepier as the film runs on because of what happens within it and how it's all shot.

With so much here to enjoy, it's admirable that Dorothy McGuire, credited first above Brent and Barrymore, manages to remain a focal point throughout. She's actually threatened a lot less than we think she is, but she's the prospective victim throughout, stuck in a set of Kafkaesque scenarios. How can she call the authorities when she can't speak to them? There's a great scene where she tries to do exactly that and her face gradually reflects her realisation that her own trauma may become her downfall. Another features a fantasy wedding sequence she imagines as her ticket to happiness turn inexorably into nightmare when she finds herself unable to say the words, "I do." All of this turns everything back on her: while an insane killer is stalking her, it's her own inability to overcome a childhood trauma that traps her and the challenge to cast off her own chains defines her. Speaking again would be a life changer but now a life saver too.



Dorothy McGuire's centennial is only one reason to watch *The Spiral Staircase* but, frankly, every reason is a good one. It's also a great point to highlight that her powerful performance came close to the beginning of her screen career; while it ran for over forty years, it wasn't a particularly prolific one, even with such a notable first decade.

She only started out in *Claudia* in 1943, but was already on top of her game in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* only two years later. This film followed right on in 1946 and one more would bring her that Oscar nomination for *Gentlemen's Agreement*. At that point, her career was only eight pictures long! She would go on to lead the cast in the American standard, *Old Yeller*, and, as was unfortunately the lot of so many capable actresses in the studio era, the leading lady for a wide range of stars, including Fred MacMurray, John Mills and Gary Cooper.

She also co-starred with a number of fellow centenarians who you'll read about in this book: Glenn Ford in *Trial*, Van Johnson in *Invitation* and Rosanno Brazzi in *Three Coins in the Fountain*.





A Hundred in 2016

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DYAN CANNON

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Deathtrap (1982)

reviewed on 23rd June for actress Irene Worth

Director: Sidney Lumet

Writer: Jay Presson Allen, from the play by Ira Levin

Stars: Michael Caine, Christopher Reeve and Dyan Cannon

Somehow I hadn't seen *Deathtrap* before, even though it was a highly successful movie in 1982, both critically and commercially, however many critics noted similarities to *Sleuth*, which the lead actor, Michael Caine, had made a decade earlier to the year.

Before it was a movie, it was a play, written by Ira Levin, author of the novels behind such obscurities as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Boys from Brazil* and *The Stepford Wives*. It was produced on Broadway, beginning in 1978, where it was nominated for a Tony award and racked up a record run, its 1,793 performances the longest for a comedy thriller. Marian Seldes, who played the female lead, Myra Bruhl, appeared in every single one of those performances, earning herself an appearance in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as "most durable actress". She wasn't cast in the film, however, as her part went instead to Dyan Cannon, which perhaps wasn't a good choice given that she was Razzie-nominated for her trouble. However, that nomination does speak to the prominence of the picture, given that the biggest flaw of the Golden Raspberries is that they don't notice small pictures. *Mad* magazine even parodied the movie as *Deathcrap*, which is also a mark of success in its own way.

The film is an intricate piece, which can't lose its origins on the stage. Almost the entire movie takes place at Sidney Bruhl's home on Long Island, a delightfully open plan affair inside a converted windmill. Such a memorable location, right down to the intricate mechanisms in the roof above the bedroom, is perhaps the most important component that the

film can provide but the play can't. However, it's a stretch to imagine anyone watching the movie not envisaging the action unfolding on a stage, especially given that Andrzej Bartkowiak deliberately shoots much of it from a distance, as if rendering us a theatre audience.

It's ridiculously simple to give spoilers when reviewing this, so I'll be careful and merely highlight that it's about both a playwright and a play, also called *Deathtrap*, while referencing previous plays from the pen of Bruhl, both through dialogue and props retrieved from their productions, which adorn the walls of his gorgeous study. The script proceeds to feed upon itself rather vociferously to make all those twists possible.

We even start on Broadway, where Bruhl's latest but not greatest production, *Murder Most Fair*, is failing outrageously on its opening night. "The worst play I've ever seen," whispers one anonymous audience member, too far away from the back of the theatre for Bruhl to hear. He realises that it's flopped, though, metaphorically hearing the critics sharpening their hatchets. "So much for truth in advertising," comments one the next day. Whodunit? Sidney Bruhl dunit. And in public too.

And so he heads home by train, pissed as a newt, to shout at his drama queen wife in a performance that feels like it could be on stage too. He's had four bums, he says, all of which stink. He's written out. He's descended far from the glory days of *The Murder Game*, the longest running thriller on Broadway. And what's worst of all is that he has a copy of a stunning play in his hands; it just isn't his. It was sent to him by a student, Clifford Anderson, who attended a seminar he gave a year earlier. It's so great that, "Even a gifted director couldn't hurt it," as he suggests to his wife in one of many wonderful lines dotted throughout the script.

Those of you with twisted minds will already be imagining where the plot will take us next and, sure enough, Bruhl runs through a host of options. He promptly fantasises about killing Anderson with the mace which was used in *Rigorous Child* or attempting to get the play produced under his own name. It's flippant at first, of course, but then he starts to seriously think about the ramifications. Would he literally kill for another hit play? If we weren't thinking that already, his wife Myra asks it of him

aloud. And yes, he just might! After all, this appears to be the only copy in existence, Anderson having sent his “first born child” to its “spiritual father”. He has no family at all and he’s currently house-sitting for folk who are travelling abroad. Who would miss him? Who would connect him to Bruhl? This is a dream scene, because it’s literally the job of a mystery writer to figure out how to kill people without anyone finding out. In fact, they do it more often than actual killers, because they never have to worry about being caught. Well, until now.

In the original stage version, Sidney Bruhl was initially played by Shakespearean actor John Wood, eventually handing the part on to other actors as varied as Stacy Keach and Farley Granger. The film role, however, went to Michael Caine, perhaps as an opportunity to progress from the supporting role he played in *Sleuth* to the lead, as indeed he did in the remake of that movie in 2007. He’s well cast, easily able to shift between calm and collected scenes and shouty ones at the drop of a hat, and he’s able to sell the multiple levels of the script well.

His co-star was a major name in 1982, having been launched to fame as the title character in *Superman*, a role which he’d only just reprised in his previous film. Yes, Christopher Reeve plays Clifford Anderson and he’s decent too, if somewhat more stogy than Caine, underplaying his part deliberately: young, enthusiastic and very naïve. With *Somewhere in Time*, *Deathtrap* and *Monsignor*, the three traditional movies that he made in and



amongst the first three *Superman* pictures, Reeve was clearly aiming to diversify his roles and avoid being typecast as a superhero.

I'm far less sold on the performance of Dyan Cannon, but a debate raged in my head throughout the picture about whether the Razzies gave her a fair judgement or not. Certainly there are actors who have been punished by the Razzies for doing something unexpected rather than bad.

Sure, Myra is a histrionic drama queen of a wife who screams like a ditzy blonde waste of space, but then that's precisely what she is, right? Sidney often talks to her like she's a child, with small words and patience because she clearly doesn't come close to occupying the same intellectual level and she's also her own worst enemy, as highlighted by the pills, cigarettes and lack of any real purpose. Yes, she's frickin' annoying but she's supposed to be, right?

So, was she nominated for a Razzie because she was so annoying as Myra or because Myra was so annoying and she played the part precisely right? I couldn't choose which side I'd take in that debate but ended up noting that the fact that I was debating during the picture instead of being caught up in the story's flow, which might well be an answer all in itself. Of course, now the question to ask is whether that's bad acting from Cannon or bad writing from Levin or screenwriter Jay Presson Allen?

Now, how far can I go here without providing spoilers?

I should certainly point out that Bruhl invites Anderson to stay with



them, with the goal of revising his play into something that can be produced. He's hardly going to own up that it's perfect already!

I ought to highlight the cleverly written scene in which Myra attempts to talk her husband out of murdering their guest, while he's in the room, without letting him in on the fact that it's even being considered as an idea. That leads to a gloriously tense follow-up where Bruhl traps Anderson in a pair of Houdini's handcuffs, then proceeds to joke about killing him with his mace.

Perhaps I can get away with pointing out that he strangles him to death with a chain instead, given that it happens only a third of the way into the movie, or in stage talk, at the end of the second scene of act one. Reeve was credited after Caine but before Cannon and had only just showed up, so clearly the script has more for him to do than simply appear and die. That would be overdoing the billing even for Superman!

But I can't really go any further, except to introduce the fourth major character, Helga ten Dorp, especially given that she's played by Irene Worth, the reason why I'm watching this movie; she would have been a hundred years old on 23rd June.

Helga is an awesome opportunity for an actress, given that she's foreign, characterful and the personification of the unexpected. If the film is about Sidney Bruhl and his cleverly constructed murder plan, then Helga ten Dorp is the wild card that he simply couldn't predict. We're first introduced to her in a conversation between Sidney and Myra; she's some sort of psychic who assists the police in solving murders in her native Holland and she's taken a local cottage for six months, which in this sparsely populated part of Long Island means that she's their temporary neighbour. However, she shows up in person, right after the murder, walking right in as if she owned the place and traipsing around feeling pain in the air. She dominates immediately and emphatically, acting circles around Cannon, and Caine lets her run with it.

Worth is remembered far more for her stage work than anything that she did on film, but that's only a mark of how important she was off screen. She won no less than three Tony awards over the span of a quarter

of a century: winning Best Actress for *Tiny Alice* in 1965 and *Sweet Bird of Youth* in 1976, then adding Best Featured Actress in 1991 for *Lost in Yonkers*, a role which she reprised two years later when it was adapted to the big screen. Working in a world where critics are notorious for their hatchet jobs, Walter Kerr wrote in *The New York Times* after seeing her play *Hedda Gabler* that, “Miss Worth is just possibly the best actress in the world.”

She made few films, only sixteen over half a century, but they included many notable roles as foreigners, including a seamstress in the French Resistance in *Orders to Kill*, which won her a BAFTA Award. She also played French opposite Alec Guinness in *The Scapegoat*, but British in *Seven Seas to Calais* (playing Queen Elizabeth I, no less), German in *Forbidden* and Russian twice, in both *Nicholas and Alexandra* and *Onegin*.

Here, she’s Dutch and she comes very close to stealing the show, even though she doesn’t have a vast percentage of screen time. Part of it is certainly that Helga is a gift of a part to any talented actress, but the greater part is that she’s the talented actress who brings her to life. As the script unfolds and the paradigm shifting twists proliferate, we never forget that Helga isn’t far away and could easily show up at any moment to throw a psychic spanner into the works.

Surely I wasn’t the only one watching not just to grin at the intricate genius of Sidney Bruhl’s plans but to find the one thread that would unravel the whole thing? That old line from Robert Burns floated invisible



in the air around him, that the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. And there was never any doubt in my mind that it would be Helga who found that one thread and yanked it out from under him, all the more for her continued conspicuous absence through much of the film.

I'm happy to have finally caught up with *Deathtrap*, especially having watched *Sleuth* so recently. I grew up in the eighties and I'm well aware that nostalgia currently views the decade as the most embarrassing one that culture ever birthed, just as the sixties were when I was a kid and the seventies were to younger friends. However, every decade is embarrassing when you choose to see nothing else and this is a fantastic and timely reminder that the eighties produced much of substance, even if most of it is currently obscured by the fashionably awful. It's also always fascinating to watch Michael Caine, an actor who has reinvented himself decade on decade, somehow remaining a consistently relevant presence throughout. It was fun to watch a young Christopher Reeve, if not much fun to watch a histrionic Dyan Cannon. It was fascinating to find a masterpiece of writing twists upon twists written while M. Night Shyamalan was still in short pants, especially one that's literate and self-effacing. And it was great to discover another great performance from Irene Worth on what would have been her hundredth birthday!





Olivia de Havilland warns you: "DO NOT SEE 'LADY IN A CAGE' ALONE!

It is a shocking picture—with a terrifying theme! No holds are barred in Lady in a Cage. So take somebody along and hold onto them—for dear life!"

The Management warns you:

"Because of its frank nature we also urge you: DO NOT SEE 'LADY IN A CAGE' ALONE!"

**WHAT HAPPENS
IN THIS ELEVATOR
IS NOT FOR THE WEAK—
IT IS, PERHAPS, NOT
EVEN FOR THE STRONG!**



OLIVIA de HAVILLAND

IS THE TRAPPED...DEFENSELESS...

Lady in a Cage

ANN SOTHERN

as SADE

Written and Produced by

LUTHER DAVIS

Directed by

WALTER GRAUMAN · LUTHER DAVIS

A

Production



Lady in a Cage (1964)

Reviewed on 1st July for actress Olivia de Havilland

Director: Walter Grauman

Writer: Luther Davis

Stars: Olivia de Havilland, James Caan, Jennifer Billingsley, Rafael Campos, William Swan, Jeff Corey and Ann Sothorn

I've been working my centennial project for half a year now and it's been fascinating to pluck interesting films from the careers of important cinematic names to celebrate what would have been their hundredth birthdays. On 1st July, for the first time, I was able to pluck an interesting film from the career of an important cinematic name to celebrate what actually is a hundredth birthday.

Olivia de Havilland turned one hundred and the world of cinema wished her all the very best. Born in Japan of British parents, she was a major name in the thirties, not only for Errol Flynn movies like *Captain Blood*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, but of the quintessential Hollywood blockbuster of the era, *Gone with the Wind*. In the forties, the blockbusters gave way to more focused dramas, like *To Each Their Own*, *The Snake Pit* and *The Heiress*; she received an Academy Award nomination for each of those three and won for two of them, losing the middle one to Jane Wyman for *Johnny Belinda*.

It's easy to argue that the longer her career ran, the more wild and interesting her choices of film became. Never mind all those sweet young things she played in her early films, there are so many fascinating roles later on that I had to debate myself over which of a bunch of them I should select to review. I dismissed *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* as too well known, but could easily have picked *That Lady*, in which she wears an eyepatch; the Oscar-nominated *Not as a Stranger*; or especially *The Dark*

Mirror, a crime thriller in which she plays twins.

In the end, I plumped for *Lady in a Cage*, a surprisingly forward looking thriller from 1964 that rather feels like a commentary on the present and future state of Hollywood. It's very much a product of its time but its approach to story often feels like it could reach cinemas this year, even as it's set in a location that seems like a throwback to the old days. Put those three eras together and that makes for a schizophrenic tone that fascinates me and makes me want to read more into it than perhaps is actually there.

As it begins, there's no mistaking the film for anything but the product of sixties Hollywood. The opening credits sequence shifts between Saul Bass style animation and striking black and white photography, with a staccato jazz score. The imagery is deliberately dark throughout. A couple somehow make out in a car to the radio accompaniment of an overblown evangelical preacher lady, eager to tap into the Cold War fear of the nation. "Have we an anti-Satan missile?" she screeches. A young coloured girl drags her rollerskate up and down the leg of a passed out bum. Someone throws a keg off the roof of a building in celebration of the 4th of July. Most notably, there's a dead dog in the street with what seems like everyone in the world driving past, bumper to bumper, but not a one of them stopping. Everything screams heat and disinterest. We're very clearly shown an amoral modern world before we pop up a driveway into the old fashioned home of Mrs. Cornelia Hilyard, a house that could easily have been in a Hollywood movie of three decades earlier.

Cornelia is a fascinating character from the outset, played by de Havilland, of course. She's set up superbly by scriptwriter Luther Davis in textbook style, given that we're introduced to her through the apparent suicide note of her grown up son. That prompts us to expect a domineering tyrant rather than the sweet old lady who wouldn't say boo to a goose that we then meet. She walks with the aid of a cane, because she broke her hip the previous year; she gets up and down stairs through the use of a personal elevator, which also highlights her state of financial well-being. She seems to be an incessantly cheerful sort, even while

pondering on the morality of buying into armament stocks because of all the war talk she keeps hearing on the news. So she's a character of rare substance: tough but frail, someone used to power who has been relegated to the ranks of the powerless. That's only emphasised when her son leaves for the weekend and accidentally bumps a ladder into an electric cable and sparks (pun not intended) a power outage to her house, but her house alone.

The title has two meanings. The first is literal, as Cornelia finds herself stranded inside her lift cage, stuck between floors with her son gone for the weekend and only a book, a portable radio and a vase of flowers for company. The second is metaphorical, as her various attempts to communicate with the outside world through ringing an alarm only attract unwelcome attention, suggesting that her nice house is as much of a cage to her as her elevator, the world outside not the helpful one she imagines but a dangerous one that only wants to rage.

Initially, the alarm she triggers, which rings outside above a sign reading, "Elevator emergency: please notify police," alerts only an alcoholic thief with mental health issues who promptly breaks in to see what he can find. He's George L. Brady Jr., better known to one and all as "Repent". After one run to sell Cornelia's toaster to the local junkyard, he comes back for more with Sade, a faded whore he owes money to. This



pair are played by Jeff Corey and Ann Sothern, firmly character actors compared to de Havilland's old Hollywood star.

If the film at this point was highlighting how method actors like Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift were playing lead roles in the sixties like they were character parts instead, we're about to meet the future in the form of a trio of thugs led by James Caan in his first credited role (he had briefly appeared as a soldier in *Irma la Douce* the previous year).

While Repent and Sade are both morally repellent, their actions do make sense. He's an alcoholic who has clearly suffered for his addiction and she's a prostitute in a cheap apartment. Both of them have dug their own holes but see a way to climb out of them in the stuff that's all over Cornelia's house, free for the taking given that she's stuck in a cage and can't do a single thing to stop them.

However, when Randall, Essie and Elaine arrive, having followed Repent from the junkyard, they have no such explainable logic to guide their actions and that makes them feel both dangerous and ahead of their time. In 1964, they were the epitome of the famous dialogue from *The Wild One* just over a decade earlier: "What are you rebelling against?" Mildred asks Johnny. "Whaddya got?" Marlon Brando replies.

In fact, that would actually be more depth than this violent trio get. Given how carefully all three major characters thus far have been



introduced, Luther Davis clearly crafted these young thugs without any background at all. We don't know where they come from and we don't know what drives them, though, to be honest, neither do they. They don't even feel like they belong in the movie we're watching, more like characters who travelled back in time from the exploitation cinema of the seventies or perhaps from a picture as recent as *The Purge*. Their connection to 1964 is only through their style: Caan is clearly trying to be Brando with all the fibre of his being and Jennifer Billingsley, who plays Elaine, tapped into the same wildness as Ann-Margret did the same year in *Kitten with a Whip*. Oddly, it's the much younger looking Rafael Campos, playing Essie, who was most experienced at the time; Billingsley was brand new and Caan was earning credit one but Campos had been acting in film and on television since 1955's *Blackboard Jungle*.

You can write the rest of the script if you have a background in three distinct eras of Hollywood film: the golden age of the thirties, epitomised by the polite de Havilland and her time capsule of a house; the character-based drama of the fifties and sixties, highlighted by Corey, Sothorn and their characters from the wrong side of the tracks; and the darker but emphatically less substantial future hinted at by Caan and his thugs.

Their future is echoed most strongly in the amoral exploitation flicks of the seventies, from *A Clockwork Orange* to *The Hills Have Eyes*, but they also point to films as far away as the dystopian sci-fi and torture porn of today, let alone more nuanced thrillers like *The Strangers*. It's hard not to see the Manson family murders of 1969 in this picture, made five full years earlier, as if Luther Davis was foretelling the future. Perhaps he was looking at the present too, phrasing his world through the eyes of Kitty Genovese, who famously died three months before this film was released.

There are points where this is underlined in bold. Randall eventually engages in dialogue with Cornelia, after she hurls polite abuse at him. "What sort of creatures are you?" she asks, because she can't understand their motivation. He burps at her and the radio cries, "Here, before us, stands the man of tomorrow!" Talk about pessimistic social commentary! When Cornelia describes herself as "a human being! I'm a thinking, feeling

machine!” her emotional outburst merely prompts Randall to continue to refer to her throughout as “the human being”, usage that suggests that he doesn’t see himself as one. He’s an animal, instead, he thinks, a thought backed up by a lack of background, substance or thought. They’re not the iconic juvenile delinquents that Brando or Dean played, they’re just thugs, inept and inane. Yet, time and again, they’re seen as the future. When Cornelia attempts to stab Randall with makeshift knives, they bend and he looks at her as if stunned at her lack of acknowledgement that he’s the future and it’s simply impossible for her to stop him.

The ending is brutal, but again looking both backwards and forwards at the same time. I don’t want to spoil it, so will attempt to be notably vague here, but there’s explicit violence that feels out of place in black and white and a nod to the star-making performance of Lon Chaney in *The Miracle Man*, made when Olivia de Havilland, one of the last links that we still have to that era, was three years old. I’ve met Chaney’s great-grandson, who didn’t know him but runs a company dedicated to his and his son’s work. Yet Olivia de Havilland, alive and vibrant today and celebrating her 100th birthday by talking with *People* magazine about her career, was alive way back in 1919 when Chaney changed the face of American film.

Amazingly, she’s not the only star to reach a centennial this year, as Kirk Douglas joined her in December, but, while his career ran for longer,



it didn't begin until almost a decade later. I'm happy that we still have both of them but I'm happier still that they had such interesting careers.

Many are also happy that de Havilland took a stand, way back in 1943, against the Hollywood studio system, a stand that still resonates today.

Having been Oscar nominated as Best Actress for *Hold Back the Dawn* in 1941, two years after a Best Supporting Actress nod for *Gone with the Wind*, she felt justified in asking her employer, Warner Bros., to give her more substantial roles. Their response was to suspend her for six months. More notably, once her contract was up, they suggested that she still owed them those six months of work, as the suspension didn't count. This wasn't quite as wild as it might seem to us today; at this point, industry lawyers stopped the clock whenever an actor wasn't working, thereby extending seven year contracts into much longer periods of time.

However, de Havilland sued Warner Bros. anyway and, in 1944, she won, not merely escaping her own contract, signed back in 1936, but firmly defining California Labor Code Section 2855 to mean seven calendar years. That success helped many actors and other professionals; well into the 21st century, Jared Leto of the band Thirty Seconds of Mars visited de Havilland in Paris to thank her for the De Havilland Law, which he and many others viewed as important a legacy as her films.

Happy birthday, Olivia de Havilland!





**Big Jim Cole
had come to the rim
of Hell and nobody
but nobody was going
to push him over!**

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STARRING

CLINT WALKER · CO-STARRING **MARTHA HYER · KEENAN WYNN · NANCY KULP**

WRITTEN BY **WARREN DOUGLAS** · PRODUCED BY **BURT DUNNE** · DIRECTED BY **JOSEPH PEVNEY** · **TECHNISCOPE**



The Night of the Grizzly (1966)

reviewed on 27th July for actor Keenan Wynn

Director: Joseph Pevney

Writer: Warren Douglas

Stars: Clint Walker, Martha Hyer, Keenan Wynn and Nancy Kulp

“Big Jim Cole had come to the rim of Hell and nobody but nobody was going to push him over!” screams the tagline on the poster.

Well, it sure doesn't look that way while his wagon travels through gorgeous countryside to a town called Hope to claim his inheritance of a ranch. 150 miles cross-country in a wagon seat isn't nearly as comfortable as they make it look, but hey, welcome to Hollywood, erm, Hope.

Jim is played by a television legend, Clint Walker, who had played the title character on *Cheyenne* for seven seasons, and he's perfect for this role: he's tall, he's strong and he's softly spoken; he looks believably tough with his shirt off (which it often is) and he can backhand Ron Ely with style. Ely, famous for playing both *Tarzan* and *Doc Savage*, was 6' 4½" tall, but Walker still had an inch and a half on him. Walker had his work cut out for him here, with a host of actors of all ages ready to steal the film out from under him, but he holds on to it with a quiet authority that backs up his character's background as a former United States marshal.

Many of those scene-stealing members of the supporting cast were also best known for their work on television. Nancy Kulp, for instance, runs the local store, which also includes a café, a pool hall and almost everything else that might conceivably be needed in Hope; she's best known as Miss Jane Hathaway, Milburn Drysdale's secretary in *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Her name in this particular story is Wilhelmina but Big Jim's right hand man calls her Bill. The one thing she doesn't stock is, well, stock, so Cole has to go to Hazel Squires for his cows and pigs; she's played

by Ellen Corby, another actress who's fundamentally known for one role, of Grandma Walton in *The Waltons*. Both of them play pretty much the same parts here, even if the characters have different names. Only Ron Ely gets to do anything different: he was known as much for *The Aquanauts* as *Tarzan* on TV, but his role here as the spoiled brat of a son of the local villain isn't remotely similar to either. It's odd watching him not be in charge, but he has fun as Tad Curry, a pain in the ass hoodlum who's always in trouble.

The story isn't particularly original. In fact, it bears a great many similarities to *Terror in a Texas Town*, which I covered in March for Sterling Hayden, though there isn't a political undercurrent to be found here.

Cole has come to Hope to claim a ranch that his dad Charlie won from a man named Jed Curry in a card game; he's also brought his family along to work it with him and he's keen to get on with the job. He's so keen that when he discovers there's a \$500 loan against the property, with a further \$175 in interest, he pays it without hesitation, though it's most of his money and he hasn't even seen the place yet. "I don't need to see it," he explains.

It turns out to be not much to look at but it's 640 acres of prime land and there's another man in town who wants it badly. That's Jed Curry, its former owner, who wants it for his sons, Tad and Cal, the local pair of troublemakers. He's little different except that he has common sense, grit and control to go with their greed, and he's played with gloriously barking effect by Keenan Wynn, who would have been a hundred on 27th July.

Now, given that this is a time honoured framework for a western, you might wonder why it's called *The Night of the Grizzly*. Well, in and amongst the usual subplots of honest man against the odds, redemption through young love and the retired lawman's old life catching up with him, not to mention that old faithful of a little girl discovering what a skunk is the hard way, we have a new one and it goes by the name of Old Satan.

Regis Toomey gets to talk up this critter as Cotton Benson, the town's banker, and he does it almost enthusiastically. "1,500 odd pounds of the meanest, wickedest animal this side of Hades," is just an introduction. "If

that beast ain't Lucifer in person, he sure is first cousin," he suggests. And just in case Big Jim thinks that it's just another grizzly bear, Benson focuses in. "He's got the heart of a cougar and he can out-think any man ever born," he explains. "He kills just for the wicked fun of it." Now, that's the sort of build-up we expect to get for a movie called *The Night of the Grizzly!* Old Satan has terrorised Hope for years and Big Jim's place is next on his list.

I enjoyed this picture from the outset because of the simplicity inherent in the town of Hope. Every single character's motivation is written across his face and with his very first actions, something that works much better in westerns than, say, in mysteries.

Big Jim is a good man with a good family, even if his son Charlie is a handful and his young daughter Gypsy is a character and a half. His compadre and former deputy, Sam Potts, is the routine western sidekick but he's immediately set upon by the fact that Hope is in a dry county. He finds that out at Bill's general store, just as we find out that she's fallen for him at first sight. We meet Tad and Cal there, all ready to steal Sam's money on the pretext of supplying him with a bottle of illicit liquor. Their dad Jed is a bad man but one that's good at being bad; everyone in town knows that he owns it, even if they'd like to forget. The banker is a decent sort, who would help anyone in need, but he knows who the principal shareholder is. There's even a local odd job man, played by Jack Elam, who's happiest sleeping on a bench outside Bill's store.



We know who each of these folk are and what they're like just by looking at them. The script by Warren Douglas, who also gets a brief appearance on screen as a minister, isn't too keen on surprising us and it wouldn't be as effective as it is without the right folk in these parts. An impressive amount of kudos needs to go to the casting director here, rather than the writer. This is late for Douglas, who appeared on the big screen for the last time after a minor acting career that went back to 1938; he had one TV movie left in him, 1973's *The Red Pony*. In the fifties, he gradually switched over to writing, moving from feature films to television by the end of the decade. He was best known for western shows, having written episodes for most of the big ones: *Bonanza*, *Guns Smoke* and *The High Chaparral*, not to mention ten episodes of *Cheyenne*, starring Clint Walker. This feels like it could easily have been a couple of those TV episodes, one about the cold war between Big Jim and Jed Curry over the ranch and another about the search for a killer grizzly bear.

I didn't enjoy this for the story; I watched it for the characters and for how far into their skins the actors got. I felt like I'd arrived in Hope along with the Coles and so I had a stake in what was going on. It didn't hurt that I watched in Phoenix, AZ, where lines of dialogue like Hazel Squires's, "It's gonna be a long, mean summer," ring very true indeed.

Of course, that's a harbinger of doom if ever I've heard one and, sure enough, Satan comes visiting that very night, breaking into Big Jim's barn and right back out again, after Cole shoots at him. The brief attack leaves



Duncan, the ranch's prize bull, dead. He's only the first victim, however, as more promptly add up to ensure that the story moves gradually towards a quest to rid the town of this 1,500 pound menace. The reward put up by Jed Curry plays nicely into the rest of the story, prompting Big Jim to join the hunt to earn that cash and save his ranch, but mostly it's about a battle between the retired marshal and a man who figured strongly at a point within that past career, Cass Dowdy.

I chose *The Night of the Grizzly* as a celebration of Keenan Wynn's career and he does a stellar job as Jed Curry, clearly the villain of the piece, and undeniably not a man to cross in Hope, but also one who gains a little sympathy from us because of how much trouble Tad and Cal keep getting into, all of which he ends up responsible for cleaning up.

I wanted a lot more of Jed Curry, because Wynn made sure that he played him with a different angle from every other actor in the film, speaking quietly but with menace until he barks out a line for emphasis. Sadly, he's the villain in a film where Old Satan the grizzly bear outweighs him by over a ton and just doesn't care how much screen time he ends up with. It would have been easier to remove that grizzly from the script than any other component and, without it, Jed Curry's part would have bulked up considerably. It's fair to say that while Cole and Dowdy are out in the mountains tracking a killer bear, I was still thinking of what Curry might have been getting up to back in town.

And that tends to be the way with Keenan Wynn roles. He had a lot of them, from his first in a Clark Gable movie called *Somewhere I'll Find You* in 1942 to his 142nd and last in a Canadian sci-fi flick in 1986 with the clumsy name of *Hyper Sapien: People from Another Star*. In between came a slew of classics as varied as *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Point Blank* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*, but he rarely got the opportunity to lead the pictures he was in. Instead he mastered the art of being a character actor, which is not just to add flavour to what the leads are doing but to make a film bigger than it would have otherwise been. Arguably, his most memorable part was as the paranoid Col. "Bat" Guano in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, another example where I wanted to know what Wynn's character was up to even when

others were on screen.

But I can only review what actually happens, not what plays out in my mind while the movie is going on, and what happens is the rekindling of an old grudge between Cole, who needs the reward money, and Dowdy, whom Curry hires to make sure he doesn't get his hands on it.

Nothing that happens in the last third of the movie carries any surprises, with each little plot twist either telegraphed or obvious. However Walker is as solid in the mountains as he was on the plains and Leo Gordon is as suitably imposing as his opponent.

Just like Walker was the epitome of the tall and quietly spoken western hero, Gordon is the epitome of the tall and quietly spoken western villain. He didn't have the quirky performance tricks of a Jack Palance or, in this picture, a Keenan Wynn, but he had the look and the feel and what he himself called "a craggy-ass face." He exuded menace just by standing up, even if his stocky 6' 2" frame was a full four inches short of Walker's and his deep voice merely added to that dark tone. It's obvious that he isn't anyone we should even consider picking a fight with and that's always the first need for any western movie villain.

Victoria Paige Meyerink doesn't seem like anyone to pick a fight with either, but in a rather different way, given that she was a six year old girl, the Coles' youngest.

Kevin Brodie, as her screen brother Charlie, was a more seasoned actor, with four features to his name already, even though he was still only fourteen. Candy Moore certainly caught the eye more as cousin Meg, but she had little to do except turn green in a bizarre effects shot when Tad Curry suckers her into drinking a glass of moonshine instead of the expected punch. However, Meyerink got all the best scenes, including a bunch with Jack Elam, after she decides to just lie down on the next bench over.

She's Rosebud and he's Champeen and they're a rather unlikely pair who genuinely seemed to hit it off. Little girls tend to either fade into the background or steal every scene they're in; my guess, from the amount of them that Meyerink ended up with here, is that the director, Joseph

Pevney, was in no doubt about her falling into the latter category. She comes closer than anyone to stealing the show from Walker and I'm including Old Satan in that.

One prominent member of the cast whom I haven't mentioned yet is Don Haggerty, who plays Big Jim's sidekick, Sam Potts. In the time-honoured tradition of westerns, he's as blustery as his boss is calm, but he gets quite a bit of opportunity here, including a neatly awkward romantic angle to work with Bill. I couldn't help but see a vast amount of irony in his performance in this film, though it isn't actually warranted.

I'd read that Don Haggerty was the father of Dan Haggerty, who went on to great fame as Grizzly Adams, a connection underlined by the latter accidentally receiving a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame that had been intended for the former. The family connection seems obvious, especially when Don starts interacting with Satan, and it extends far beyond their respective bushy beards. However, I checked with Charlie LeSueur, who's Arizona's official western film historian, and he confirms that they weren't actually related! Dan Haggerty's father really was a Don Haggerty, but he wasn't *this* Don Haggerty, so the irony is coincidental.

I tried to find out who played the bear too, but the information doesn't seem to be findable online. I don't even know if it was male or female, so I'll use "he" and hope for accuracy. Whoever he was did a decent job, but not up to the level that we would soon come to expect from various TV shows and films starring the non-related Dan Haggerty. I didn't buy into



the hype Cotton Benson spins up for him, perhaps because he looks like a demonic teddy bear on the poster. He does turn out to be a big bear, but he really isn't put to the sort of use that we might expect a big bear in a movie called *The Night of the Grizzly* to be put.

Perhaps this is because the closest Joseph Pevney got to horror was *The Strange Door* a decade and a half earlier, starring Charles Laughton and Boris Karloff. He did direct genre material, such as a fifth of the episodes in the original *Star Trek*, but the grizzly side of this story needed horror treatment and he didn't have a clue. Title aside, the grizzly is merely a distraction from a well cast and well acted but routine western drama.

Goodnight, John Boy! Goodnight, Satan!



A Hundred in 2016



23 Paces to Baker Street (1956)

reviewed on 25th August for actor Van Johnson

Director: Henry Hathaway

Writer: Nigel Balchin, from the novel *The Nursemaid Who Disappeared* aka *Warrant for X* by Philip MacDonald

Stars: Van Johnson and Vera Miles

I was busy with centennial reviews in late August, with three of them due in three days. Martha Raye and George Montgomery shared a birthday on the Saturday, while the Thursday before them marked a hundred years since the birth of Van Johnson who, by the sheerest coincidence, shared a wife with my last subject, Keenan Wynn.

In fact, Johnson married Eve Abbott, a stage actress, the day after her divorce from Wynn was finalised in 1947. To be fair, she later explained that the whole thing was conjured up by MGM, as Louis B. Mayer wanted a big star like Van Johnson to have a wife to hide from the public the fact that he was gay, so he ordered what was generally known in Hollywood as a lavender marriage. Johnson was a close friend of the Wynns and hers was the only name he would consider.

Johnson remained a big name, even in 1956 after he had been dropped by MGM. He's still justly remembered for dramatic films like *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* and *The Caine Mutiny*, but I chose this little gem from 20th Century Fox that gifts him with a great opportunity to portray a blind playwright, one who accidentally overhears a conversation which in turn throws him into a race to save a kidnapped child. It's a dream of a role.

He's Phillip Hannon, an American living in self-imposed exile in London, where he writes by dictation, capturing his work on a reel to reel tape recorder for Bob, his assistant, to type up. The first words he speaks are rather telling, partly because they're minor revisions to a hit play he's

bringing from Broadway to the West End rather than anything new and partly because they reflect the bitterness that has eaten him since he became blind. “Sorry?,” he barks into his mike. “What have you been to be sorry about? You didn’t make the world and neither did I!”

When Jean Lennox promptly arrives from New York, he pours bitterness all over her too. She’s clearly an ex from her very first moment on screen even though she just as clearly doesn’t want to be, although Hollywood morals of the fifties forced the weakening of both characters by forcing what should have been a relationship between a boss and his secretary into an engagement. “And then it happened,” she explains to Bob. “He didn’t like having me around. So I was fired.” And thus Hannon becomes even more of an ass than he should have been.

Jean is played by Vera Miles, who is a soft spoken delight in this picture, which arrived at a crucial point in her career. Only a year earlier, she was a Miss Kansas playing the love interest in *Tarzan’s Hidden Jungle*, but then she gave a great performance in *Revenge*, the pilot episode of the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* television show. That prompted Hitchcock to cast her opposite Henry Fonda in *The Wrong Man*, later in 1956, then *Vertigo* (though she was replaced because of pregnancy by Kim Novak) and, of course, *Psycho*. She’d just starred with John Wayne in *The Searchers* before this picture and John Ford would later cast her between Wayne and Jimmy Stewart in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

She lives up to that promise immediately. When Bob asks if she’s a



friend of Mr Hannon's, she replies simply, "Well, I think of myself as one," a line that superbly explains their relationship at this time. When her former fiancé takes her onto the balcony to point out to her the sights of London, she deliberately looks only at him instead.

Of course, the script has to figure out some way for Hannon's bitterness to be somewhat abated, because we certainly don't want to watch him for ninety minutes like this, and the next scene sets that up beautifully. He heads over the road for a double scotch at the Eagle and to listen to the world that he can no longer see.

Initially that's just a gentleman playing a pinball machine, but then it's a pair of enticing voices within the Ladies Bar right behind him. A lady pleads not to be forced into a crime by her companion, who sounds rather like Peter Lorre trying to be the Godfather. His hearing enhanced by his loss of vision, Hannon nonetheless strains to hear this conversation and remember its dialogue, so that he can promptly record it after returning to his apartment, in turn so he can replay it later to the police. Context prompts him to believe that the woman was a nursemaid to nobility and she is being forced to get something from Mary to give to Evans on the upcoming 10th of the month. But what? Is this a robbery? The kidnapping of a child? "It's something," he says. "Something very wrong."

I'm going to pause for a moment to return to that concept of lavender marriage. The unnamed barmaid who serves Hannan is the wonderful Estelle Winwood, a stage actress who made few films over her long life



(she was the oldest actress in the Screen Actors Guild when she died in 1984 at 101). She was married four times and at least one was a lavender marriage, to the gay theatre director Guthrie McClintic, whose further lavender marriage of forty years to the lesbian stage actress Katharine Cornell is often cited as a prime example of the practice; theirs is the photo which illustrates the Wikipedia article on the subject. I usually cite Charles Laughton and Elsa Lanchester as an example, he being gay and she bisexual, and it springs to mind here also because I remember Winwood well as Lanchester's nurse in *Murder by Death*. Winwood was one of the so-called Four Riders of the Algonquin, with Eva Le Gallienne, Blyth Daly and Tallulah Bankhead, her best friend for decades. All of them were either lesbian or bisexual and some considered or joined lavender marriages.

Even though gay marriage has only recently been made legal in the United States by the Supreme Court, most of us are aware that gay people exist, probably because we know them and may even be related to them. It's hard to comprehend that people didn't actually know that Liberace was gay, for example, but that's because being gay was an underground concept at the time.

Back in the early years of the twentieth century, though, public opinion made it almost impossible to be both gay and maintain a prominent career in Hollywood, which was notably awkward for the many people who fit into both categories. Most maintained the latter by hiding the former and there was never a better way to hide homosexuality than marrying a member of the opposite sex.

Most outrageously, this was often done not through personal choice but because some studios placed morality clauses into the contracts of their stars, which prompted the downfall of some and the impetus for others to be forced into lavender marriages. Times have certainly changed; ladies aren't forced into separate rooms in pubs to drink any more, as they were in the Eagle!

Back to the film at hand, both the characters and the story have just leapt into motion. The police listen politely to Hannon's story but dismiss his interpretation of the conversation entirely, albeit more because he's a

dramatist than because of his blindness, as they argue that his very job description tasks him with imagining things. “Is that all there was, Mr. Hannon?” they ask.

And so, as tends to happen in such tales, he must become an amateur sleuth and solve the mystery himself. Crime fiction is full of unlikely detectives but what makes Hannon special is that his blindness doesn't merely hinder his ability to investigate, the very case itself provides the spark he's needed to come to terms with it. It also brings Jean firmly back into his life, because he connects the perfume the lady was wearing with what she used to wear when they were together. She soon becomes his right hand once more and explains to the police why it's important. “You see,” she tells them, “this is the first real thing that's brought him to life in a long time.”

In other words, this mystery provides him with both a constant reminder of his disability and a number of reasons to live his life as best he can anyway. There are points where he simply forgets to be bitter, wrapped up as he is in the hunt, and Johnson does well at suggesting that without ever making it overt. In many ways, he's playing a character who's playing a part but who's gradually losing connection to that part and becoming himself again. He even finds benefits to being blind, something he would not have considered possible even so recently at the beginning of the picture. “Oh, you people with eyes!” he tells Jean when she fails to hear or smell what he does. “You're so busy looking, you never



notice anything!”

Clearly, this script takes Hannon’s blindness seriously, not only as a gimmick but also as a means of deepening both his character and the mystery that he’s driven to solve. That’s very Hitchcockian and it’s yet another reminder of *Rear Window*, made only two years earlier, to which this often warrants comparison.

The screenplay was written by Nigel Balchin, a novelist before he ever became a screenwriter. At this point, two of his novels had been adapted to the screen and a third for the stage. One of them, *The Small Back Room*, which had popularised the term “back room boys”, had been filmed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. He didn’t write the source novel for this picture though, adapting one instead by Philip MacDonald, another novelist whose work had been frequently adapted to film, hardly surprising given that his father was a writer and his mother an actress. In fact, two of his novels had coincidentally been filmed by Michael Powell, which underlines a connection between MacDonald and Balchin. This was the fourteenth adaptation of a MacDonald work and the second of his novel, *The Nursemaid Who Disappeared*, also known as *Warrant for X*. This was easily the looser adaptation, given that it removes the detective who investigates the crime, Anthony Gethryn, and also renders the playwright blind, so this story would seem to be as much Balchin’s as MacDonald’s.

Beyond the script, the film adds other worthy elements. It was shot in CinemaScope, so it’s big and wide from the opening shots of the Thames,



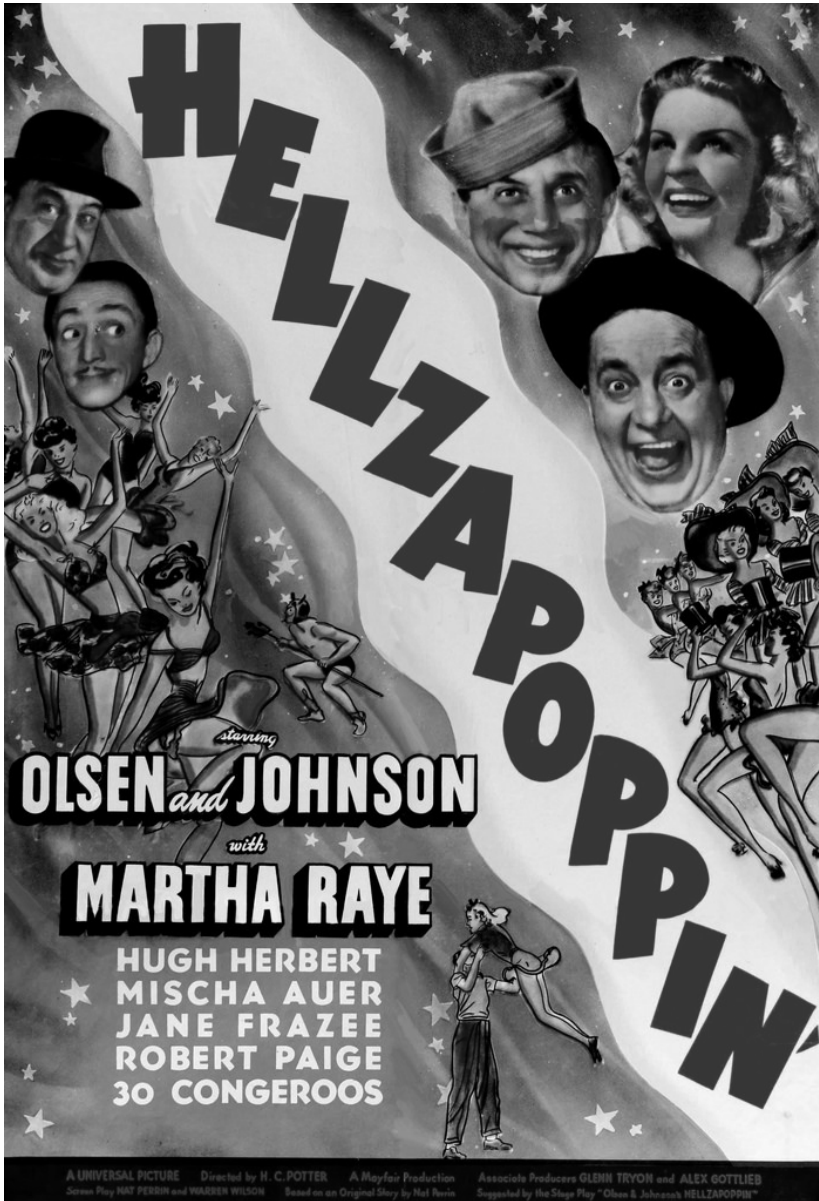
and it was shot by someone who knew how to put that format to good use. He's Milton R. Krasner, who had, two years prior, shot *Three Coins in a Fountain*, which won him the first Oscar awarded for cinematography in a widescreen film. It was shot in London, so the opening panoramas of the Thames were original location footage rather than spliced in material borrowed from a stock vault.

MacDonald was well known for writing visually, but Balchin, Krasner and director Henry Hathaway set up a number of highly impressive shots, including one where the blind playwright has been suckered into a partially demolished building and is about to walk off the edge of an upstairs room into nowhere. There's also clever use of the London fog, both visually and within the story, given that the very title comes from directions Hannan can give to someone with sight who's rendered just as blind as he is by the fog.

Generally, this is a solid thriller from an era of solid thrillers. It bears strong comparisons to the work of Alfred Hitchcock, not only *Rear Window*, which also centered around a crime believed only by one man with a disability, but others too. The downside is that it needed Hitch to ground it better. Balchin's script is capable and includes much that's praiseworthy but it relies on two things.

One is the twist, which I saw through immediately, albeit partly because I'd seen a more famous film that features the same twist (admittedly it didn't arrive for another year but was based on a hit play from 1953, in turn based on a famous short story from 1925; and no, I'm not telling you which one if you can't work it out from that convoluted history).

The other is the progression of discoveries, because we have to rely entirely on Hannan for these as they're not the sort we can figure out in advance. This isn't a mystery for us to solve along with the protagonists; it's a procedural where we watch the protagonists solve it and thrill to the cleverness of it all. As long as we're OK with those caveats, it works well, but if we're not, it may well seem like a problem.



Hellzapoppin' (1941)

reviewed on 27th August for actress Martha Raye

Director: H. C. Potter

Writers: Nat Perrin and Warren Wilson, based on an original story by Nat Perrin, suggested by the stage play, *Olsen & Johnson's Hellzapoppin*

Stars: Ole Olsen, Chic Johnson and Martha Raye

I knew that *Hellzapoppin'* had a reputation for being, shall we say, off the wall, but I wasn't prepared for how off the wall it actually was. I wonder how well prepared audiences of 1941 were, because this is so far ahead of its time that it took everyone else decades to catch up.

Sure, we can see some progression from the Marx Brothers, Busby Berkeley and vaudeville, not to mention the wacky world of cartoons, but this goes beyond them to remind of *The Goon Show*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *Blazing Saddles*, to pick on just three insanely influential titles from future eras that clearly owe a major debt of gratitude to Olsen and Johnson, who I'm now realising were much more than just another double act from the thirties, a sort of lesser Abbott and Costello, as I'd vaguely categorised them mentally. I've seen a little of their work before, like 1944's *Ghost Catchers*, and I was mildly impressed, but nothing so far had suggested the sheer insanity of *Hellzapoppin'*. This is because their brand of madness was actually hindered by film and best performed on stage, where they could imaginatively interact with the audience.

This was sourced from a stage revue, which, by all accounts, was more outrageous still than this film adaptation. It began in 1938 and was a huge hit; its 1,404 performances over three years made it the longest-running Broadway musical at the time and it went on the road too, initially during the original run, but again after it: twice in 1942 and again in 1949. Olsen and Johnson wrote the show, or as much of it as wasn't improvised on the

spot, and led the cast for much of its original run and for the *Hellzapoppin of 1949* tour. The cast of each version was fleshed out by a wild variety of vaudeville performers and the material was updated often in order to remain topical. Its irreverent nature is ably highlighted by the opening newsreel clips featuring a Yiddish Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini in blackface and then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt reciting some brand of gibberish. It continued on with what Celia Wren called a “smörgåsbord of explode-the-fourth-wall nuttiness”. Given what’s in this film, especially as it begins, I can buy that absolutely.

What I got from this film is that Olsen and Johnson, the only cast members to transfer over from the stage revue to the screen adaptation, never found a rule they didn’t want to break. The revue had clotheslines strung above the audience, which had a variety of stooges carefully planted to interact with the show, as that often left the stage; chorus girls danced with members of the audience or even sat in their laps.

Some signature gags made it into the film: a woman wanders around shouting, “Oscar!” while a man does likewise attempting to deliver a plant to “Mrs. Jones!”, a plant that continues to grow during the show. In the revue, it even continued on after the end of the show, because audience members leaving the venue found the man stuck in a full sized tree in the lobby. Obviously, that gag couldn’t be realistically transferred to film in full; neither could the buzzers that were fitted to random seats in what sounds suspiciously like what William Castle would call “Percepto” when exhibiting *The Tingler* two decades later in 1959.

Universal did impose a little structure onto the picture, at least once we get into the main thrust of it which starts around thirteen minutes in. So much happens in the prior time that I gave up taking notes, even though I type at 160 wpm, and tried to absorb the insanity instead. I replayed those thirteen minutes to my son, who wouldn’t dream of watching a 1941 musical even if he got paid to do it; he grinned his way through it and suggested that he wouldn’t mind actually seeing the movie sometime.

That’s how ahead of its time this stuff is. In fact, anyone who enjoyed the honest digs that *Deadpool* hurled at its own genre would recognise the

approach here, 75 years earlier. “It’s a picture about a picture about *Hellzapoppin*,” the on-screen director explains. “It’s a great script. Feel how much it weighs.” The stars aren’t impressed. “Listen, buddy. For three years we did *Hellzapoppin*’ on Broadway and that’s the way we want it on the screen.” The director has no intention of agreeing: “This is Hollywood. We change everything here. We got to.” The simple, unanswerable reply is, “Why?”

The layers aren’t merely deep, they’re Escher-esque.

The entire film starts with Shemp Howard as a projectionist called Louie who kicks off the film from his booth. We briefly watch him watch a glamorous musical number on his screen, before the staircase the dancers are descending folds in on itself and tumbles them all the way down to Hell behind the opening credits. Now we watch the surreal musical number of the title, with its hilariously telling lyrics: “Hellzapoppin’! Old Satan’s on a tear. Hellzapoppin’! They’re screaming eveywhere. See the inferno of vaudeville; anything can happen and it probably will!”

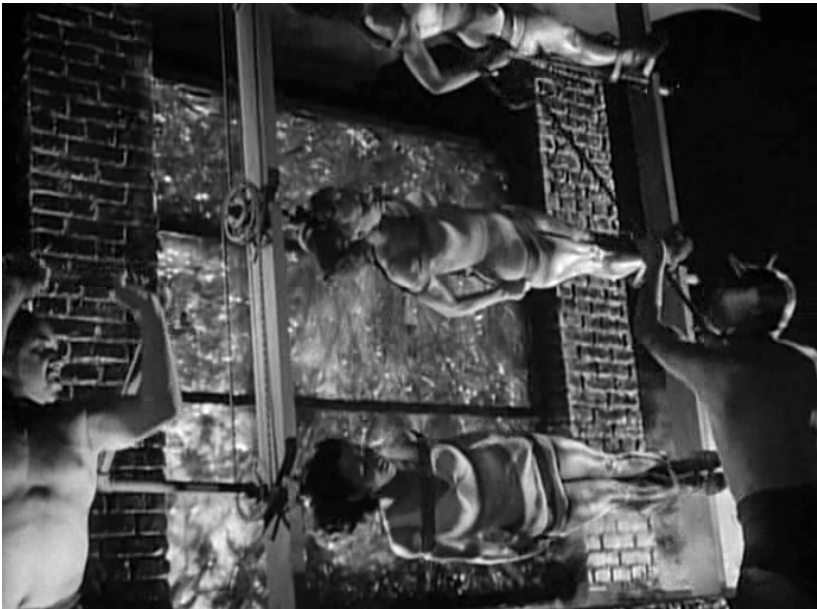
And so, into a wild landscape of acrobatic dancing devils tormenting



elegantly attired ladies and gentlemen who look like they might have just wandered on over from a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie to be jabbed with pitchforks, turned on spits or canned for future consumption, “our prize guests” show up by taxi. “That’s the first taxi driver who went straight where I told him to!” Ole Olsen mutters.

After burning up the taxi in a special effect, they ask Louie to rewind the picture so they can see that part again. “Don’t you know you can’t talk to me *and* the audience,” he tells them, but rewinds it anyway so they can redo the effect and transform the cab into a horse instead, with a tic-tac-toe board on its butt. Does anything here make sense?

Well, they then promptly walk off the set and argue with the director again. “You’ve got to have a love story,” he insists. Why? “Because every picture has one!” He wants the studio’s writer, in the recognisable form of Elisha Cook Jr., to write one in and, after walking through a variety of sets with instant costume changes but a consistent running conversation, they sit down to watch what the studio wants in a photograph that turns into a interactive video, eventually adding Olsen and Johnson into the frame.



They've been talking to characters in the photo, then overdubbing them with dialogue as if they're robots on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Now they're in the picture within a picture and we can finally maximise.

I adored those thirteen minutes of sheer cinematic genius and still have trouble believing that I'm watching something from 1941. It isn't just the age, but the Production Code. We've spent most of the time in Hell, with an army of devils torturing the young and beautiful, and we've experienced at least one casual murder, one casual suicide and one casual animal killing. Sure, they're all off-screen, but that's not the point. Now we're about to move onto mass theft, destruction of museum property and, eventually, rape, even if it's a woman ravishing a man. That still counts and it was rather subversive in the Production Code era. I'm shocked at how much Olsen and Johnson got into this movie, all while showing us how Universal wouldn't let them do what they want. It's hard to quantify how surreal it was watching this introductory sequence and, to only a slightly lesser degree, the rest of the picture, but I had an absolute blast doing it, again not something I tend to have while watching classic era musicals.

Of course, there are jokes, which come thick and fast, thicker and faster even than Mel Brooks delivered in *Blazing Saddles*. It's fair to say that a decent amount are obviously set up gags that we can see coming: the balloons, the cactus, the kitchen sink. Others are just plain awful, like the coat of arms. Some are neatly topical, like the sled they pass walking through an eskimo set with the word "Rosebud" painted on it. "I thought they burned that," comments Chic Johnson. Many are neatly self-deprecating. The man with that ever-growing plant interrupts the stars during his search for Mrs. Jones. "We're making a movie!" they protest. "That's a matter of opinion," he replies. The lady shouting for 'Oscar!' first appears as an autograph hunter, asking for Olsen and Johnson's, only to rudely snatch her autograph book back when she realises who they are. That suicide was of a cameraman trying to avoid the torment of making this very film. The edgier the humour, the more important it is to be aimed as much inward as outward.

Now, this hasn't sounded particularly much like a musical yet, the opening number being really just a theme tune, but we do get there in the end and, to get there, we have to leap into romance.

The romantic plot that Universal are so keen on introducing revolves around a simple love triangle, but it unfolds at a mansion in Long Island that's packed full of people for a Red Cross benefit. It's the Rand estate and the "disgustingly rich" and beautiful young Kitty Rand is at the heart of that love triangle.

One of her beaux is Jeff Hunter, a playwright who's staging a revue called *Broadway Bound* in her spacious backyard, with its stage the size of a Busby Berkeley set; she loves him and he loves her, but he won't marry her for money. "That's crazy," suggest our stars. "That's movies," insists the director.

The other is Woody Taylor, Jeff's best friend, who has the eye of Kitty's parents, perhaps because he's also disgustingly rich. I can't argue that this nod to convention doesn't hurt to ground at least some of the outrageous humour, but it also aids it in ways I didn't expect and that impressed me.

The actors in this love triangle are well cast.

Jane Frazee is a delightful young lady whose work here appears to be effortless. She had previously appeared in a host of musicals, occasionally with her sister Ruth with whom she'd been performing for many years. She had a busy 1941, beginning as the leading lady in Abbott and Costello's *Buck Privates* and ending here as the leading lady in an Olsen and Johnson movie. In between were *Sing Another Chorus*, *Angels with Broken Wings* and *Moonlight in Hawaii*, all musicals, as was *San Antonio Rose* with its rather unusual comedic double act of Shemp Howard and Lon Chaney Jr.

Lewis Howard plays Woody Taylor like an honest but dumb waste of space, which is appropriate for the story but unfortunate for his chances to do much. It's no surprise that Kitty ends up with Jeff Hunter, as Robert Paige is the epitome of the bland romantic hero that musical fans adored. He's rather like Allan Jones in a number of Marx Brothers pictures: a good looking prop with a good voice who couldn't steal a scene from the stars if he tried.

If only all those other films did what this one does with these beautiful people. As Kitty and Jeff share a suitably soporific number on the empty backyard stage, a note is plastered up on the screen over them: “If Stinky Miller is in the audience, go home now!” it reads and I have to say that I howled with laughter. After another message is ignored, they interrupt the song to reinforce it themselves, imploring the kid directly, as does Hugh Herbert, who pops around a theatre curtain. And, sure enough, Stinky Miller stands up in silhouette and walks out. I have enough trouble with classic musicals anyway, but I’m going to ache for a recurrence of this scene in every classic musical that I see from now on. More comedic manipulation of musical numbers ensues, but they’re livened up generally through most being sung by Martha Raye, who would have turned one hundred years old on 27th August. I haven’t seen many of her films, but I did enjoy Raye’s performance here as she provided a much needed bridge between the comedy and the songs.

Raye was a real character, born to vaudevillian parents who started her out in their own act at the age of three. She sang for orchestras and on



radio, eventually finding her way to film in 1934. Her feature debut two years later came alongside no less a name than Bing Crosby in *Rhythm on the Range* and, like Frazee, she came to this picture from a 1941 Abbott and Costello movie, this time *Keep 'em Flying*.

She was so well known that Warner Brothers caricatured her as a jazz singing donkey in a 1937 cartoon, *The Woods are Full of Cuckoos*. Her prominence was something that stayed throughout her career, helped by her relentless work for the U.S.O., which saw her often described as the female Bob Hope. My better half knew her best from a set of annoyingly omnipresent commercials for Polident denture cleanser, in which she played up her “Big Mouth” image.

In her private life, she was a conservative Republican and devout Methodist who even taught Sunday School classes, but she still managed to marry seven different people, divorcing six of them within just over two decades. Welcome to Hollywood!

She seems to have had a lot of fun here and the most memorable musical numbers are hers, especially *Watch the Birdie*, which sees her



pausing the picture at key moments during the song. Oddly, given that Jeff's words to her screen brother, Chic Johnson, when he sees her are, "Don't tell me you brought her?" she gets a good proportion of the singing time in his backyard revue.

Given that the wild situation comedy leads Olsen and Johnson to sabotage the show, under what are surely good intentions, that involves Raye singing while inhaling sneezing powder, being stuck to flypaper and even being chased by a man trying to read a pulp magazine in her moving spotlight. I have absolutely no idea how these apparently disconnected performances were supposed to gel together, but I enjoyed the sabotage, not only the bit where they nail the antebellum skirts of a bevy of beauties to the stage and they walk right out of them. Raye is even thrown into the audience at one point, after the introduction of tacks, only to be thrown back on by the Frankenstein's monster!

At the risk of letting this review keep going forever, there's much more here that's worthy of comment. As befits a show rooted in a vaudeville revue, there are a varied collection of talented folk doing impressive things. Some are actors, as you might expect for a film; I've mentioned Shemp Howard and Elisha Cook Jr., but Mischa Auer and Hugh Herbert get plenty of screen time too. The former is a real nobleman pretending to be a fake one for effect and he's the character who's surely raped by Martha Raye's. The latter plays a private detective for no reason I could work out, unless it was to give him a vague excuse to wear more disguises than can comfortably be imagined. Others are performers, such as the Olive Hatch Water Ballet, who put on a Busby Berkeley style show in the pool, and Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, credited as the Harlem Congeroot Dancers, who perform what appears to be an insanely dangerous dance routine to the accompaniment of Slim and Slam, both musicians and dancers but sadly having to pretend to be exuberant servants.

What I have to come back to most, however, is just how much Olsen and Johnson play with the traditional filmgoing experience. At one point, Shemp Howard's projectionist is trying to get it on with an usherette, only for her to bump the projector. Suddenly, the stars are separated on screen

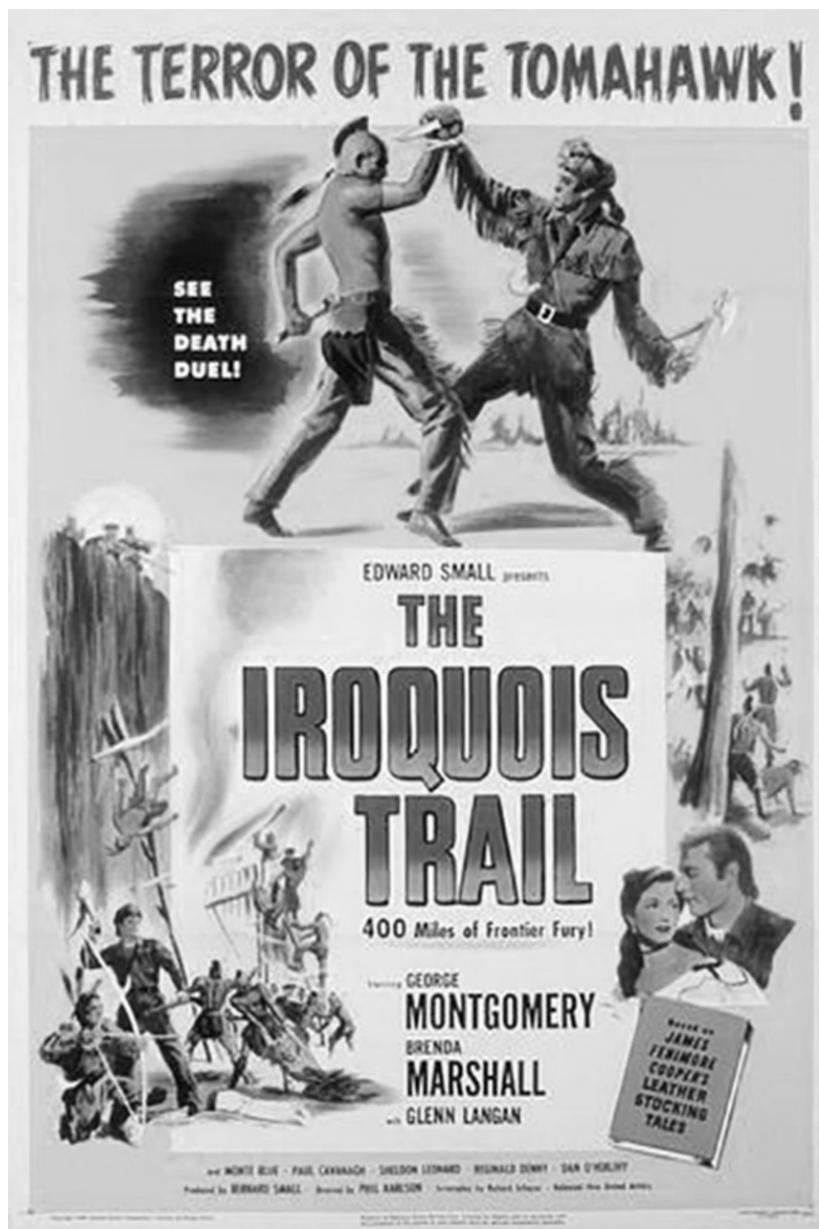
by the projector showing half of consecutive frames in a device I've only ever seen done in cartoons before; they even fix the problem themselves by reaching up and pulling the frame down, a move I might expect of Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck rather than a pair of comedians in a 1941 musical. Then they're upside down. Then the cavalry rides through as they're in a completely different picture, which magically interacts with them. "The big dope!" Olsen says of a native American with a rifle, who promptly changes his aim to shoot the star. I have to call out the visual effects of John P. Fulton for special praise, as many of them are seamless, including the zany extension of concepts that he had first explored in *The Invisible Man*.

To suggest that this film surprised me is an understatement. While I've seen many of these actors before, this was easily the most I've seen our birthday girl, Martha Raye, and I'm eager to explore how versatile she was in pictures as varied as *Never Say Die*, *The Phynx* and *Pufnstuf*. I'm also now highly aware just how much I've overlooked Olsen and Johnson's considerable contributions to thirties comedy. The gags aren't all as original as they sound, not only because of a host of cartoons but because of silent comedians like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton too; *Sherlock Jr.* especially came to mind while watching. However, I've never seen the patent lunacy of the Marx Brothers ratcheted up this high before and I'm intrigued as to how much this double act managed to get that over on the more inherently restrictive medium of film, as compared to the stage. I want to revisit *Ghost Catchers* and especially find *Crazy House*. IMDb credits might suggest that Olsen did little except co-write *You're in the Army Now*, but this film proves otherwise.

Now let's watch it again!

A Hundred in 2016





The Iroquois Trail (1950)

*reviewed on 27th August for actor George Montgomery
(who incidentally was married to 29th February's Dinah Shore)*

Director: Phil Karlson

Writer: Richard Schayer, loosely based on the *Leatherstocking Tales* novels by James Fenimore Cooper

Stars: George Montgomery and Brenda Marshall

Wikipedia may say that George Montgomery was born on 29th August, 1916, but his gravestone says the 27th, so I'll go by that. I've too few of his movies under my belt, but I wrote in my review of *Masterson of Kansas* that he was known not only for westerns but also for playing iconic characters in them.

In that film, directed by William Castle before his gimmick days in the horror genre, he was Bat Masterson, a legendary Sheriff of Dodge City. He also played Pat Garrett, one of the Ringo Gang and even the Lone Ranger in a serial made long before the TV show in 1938 (well, sort of). I focused instead on the year of 1950, in which he played a pair of famous trappers: he was the title character in *Davy Crockett, Indian Scout*, and here he played Hawkeye, the hero of James Fenimore Cooper's pentalogy that's generally known as the *Leatherstocking Tales*. While this film does follow the general sweep of the most famous of them, *The Last of the Mohicans*, it's far from a direct adaptation, not least because it changes most of the names and leaves out the title character entirely.

The novel was a historical romance, written in 1826 but set in 1757 during what North Americans tend to call the "French and Indian War" but Europeans the "Seven Years' War". Most of it is spent deep in the wilderness of upper New York.

The French, under the command of Gen. Montcalm, are besieging the

British garrison of Fort William Henry on Lake George, but the daughters of Col. George Munro, the fort's commander, are on their way to him, accompanied by a relief column led by Maj. Duncan Heywood. Both sides in this conflict are reliant on Native American allies but Magua, the guide for those reinforcements, is a traitor who's working for the French and he tries to lead the British into danger. Fortunately, they meet up with the frontiersman, Natty Bumppo; his travelling companion, Chingachgook; and the latter's son, Uncas, the titular last of the Mohicans. From there, the novel moves through deception and disguise, intrigue and action, battle and massacre. It's one of the most popular and enduring works of American fiction.

The film retains little but the sweep of it all. We're still in the Seven Years' War and Britain is still battling France. Montcalm is still in charge of the French but, while he is planning to attack Fort Williams, he hasn't done so yet and the focus is initially on another fort at Crown Point. Renaming Fort William Henry to Fort Williams isn't the only name change on offer. It's Col. Eric Thorne in charge there now and he only has one daughter travelling with the men, who's Marion rather than Cora or Alice. Maj. Heywood is now Capt. Jonathan West, who has loved her for years; Magua is now Ogane, but is otherwise just as treacherous; and Natty Bumppo, the hero of the story, becomes Nat Cutler, even if he's still called Hawkeye by the Native Americans. His companions shrink down from two to one, Uncas vanishing entirely and Chingachgook now Sagamore, presumably because it was easier for actors to pronounce; he's also now a Delaware rather than a Mohican. The film's title, at least, is fair because the consistent road north is the Iroquois Trail.

Those familiar with the source material will see it changed so much that it's almost a different story, while those who haven't read it probably won't care, as it will play out just like any other historical adventure they've seen from Hollywood. We often laugh today at the historical inaccuracies of Hollywood, as epitomised by Peter Traquair's famous line about Mel Gibson's William Wallace being a "wild and hairy highlander painted with woad (1,000 years too late) running amok in a tartan kilt (500

years too early)”, but this is a time honoured problem. Only eight years before this film, George M. Cohan attended the premiere of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, a biopic of his life and is reported to have said, “Good picture. Who’s it about?” I’m sure many who saw *The Iroquois Trail* in theatres had read *The Last of the Mohicans* in school but I wonder how many connected it to the film, especially as the credits cite *Leatherstocking Tales* as the source rather than any particular one of the five novels that that title includes.

I found it an odd mixture of ambition and laziness. The canvas is painted much more broadly than the Hollywood norm, perhaps as a consequence of Hawkeye hardly being a traditional hero.

Natty Bumppo in the books was usually in the thick of it but rarely as a real lead. Critic Georg Lukacs compared him to “the middling characters of Sir Walter Scott” in that he’s a mechanism for Cooper to explore history without actually writing it. Modern audiences might think instead of R2D2, who is there for every key moment in the entire *Star Wars* universe, even though he’s hardly a romantic lead driving traditional action. George Lucas famously borrowed that approach from Kurosawa and *The Hidden*



Fortress, but I'm sure someone has written a thesis on how far back it goes, perhaps all the way to Shakespeare.

What it means here is that we see the war from both the macro scale (disconnected generals sending dispatches that take days to arrive) and the micro scale (as seen through Nat Cutler being our avatar, this film's personification of the common man) but not in between.

If that approach suggests a worthy story that we can get our teeth into, I have to disappoint. While we do feel like we're caught up in the sweep of history during a time in which characters feel that history is being made around them, it's mostly just a backdrop for the Hollywood shenanigans you might expect: a traditionally iconic leading man and the inevitable love triangle.

I liked Montgomery a lot here, but he's going for that. He's only half playing the actual character of Hawkeye and half playing a matinee idol playing Hawkeye instead. His boyish good looks and easy going charm reminded me of Elvis Presley enough that I half expected him to break out into song, but a number of other names came to mind too. His Hawkeye is



a swashbuckling hero who is a little too laid back to buckle any swashes, somewhat like Charlie Sheen playing Errol Flynn, but there is a serious undercurrent that shows up occasionally reminding of a young Lawrence Tierney and that sense of danger that he so ably carried with him.

From the beginning, though, he's a man apart. Cutler is a frontiersman who's been adopted by the Delaware tribe, though he still has a periodic hankering to come home to see mama in her cabin in the woods.

By sheer coincidence, his younger brother, Tom Cutler, who had signed up with the British army since he saw Nat last, is the recruit chosen to carry an important dispatch north. Gen. Johnson back in Albany wants Col. Thorne at Fort Williams to reinforce Crown Point because it's a clear target for the French. By sheer coincidence, this ride takes Tom right by his mother's cabin and he's just popping over the field to see her when one of his companions shoots him in the back and retrieves the dispatch. By, you've guessed it, sheer coincidence, Nat finds Tom's body and brings him home to the cabin, where he lives just long enough to set the spark of the story in motion. The British think Tom's a traitor, his own killer setting him up for that fall, so it's up to Nat to both seek revenge and save the day for the good guys.

Given that he's a talented frontiersman, he soon tracks Tom's killer down and presses him for information but he's forced to kill him and escape the scene on a stolen British officer's horse. Now the British have a thousand dollars on his head, dead or alive, and he has to sign up with them to follow Ogame, the only lead he has left. He and Sagamore seize an opportunity to ride north alongside Capt. West and Marion Thorne, not to help out the British or fight in their war but to see what Ogame is up to. The fact that those two separate goals end up in alignment is mere coincidence from his perspective.

Of course, he ends up saving the lives of the other leads. Of course, he scuppers Ogame's plans on more than one occasion. Of course, his disobeying of orders prompts the British to listen to the trusted Ogame over him. As we head towards the famous massacre, the script becomes even more predictable and it's both easy to see exactly where we're going

and easy to follow Hawkeye into such predictability with relish.

Brenda Marshall plays Marion Thorne in her final film role, only a decade after her career began. She started in 1939 with an uncredited role as a secretary in *Blackwell's Island*, moved up to female lead for *Espionage Agent* and *The Man Who Talked Too Much*, then firmly established herself as a romantic lead in *The Sea Hawk*, playing opposite Errol Flynn in one of the all time greats of historical adventure. This would surely have seemed like familiar territory, even separated by so many degrees of latitude, and she proves able to do more than I expected her to get away with. While she is absolutely a damsel in distress, literally being fought over by two strong men ("Mine!" proclaims Ogane, pounding his chest in front of four Huron warriors), she does try to avoid the stereotype by fighting back when attacked and even reloading for Hawkeye during one gun battle, because he's busy rowing a kayak at the time. I appreciated Marshall's attempts to give Marion actual value but this role is still beneath her.

If Marshall couldn't do much with Marion as she's a weak character, Glenn Langan does less as Capt. Jonathan West because he's just another British officer and he just does what a thousand other actors would have done in his shoes. He isn't bad, but he's unable to do anything memorable. That's really left for the Native American roles, because this was 1950 and Hollywood was still as racist in its casting decisions as the British are to the "colonials" during the majority of this film.

There were Native American actors in classic Hollywood, just as there were Asian actors and actors of colour, but that didn't stop the studios from relegating their talent to the lower characters on the credits list and giving white actors the bigger parts. Filmgoers are usually horrified nowadays by the idea of white actors arrayed in blackface, but seem surprised by similar concepts like yellowface and redface, which is personified here by a horrendous showing by Sheldon Leonard as Ogane. Monte Blue, on the other hand, is oddly decent as Sagamore.

I've seen Leonard in other pictures and enjoyed his work, but then the parts I've seen him in were more suited to his middle class New York Jewish upbringing. He played a lot of thugs and heavies in forties crime

series, including the *Thin Man*, *Falcon* and *Joe Palooka* series, but he also got odd parts in classics like *To Have and Have Not* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. I don't remember that he ever played a role as inappropriate as this one, but he was cast in it and he certainly gave it a shot. I don't even blame him because he's memorable in his portrayal, but he should never have been cast as a Native American. Ironically, Jay Silverheels had just begun to break the mould in popular culture as the first genuine Native American star, even if it was by playing the Lone Ranger's stereotypical sidekick, Tonto. It doesn't help that whenever Ogane goes back to his tribe, we watch him talk to them but, after he's fired them up into a frenzy, we cut to overt stock footage of whoopin' and hollerin'. This and poor rear projection shots hurt the film.

Monte Blue does better as Sagamore but that's mostly because he was more appropriate for the role. He started in Hollywood back in the teens and worked as an extra or stuntman in early films as important as *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*. He grew to play romantic leads opposite many of the leading ladies of the day, like Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Gloria



Swanson and Clara Bow. He was memorable in *Orphans of the Storm* and *White Shadows in the South Seas*, amongst a long list of credits. By this point in his career, he'd made over two hundred and fifty movies, which span the map of genres and include titles as prominent as *Dodge City*, *The Mask of Dimitrios* and *Key Largo*, but he was increasingly cast in westerns.

All that I knew, but what I didn't realise until now was that Monte Blue was really Gerard Montgomery Bluefeather, at least a quarter Native American, given that his father was half French and half Cherokee or Osage. Monte Blue brought a grounding, patience and tolerance to this picture that was sorely needed.

The film begins with routine setup, characters and actions slotting together like jigsaw pieces, but when Nat Cutler joins the story by discovering his brother, Sgt. Tom Cutler, shot by traitors, it gains some power and depth. We're treated to action and intrigue and betrayal, all the component parts that we might expect from an adaptation, however loose, of James Fenimore Cooper. Hawkeye has to play along with the war to wreak revenge on the unknown man behind his brother's death and, as



poorly as he takes orders, I enjoyed that process as much as I did the performance of George Montgomery.

If the war is the background and Blue the grounding, then surely Montgomery is the heart of the picture. He's both part of the story and apart from it, hanging around only as long as his story and ours coincide but doing so with a charm that is difficult to ignore. He's a quintessential Hollywood movie star cast for his matinee idol looks, but even if he's performing rather than acting, he's still well worth watching.

Oddly, his greatest skill may not have been either. He worked in wood as boy and put his talents to good use later, initially building furniture for himself, then for friends and eventually as a cabinet-making business with twenty craftsmen on his payroll. He ran that for forty years, expanding in directions as diverse as house building and bronze sculpture. His wife of twenty years, Dinah Shore, stands with their children in bronze at the Mission Hills Country Club in Rancho Mirage, California. His own statue is back home in Plentywood, Montana.



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Screenplay by **ELWOOD ULMAN** and **ROBERT KAUFMAN**
Produced by **JAMES H. NICHOLSON**
and **SAMUEL Z. ARKOFF**
Co-producer **ANTHONY CARRAS**

IN PANAVISION® AND PATHECOLOR

Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine **(1965)**

reviewed on 14th September for producer James H. Nicholson

Director: Norman Taurog

Writer: Elwood Ullman and Robert Kaufman, from a story by James Hartford

Stars: Vincent Price, Frankie Avalon, Dwayne Hickman, Susan Hart, Jack Mullaney and Fred Clark

In high school, he joined a science fiction fan club alongside Forrest J. Ackerman, with whom he produced a fanzine centred on the fantasy genre. After graduation, he managed a pair of movie theatres in Omaha, Nebraska until being made redundant when the chain which owned them went out of business, but he moved onto run revival houses in Los Angeles. He joined Realart Pictures, where he was tasked with inventing advertising campaigns for re-releases of old movies. A threatened lawsuit from Alex Gordon about similar titles led to a meeting with Gordon's lawyer, Samuel Z. Arkoff. They soon became friends and, later, business partners in a distribution venture they initially called American Releasing Corporation but then renamed to American International Pictures. Arkoff handled the business end, while he handled the creative angles. Often he would conjure up entire ad campaigns, with titles and poster art in place, even before scripts were written. He was James H. Nicholson and he would have been a hundred years old on 14th September.

A.I.P. released low budget indie movies, often capitalising on new youth trends and packaged in double bills for the drive-in market. Their first film was *The Fast and the Furious* in 1955, starring John Ireland, who also co-directed; it was produced and co-written by Roger Corman. It earned a huge \$250,000 in box office receipts against a \$50,000 budget and the new

company was off and running.

The average fan of exploitation cinema will have seen a whole bunch of A.I.P. movies in a whole bunch of genres: not merely the usual sci-fi and horror pictures but also juvenile delinquent movies, rock 'n' roll movies, biker movies, beach movies and hippie movies. They ran the gamut, whatever would sell in a particular month.

I chose *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* to celebrate Nicholson's centennial, partly because I hadn't seen it before but partly because it seemed to be the quintessential A.I.P. picture. At heart, it's what's called a spy-fi movie, mixing up the spy genre with sci-fi like, say, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, but it's also populated by a slew of regulars from the beach movies and stars Vincent Price from Corman's Poe pictures.

As such, it's not going to be to everyone's taste. It's dumb, it's ridiculous and it's unrealistic to the extreme. It's culturally attuned to its time, so that it appears today less like a film and more like a cinematic time capsule. It's so politically incorrect that audiences today would be shocked at its viewpoints. And it's not even a good movie whatever criteria you choose to judge it by, except that the presence of Vincent Price is automatically a plus because he would be magnetic even if he was reading the back of a cereal box.

It was the most expensive A.I.P. picture at the time, the first to cost over a million dollars to make, but it plays just like the others so the extra money wasn't well spent. It has been argued, by some of those involved, that it would have been better had the original plan been adhered to, namely to make it a camp musical. "It could have been fun," said Price, "but they cut all the music out." Susan Hart said that removing Price singing about the bikini machine "took the explanation and the meat out of that picture."

Of course, Jim Nicholson, who also co-wrote the film under the pseudonym of James Hartford, was far more interested at the time in showcasing Hart. Her first major role in a feature had come the year before, when she appeared opposite Tab Hunter in *Ride the Wild Surf*, and when Nicholson saw rushes from that picture, he promptly snapped her

up for an A.I.P. contract. Shortly thereafter, he snapped her up for a marriage license too and James Jr., now a composer in New York, was born in 1965.

I have to say that Hart, who appears early and often, looks amazing for someone who had given birth that year, and it's easily her movie until Vincent Price arrives. Never mind that we've seen just as much of Frankie Avalon, half of A.I.P.'s pair of beach movie stars (the other, Annette Funicello has a neat cameo locked in a pair of stocks), it's Susan Hart that we're watching. Of course, she has the advantage of being a bulletproof and car-proof beauty in a gold bikini (worn under a raincoat) who flirts outrageously in a southern accent. Frankie who?

Avalon is Craig Gamble, apparently a spy for Secret Intelligence Command, but a completely inept one. D. J. Pevney, Gamble's boss and uncle Donald, calls him 00½ to begin with but downgrades that during the movie to 00¼ because the boy is accident prone and he ends up on the worse side of those accidents. He won't even let the poor spy carry a gun!

The obvious comparison is to Maxwell Smart, but given that *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine* was shot in the summer of 1965 and *Get Smart* didn't launch until 18th September, I'll guess that they each combined James Bond and Inspector Clouseau independently rather than directly influence each other.

Avalon isn't a bad bad spy but he seems to be playing someone else; in



the beach movies, he owned the role and anyone else trying the formula elsewhere seemed to be playing him. He's in this film because Diane, that bulletproof beauty in a gold bikini, seems eager to chat him up and get him home, something he's hardly going to argue with, given that his date walked out on him for being cheap. Unfortunately for him, it's all a case of mistaken identity. Diane is really a robot working for the mad genius, Dr. Goldfoot, who has just tuned in to discover that he isn't watching #11 roll around the floor with Todd Armstrong, the world's most eligible bachelor. "Eye on you!" Vincent Price tells his assistant, inevitably named Igor, "You're an idiot!"

Beyond this being a magic line that I should program my alarm clock to use, it marks Price truly taking ownership of the film. Sure, Susan Holt is delightful as Diane, changing accent at the drop of a hat. Sure, there are there are also similarly clad beauties #1 to #9 to feast our eyes upon. Sure, the sets are gloriously familiar, all decked out with old dark house gimmicks and spy-fi gadgetry, including what looks rather like the pit and the pendulum from *The Pit and the Pendulum*. But all this is subservient to



Mr. Price, who stalks his underground lair in gold slippers and smoking jacket, wringing his hands, hurling out cheap gags and telling Igor to shut up. He's what keeps us watching.

That's not to say that those robot girls in gold bikinis aren't spectacular. They're a suitably diverse lot, which in 1965 means a bevy of white beauties with different coloured hair, plus a token black girl (Issa Arnal) and a token Asian (China Lee). Most of them were regulars in the beach movies and didn't go on to long careers outside the genre, the notable exception being Deanna Lund, soon to become famous as Valerie on *Land of the Giants*.

Three of them were *Playboy* Playmates of the Month: Marianna Gaba in September 1959, two years after she became Miss Illinois; China Lee in August 1964, becoming in the process the first Asian-American Playmate; and Sue Williams, who was the first Playmate to be under five feet tall and the first to get breast implants, though apparently not the first to commit suicide, as has been frequently reported. It has to be said that Gaba was fluent in three languages and Salli Sachse earned a masters degree in psychology, but this is 1965 and they were hired to look cute in gold bikinis. That's it.

Oh, and three of them are related to Jim Nicholson. Beyond Susan Hart, his new wife and the mother of his son, at the time only a few months old, there are also Laura Nicholson and Luree Holmes, his grown-up daughters by his first wife, Sylvia. Luree was less than a year younger than her new mother-in-law; Hart's first role in an A.I.P. movie was in the very same film, 1964's *Pajama Party*, in which Luree's daughter appeared as a topless baby model. That makes Joi Holmes, Nicholson's granddaughter, older than James Nicholson Jr., his eldest son. Boy, those family get togethers must have been a blast! I wonder how long they continued after Nicholson died of a brain tumour in 1972.

A.I.P. certainly continued on for a few years before his partner, Sam Arkoff got bored with the movie business and sold his stake to Filmways for \$4.3m. I've documented the shenanigans that went on with the rights to their pictures in my review of *Naked Paradise*, a Corman film that Hart

now owns and apparently refuses to release.

But back to *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine*, a title that might seem unwieldy until you hear the incredibly catchy theme song by no less a recording sensation than the Supremes, still with Diana Ross in 1965, as it will stick in your head and prompt you to start singing it out loud at random moments. I'm doing it right now.

The story starts out relatively focused, but it gradually veers out of control, into what can only be described as slapstick comedy territory. By the time we end up in a substantial chase scene through San Francisco in what seems like every mode of transport known to mankind, usually accompanied by horrendous rear-projection, I was half expecting the Keystone Kops to join in.

It's hard to pin down what goes wrong because there's so much going on and so much of it makes us laugh and roll our eyes at the same time. The chase would have impressed me a lot more if I hadn't been reeling from the motion sickness induced by the script screaming back and forth like a cat that's overdosed on catnip.

Price is the traditional lead, as mad scientist Dr. Goldfoot, who's attempting to get rich by using robots to seduce the wealthy into marriage and the subsequent signing over of all their assets. These are goldiggers in gold bikinis and rather blatant ones at that! Diane lands Todd easily enough but won't even sleep with him on their wedding night until he signs over the stocks she stole out of his safe. The word of the day is "pre-nup", friends.

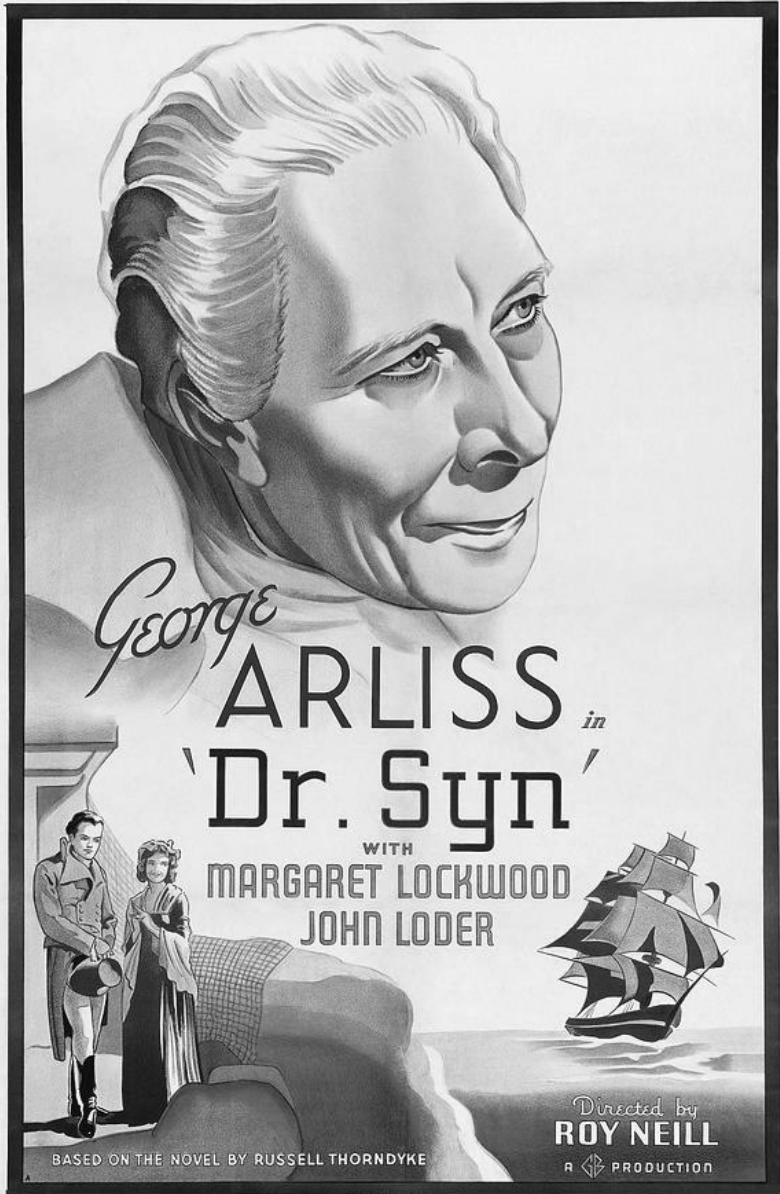
While Dwayne Hickman is highly billed as Todd, Avalon is the real supporting character, playing the inept spy, Craig Gamble, in a mostly unfunny secondary plot that only serves to undo much of Price's deliciously camp evil. Fred Clark has far more talent than is shown here as nothing but the victim of Frankie Avalon's unwitting idiocy.

You might think that this would be easy enough to follow, but the scriptwriters focus so much on misogynism and in-jokes that they almost become a plot of their own. Did anyone really notice that Avalon and Hickman played the same roles in *Ski Party* a year earlier, merely reversed?

Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Machine seemed to be a timely release, justifying a new high for A.I.P. budgets, riffing on 1964's *Goldfinger* and many of the company's successful series: the Poe movies and the beach movies, many of which featured very similar cast and crew. However, for some reason, it was unable to find the audience it sought in its home territory, though it did find a surprising new one in Italy, where it was a huge hit.

That prompted the sequel, *Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bombs*, to be shot in Italy, with Italian stars and an Italian director to back up the returning Vincent Price. That director was Mario Bava, whose work was redone for the English language release; given that his next film was the glorious spy-fi romp, *Danger: Diabolik*, A.I.P. clearly lost out. The stars are Franco Franchi and Ciccio Ingrassia, a pair of comedians who had already spoofed *Goldfinger* themselves, in 1965's *Goldfinger*. Even as a big fan of Mario Bava, I'm not feeling the need to follow this up with that. I'll just sing the theme tune to myself again instead.





George

ARLISS *in*
'Dr. Syn'

WITH
MARGARET LOCKWOOD
JOHN LODER

Directed by
ROY NEILL
A  PRODUCTION

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY RUSSELL THORNDYKE

Doctor Syn (1937)

reviewed on 15th September for actress Margaret Lockwood

Director: Roy William Neill

Writer: Roger Burford, from the novel by Russell Thorndike, with additional dialogue by Michael Hogan

Stars: George Arliss, Margaret Lockwood and John Loder

Alfred Hitchcock was hardly one to heap praise on his actors, whether or not his famous quote about actors being cattle was ever spoken or not. However, after working with Margaret Lockwood on *The Lady Vanishes*, he was highly complimentary of her talents.

“She has an undoubted gift in expressing her beauty in terms of emotion,” he told the press, “which is exceptionally well suited to the camera. Allied to this is the fact that she photographs more than normally easily, and has an extraordinary insight to get the feel of her lines, to live within them, so to speak, as long as the duration of the picture lasts.”

He was optimistic about her future as well, albeit in a strangely contradictory fashion: “It is not too much to expect,” he said, “that in Margaret Lockwood the British picture industry has a possibility of developing a star of hitherto un-anticipated possibilities.” How an un-anticipated possibility could be thus anticipated, I have no idea but I’m not going to argue with the master, especially on what would have been Lockwood’s hundredth birthday, 15th September.

To celebrate her career on such an auspicious day, I selected the first screen adaptation of Russell Thorndike’s stories of the Kentish smuggler called *Doctor Syn*, released in 1937 by the British production company, Gainsborough Pictures.

Doctor Syn apparently enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in the thirties, the original novel of 1915, *Doctor Syn: A Tale of the Romney Marsh*, starting to generate sequels: two in 1935 and another in 1936, with three

more following this film version for a total of seven by 1944.

I picked it in part because it was a major stepping stone for Lockwood, who stepped in when Anna Lee dropped out and earned a three year contract with Gainsborough for her troubles, but also because it's the last movie role for the fascinating actor, George Arliss, who was the first Briton to win an Academy Award and the first actor from anywhere to win for portraying a real person, Benjamin Disraeli. I'd like to see a lot more Arliss movies than I have, but two have especially remained with me over time for his performances in them: *The Green Goddess* and *The Millionaire*. He's memorable here too.

Some might see this story as a mystery, but they'll be disappointed because it's pretty clear from moment one what's going on. It's 1800 and the very first thing we see in Dymchurch is the gravestone of Captain Nathaniel Clegg, pirate, who was hanged at Rye. We pan up and jump into the church above it to discover a packed house with an eager warden taking collection. Imogene Clegg, the lovely young beauty played by Lockwood, is batting her eyelashes at Denis Cobtree across the aisle and J. Mipps, stone mason and coffin maker, is watching the surrounding area with a telescope from the bell tower. When he spies a detachment of revenue agents from the Royal Navy on their way, he rushes down to warn Dr. Syn, the local parson, who's about to begin his sermon.

The first thing that we wonder as we get underway is why everything seems to be about Captain Clegg when the movie's title is *Doctor Syn* and the answer we give ourselves is the obvious one. When Hammer remade this in 1962 they called it *Captain Clegg*, an honest enough approach, even if they renamed Dr. Syn to Pastor Bliss. Of course, Disney's version a year later was *The Scarecrow of Romney Marsh*, retitled *Dr. Syn, Alias the Scarecrow* in Great Britain.

It's pretty clear that Dymchurch is a hotbed of smugglers. While we never actually see any smuggling, we certainly see the goods that they've been smuggling and we watch the smugglers talking over them too, about whether to dump all this fancy French liquor into the sea or run the risk of being rumbled by the revenue agent, Capt. Howard Collyer, and hanged.

Nobody hides behind masks; we know who these people are and we watch them move through their secret passages and run rings around the investigators. No, this isn't a mystery, it's more like the origin story of a folk hero. Dr. Syn explains that half the population of Dymchurch was sick and poor when he arrived and began the organised smuggling; now there are neither and there's even a new schoolhouse to boot. If anything is clearer than that Dymchurch is ripe with smugglers, it's that people are pretty happy about its effects, but the continuation of those effects is placed into jeopardy by the extra man that Collyer brings along with his sailors.

He's generally referred to as a mulatto, though Dr. Syn, hardly politically correct for all his beneficent aura, calls him "your yellow man" at one point in proceedings. He's played by Meinhart Maur, a Hungarian actor active in Jewish theatre, who moved to England to escape the Nazi menace rising in Germany in the early thirties.

This is hardly a great opportunity for him to demonstrate his command of the English language, as his character had his tongue ripped out



immediately before the film begins. We join it as he's being tied to a tree on a South Sea island and left to die, the sign above his head declaring that this is what happens to those who betray Captain Clegg.

For him to arrive in Dymchurch with the revenue agents is the one thing that really worries Dr. Syn, who naturally recognises him, as he's really... no, I'm not going to give that spoiler even though it's so obvious that anyone who misses it surely has to be kidding. Maur's performance reminds of George "The Animal" Steele and Tor Johnson. I presume he could act circles around both of them but he's unable to do that in this film, given the restrictive material that he's given.

If the stirring up of a smuggling town by revenue agents and the real risk of exposure of Dr. Syn's former life isn't enough, we get a few subplots to keep this 78 minute feature brisk.

Imogene, the daughter of a notorious pirate (not that she is at all aware of it) and Denis, the son of Sir Anthony Cobtree, the local squire, are madly in love but they're clearly from different classes so their future isn't certain. Meanwhile, the aptly-named Samuel Rash, local schoolmaster, is



madly in love with Imogene; he's ready to have their banns read in church, even though she can't bear him.

In fact, Rash isn't too popular with anyone, it seems. He butts heads with Dr. Syn on how to keep Collyer and his men away from their goods. One of his students, the unfortunately named Jerry Jerk, clearly hates him with a passion and that leads to both tension and hilarity later on. When the film bogs down in the middle, it's Graham Moffatt who picks it back up again as Jerry. Most of his films were with Will Hay, playing the regular character of Albert Brown, but this is a welcome exception.

However, Moffatt is just one of the actors who infuses this film with character. He may be too old and too big to be particularly believable as one of Mr. Rash's students but he's great fun, even when he's not having conversations with himself. "Am I a liar?" he asks himself for Dr. Syn late in the film. "Sometimes. But not now." He comes across like a too tall hobbit and I adored him.

Muriel George plays Mrs. Waggetts, Jerry and Imogene's boss at the Ship Inn, and she plays her so believably that I recognised the character in a dozen people I grew up with, even though I was born on the other side of the Thames. She doesn't take lip from anyone, whether it be the kids working for her or the naval captain who's searching her pub from top to bottom for illicit liquor.

And then there's Wilson Coleman, who surely plays the most unfortunately named character in a movie that includes sinful Dr. Syn, rash Mr. Rash and, well, Jerry Jerk. The latter is tasked with shouting "Dr. Pepper! Dr. Pepper!" as he follows him through the marshes at night but that's only hilarious through hindsight.

There's much to enjoy here, even if the mystery isn't in the least bit mysterious. It played to me as a quintessential slice of whatever we might call the British equivalent of Americana. I don't know if there's a word for such a thing, but this is so British through and through that it's easy to see why Talbot Rothwell parodied it so capably in *Carry On Dick*, one of the better episodes in a series that speared British organisations, institutions and traditions for decades. We'll return to that series later in the book

with *Carry On... Up the Khyber*.

I knew that the title of *Carry On Dick*, inevitable double entendre aside, referred to highwayman Dick Turpin, another inappropriate British folk hero, but its story is clearly hijacked from *Dr. Syn*. Sid James just plays a highwayman who happens to be masquerading as a parson rather than a... no, I still won't spoil the obvious reveal. I'll let Capt. Collyer do that when the time is right, because thankfully Roy Emerton portrays a jovial captain who isn't entirely as dumb as he makes himself out to be. He could easily have played this like the usual inept authority figure but he's thankfully much more worthy, even if he's led a merry chase for most of the film.

Everything here felt like home to me, with the British character emanating from the good folk and the bad. There's great hospitality at the squire's mansion, especially to the drunken doctor. There's a thriving inn in the middle of town because everything revolves around it as much as the church. There's organised sticking it to the tax man, which we accept because it's generally used for the benefit of the people. The smugglers use secret passages, pretend to be marsh phantoms and switch signs



around in what should feel dangerous but really feels like jolly good fun. Even the bosun's bunions are somehow traditional.

And, of course, young love surely makes any heart feel like it's home. Margaret Lockwood and John Loder could have been given much more substance here but they're both enjoyable to watch and at least the former gets more to do towards the end of the movie than in the build-up to it.

At the end of the day, we can't avoid the fact that above, behind and on top of absolutely everything in the town of Dymchurch is the title character, played by George Arliss.

I've been fascinated by Arliss ever since I saw *The Millionaire*, a 1931 pre-code that I watched for Jimmy Cagney but left as a fan of George Arliss. He's an odd duck who doesn't quite seem real. His head is too big for his body, which sometimes makes him appear to be a walking caricature, but we only laugh with him when he wants us to and we never laugh at him. He's relentlessly calm for all but a couple of brief moments, even when things aren't going his way. When he does get upset, his maid is truly shocked; "I've never seen you like this before!" she cries. He underplays



his role for most of the film's running time, letting others act around him and take the spotlight throughout. Yet we still can't stop watching him, because there's a presence to him that's impossible to miss. He's always the most important person in the shot, whatever the scene happens to be and whatever he happens to be doing in it. As a man with a great number of secrets, he's somehow the one who sits there and listens while others sit there and chatter, but however quiet he gets and however close Capt. Collyer's investigation gets, we never believe that he's not in charge of the situation with a backup plan for his backup plan.

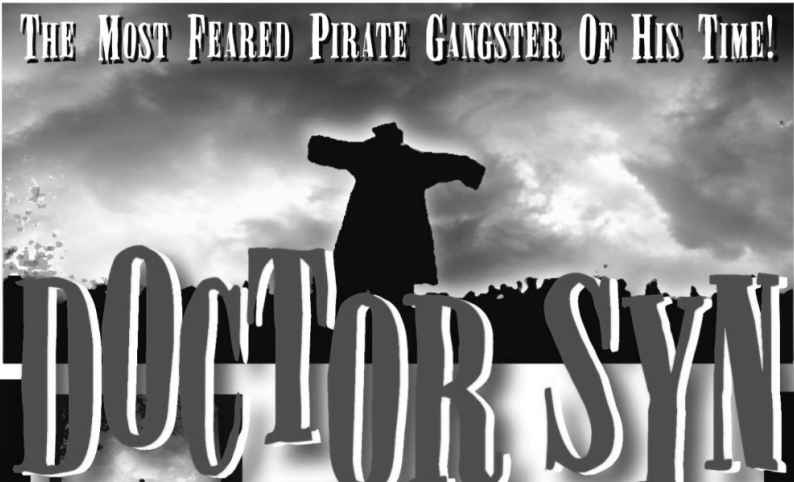






I like that this film simultaneously marked the end of one career and the ascendance of another.

Arliss had made 25 films over 17 years, playing an impressive array of historical figures, including Benjamin Disraeli, the Duke of Wellington, Voltaire, Alexander Hamilton, two members of the Rothschild banking dynasty and even Cardinal Richelieu, so many that his fictional characters like Dr. Syn feel just as grounded in history.

Margaret Lockwood, however, had only been in pictures for four years at this point and her most important films were still ahead of her: *Bank Holiday* and *The Lady Vanishes* in 1938 and, turning her screen persona upside down, *The Man in Grey*, *The Wicked Lady* and *Bedelia* in the forties. She did well in film, becoming the highest paid actress in British cinema in 1952, but she increasingly found herself returning to the stage, eventually retiring from the screen after *Cast a Dark Shadow* in 1955. 21 years later, she was finally talked out of retirement for *The Slipper and the Rose*, a retelling of *Cinderella* that also provided late roles for other legends like Sir Kenneth More and Dame Edith Evans, making it a sort of British equivalent to *The Whales of August*, but even with only that one film made in the last sixty years, she's still well-remembered and well-respected today.

THE MOST FEARED PIRATE GANGSTER OF HIS TIME!

DOCTOR SYN



MARGARET
LOCKWOOD

GEORGE
ARLISS



Psychout for Murder (1969)

a replacement for The Bobo,

reviewed on 18th September for actor Rosanno Brazzi

Director: Edward Ross

Writer: Biaggio Proietti and Diana Crispo, from a subject by Oscar Brazzi

Stars: Adrienne la Russa, Nino Castelnuovo, Alberto de Mendoza, Idelma Carlo, Renzo Petretto, Nestor Garay, Rossano Brazzi and Paola Pitagora

On 18th September, I reviewed *The Bobo* at Apocalypse Later because it was the centennial of Rosanno Brazzi. It seemed like a decent choice and indeed it was, for Apocalypse Later, just not for Rosanno Brazzi because he was hardly in it. Sure, he appeared third on the bill, right behind the two leads, Peter Sellers and Britt Ekland, but perhaps that was merely an acknowledgement of his stature. After all, he was an important European actor who had starred in one of the biggest hits of the previous decade, *South Pacific*. Still, he was hardly in it, so I needed to find an alternate.

There are plenty to choose from, given that Brazzi made 120 pictures in all, in addition to his television work, though many are difficult to track down today, not least because he spent the first half of his screen career in Italy. I'm not sure what the survival rate of World War II era Italian films happens to be but I hope there was an equivalent in the country to the Phantom of the Cinémathèque, Henri Langlois, who saved so many French films during that same period.

Brazzi's first English language film was MGM's *Little Women* in 1949, by which time he had no less than 36 Italian pictures behind him, including *We the Living*, a 170 minute adaptation of Ayn Rand's novel that soon fell foul of Mussolini's political watchdogs. Other titles of note, based entirely on reading about them, include a 1942 spaghetti western called *Girl of the Golden West*, a historical romance set in the 11th century called *The Gorgon*

and a Pushkin drama in 1946 called *The Black Eagle*, which prompted a sequel in 1951. On he went in Italy, turning out drama after drama, many of them historical or romantic in nature and often both at once, such as *Milady and the Musketeers*, a version of *The Three Musketeers* told from a female perspective. Inevitably though, Hollywood called loudly enough to summon Brazzi over the pond, but even with big hits in 1954 like *Three Coins in the Fountain* and *The Barefoot Contessa*, he chose to continue to make films in Italy with just the odd American title here and there to dot his filmography like confetti.

The easiest place from which I could grab a title is the late fifties, because he shot seven English language films in a row, from *Loser Takes All* in 1956 to *Count Your Blessings* in 1959. This is the time of *South Pacific* and it included titles with John Wayne, Sophia Loren and Joan Crawford. The Crawford picture, *The Story of Esther Costello*, looks particularly interesting.

However, I found myself drawn to the late sixties instead, not just English language movies I knew like *Krakatoa: East of Java* or *The Italian Job*, but Italian genre flicks like *Seven Men and One Brain* and *Psychout for Murder*, not only for their subject matter but because Brazzi didn't merely act in them; he wrote and directed them both too. The former looks like a rather wild Eurocrime thriller but it doesn't seem to be available in subtitled form, so I chose the latter instead, a psychedelic giallo titled *Salvare la faccia* in the Italian and also known as *Daddy Said the World Was Lovely*. Brazzi plays an important on-screen role but I'm even more intrigued by what he did off screen.

He's not listed in the opening credits as crew. The director is Edward Ross, universally accepted as a pseudonym for Brazzi, but who wrote the picture is a little harder to identify. The opening credits list the screenplay as being by Biagio Proietti and Diana Crispo, working from a subject (or story idea) by Oscar Brazzi, who was Rossano's brother and the picture's producer. Wikipedia only has a page on its Italian site for *Salvare la faccia*, but that backs up what's on screen. IMDb omits Proietti entirely, odd given that he wrote a great deal more than Crispo, but it also adds both Renato Polselli and Piero Regnoli as writers, with Rossano Brazzi listed too

for both screenplay and story. It may be that IMDb is misleading us, which wouldn't be for the first time, but there are other sources which share its suggestions. Regardless, however much or however little he contributed to the writing, he was clearly interested in directing pictures that were notably different from the films that he'd acted in. In particular, there's a stylish and experimental edge to this one that helps to flavour it well.

Back on screen, Brazzi plays an industrialist called Marco Brigoli, a very important character, as ably highlighted by the first scene in which his new factory is opened to great fanfare by an aspiring politician whose wife, Laura, Brigoli is doing on the side. He isn't the lead, however, that role going to Adrienne la Russa as Licia, his youngest daughter.

We'll soon discover that she's the only key player absent from the ceremony, as her boyfriend Marco has talked her into spending the day in bed with him instead. While it's not overtly called out, they're apparently in a brothel, hence why a scandal arises after the police raid the place and a half-naked Licia is photographed while trying to escape onto the roof. It's all a set-up, so Marco can successfully blackmail Brigoli and get out of



his cheap apartment into something closer to his mind's desire. The downside is that, to quieten the scandal, Laura talks Brigoli into announcing that Licia is "sick" and thus must spend time in an asylum to recover. Ah yes, the overblown drama of the rich and powerful.

Of course, Licia, who swans around in the wildly colourful mini skirts of the late sixties with her long hair floating in the breeze, as free as a bird, is far from comfortable in austere white gowns and ponytails. We don't know how long she spends inside, but we do know that she hates every moment of it and she leaves with a serious grudge. If she wasn't crazy when she went in, she is after she gets out and, in a giallo, that doesn't bode well in the slightest.

One of the successes of *Psychout for Murder* is its editing. It's shot well by Luciano Trasatti, but it's how those shots are cut together by Amedeo Giomini that really turns up the style. It's overt editing, obvious in scenes like the one where Licia is driven to the asylum. We jump around frenetically between three scenes which represent her past, present and future: the factory opening, which she didn't attend but can happily



imagine if it might undo the past; the car, a notably uncomfortable present; and the imminent future of a small Licia in white against a big wall, hidden away from everything in the asylum.

Another success is the performance of Adrienne la Russa, who dominates this film. She changes wildly, in ways that often torment everyone around her. One minute she's both childlike and childish, flouncing around an empty estate, destroying flowers in an apparent fit of pique; while the next she's clearly an adult, teasing her sister's husband from a distance with sexual allure, only to vanish when he decides he might want to do something about it.

There's a great scene in which she switches from one to the other and back: she's going into town with daddy and he stops his sports car to open the gate. She suddenly gets acutely serious, takes off the handbrake and lets the vehicle roll towards him, screaming as it goes, then stops it just in time and leaps out for a big hug to give thanks that he's still alive.

Oh yes, she's dangerous, as she tells Mario. She lies in wait for him at his new place, spins around in a gigantic chair to point her father's empty gun in his direction. "I can kill you whenever I want to," she taunts. "I'm mad, remember?" Then she pulls the trigger and he drops his expensive bottle of liquor.

I didn't recognise Adrienne Larussa, as her surname is usually spelled, but she made three Italian pictures in two years, her two in 1969 being notable; the other was *The Conspiracy of Torture*, a non-horror picture from Lucio Fulci that many deem underrated and unfairly obscure.

She appears to fit this material wonderfully, epitomising that free spirit of Europe in the sixties but still able to turn psychotic whenever a scene calls for it. Given that, I was wildly surprised to find out that she didn't fit this material in the slightest.

I didn't expect her to have been born in New York or to have ended up as a real estate agent in Beverly Hills. I hadn't realised that I'd either seen her before (in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*) or that her best known role was on an American daytime soap, *Days of Our Lives*, in which she played "the scheming Brooke Hamilton", as IMDb would have it, for three years. I was

particularly shocked to discover that she was married to Steven Seagal for four years in the eighties. All these things are true, but none of them seem remotely likely. Well, except for the scheming part. The scheming part is everywhere here, as is appropriate for a giallo.

In Italy, “giallo” is simply the local word for thriller, regardless where such things happen to be made. However, it’s taken on a more specific meaning to genre film fans, namely a recognisable style of Italian murder mystery, mostly made between the mid-sixties and late-seventies, with strong psychological overtones, artistic and stylistic cinematic elements and touches of horror, violence and eroticism.

This is an early giallo but it checks all the boxes, even if it doesn’t contain quite as much death as the seventies would soon condition us to expect and it’s much easier to figure out than many of the more complex movies to come. It also builds relatively slowly, as it eases us softly into the world of the Brigolis and gradually isolates us there; that’s helped by a scene in which Licia, freshly released from the asylum, wanders round town and realises that everyone sees her differently now. It’s not important whether that’s real or just in her mind; the effect is the same, which is to bring her, with us in tow, back to the Brigoli estate to fester.

Even when we leave the estate, we’re still firmly stuck in this family’s grip. We wander with Brigoli over to Laura’s house so they can get it on and lay plans that will elevate everyone in prestige and wealth. We leap with Licia into the car of Paterlini, Brigoli’s right-hand man, so she can set him up and derail those plans. We gyrate with teens during the dedication of a swimming pool which ends with a reputation neatly sabotaged.

Gradually, though, we focus in on the estate, watching Licia set her traps and waiting for everyone else to fall into them. What’s surprising is how closely all the traps spring, because they’re mostly left until the final act, which is blistering. I won’t spoil the final scene, but it’s a beautifully shot demonstration, without dialogue, of both victory and defeat, the inevitable conclusion to one bad decision. Well, there may have been more bad decisions, as there are certainly undercurrents here, but it’s all framed as one quest for revenge spawned from one inappropriate action.

Given where we end up, I wonder why Rosanno Brazzi was drawn to this material, even if he didn't write it. Perhaps it appealed to him as a combination of old and new.

The old is most apparent in the story, the classic European tale of the rich and famous doing what they want but eventually coming a cropper for it.

The new comes in the choice of style and genre; this could not be mistaken as a picture from any other era, partly because of the costumes and wild score but also because it feels naturally like a giallo without a deliberate effort to adhere to the iconography of the genre. Sure, it's all about madness and murder, violence and voyeurism, but it's short on gore and nudity and the protagonist is female. It's more stylised than regular films, with the opening credits unfolding to extreme close-ups of eyes or lips, but it's not stylised to the degree of having an Argento colour palette. The editing is spot on for giallo but the story is too focused. Italian genre cinema is a fascinating beast and I wonder if Brazzi was merely getting caught up in its changes.



Maybe he wanted to comment on such changes by abstracting them onto the screen. There could well be social commentary going on here but, if there is, I can't speak to it beyond highlighting how the various roles are all archetypes, as there's no depth to any of these characters with the sole exception of Licia.

Her father is Brigoli the industrialist, ever set on improving the family's lot even if it brings them all down. Laura his mistress is even worse, orchestrating everyone else, including her husband, the politician who so archetypal that he's never given a name, just "the politician". Licia's sister, Giovanna, is nothing but Licia's sister, just as her husband, Francesco, is nothing but a man to be stolen away. Paterlini is just a businessman and the Monsignore is just the Monsignore, put on screen not to represent a character but as the encapsulation of the entire Roman Catholic Church.

It falls to Licia, the young and vibrant creature who just wants to live and love, to stir everything up because she's too free to fit into an easily categorised box. Maybe this is about generational warfare at the time of

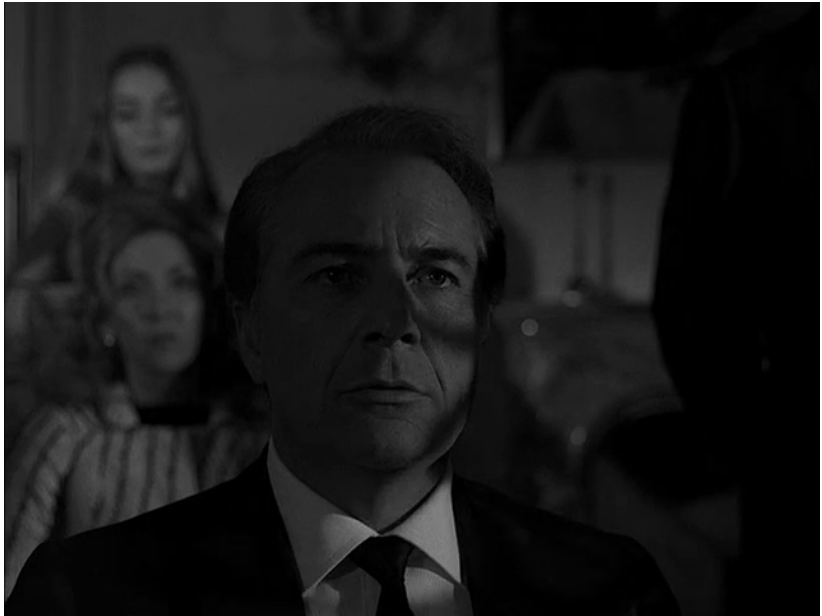


the counterculture, but maybe I'm stretching.

Oddly, I haven't called out any of the actors, but that's because this isn't an actors' film. Sure, Paola Pitagora gives great reaction as Giovanna and Alberto de Mendoza looks like an odd Italian cross between Robert Vaughn and Bruce Campbell, but there's little to talk about on the acting front. With the notable exception of Lucia, this is all about story, direction and style, which means that Brazzi is all over the film even when he's not on screen.

He clearly cares about this more than he did other wild movies like *Frankenstein's Castle of Freaks*, in which he plays the lead, and I can only assume it's because he had a lot more to do with this than simply act.

There are better gialli out there and better dramas, but this is fascinating stuff and I'm keen to follow up with the other two films that Brazzi wrote and directed: *Seven Men and One Brain*, a Eurocrime flick from 1968, and *The Christmas That Almost Wasn't*, a seasonal film with his wife, Lydia Brazzi, playing Mrs. Santa Claus. Never mind *South Pacific*, Brazzi in the late sixties is where it was at.



A Hundred in 2016

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER
PRESENTS
A MICHAEL BALCON PRODUCTION
STARRING

PETER FINCH

**ELIZABETH
SELLARS**



WITH **DANA WILSON** AS
"THE SHIRALEE"

DIRECTED BY **LESLIE NORMAN** ASSOCIATE PRODUCER **JACK RIX**
SCREENPLAY BY **NEIL PATERSON** AND **LESLIE NORMAN**

AN **EALING** FILM

AN
M-G-M
RELEASE



He fought for his
right to be free—until
an unwanted child
became his Shiralee

The Shiralee (1957)

reviewed on 28th September for actor Peter Finch

Director: Leslie Norman

Writers: Neil Paterson and Leslie Norman, from the novel by D'Arcy Niland

Stars: Peter Finch, Elizabeth Sellars and Dana Wilson

I'm a sucker for Ealing films, not only their classic comedies, so this was an easy pick for me to celebrate what would have been the hundredth birthday of Peter Finch on 28th September.

It was made halfway through his career, a long time after his early Australian films for director Ken G. Hall, such as *Dad and Dave Come to Town* or *Mr. Chedworth Steps Out*, but just as long before his Academy Award win for playing Howard Beale in *Network*. Until Heath Ledger's win over thirty years later for *The Dark Knight*, Finch was the only posthumous Oscar-winner in a performing role. He was also the first Australian actor to win an Oscar, though that does depend on how you look at nationality.

Technically, Finch was British, born in London to an Australian father and a British mother. However, in his forties, he learned that his father wasn't really his father; he was the result of his mother's affair with an Indian Army officer who, with a giveaway name like Jock Campbell, surely hailed from Scotland. He grew up first with his grandmother in France and then his great-uncle in Sydney, Australia. He arrived in Sydney in 1926, when he was ten years old; by the time he moved back to England again in 1948, he had surely become an Australian in heart and mind.

He toured Australia as a stage actor and became a major name on radio, the first to portray Ruth Park's Muddle-Headed Wombat. The Second World War interrupted his nascent film career, because he enlisted in the Australian Army, serving as an anti-aircraft gunner as well as an actor and

director touring army bases and hospitals in 1945. He was also allowed to keep making films while serving in the army, many of them propaganda shorts, and he promptly returned to his screen career after the war, but he was sent to Britain by Laurence Olivier, who put him under contract. He built a name for himself there in movies as varied as *The Miniver Story* (the sequel to *Mrs. Miniver*), *Othello* (opposite Orson Welles) and *Father Brown* (as the villain). Once his contract was completed, he shot a number of films down under for Rank: parts of *A Town Like Alice* in 1956, then *Robbery Under Arms* and *The Shiralee* in 1957.

This is unmistakably an Australian film, the vast spaces of that country depicted in beautiful black and white by cinematographer Paul Beeson, very early in his career and long before his Primetime Emmy nomination in 1974 for the mini-series *QB VII*.

The local vernacular is put to good use, without ever seeming like someone from another country had simply borrowed words to make it all appear authentic. That's commendable, given that the screenwriters, Neil Paterson and Leslie Norman, were Scottish and English respectively; the latter was the father of Barry Norman, the UK's best-known film critic.

It has to be said that they were adapting an Australian novel, written by D'Arcy Niland from Glen Innes, New South Wales, and many of the cast were Aussies too, including the film's one and only Aborigine, Gordon Glenwright, whose character is treated just like any other.

Yes, characters call each other "mate" and "sport" and the "real bonzer kid" is "a bit crook", but the line that spoke to me most was, "I wouldn't touch them with a maggoty cat," an interesting phrase to google.

However, it's really a British film which merely happened to be shot in Australia and that's not difficult to see either. It feels like a British drama, even before we get to the well-enunciated Rosemary Harris, who was born in Suffolk and sounds like it. This is early for her too, only her second feature three decades before her most famous role as Aunt May in the Sam Raimi *Spider-Man* pictures. It also plays consistently with the other Ealing dramas I've seen from this period, which comes close to the end of Michael Balcon's era at the studio.

Surely the most recognisable actor on screen is Sidney James, a British institution, the star of nineteen *Carry On* films and the top billed name in seventeen. Coincidentally, I introduced my better half to *Carry On Dick*, James's last film, this week, as it had borrowed so freely from *Doctor Syn*, which I reviewed earlier in this book for Margaret Lockwood's centennial. I had no idea he would be in *The Shiralee* or that cinematographer Beeson also handled the camera for Disney's version, *Dr. Syn, Alias the Scarecrow*. It's a small world and I'll return to Sid James again for *Carry On... Up the Khyber* later in this book.

More than anything, it's an eye-opening portal into another era and I don't merely mean that of the swagman, an Aussie word that we know from the unofficial Australian national anthem, *Waltzing Matilda*. Swagmen like Jim Macauley, the character that Finch plays, were gentlemen of the road, akin to hobos and tramps. The opening narration explains that, while some are bludgers (or scroungers), others are honest working men who merely prefer the freedom of living under the "friendly sky", as Mac later puts it.

I get the impression that Aussies have more romantic respect for swagmen than Brits do for tramps and perhaps Americans do for hobos, as walkabout is a quintessentially Australian concept, but it's hard to find



any real sympathy for Mac when we realise that his marriage has broken down because he's only spent six months with his wife and daughter in Sydney during a total of five years since the wedding. When he shows back up out of the blue to find a man with his wife, he beats him up, bundles his daughter under his arm and walks out, not saying a single word, and we're in motion.

Buster is the difference between Macauley and other swagmen, an eight year old girl slowing him down and getting in his way. It's not difficult to see her as a penance for his dereliction of marital duty, his "special cross", his "burden", his "shiralee".

The title really refers to the swagman's bundle or pack, which we also know from the song as his matilda, but something that weighs him down is apt as a metaphor, especially early on when Mac often has to literally carry Buster.

She's a scene-stealing young actress called Dana Wilson and she debuted here in a powerful way. She would only go on to two more pictures, 1958's *A Cry from the Streets* and *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in 1959, before retiring at the ripe old age of ten. As great as Finch is in this picture, and the liner notes of my DVD suggest he later described it as his favourite role, I'm going to remember it as much for Dana Wilson as for



him. She sells her part magnificently, bringing it to life through both little moments and the grand sweep of her performance.

Of course, the story is going to have to find some way for Buster to humanise her father at least to a degree, but I'm not going to spoil just how that happens. Let's just say that it unfolds in a very believable fashion that avoids both Hollywood sentimentality and a Hollywood ending.

Early on, we wonder why he even took her, given that he neither needs nor wants a child on the road. Certainly, he walks ahead of her just as much as beside her and he isn't exactly a beacon of conversation. "I like it when you talk to me," Buster says late on but that's surely as much for the rarity of his speech as its content. These characterisations are deep ones, so there's a great deal of debate possible about motivations, but my take is that Mac took Buster as much out of spite as any of his wife's notably spiteful and bitchy actions. Discussion about who creates the situation and who reacts to it, not to mention who has the right to act in such a way, renders *The Shiralee* perfect for anthropological studies as much as cinematic ones.

You see, Mac is very much a man's man. He thinks of himself as a decent soul, someone who's willing and able to work for a living; he often says that he "won't scrounge off anybody" and he lives up to his words. He's no muscleman but he'll stand up to anyone to further what's right and scupper what's wrong and, some pretty terrible choreography aside, he can use his fists to good effect. He's certainly loyal and has a set of strong friendships that survive the infrequency of visits. Finch sells the physical side of this picture capably, believably a man who shrugs off the uncomfortable and walks on. He also sells how much Mac has excised the sentimental side of his character, to the degree that we wonder why he ever got married. Even things that could be read as sentimentality really aren't. When his daughter goes down with a fever and he spends an uncomfortable night breaking it, it's because it's a job that has to be done rather than because it's his daughter. He doesn't seem to know what love is, though the story shows how he starts to learn.

A friend of mine talks about how America has changed over the last few

decades because men nowadays aren't brought up by men any more. He doesn't say that in order to be macho or sexist; he's merely making an intellectual point that does make a lot of sense, especially with any political subtext removed. It used to be that boys were brought up outdoors, taught by their fathers how to do everything that we see boys doing in old movies: hunting, fishing and camping for a start but also, on a far deeper level, learning how to do things that aren't safe.

Buster is thrown right into this sort of upbringing and, with only the slightest touch of sentimentality, enjoys the heck out of all the freedom that it involves. However, it's glaringly obvious that this sort of thing would be difficult to put on the screen today. And I'm not even talking about the naked butt of an eight year old girl in a shower scene or the leading man rubbing eucalyptus oil on her chest when she's feverish, things that would surely spark a debate nowadays because someone would interpret them sexually even if they weren't meant that way.

Talking about the film, my better half suggested that men would appreciate *The Shiralee* much more than women. I can see exactly what she means, because women watching today aren't likely to care about walkabout and swagmen and the romanticised road of freedom, but they are going to see Marge as a neglected woman and anything she can do to Mac as justified.

However, the point of the story is to show this quintessential man's man that there's more to life than working and moving on, that emotions are important and that relationships aren't just for buddies. Have we moved so far away in sixty years from this rough world of masculinity that the lessons Mac learns just aren't enough any more? I haven't seen the 1987 mini-series based on the same source novel, starring Bryan Brown as Mac, but it seems to reprise the same territory without any modern updates to cater to modern sensibilities and it was the most popular show of the year. Maybe in traditionally masculine Australia, this conversation is still active.

There are subplots to both keep things moving on and deepen the plot but I won't spoil them. Suffice it to say that each character, each location

and each scene has a resonance that gradually and collectively builds into a force to change him just a little. It's fair to say that, while Mac is unquestionably the most masculine, stubborn and uncompromising male character, those properties are active in each of the others too.

We're really shown a scale of masculine behaviour and asked to figure out where the marker should be set. Mac is too masculine, apparently unable to truly love, so it should be shifted well away from him. However, it shouldn't be moved as far as the opposite end of the spectrum, which is Donny, the successful coward who's been having an affair with Marge while Mac is away. Should it be set to the helpful Jim Muldoon, the charismatic Luke Sweeney or the loyal Beauty Kelly? Perhaps it should be set to the honourable W. G. Parker, a successful working man who can lay down the law but also admit when he was wrong.

If we're following that train of thought, we can ask the same question about the women. Marge may be a wronged wife but she's also a bitch who has no apparent redeeming features beyond Scots actress Elizabeth Sellars looking rather pleasing to the eye. The opposite end to her may be Lily Parker, who is very much a woman though one who often acts like a man, making decisions and riding the range on horseback to herd sheep on her father's ranch. There aren't too many female characters in between, but



one is certainly Bella Sweeney, who runs a bed and breakfast with her husband and rules the roost with her cheeky grin. As politically incorrect as their conversations often are, the Parkers are good people: loyal, caring and willing to speak their minds. “Two Ton” Tessie O’Shea is a delight here as Bella and she was a discovery for me here, even if untold millions saw her as the other guest on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1963 that introduced America to the Beatles, the most watched show ever on American television at that point in time.

I do wonder how modern audiences would see this film because there are so many things that they’re simply not going to be used to seeing. The morality is far from clear, but it’s not because the filmmakers wanted to go dark and moody; it’s a slice of time and a starting point for discussing topics like masculinity and femininity or freedom and responsibility. With our modern mindset, we often wonder which characters we should sympathise with, when the answer is all of them, just not all the time.

Surely the most sympathetic character isn’t Mac, especially during the first half of the film; I’d suggest that it’s Buster, the title character, who is thrown into a tough situation at an extremely impressionable age but comes through it all with a smile. The biggest problem may be in just how free range she’s forced to be. Everyone watching today would rail at Mac’s



choice to leave Buster fishing in a billabong with a poet while he goes looking for work in town. Things like this impact our ability to empathise, especially given what happens next.

Australia, of course, looks great here and the bush sounds just as enticing as it looks, even outside of any attraction of the simple if tough life that the swagman leads. I've long been a fan of the cinema of Australia and New Zealand, but little of what I've seen goes back to this era. I know down under in the seventies and the eighties pretty well, especially in genre cinema, but I should look further back too, especially as Australia produced the first feature film ever made, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* in 1906, and remained a prominent player in the teens, before it fell prey to the cheap American imports of the twenties, a cycle of over-production and under-production that continued for a long time.

One of its most enduring problems is that whenever it generates new stars, they're all too easily drawn away by Hollywood salaries. It happened recently with Mel Gibson, Hugh Jackman and Geoffrey Rush, with Cate Blanchette, Nicole Kidman and Toni Collette, but that isn't a new thing at all. Go back through the decades and it also happened with Errol Flynn, Rod Taylor and Peter Finch.



A Hundred in 2016

THE
STORY
OF

The Tattered Dress



...that exposed
a town's
hidden evil!



CINEMASCOPE

A Universal-International Picture starring

JEFF CHANDLER · JEANNE CRAIN
JACK CARSON · GAIL RUSSELL
ELAINE STEWART



with **GEORGE TOBIAS · EDWARD ANDREWS · PHILIP REED**

Directed by **JACK ARNOLD** · Written by **GEORGE ZUCKERMAN** · Produced by **ALBERT ZUGSMITH**

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Printed and Bound in the U.S.A. by the International Printing Co., New York, N.Y.

17 1/2 x 11 1/2

The Tattered Dress (1957)

reviewed on 14th October for director Jack Arnold

Director: Jack Arnold

Writer: George Zuckerman

Stars: Jeff Chandler, Jeanne Crain, Jack Carson and Gail Russell

The legendary Jack Arnold, who would have turned a hundred years old on 14th October, actually began his career as an actor, appearing on and off Broadway in the late thirties and early forties, but made the switch to direction during the Second World War, after working under Robert J. Flaherty of *Nanook of the North* fame.

His theatrical feature debut was the obscure *Girls in the Night* in 1953, but he soon found his niche, making some of the very best of all the fifties sci-fi movies: *It Came from Outer Space*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon* and *Revenge of the Creature*, not to forget *Tarantula* and, above all, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. Because he's so well known for his sci-fi, I initially planned to cover the glorious comedy, *The Mouse That Roared*, for his centennial instead, but ended up going with this one and I'm happy I tracked it down.

It's a film noir from that golden year of 1957 and it's a neatly cynical one to sit alongside other cynical films like *A Face in the Crowd*, *Paths of Glory* and *Sweet Smell of Success*. If 1939 was really Hollywood's greatest year, then 1957 was the equivalent for world cinema, with *The Seventh Seal*, *Nights of Cabiria* and *Wild Strawberries* merely the pinnacle and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Throne of Blood* and *Night of the Demon* nipping at their heels. Calling out world cinema doesn't exclude Hollywood though, as that year it produced *12 Angry Men*, *3:10 from Yuma* and *Witness for the Prosecution*, amongst many other classics. Jack Arnold contributed to that great tally in no uncertain fashion; he began 1957 with *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, with Richard Matheson adapting his own novel to the screen, then he kept

going with three lesser known but fascinating titles starring Jeff Chandler: *The Tattered Dress*, *Man in the Shadow* and *The Lady Takes a Flyer*. That films as good as these appear way down most people's lists just highlights how strong the competition really was in 1957.

Chandler, an underrated actor at the worst of times, is in superb form here and he needed to be. The script by George Zuckerman, best known for Douglas Sirk dramas like *Written on the Wind* and *The Tarnished Angels*, gifts him with an incredibly deep character, who is a challenge and an opportunity for an actor; Chandler seizes the former and proves up to the latter.

He's James Gordon Blane, a very talented New York lawyer who has achieved great success at the cost of his conscience. He wins a lot of cases but that only means that he's got a lot of guilty clients off and put a lot of innocent people behind bars. He's become rich off that practice but he's lost his marriage in the process. We meet him on a train taking him out west to Desert Valley, 150 miles from Las Vegas, where he soon gets off briefly to say hi to his estranged wife and kids at a stop on the way; only when he gets back on the train does he realise that he didn't bring anything for them. Clearly his conscience is alive, but its hardly healthy and it's apparently also not being fed.

He's been summoned to Desert Valley to represent yet another guilty man; this one's called Michael Reston. We know full well that he's guilty for we watched him murder a man in cold blood during the opening scenes. He's angry when his trophy wife arrives home in the tattered dress of the title, ripped during a wild dalliance with a local bartender, so he bundles her back into her car, drives her back whence she came and shoots his wife's lover in the back as he tries to run.

None of these folk are prizes. Reston isn't merely a murderer, he is a rather arrogant one to boot: he isn't worried about jail because he knows precisely how good a defence his money can buy. The victim obviously knew he was sleeping with a married woman and didn't care; she, of course, is an unrepentant adulteress. "Are you a faithful wife?" Blane asks her. "In a fashion," she replies. When he asks whether she wanted her

lover to assault her, she answers, “Let me think about that.” She’s low enough to hit on her husband’s new lawyer, even though he’s defending him for killing her last illicit affair.

As well set up as all that is, it would only make for a relatively routine film noir. This one elevates itself by going much deeper. We have to look at Blane too, the attack dog of a lawyer who defends the worst of the worst, just so long as they can pay him the large fees he commands.

In the early scenes, he’s given the opportunity to show a positive side but he can’t seem to manage that. He fails with his family; he fails with Charleen Reston; he even fails with the journalist who built a career off his because, just as the writer asks him if he’d consider taking on the case of a wrongfully imprisoned man, he lets himself be distracted over to a random brunette who walks into the dining car on the train.

Blane is very sharp in court, as talented as his reputation and his fees suggest, but he’s hardly a hero. If we had to conjure up a hero from these early scenes, it would most likely be the Desert Valley sheriff, Nick Hoak,



in the neatly jovial form of Jack Carson. He's just the sort of sheriff that a small town might want. Or at least so he appears at this point.

It doesn't last. Blane destroys Hoak on the witness stand and wins the acquittal of Michael Reston, as expected, but, while Blane celebrates another victory, Hoak arrests him for bribing a juror. It's all a set-up, of course, that he perpetrates for revenge on a number of fronts, but it's the real beginning of the film because now we have to wonder a great deal about where our sympathies lie.

Are they with Blane, who is a good lawyer but a bad man, getting his at last even if it's for something he didn't do? Or are they with Hoak, who doesn't only feel wronged personally for his treatment in court but also on behalf of the murder victim, Larry Bell, who was a protégé to him? We come to realise that we feel for the plight of each of these two men but not for them personally. Instead our sympathies are with Lady Justice, whose own dress is tattered here, and we keep watching so we can root for her, hoping that the script can find some way somehow in which she can be



fair to each of the characters who wove this tangled web and each of those caught up in it.

If the film belongs to Jeff Chandler, Jack Carson matches him step for step. They're two thoroughly different characters, one sleazy and vicious but the other quiet and folksy. However, they share a great deal because they've both sold their souls and don't struggle too much with that knowledge. The game they play moves in both directions, so each of these two men gain the upper hand and lose it again. Having effectively two leads alternating between being on top and on the ropes gives the story a vast amount of depth and both of the actors plenty of opportunity to delve into their own characters and shine.

I've talked often at *Apocalypse Later* of how difficult I find it to appreciate films, from *Gone with the Wind* on down, in which there is simply nobody to sympathise with. It's tough to stay focused on the characters in that scenario, rather than shift my appreciation to the work of the actors or another technical aspect, like costumes, score or cinematography. With this film, I found myself absorbed, not because I wanted to see anyone win or lose but to see if justice could be done.

Those in support receive less opportunities but they do precisely what's needed in their more restrictive roles. Most are relatively familiar faces: Jeanne Crain and Gail Russell, Edward Platt and George Tobias.

Russell is surely the best known of these, though her career was shorter than we might expect and she would be dead in four years at the too young age of 37, from a heart attack surely brought on by her abiding alcoholism. Ironically, given that she drank to combat stage fright, it's her fear that shines brightest here. She's one of the characters who's caught up in the grand game between Blane and Hoak, Carol Morrow by name, and she's very believably frightened for much of it.

Crain, on the other hand, is quietly composed even when times are toughest. She's Diane Blane and she loves her husband, even with what he's become, and, while they're estranged, she becomes the rock on which he gets to stand. I was especially struck by her eyes, which are limpid pools to dive into, but she's worth more than that. She's sharp too and she

gets better and better as the film runs on, as her part becomes more substantial.

Platt is the film's conscience as journalist Ralph Adams, which means he's the quietest character in the entire film. However moral he is, he's still benefitted from the travesties of justice that litter Blane's trail, to the tune of a Pulitzer Prize for his writing on him. We can't help but wonder how insightful he must be if he hasn't yet twigged to the true impact of this lawyer's career thus far. He either wears blinkers, in which case he's not a good journalist, or he sees what's going on, in which case he's not the moral centre we think he is.

Tobias is the film's comic relief, as a professional comedian in Las Vegas called Billy Giles, who owes Blane big time because he saved him from both conviction and death row for killing his wife a decade earlier. He's never a particularly funny comedian, but he carries a lighter touch to the material than anyone else in the cast and that's more than welcome given where it goes.

Even Phillip Reed is spot on as Reston, but he's just a minor character, even if most films would have focused on his story and made him the chief support.

My discovery here was Elaine Stewart, the lady who plays his wife, Charleen. She smoulders her way through this picture with a knowing sensuality. She's the shallowest character in the film, the beauty of the femme fatale without any of the bite. She's good looking enough to hook any man she wants, and she's clearly been doing that for a long time, but she has nothing beyond that at all. I've seen her before without realising it, stealing moments in films as varied as *Singin' in the Rain* and *The Bad and the Beautiful*, but I'll have to find something in which she was given more substance to play with and see if she was able to live up to it.

She's obviously a scene-stealer but she had scenes stolen from her here, initially by a great little gimmick rather than another actor. It's the scene where she swaggers home in her tattered dress to be confronted by her husband. What's neat is that this happens on the other side of a sliding glass door, so that we're kept in the dark as to what specific words are

hurled but voyeuristically in on what they mean. She goes in sassy, backed by a stereotypical sexy score, and comes out cowed; it's a superbly set up scene.

I could easily see some viewers believing that the film lessens as it goes on. The later scenes could certainly be seen as being more predictable, more stereotypical or more emotionally manipulative, but I'm fine with them all. I see this script as taking a lot of the traditional elements of the film noir, the legal thriller and the small town drama, then throwing them all into a mixer to churn up a fresh story that digs deep into what role justice plays in each.

Films of the era that looked at justice each tended to focus on one aspect, whether that be the jury in *12 Angry Men*, the lynch mob in *The Ox-Bow Incident* or courage and duty in *High Noon*. This one looks at a whole slew of aspects and that's what makes it special. Maybe Blane explicitly calling out the double meaning of the title in court was a little too blatant but I can forgive that. This isn't as deep or as wild as Orson Welles's *Touch*



of Evil, released a year later by the same producer, Albert Zugsmith, but it perhaps digs deeper than the highly regarded *Anatomy of a Murder*, released two years later with some notable similarities.

There were downsides for me, though I have to add a caveat to one. The cinematography felt very weak but, as this is still a rather obscure title never made available on home release, I had to make do with a VHS rip taped off the TV. It was clearly re-formatted using pan and scan techniques that shatter the artistic vision of the cinematographer, Carl E. Guthrie, who had learned on pictures as prominent as *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, working first assistant camera, and became responsible for shooting others as gorgeous, if low budget, as *House on Haunted Hill*. Less explainable is the score, by Frank Skinner, which is much more stereotypical than the rest of the film. I won't complain too much because it did a capable job, just a capably clichéd job. Perhaps that's not Skinner's fault or at least not entirely his fault, as the stock libraries were certainly plumbed to pad out the score and it may be that what might otherwise be



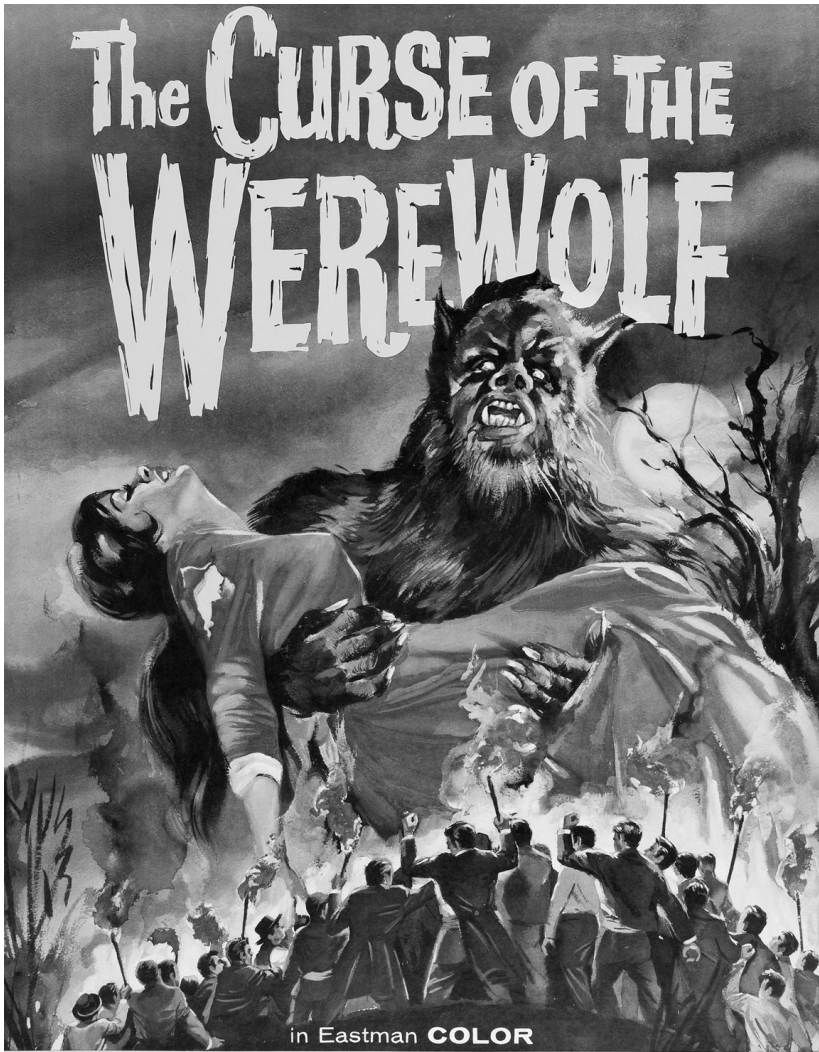
decent snippets by Henry Mancini are really the clichéd bits, spliced into Skinner's score. Delving that far would be difficult work.

Like Guthrie, Jack Arnold moved on to wrap up his career mostly in television. He'd already dabbled in the medium, having made four episodes of *Science Fiction Theatre* in 1955 and 1956, but it would become more frequent as the years went by. It seems rather odd to me that a massively talented director who had elevated otherwise cheap material like *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *Tarantula* and *High School Confidential!* would become better known as the director of 26 episodes of *Gilligan's Island*, 15 of *The Brady Bunch* and 8 more of *The Love Boat*.

I don't want to demean classic American television but to go from directing some of the best genre movies of the fifties to episodes of *The Mod Squad* or *The Fall Guy*, let alone shows I haven't even heard of like *Make Room for Granddaddy*, *The San Pedro Beach Bums* or *Holmes and Yo-Yo*, feels like a really bad call on the part of American culture. It could well be that he elevated those too, but I'm not particularly interested in finding out. I'll keep tracking down his more obscure movies of the fifties instead.



A Hundred in 2016



in Eastman **COLOR**

Starring **CLIFFORD EVANS** • **OLIVER REED** • **YVONNE ROMAIN** • **CATHERINE FELLER**

Screenplay by **JOHN ELDER** Directed by **TERENCE FISHER** Produced by **ANTHONY HINDS** Executive Producer **MICHAEL CARRERAS**

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The Curse of the Werewolf (1961)

reviewed on 18th October for actor Anthony Dawson

Director: Terence Fisher

Writer: John Elder, from the novel *The Werewolf of Paris* by Guy Endore

Stars: Clifford Evans, Oliver Reed, Yvonne Romain and Catherine Feller

Horror movies have often focused on duality and not only in the more obvious examples like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In folklore, both vampires and werewolves sprang from the same concept of duality, though not just to highlight good and evil in a moral sense but also on a deeper level, comparing man with his God-given soul with the savage beast without.

Such thoughts were surely fresh in the minds of director Terence Fisher and producer Michael Carreras at Hammer Films after they had made *The Two Faces of Dr. Jekyll* in 1960. A year later, they found themselves in need of a new script, because they'd built substantial sets for a film set in Spain. Some sources say that it was going to be about the Spanish Civil War but the co-production deal fell apart before shooting began, while others suggest that it was about the Spanish Inquisition and the script was rejected by the censors. Either way, Hammer had sets but no story to flesh them out at a time when they were successfully resurrecting iconic characters like Dracula, Frankenstein and the Mummy (in 1957, 1958 and 1959 respectively).

So, in addition to shooting sequels to those films, they expanded their repertoire of famous monsters: *The Two Faces of Dr. Jekyll* in 1960, *The Curse of the Werewolf* in 1961 and *The Phantom of the Opera* in 1962. Of course, all these had antecedents in the Universal horrors, but their sources were in public domain novels so there was little likelihood of being hauled up for copyright infringement. Well, except for this one, because Universal's *The Wolf Man* was based entirely on an original script by Curt Siodmak.

Hammer therefore sought out a different source, transplanting the action of the 1933 novel, *The Werewolf of Paris* by Guy Endore, from France to Spain. They also eviscerated all its historical and political subtext and crafted it into what is surely as archetypal a werewolf movie as the one it was so careful not to copy. This one is slow and short on werewolf action (we don't even meet the grown up werewolf until halfway in), but it handles the dual nature of man and beast impeccably. From that angle, it has perhaps not been surpassed.

Almost every key moment in the film is the result of the bestial nature of man and it all begins with the Marques Siniestro, a name that translates from the Spanish as "sinister", a word that was derived from the Latin for left-handed, so playing up duality from the start.

It's a public holiday in the Spanish town of Santa Vera and all the townsfolk are "rejoicing"; the Marques is getting married and he's literally ordered them to rejoice. The reason they're not too happy about it is because they're footing the bill for the wedding and the lavish feast at the castle, to which none of them are invited.

The beggar who unfortunately walks into town on this day tries his luck there, only to find cruelty instead. The Marques invites him in and torments him in front of everyone. When his bride asks him to stop as she sees the beggar as a man not an animal, he suggests that she keep him as a pet, flinging ten pesetas at him as a purchase price. He plies him with wine but sadistically refuses him food, making him dance and inevitably fall over for the entertainment of those assembled.

This is a blistering scene, not only because it sets the stage for the entire picture to come, but also because it's performed by two perfectly cast actors.

Because this is a British film, even the ragged beggar, who is about to become more ragged after being thrown into the dungeon and forgotten, is a Shakespearean actor, Richard Wordsworth, the great-great-grandson of the famous poet, William Wordsworth. It's an appropriate choice, because this beggar has no skills and has to resort to oratory to persuade folk into parting with their money.

A better foil could not be found for him than Anthony Dawson as the Marques Siniestro. Dawson was a Scottish actor whose greatest role thus far had been the man paid to murder Grace Kelly in *Dial M for Murder*. This was a fantastic opportunity for him even if his part is over relatively quickly, and it surely helped him land his next role, as Professor R. J. Dent, the geologist working for *Dr. No* in the film of that name. He would have been a hundred years old on 18th October.

The tormenting of the beggar and his ensuing abandonment in the dungeons is the first example of many a bestial act which begets a cycle of evil. Years later, now a recluse, the Marques has his jailer's mute daughter thrown into the same cell for not speaking to him. It can't be too surprising that the beggar, driven insane by years of isolation, promptly rapes the girl who had fed him through those years. Released the next day to "entertain" the Marques, she kills him instead and escapes into the surrounding countryside. Her own bestial act is soon punished by the fact that the rape resulted in pregnancy and, to make matters worse, the child is born on Christmas Day.

"For an unwanted child to be born then," suggests Teresa, the housekeeper of the man who rescues her from the river, "is an insult to Heaven!" That the mother dies in childbirth surely can't help and, just to drum home where we're going, we hear a wolf howl right before we hear the newborn cry and a wolf's head seems to appear during the child's



baptism, even though it's really the reflection of a gargoye in the font.

And so we have a werewolf who was cursed rather than bitten, even if that was partly due to the censors thoroughly rejecting the idea of a werewolf rapist, and a curse can be lifted while a bite can't be undone. It helps that this orphan is raised by loving parent substitutes: the man who found his mother, Don Alfredo Corledo, and his housekeeper, Teresa. However, his nature will manifest itself soon enough, even if young Leon seems to be a perfect child.

He's such an animal lover that when Pepe, the nightwatchman, takes him out shooting, he can't bear to shoot a squirrel; when Pepe kills it instead, he tries to kiss it better, tastes the blood and finds it very much to his liking. This scene neatly adds the bodily changes wrought during puberty to the various metaphors for lycanthropy in this film, though the curse remains paramount. Clearly Leon is the young wolf who's responsible for the string of deaths of local goats, not least because he gets shot at one point for his troubles, but he doesn't know it himself; he thinks he's merely dreaming.

The Curse of the Werewolf is a great movie in many ways but it's also a very flawed one and the most obvious flaw is in its pacing. I'm on board with that long opening scene at the Marques's castle, but we continue with drawn out scene after scene all the way until the halfway point.

Only then does young Leon, looking rather like a vampiric take on



Damien from *The Omen*, cease his bestial attacks on the local wildlife, partly because he can't break through the bars that Don Alfredo has installed on his window and partly because he's being brought up in a loving household that weakens the curse until it appears to be completely nullified. Only then does grown-up Leon appear, all ready to set out on his own and find his place in the world. Within two minutes, he's at the gates of Gomez Bodegas, Don Fernando's winery, where he finds work in the wine cellar, bottling and labelling the product. It has to be said, with a sly wink, that this job was perhaps inevitable, given that the grown-up Leon is played by Oliver Reed.

Reed was a force of nature far more than he was an actor. It has been said that he's the only British film star who never worked on stage before transitioning onto the screen, becoming what a National Portrait Gallery show in 1980 called Britain's "only pure film actor". However, he was a hugely important film star who was responsible for a whole slew of firsts.

In 1966, he starred in *I'll Never Forget What's'isname*, the Michael Winner film which became the first mainstream movie to use the F word. It was also denied an MPAA seal of approval because of an implied sex scene; Universal's choice to distribute it through a non-MPAA subsidiary helped to end the Production Code. In 1969, he wrestled Alan Bates nude in front of a fireplace in Ken Russell's *Women in Love*, the first time that full frontal male nudity featured in a mainstream film. Then, in 1972, he starred in *Sitting Target*, the first British movie to be rated X on the grounds of violence alone. This film was a first too: Oliver Reed's first starring role.

He's a force of nature in this picture too, both literally and metaphorically, and it's hard to look away when he's on screen.

The cast is consistently strong, from the top-billed Clifford Evans as Don Alfredo, through Reed to the various other recognisable faces further down the credits list. There's one scene where one famous British sitcom actor berates another; that's Peter Sallis from *Last of the Summer Wine* playing the town's mayor, Don Enrique, complaining to Warren Mitchell from *Till Death Us Do Part* that his nightwatchman, Pepe, isn't keeping the wolves away.

The catch, of course, is that they're all English and it has to be said that this is a particularly English Spain. It's not just the accents (Dawson can get away with that as the believably foreign-educated Marques, but Mitchell certainly can't; Spaniards called Pepe just shouldn't sound like they're from Norfolk), but their attitudes as well. Leon falls for his employer's daughter, Cristina, for instance, who's to be married to a quintessentially English toff. "Oh I say!" simply isn't a line that helps set a provincial Spanish mood.

Even if we can forgive the Englishness of this film, Reed still stands out above his peers. Only Evans really matches him, because he has the internal fortitude to match his co-star's external vitality. Reed seems to be in the vibrancy of youth and the best of health, which is good not only for the ambitious young man but for the beast he becomes.

Though he loves Cristina and Cristina loves him back, his friend, Jose Amadayo, talks him into visiting a local brothel. That's when his bestial side returns, as the morality that governs lycanthropy in this film suggests that love and kindness lessen the curse but sex and depravity heighten it. What's more, distance is a factor: with Cristina, Leon can control himself, but when he's separated from her, he can't. And, two murders later and Leon in jail, the endgame is quickly in sight, one that's flavoured by repentance and sacrifice. Characters who have sex (even unwillingly) all suffer or die in this film, while those who remain chaste survive untouched. It's slasher morality taken even further.

If Reed doesn't appear as much as he should, he is at least a highly memorable werewolf. The script is ruthlessly chronological and quite a few early scenes should have been trimmed or cut entirely to make room for more scenes featuring him later, both in Roy Ashton's excellent make-up and out of it.

While this was his first lead role, it was his third film for Hammer and he'd go on to make another five. What he did after that is the stuff of legend, both on and off the screen. Hammer themselves thrived for another ten years before they started to struggle in the different cinematic climate of the seventies. While the decade arguably saw their

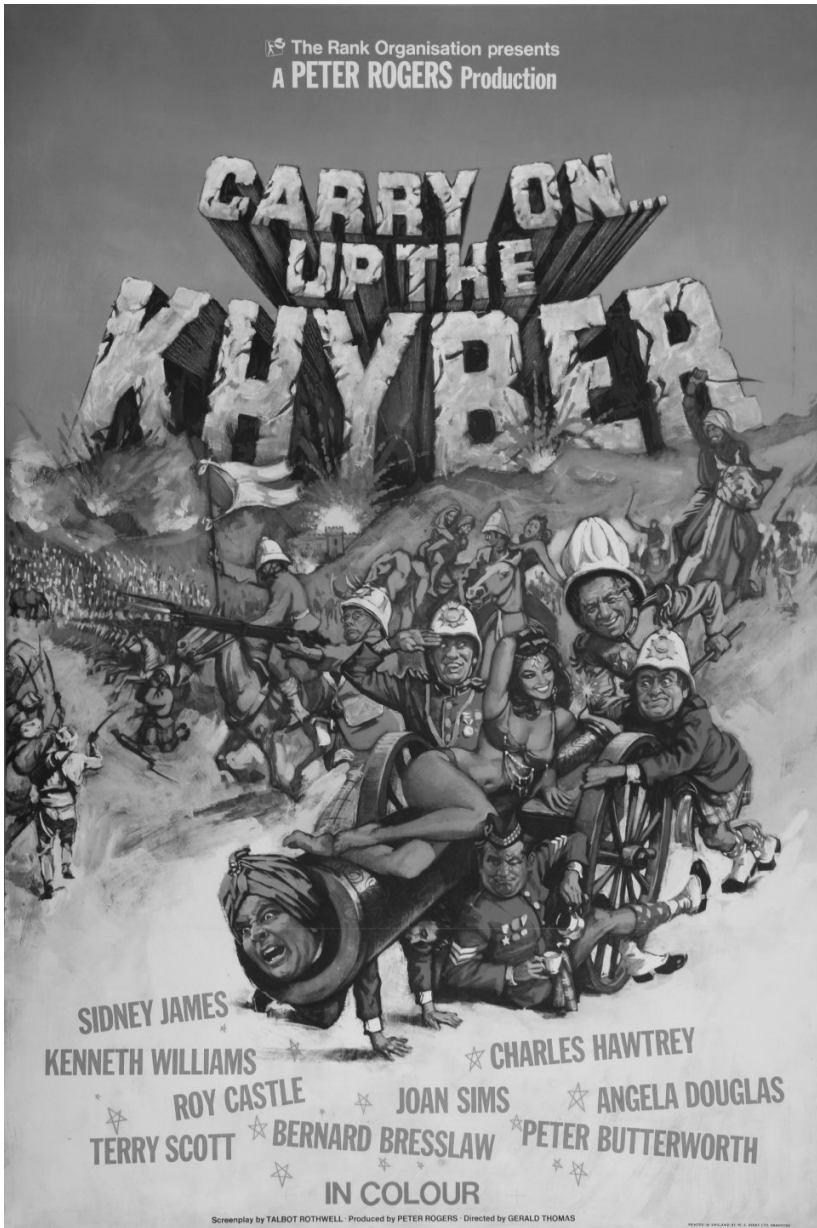
most interesting pictures, their heyday was clearly behind them and their prominence had waned; they closed their doors after their remake of *The Lady Vanishes* in 1979. As for Anthony Dawson, our birthday boy today, he never quite found the career that he deserved, his most important contributions to film coming in the fifties and early sixties.

Oddly, his most memorable moment on screen was in a film for which he wasn't even credited. He started out uncredited in 1940, but that's relatively standard for a new actor. By 1963, he wasn't new any more and wouldn't have expected that but for an unusual need of his friend, Terence Young.

He'd appeared in a string of solid if relatively unknown British films, such as *The Way to the Stars*, *School for Secrets* and *The Queen of Spades*, working his way up the credits list. He had strong roles in pictures as varied as *The Wooden Horse*, *Dial M for Murder* and *Grip of the Strangler*. He'd set this film off not only on the right note but in the direction that his character defined, remaining memorable to the end even though he's killed only twenty minutes in. And he'd become a Bond villain, working for *Dr. No*. That movie's director, Terence Young, cast him often, including as the first appearance of Ernst Stavro Blofeld, in *From Russia with Love*. The character's voice belonged to Eric Pohlmann but the body and the famous hand stroking a white cat belong to Dawson. It has to be said that there are worse ways to be remembered.



A Hundred in 2016



Carry On... Up the Khyber (1968)

reviewed on 12th November for writer Talbot Rothwell

Director: Gerald Thomas

Writer: Talbot Rothwell

Stars: Sidney James, Kenneth Williams, Charles Hawtrey, Roy Castle, Joan Sims, Bernard Bresslaw, Peter Butterworth, Terry Scott, Angela Douglas and Cardew Robinson

It's hard to explain to anyone not brought up in the UK just how much of an institution the *Carry On* team were and still are, even if they haven't made a movie since 1992 or a decent one since at least 1975. It's especially hard to explain to Americans how they got away with that sort of material in the 1960s, when the Hays Office routinely stripped out dialogue from American movies that even suggested the subject of sex, but every year there were *Carry On* Christmas specials on television in the UK.

You see, *Carry On* movies are a mixture of double entendre and dirty joke, the naughty seaside postcard brought to life, and they're uniquely British creatures, a comedic descendant of the music hall that Americans might recognise mostly from *Are You Being Served?*

There were 30 original *Carry On* movies made, plus a 31st that was built from a little new material wrapped around a lot of clips; there were also four Christmas specials, a thirteen episode TV show and three stage plays. All of them were produced by Peter Rogers and directed by Gerald Thomas. The majority were written by two writers: the first six of them by Norman Hudis and the next twenty by Talbot Rothwell, who would have turned one hundred on 12th November.

How Rothwell got involved with the series almost sounds like the script for a *Carry On* movie. He was a Royal Air Force pilot in the Second World War; after being shot down over Norway, he was imprisoned in Stalag Luft

III, the Luftwaffe-run officer camp that was made famous by the major movies *The Wooden Horse* and *The Great Escape*. He started to write as a POW, for concerts that aimed to both keep up morale and drown out the noise of tunnel digging. He befriended actor Peter Butterworth in the camp and partnered with him on those concerts; he would later introduce him to the *Carry On* series, in which he would become a regular, appearing in 16 of them. Rothwell even wrote a spoof of this sort of thing, *Carry On Escaping*, but it was never made.

Having held “respectable” jobs like town clerk and police officer before the war, he turned instead to writing as a full time career in the fifties, penning comedy sketches for television shows featuring established comedians like Terry-Thomas, Arthur Askey and Ted Ray. His first feature film scripts were dotted around the mid-1950s. However, he didn’t write *Carry On Sergeant*, the first *Carry On* film in 1958, or the next five films in what soon became a thematic series; Hudis did.

Carry On Sergeant was always intended as a standalone film. It was adapted from a play by the historical novelist, R. F. Delderfield, and starred Bob Monkhouse and the first Doctor, William Hartnell, so it’s hardly what the series became. If anything, it’s a 1958 version of *Police Academy*, merely with conscripts into National Service rather than policemen. However, the cast list did include such names as Kenneth Williams, Charles Hawtrey, Kenneth Connor, Terry Scott and Hattie Jacques, who all became regulars in the *Carry On* films that were soon spun out of this picture’s success. The first four of those actors were still regulars for this sixteenth in the series in 1968; Jacques appeared in fourteen of the films between 1958 and 1974, but not this one.

In those early years, *Carry On* movies tended to throw respectable professions into a comedy framework, following quite closely the formula of the first, such as *Carry On Nurse*, *Carry On Teacher* and *Carry On Constable*. However, they would quickly begin to take on a variety of British institutions, traditions and tropes, especially after Rothwell replaced Hudis as the series writer.

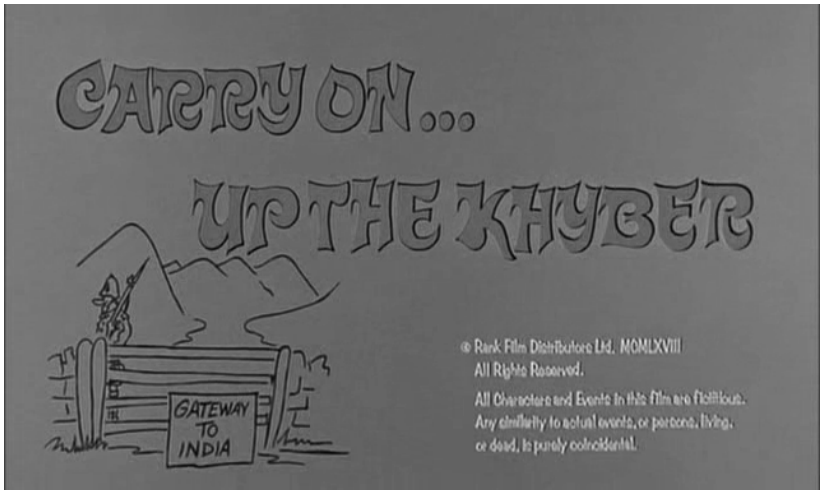
While Rothwell wrote the eighth film on spec, *Carry On Jack*, it was made

after *Carry On Cabby*, which he hadn't written as a *Carry On* film at all; he'd submitted it to Peter Rogers as a standalone picture, *Call Me a Cab*. Rogers liked his work and brought him on for the series.

To my mind, it took him a while to warm up, *Carry On Spying* and *Carry On Cleo* being overrated entries in the series, even if the latter did feature what has been voted the greatest one-liner in movie history, which Rothwell admittedly borrowed from the radio show, *Take It from Here*. Kenneth Williams, portraying Julius Caesar, shouts out, "Infamy! Infamy! They've all got it in for me!"

To me, Rothwell hit his stride in 1966 with *Carry On Screaming!*, a spoof of Hammer horror movies, because the next half dozen are all great bawdy fun. Personal favourites of mine include *Carry On Henry* (about Henry VIII's wives), *Carry On Dick* (about highwaymen) and *Carry On... Don't Lose Your Head* (about the French revolution).

Fans argue about which is the worst feature in the series (many vote for the last, *Carry On Columbus*, released fourteen years after its predecessor to tie in to the 500th anniversary of Columbus reaching the New World, but I'd suggest either of the two that came before it, *Carry On England* or *Carry On Emmanuelle*). However, it's almost always agreed that *Carry On... Up the Khyber*, is the best. In fact, the British Film Institute included it in their list



of the 100 greatest British films, in 99th place above *The Killing Fields*.

It's hard to argue against it being the most quintessential, partly because it featured most of the series regulars in some of their best roles but partly because it focused around a subject that was ripe for ridicule in 1968: the colonial era of British expansion, in which we waltzed into other countries and proudly proclaimed that they were ours, and the Kipling-esque adventures that glorified it, like the 1939 version of *Gunga Din*. The time was right, the people were right and the end result was so right.

We're in India in 1895, with the British in charge but the natives restless. Her Majesty's governor of Khalabar, in the northwest of the country bordering Afghanistan, is Sir Sidney Ruff-Diamond, in the form of the irrepressible Sidney James, so good at playing a dirty old man with an even dirtier laugh. His foil is Randy Lal, the Khasi of Khalabar, the local rajah, played by Kenneth Williams.

It's worth mentioning that the humour is thoroughly English, to the degree that many jokes will fly over the heads of those from other countries. For instance, "khazi" is military slang for a toilet and the film's title, in addition to referencing a real historical location, is an example of Cockney rhyming slang, in which a word is deliberately obscured by shortening a phrase with which it rhymes. For instance, "to use your loaf"



means “to use your head” because “head” rhymes with “loaf of bread”. Of course, this is often used to obscure words that aren’t usable in polite company, such as “cobblers”, which is taken from “cobbler’s awls” or “balls” and, in this case, “Up the Khyber” from “Khyber Pass” or “arse”.

Rothwell defines the state of affairs perfectly at a polo match. The Khasi tells his daughter that Sir Sidney is a British governor, “whose benevolent rule and wise guidance we could well do without.” Why does he smile at him so favourably? “Because in these days of British military supremacy, the Indian must be as a basket: with two faces.” Meanwhile, Sir Sidney tells his wife, Lady Joan, that the Khasi would like to massacre him and “every other Britisher in India”. Why does he smile at him like that, then? “Because as a top-ranked British diplomatist, I’m as two-faced as he is.”

They do say that the best comedy is based in truth and there’s much truth here, not least in the final scene, in which the native Burpa tribe attacks the Governor’s Residence and, while the men fight outside, the Governor sits down to a black tie dinner, with orchestra, and everyone ignores the battle, even with the room being blown to bits around them. This is the most ridiculous yet still truest example of “stiff upper lip” that has ever been filmed.

But how do we get there? Well, Sir Sidney’s province is defended by the 3rd Foot and Mouth Regiment, colloquially known as “the Devils in Skirts” because they are said to wear nothing under their kilts. Rothwell suggests that this is the primary reason why the natives have not revolted. In the words of the Khasi: “Think how frightening it would be to have such a man charging at you with his skirts flying in the air and flashing his great big bayonet at you!” But the local warlord Bungdit Din, surely the best role for the 6’ 7” Bernard Bresslaw in 14 *Carry On* movies, flashes his scimitar at the cowardly Private Widdle who promptly faints at the sight. Because it’s so important, he looks under the man’s kilt to discover that he’s wearing large underpants beneath it. He takes them to the Khasi, who sees the possibility and, sure enough, it soon escalates to the point where he can convince the Burpas that there is nothing to fear from men who wear such garments under their skirts and a native uprising begins.

This set-up is perfect for a *Carry On* film and it's aided by a host of fortuitous circumstances, because budgets were never high for *Carry On* films. This one cost a mere £260,000, even with a dozen or so regular cast members, because even the biggest stars, such as Kenneth Williams, were only paid £5,000 per picture. To put this budget into perspective, Rogers planned *Carry On Dallas* in 1980, a spoof of the TV show, but had to ditch the idea when Lorimar Productions wanted twenty times the entire production budget as their royalty fee.

Carry On Cleo was the greatest beneficiary of circumstance within the series, able to use expensive costumes and sets created and built for the Elizabeth Taylor version of *Cleopatra* but abandoned when production moved to Rome. However *Carry On... Up the Khyber* also lucked out, as all the kilts were re-used from the Alec Guinness film, *Tunes of Glory*. The Governor's Residence is Heatherden Hall, a Victorian country house located within the grounds of Pinewood Studios and the Khyber Pass scenes were shot on Mount Snowden in Wales.

Rothwell's scripts were generally written with series regulars in mind for specific characters, which is why Roy Castle's one and only appearance is in a role clearly intended for Jim Dale, but this one features what are arguably the best roles for a whole host of those regulars. Sid James was top billed in 17 of his 19 *Carry On* appearances and Kenneth Williams was the most regular of the regulars, appearing in 25 of the 30 films, but these are surely the quintessential roles for them. Beyond Bresslaw as Bungdit Din, I'd suggest that Joan Sims, Terry Scott and Peter Butterworth never got better roles either as the common-as-muck Lady Joan Ruff-Diamond, the gruff Sgt. Maj. MacNutt and the lecherous missionary, Brother Belcher, respectively. Other regulars, like Charles Hawtrey, Angela Douglas and Julian Holloway, are also well cast and Cardew Robinson is perfect in his sole series appearance as an inept fakir. The consistent quality of these actors and Rothwell's scripts are the two primary reasons why this series did so well, with the film-going public if not the critics.

And Rothwell was never better than here!

Some jokes are truly awful but perfect for the moment, such as when

Brother Belcher, horrendously disguised as a Burpa chief, carries on with a harem girl in a jewelled bra. “Are those rubies?” he asks her, to which she replies, “No, they’re mine.” When the British prepare to defend against the natives, Capt. Keene issues the command to fire at will and Brother Belcher comments, “Poor old Will! Why do they always fire at him?” As the ceiling collapses in on Lady Joan during the native uprising, she laughs it off. “Oh dear, I seem to have got a little plastered!”

Some are mildly rude, such as an exchange in which Sir Sidney politely receives the Khasi’s compliments with succinct responses, which slowly lead to, “And may his radiance light up your life!” “And up yours!”

Many are dirty jokes indeed, like one made during the introductory conversation at the polo match. Talking about the Khasi, Sir Sidney tells his wife, “I wouldn’t trust him an inch,” to which she saucily replies, “Neither would I.”

Some jokes are situational, such as when Private Widdle paints a thin red line across the courtyard of the Governor’s Residence, a reference to the Battle of Balaclava when a half-depth line of red shirted Highlanders scared off a Russian cavalry attack, “the thin red line: becoming a symbol of British stiff upper lip. Having the Khyber Pass, “the gateway to India”, be a traditional British sheep gate, complete with a “Please shut the gate”



sign, is priceless.

More topically, the Khasi is dismissive when one of his men announces the arrival of Sir Sidney by sounding a gong, uttering the line, “Rank stupidity!” This film was being distributed by the Rank Organisation, whose ident is a similarly dressed man sounding a gong.

And it all builds up to the final scene, when Sir Sidney and his officers politely ask the ladies for their permission to leave the dinner table, after the natives have finally breached the Residence’s gate. They saunter outside to the battle and treat the whole thing like a game of cricket. “Permission to have a bash, sir?” asks Maj. Shorthouse, before leaping into the fray with his pistol.

These final scenes are really the *Carry On* series in microcosm. We British are always good at laughing at ourselves and that pervades the history of our humour. It was a rare *Carry On* film that didn’t target a traditional British institution, from Hammer Horror films to the National Health Service, from caravan holidays to the Brits abroad, from the armed forces to the trade unions.

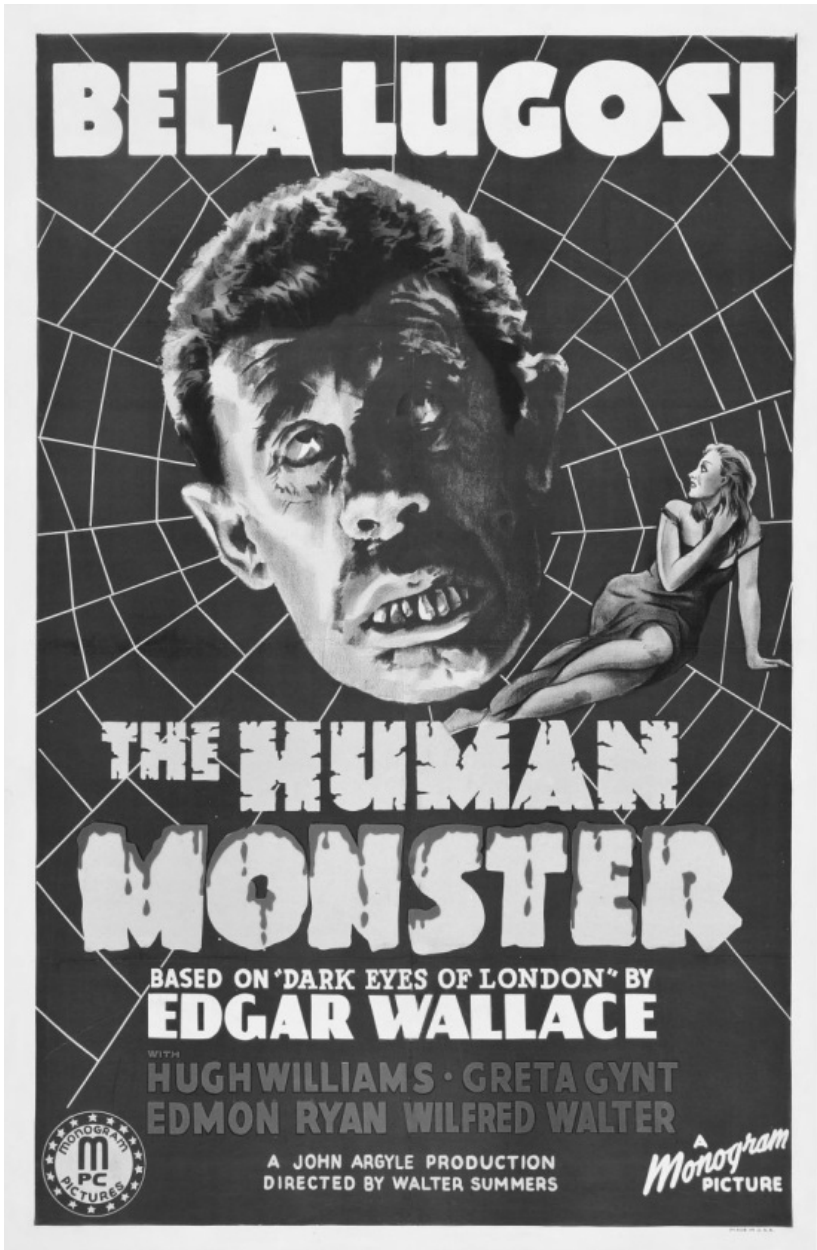
The British Empire was a logical target, of course, but it allowed Rothwell to really hone in on what it truly meant to be British. The final scenes both celebrate and lampoon the heart of the British mindset. We’re



brave, we're cultured and we're cool cucumbers under pressure, but we stand on ceremony, we make a ritual out of everything and we take things to ridiculous extremes.

I can't say that this movie is perfect: not every joke hits, there are slow bits during the middle and the plot could have been tighter. However, as a proud Briton who wears a kilt every day, this is part of who I am. It's an institution in itself, just like the entire *Carry On* series.





The Dark Eyes of London (1939)

reviewed on 15th November for actress Greta Gynt

Director: Walter Summers

Writers: Patrick Kirwan, Walter Summers and J. F. Argyle, from the novel by Edgar Wallace, with additional dialogue by Jay Van Lusil

Stars: Bela Lugosi, Hugh Williams and Greta Gynt

Looking back just over three quarters of a century on, the big name in this picture is surely that of Bela Lugosi, a Hungarian actor who emigrated to the United States via Germany and found his star in 1927, appearing as the exotic Count Dracula on the Broadway stage. Adapting that role to film for Tod Browning at Universal in 1931, he revitalised the Universal horror movie for a new decade and became the first heir to the only just vacated throne of Lon Chaney.

The Dark Eyes of London, however, came eight years later, at a time when horror films were being reduced in number at all the major studios, and so Lugosi was finding his career mired in B-movies of ever decreasing quality. Even though it would be released Stateside by Monogram, this British horror feature, made by Argyle Productions and shot at Welwyn Studios in Hertfordshire, must have felt like a breath of fresh air for him. Certainly he sailed out on the Queen Mary to star in it, a convenient holiday on the way to work. Perhaps he'd also enjoyed making *The Mystery of the Marie Celeste* in the UK a few years earlier for Hammer.

As much as Argyle were keen to capitalise on Lugosi's legendary performance as Dracula in their advertising for the film, he was not the biggest star associated with the project, that honour surely going to Edgar Wallace, who had written the novel upon which the film was based. Sure, the script was adapted by three screenwriters, one of whom was the film's director, Walter Summers, in a far more gruesome style than the original

novel, but it was still an Edgar Wallace picture and that's hard to miss.

The success of Edgar Wallace, whose name is hardly remembered today, cannot be understated. In 1928, it was joked, believably, that one in four books being read in Great Britain came from his pen and he churned out material at an amazing rate, even for the pulp era. By the time he was done, he had written over 170 novels, 18 stage plays and a thousand short stories or so, racking up 50 million sales in the process, more than there were people in the country at the time. What's more, over 200 films have been based on his writings, though he's mostly remembered today for creating *King Kong*.

Having read some Edgar Wallace, this rings mostly true to his novels even though it's more horrific. Wallace helped to shift British detective stories away from polite private investigators like Sherlock Holmes and towards routine policemen; this string of river murders is investigated by Det. Insp. Larry Holt of C.I.D., the Criminal Investigation Department of the British police force. There are a number of procedural scenes that explore the police routine, including the projection of crime scene photos and tests run on a body to ascertain stomach contents.

It's also a fantastic opportunity for Bela Lugosi, who plays a double role well enough that it doesn't even seem like a double role for the longest time. Monogram released the film in the States as *The Human Monster*, and while that title surely includes a nod to the morality of Lugosi's character, Dr. Feodor Orloff, it really shifts the focus of the marketing to Jake, a supporting character played by Wilfred Walter. A few years later, it would surely have been given to Rondo Hatton.

I'm watching, however, for Greta Gynt, a Norwegian actress who lived in the U.K. as a young child and moved back again as her acting career got under way. She was a regular face in British films of the forties, often playing the female lead; she retired in the early sixties on a high note, playing the lead in *The Runaway*. She would have been a hundred years old on 15th November and, to celebrate, I selected one of the two films she's best known for.

While she was never typecast in genre film, she is still remembered

mostly for *Sexton Blake and the Hooded Terror*, with Tod Slaughter, and *The Dark Eyes of London*, which is often cited as the first film to be awarded the H for Horrific certificate by the British censor. That's not strictly true but it ought to be, given what goes on down at Dearborn's Home for the Destitute Blind, an agreeable cover for the sordid machinations of Dr. Orloff. Most H for Horrific films are released as PG today, but this one still carries quite a punch because of that setting and what goes on there.

Gynt doesn't appear for quite a while, as the story becomes first established through a number of plot strands. At Scotland Yard, the C.I.D. wonder if five missing persons showing up drowned in eight months is a coincidence. They've found no connections thus far but "the Home Office is kicking." Three of those five were on Det. Insp. Holt's watch, as the Commissioner is gleeful to point out, so Holt is eager to break the case open. Elsewhere in London, Dr. Orloff loans Henry Stuart \$2,000 under the banner of the Greenwich Insurance Company. He trusts him, he says,



because he can read it in his eyes. Meanwhile, on his way back from the States is a forger by the name of Fred Grogan, being extradited and delivered into Holt's custody. Bringing him is Lt. Patrick O'Reilly of the Chicago P.D., who will follow Holt around to study the methods of the British police. He'll quickly become the film's comic relief, even if the Commissioner has a deliciously dry sense of humour. "I'll attach him to you," he tells Holt, "so he won't learn anything."

So far, this feels very much like a detective story, the sort of thing that someone like, hey, Edgar Wallace might have written, but there's another edge that gradually grows as the picture runs on, one that's quintessential early American horror. It reminds us that there are people out there in our world, not necessarily far away like Transylvania but right here in our town, that are not like us. They're usually seen as sinister just for being different and the best movies to tread this territory use that as a means to examine what it is to be human. Lesser pictures, of course, merely conflate



physical deformities with mental ones, suggesting that anyone who doesn't look like us must be a monster, but the real classics like *Freaks* and *Island of Lost Souls*, highlight that such people might just be more human than those who we're conditioned to see as their superiors, regular able-bodied folk who can be and usually are the real bad guys. *The Dark Eyes of London* isn't of the calibre of either of those classics but it does try and it succeeds more often than not.

It helps that the "deformities" are mostly ones that we don't see in a horrific light any more. Orloff supports Dearborn's Home for the Destitute Blind, where Rev. or Prof. Dearborn, depending on the source, sightless himself, tries to rehabilitate the blind by giving them food, shelter and work. Sure, having them shuffle around like zombies isn't realistic but it certainly contributes to the freaky tone that's being cultivated. Maybe they're all newly blind and haven't yet found the sixth sense that Dearborn suggests will develop. No, I don't believe that in the slightest but maybe the scriptwriters did.

Blindness isn't the only lost sense here, as Orloff's secretary is surely mute, as is Lou, the blind violinist who plays in the street outside Orloff's office and delivers notes for him to Dearborn's. At the home is Jake, who is not only blind but also looks like a cross between a werewolf and an acromegaly case. After the war, actor Wilfred Walter would have a leg amputated, highlighting in real life the difference between "physically different" and "monster".

The scam that's going on behind all this isn't hard to figure out and we follow the details of it through Henry Stuart, the imminent victim who will break the case for Det. Insp. Holt. His eventual death scene is fantastic, the abstraction required in 1939 adding to the effect. Jake looks rather like Leatherface as he lifts his apron, Stuart promptly turns to run and Orloff closes the door on both him and us so that the scream echoes at us from the other side.

The cinematography was by Bryan Langley, who had a decade behind him; he had co-shot *Number Seventeen* for Alfred Hitchcock in 1932. There are a number of highly effective and varied shots, including one through

an archway and another through a doorway, both of which succeed in focusing our attention magnificently. The scenes at Dearborn's are often gorgeous too and they make the film feel reminiscent of *Bedlam*, which wouldn't be made for seven more years. Nicholas Musuraca's camerawork there is legendary but I wonder if he saw this as an influence.

What breaks the case for Holt is the unexpected fact that Stuart has a daughter, Diana, something that Orloff hadn't factored into his plans at all. Through the time honoured art of coincidence, she is already on her way home from America and Holt actually treads on her foot as she alights from the train right before Fred Grogan; he's immediately smitten and will have plenty of contact, starting at the morgue as she comes to identify her father's body.

Greta Gynt isn't given a huge amount of screen time but she does get to do quite a lot with it, because the role takes her through a variety of situations rather quickly. One minute she's a potential love interest, the next she's called on to deliver dramatic reactions, before eventually being sent undercover in a police investigation. I enjoyed her performance but it's not as consistent as it could be and would have benefitted from more screen time to allow Gynt to find her feet in each scene. When she gets that, she's great and she's a fun damsel in distress; without it, she's not as good.

Lugosi makes the best of his double role, which is surely one of the best such performances of the era. As Orloff, he's overdone in the traditional Lugosi style, hypnotising with his eyes and going all moody and dangerous when things don't go to plan. However, his other role, which I won't name to avoid spoiling the film for you, is thoroughly different and the costume is simple but neatly effective.

To be fair, the biggest reason he gets away with it is that the voice of his alternate persona is dubbed by another actor, because Lugosi's thick accent was never something he could switch off at a moment's notice, but he does lip synch very well. As Det. Insp. Holt, Hugh Williams is the actor unenviably tasked with playing the routine, albeit talented, character in a film full of grotesques and so isn't particularly memorable, even though

he does exactly what he needed to do. It's always the case that outrageous roles dominate in pictures like this and there are a whole slew of outrageous roles stealing scenes from the decent policeman.

Most obvious, of course, is Wilfred Walter as Jake, who would become the focus of the American marketing campaign. If Dr. Orloff is a human monster in a moral sense, Jake is certainly a human monster in the physical one. That's his visage on the poster, under Bela Lugosi's name; I wonder how many American filmgoers were confused when they saw *The Human Monster* in 1940 and found that Lugosi wasn't the actor playing Jake.

While Walter is not perfect as the lumbering assassin, I was impressed more by Arthur E. Owen as Lou and Alexander Field as Grogan. The former initially seems like a throwaway character, but he keeps on finding moments of importance, eventually writhing around on a hospital bed like he's turned into Renfield. The latter nails the feel of polite disrepute that



Leonard Rossiter epitomised much later on. He's making the most of his fame, as dubious as it is, lording it over the cops who never fail to be in charge. He gets a memorable final scene too, which I also won't spoil.

For a 75 minute B-movie that relishes in gruesome inventiveness, this is surprisingly effective and stands up well today, both as a detective yarn and a horror flick. Bela Lugosi made some incredible movies in the thirties but not all in a good way; some were horrific while others were just horrible. I haven't quite seen everything he made after this but I have seen the vast majority and it's a rare one indeed that's better than this. I could argued that there are only two, *The Wolf Man* and *The Body Snatcher*, making this an important film in his career, the last of his good work of the thirties.

I wonder if part of that was because this was a British film; while that meant that it didn't have to cater to the American Production Code, the British censor was notoriously tough on horror and I'm honestly surprised



this crept through their net. Destroying the hearing of a blind mute and then murdering him in front of our bound heroine is brutal and not what would be allowed at a time other than when the H certificate was brought back in.





DICK POWELL · EVELYN KEYES

IN
Johnny O'clock

with
LEE J. COBB · ELLEN DREW · NINA FOCH
S. THOMAS GOMEZ · JOHN KELLOGG

Screenplay by ROBERT ROSSEN

Directed by ROBERT ROSSEN

Produced by EDWARD G. NEALIS

Associate Producer MILTON HOLMES

A COLUMBIA Reprint

Johnny O'Clock (1947)

reviewed on 19th November for actress Evelyn Keyes

Director: Robert Rossen

Writer: Robert Rossen, from an original story by Milton Holmes

Stars: Dick Powell and Evelyn Keyes

It's ironic that the title of this film is never fully explained. It's a catchy one, especially when compared to the relentlessly generic titles that were usually given to films noir, and it sticks in the brain. It surely contributed to my choice of this film, which I had not seen before, to remember the career of Evelyn Keyes, its leading lady, on what would have been her one hundredth birthday.

Yet, beyond being the current name of its lead character (he has others, for reasons never explained but all clearly dubious), it never finds a real purpose. Mostly it just serves to keep time in mind, as do the superb opening shot of a man checking his watch against the large clock above him and the importance of a pair of expensive watches within the story. The title is much catchier than the movie itself, a lot more memorable and, arguably, of a higher quality than the material it advertises. After all, it did a great job of suckering me in, as I'd heard the name before often and so sought out the film for this project.

I'm happy that I watched *Johnny O'Clock* though, because it's an important and interesting film, even if the importance is mostly in the presence of Robert Rossen as writer and director; he wrote the script from an original story by Milton Holmes. He was already known as a writer, having penned a host of screenplays for Warner Brothers in the thirties, including *Marked Woman*, *Racket Busters* and *The Roaring Twenties*; his greatest up to this point may have been *A Walk in the Sun*.

However, this was his first time to sit in the director's chair and, while

he would never be prolific there, his ten films as a director include classics like *All the King's Men* and *The Hustler*, both of which landed him Oscar nominations for Best Director; the former won three from its seven nods, including Best Picture, but Rossen lost to Joseph L. Mankiewicz for *A Letter to Three Wives*. I wonder how much of a learning experience this was for him, given that he was firing on all cylinders later in 1947 with *Body and Soul*, a film which he directed but notably did not write.

Surprisingly, to my mind, Rossen is the weakest link here. While he (and perhaps Holmes) deserve great credit for the quintessential film noir dialogue which fills the script to bursting, this is really methodical direction of a methodical script and there's just no passion in it, even when the actors do their best to generate some.

Methodical works well for Lee J. Cobb who, as the capable Insp. Koch, drives everything through his investigations of the deaths that pepper the story. It doesn't work well for Dick Powell as Johnny O'Clock or for other important characters: his partner, his assistant and the three ladies with important parts to play in proceedings. Each of them, albeit in different ways, feel like they're bridling at the steady pace which Rossen forces onto them and aching to break out of it and into their own momentum. Two of the ladies want to ratchet things up while the third wants to slow it down. Johnny wants his control just because, while his partner is alternately active and passive. But none are happy with the pace as it is.

That's not to say that the script isn't cleverly written, because it is. The first nine minutes are spent at Johnny's hotel in only two scenes: one in which Charlie, his personal assistant, wakes him up and a second in which Insp. Koch and Harriet Hobson, separately but together, meet him downstairs. In other hands, this would be throwaway material but, in Rossen's, every moment has a purpose. He sets the stage with a murder, establishes the characters of five important people (one of whom we haven't even met yet) and sets in motion the events that will constitute our story, and the latter from a number of different perspectives too.

It's textbook stuff and the only flaw is that it misleads us to believe that the core of the film will revolve around a man named Chuck Blayden.

Blayden is a dirty cop, one who has shot dead a gambler while he “resisted arrest”. Johnny knows Blayden (and the gambler), Harriet loves him (and wears the bruises to prove it) and Insp. Koch wants him off the force (and Johnny to help make that happen). But hey, why not a human MacGuffin?

Another clever aspect to the script is what meaning is brought by the three ladies of importance.

Harriet is the first of them, a girl who checks hats and coats at the club which Johnny helps to run. She’s a lovely little thing, played to glorious effect by Nina Foch. She’s always reminded me of a more angelic and less Teutonic Marlene Dietrich but that works especially well in this film because Harriet is a simple girl, both in outlook and perhaps in mind too. “Old enough. Not smart enough,” explains her sister. She’s a good girl, but she loves a bad man and can’t stop loving him. That leads to her suicide which, of course, isn’t any such thing. She can be seen as the present for Johnny O’Clock, clearly a man of dubious history who is nonetheless doing an honest job with a clean record. Ironically, the film noir genre, which is perhaps more closely associated with black and white than any other,



never saw things in anything but shades of grey. Most characters here are straightforward, but Johnny is fashioned from quintessentially deep film noir complexity.

If Harriet is his present, a moment in time where he's a good man doing honest work, Nelle Marchettis is his past. She's the trophy wife of Johnny's partner, Guido (pronounced Geedo), a more traditional slimy businessman who may or may not be operating in isolation from organised crime. Given that actor Thomas Gomez was 42 and weighed three hundred pounds, but vivacious actress Ellen Drew was a decade younger and reminds of both Joan Crawford and Rita Hayworth, it's hardly surprising that Nelle has a thing for Johnny instead, who buys a fresh flower every morning for his buttonhole and is played by the dapper Dick Powell, who doesn't look a year older than Gomez even if he was. I don't believe that it's ever said outright but it's firmly hinted that Nelle and Johnny had a relationship in the past and her various attempts to restart it are so overt that it's difficult to believe that her screen husband doesn't realise it. That's one reason why Guido might act like he's Johnny's boss but we never buy it.



Our birthday girl, Evelyn Keyes, arrives just shy of a third of the way into the film. She's Nancy Hobson, Harriet's elder sister, who flies into town after her death to take care of affairs. She meets Koch first, who's ahead of everybody else throughout, but falls for Johnny. While the "club" he runs with Guido looks much more like a casino, he underlines to her that he isn't a gambler. "Gambler's a guy who takes a chance," he says, though he soon takes a chance on her. Nancy's first scenes hint at her being a femme fatale, but that role is much better played by Nelle Marchettis. Really, she's the future in this triptych, or at least the possibility of one for Johnny that's entirely above board. The pair are quick to fall into romance, perhaps much too quick, but we can buy into it happening and the various things happening around it too that flavour it in film noir terms. Nancy isn't the looker that Harriet was but she's hardly bad on the eyes and she has the depth that was denied her screen sister. Keyes played a substantial character, if not a substantial part.

Keyes was a capable actress who successfully avoided typecasting but failed to escape her most famous role; it eventually found its way into the title of her autobiography, *Scarlett O'Hara's Younger Sister: My Lively Life In and Out of Hollywood*. The affairs documented within it include those with three of her fellow 2016 centenarians: Glenn Ford, Sterling Hayden and Kirk Douglas; though none of those were included amongst her four marriages, she did wed film directors Charles Vidor and John Huston. It's not fair to say that her life eclipsed her career, but the latter didn't take off to the degree it deserved. Her favourite of her own pictures was *Mrs. Mike* in 1949; given that she plays the Bostonian wife of Dick Powell's Mountie in the remote north of Canada, it's not difficult for the more romantic among us to treat that as an alternate future for her and Johnny O'Clock. Certainly, it would be tough to argue against the ending of this picture being weaker than the events which led up to it.

While many of her career highlights were in lead roles in B-movies, she did good work in some major films too. After playing that supporting role of Suellen O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*, she landed a Columbia contract; they tasked her with playing an ingenue in *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* and the

female lead in *The Jolson Story*, amongst others. Personally, I'd call out *The Face Behind the Mask*, a dramatic crime story from 1941 with a tinge of horror, in which she gives great support to an even better Peter Lorre. Her versatility is ably highlighted by this film noir coming right after *The Jolson Story* and right before *The Mating of Millie*, a comedy in which she played the title character. She retired in 1956 after playing Tom Ewell's absent wife in *The Seven Year Itch*, but she never really quit acting. Her final film role was as a witch in *Wicked Stepmother*, also a final film for Bette Davis, and she still had a third appearance to come on television's *Murder She Wrote*, on which she played different characters each time out.

As a versatile actress of consistent quality, it's appropriate that she's consistently good in this film, even in support of an actor who has a little more trouble with his role. There are points where Dick Powell is nuanced and perfect, as we might expect, but others in which I wasn't convinced that he understood his character (or, at least, the script's take on it).

Perhaps he had trouble being the lead but not the driving force behind the film; that's Insp. Koch all the way. Johnny is one of those hardboiled characters who sits back and lets things be as they must be, but usually those characters were pulling the strings behind the scenes and he isn't. For half the film, I imagined Johnny as being rather like Rick Blaine from *Casablanca* as played by William Powell; that's not quite as palatable as it is intriguing and he's not given the grounding. Powell is great while standing up to Koch and delivering fantastic film noir dialogue, whether talking to cops or ladies. He's less believable during emotional scenes, where he's a little too cold, or during the end, where he's out of character.

And that ending is definitely a down point. As carefully as the plot is constructed, it's not complex enough to mask whodunit and why. The finalé needed more than the solving of a crime but what's provided doesn't feel satisfactory. Mostly it's the writing and I can understand if the acting errors came from that.

There are a number of other details that don't feel at all resolved either. Clearly Johnny wasn't born an O'Clock but we're never given his real surname or any reason why he chose this particular one, especially as it

A Hundred in 2016

screams to have meaning. Perhaps it was just one of many elements to focus on a theme of the passage of time, which was promptly written away from without the due diligence done in clean up to avoid misleading us.

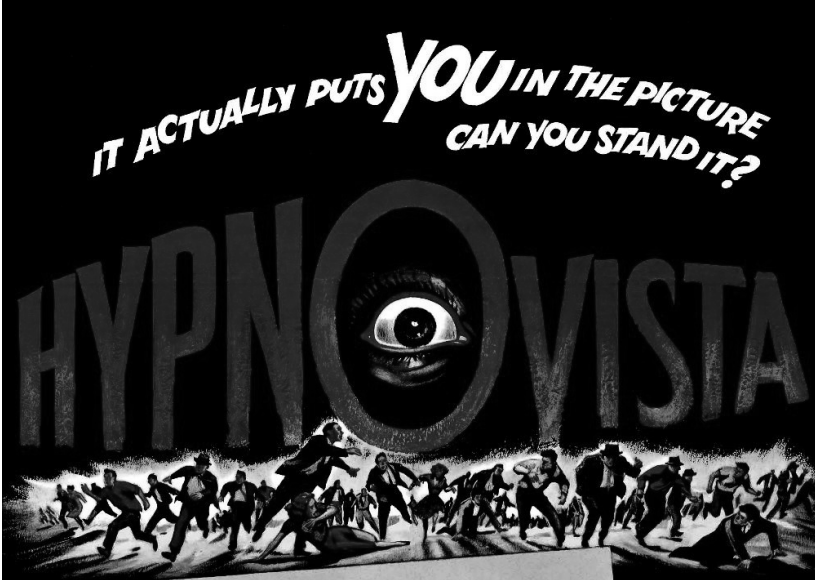
And that leads us back to Robert Rossen, an established writer of screenplays who debuted here as a director. I wonder if the best of this picture was due to his experience as the former but the worst was due to his lack of experience as the latter. Certainly it works best as a starting point to his career.



A Hundred in 2016

IT ACTUALLY PUTS **YOU** IN THE PICTURE
CAN YOU STAND IT?

HYPNOVISTA



**'HORRORS
OF THE
BLACK
MUSEUM**

SEE
THE VAT OF DEATH!

FEEL
THE ICY HANDS!

SEE
THE FANTASTIC
BINOCULAR MURDER!

FEEL
THE TIGHTENING
NOOSE!

IN **CINEMASCOPE** AND **COLOR**

starring **MICHAEL GOUGH** • **JUNE CUNNINGHAM** • **GRAHAM CURNOW** • **SHIRLEY FIELD** • Produced by **HERMAN COHEN**
Written by **ABEN KANDEL** and **HERMAN COHEN** • Directed by **ARTHUR CRABTREE** • **A JAMES H. NICHOLSON** and **SAMUEL Z. ARKOFF** Production • An **AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL** Picture

Horrors of the Black Museum (1959)

reviewed on 23rd November for actor Michael Gough

Director: Arthur Crabtree

Writer: Herman Cohen and Aben Kandel, from their original story

Stars: Michael Gough, June Cunningham, Graham Curnow and Shirley Anne Field

I was rather shocked to find that I hadn't seen *Horrors of the Black Museum* before. I grew up on this period of British horror movies, watched on my sister's TV late at night after I was supposed to be asleep, and I've seen most of them, including the other couple of pictures in what David Pirie called in his book, *A Heritage of Horror*, the "Sadian trilogy" of horror thrillers from Anglo-Amalgamated: *Peeping Tom* and *Circus of Horrors*.

That's an interesting trio, very different in style and approach but with a common theme of cruel violence, and there's plenty of that on offer here. Being British films from the tail end of the fifties, they're polite and courteous in their aberrance and so they occupy a curious midpoint between the amoral excesses of the Grand Guignol and the twisted torture porn of today. In doing this, they were massively influential and it's fair to say that, without them, we may not have had Vincent Price in eight Edgar Allan Poe adaptations from American International, who coughed up half the budget for this picture.

In fact, Herman Cohen, in his role as producer of the film rather than that of a co-writer of the script, wanted Price in the lead, or at least Orson Welles, but Anglo-Amalgamated successfully lobbied for a British actor, partly because of cost and partly because of the Eady Levy.

This was a tax on the box office whose proceeds were divvied up between exhibitors and qualifying British movies; the aim was to support the British film industry by keeping money within it. To qualify for such

funding, administered through the newly formed British Film Fund Agency, at least 85% of a picture had to be shot in the United Kingdom or its Commonwealth and there could only be three foreign salaries associated with each film. Cohen took up one of those slots already, so hiring a British lead avoided an immediate second.

That was Michael Gough, who was born in Malaysia while it was still British Malaya. He's a fantastic choice for the role of Edmond Bancroft, the arrogant and quite deranged journalist and author of books on true crime. He would have turned one hundred on 23rd November.

Gough had a long career, debuting on film in 1948 and television as far back as 1946. Originally, as British actors have a tendency to do, he appeared in adaptations of classics. That first TV movie was George Bernard Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* and that first feature was Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, in support of Vivien Leigh and Ralph Richardson. However, most know him from fantastic film, probably for his repeated role as Alfred in no less than four *Batman* movies, two for Tim Burton and the following two that we pretend don't exist. When I think of Michael Gough, though, I tend to think of the villainous Celestial Toymaker in *Doctor Who* and the murderous Dr. Armstrong in *The Avengers*, two iconic characters in two iconic TV shows, as well as mad scientist Dr. Charles Decker in *Konga*. Oddly, his first horror movie saw him play an entirely sane character, Arthur Holmwood in Hammer's *Dracula* in 1958, third billed after Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee, but filmmakers quickly realised that he was even more fun as the bad guy, the villain or the lunatic.

He's particularly unhinged here as Bancroft, especially as the film runs on. His final scene is gloriously memorable but it's only one of many because it's a real gift of a character to an actor with classical training who's willing to ham it up in a horror flick.

Bancroft is a writer, the author of many successful books on true crime (his latest is *Terror After Dark*) and a journalist who stops in regularly to cock a metaphorical snook at Scotland Yard. It seems that one-upping the peelers is something of a hobby of his and he simply revels in it. We watch both those aspects of his character often, signing books for fans one

moment and politely tormenting Supt. Graham the next.

As the film runs on, we also get to see his more twisted side. You see, there's a killer in town with three victims to his name in a mere two weeks, all women and "each murder more horrible than the last." Bancroft describes the most recent, conducted with a pair of binoculars with a concealed pair of needles to pierce through the eyes into the brain, as "fiendishly clever". It's this death scene that has kept this film alive in the minds of many for decades, not least that of Martin Scorsese.

More importantly, Bancroft suggests that the inspiration for the gruesome device must have come from a similar pair of binoculars that are stored in the Yard's own Black Museum. As unlikely as it may seem for a location lauded in the title of a horror movie, this particular location really exists. Officially named simply the Crime Museum, it was founded in 1874 and contains a vast array of relics of real crimes, including the *From Hell* letter, supposedly written by Jack the Ripper, to the fake Millennium Star diamond placed into the Millennium Dome to outwit jewel thieves. It isn't just famous stuff; it also includes other items of interest, such as shotguns disguised as umbrellas and, oh yes, a pair of binoculars with hidden spikes. These, according to Fred Cohen, were sent by a young stable boy back in the thirties to his master's daughter. He was in love with her but found himself fired for having sex with her in a stable and taken aback when she refused to have anything to do with him after that. He sent her these binoculars so that, when she focused them, the spikes



emerged, skewered her eyes and pierced into her brain, killing her instantly.

What's important to note here is that the Black Museum, housed today in the ominously named Room 101 at New Scotland Yard, is not open to the public and never has been since its founding. With the exception of a single recent exhibition of selected items at the London Museum, you must be a policeman, a lawyer or some other professional with a valid reason, to tour the exhibits.

It's drily funny to watch Supt. Graham and Insp. Lodge try to rebut Bancroft's suggestion that a visitor to the museum might be responsible for this string of new murders and hilarious to watch the police fail to realise that the writer overtly taunting them might be the killer.

Actually, he isn't, not directly, but it can't be considered a spoiler for me to bring that up because he's set up from moment one to be the obvious killer. His doctor thinks that he should be hospitalised for "unnatural excitement", a state which he apparently reaches after each murder. "It's my favourite subject," he tells Aggie, who runs an antique shop, as he buys a long dagger from her, the latest in a string of weaponry purchases. And it's only a quarter of an hour in when we visit his own Black Museum, full of weapons and torture devices, secreted in his own basement.

It's much more than circumstantial evidence though. Any horror fan will surely recognise the iconic characteristics which Gough so gloriously



exhibits. He walks with the aid of a cane, leans forward to orate with passion and has hair greying on the sides. In another movie, he'd be distinguished; in this one, he's clearly involved. It's less than half an hour in when we first catch sight of the real killer and immediately piece together most of the plot points we need to figure out the rest.

This isn't a picture to surprise us, it's a picture to shock us with what might honestly be described as the depths of depravity in a British film from 1959 or, to be fair, from anywhere, much nastier in tone than anything that Hammer had shown but keeping their glorious Technicolor. Especially in this sense, *Horrors of the Black Museum* predates such pictures as *Jigoku* in Japan, *Black Sunday* in Italy and *Blood Feast* in the United States. Today, of course, it seems tame, not to mention old fashioned, and, frankly, it would have felt that way by the mid-seventies, but Gough keeps an edge on it.

As fantastic as Gough is in this movie, he's not the only reason to watch. The murders here are more clinically twisted than sexual, unlike the film's Sadian peers, *Peeping Tom* and *Circus of Horrors*, but there is a sexual element that invites us to be voyeuristic.

Bancroft is keeping a young lady (and keeping her cooped up); her name is Joan Berkley and she's played by a curvacious June Cunningham who knows how to use her curves and gets plenty of opportunity to do so. After a heated argument with Bancroft, in which she gets rather vicious in her verbal attacks, she swans off to the pub to dance in front of the locals but pointedly leave on her own. She's such a tease!

We're set up to expect her death, of course, but she's escorted safely home by a couple of gentlemanly policemen, of the sort that you only see in British movies. There she teases us by disrobing for bed and is murdered when she least expects it. I won't detail how, because there are surprisingly few deaths in this film and I feel that I shouldn't spoil them. It's a pivotal moment for this film, though, half an hour in that sets the rest of the plot in motion.

If Gough steals the film and Cunningham gets the opportunity to steal a couple of scenes from him, the rest of the cast are, as was so often the case

with British film, thoroughly able support. There are fewer recognisable faces than usual, although Supt. Graham is the ever-reliable Geoffrey Keen, well known as the Minister of Defence, Frederick Gray, in no less than six James Bond films, and to horror mavens as the lead in Hammer's *Taste the Blood of Dracula*. His boss here, Commissioner Wayne, is Austin Trevor, the first actor to play Hercule Poirot on screen, in three films back in the early thirties. Also recognisable is Shirley Anne Field, a mainstay in the sixties, with key roles in *The Entertainer*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *Alfie*; she was also in *Peeping Tom*. However, surely the most memorable is Howard Greene, because he's the only one to overact. To be fair, he does so deliberately because he's playing a madman who confesses to the murders, promising that he'll use a death ray on the next one. He's a hoot.

On the technical side, only the script could really be viewed as problematic. Arthur Crabtree did everything he could with it as a director and did really well for the most part; he was known more for his comedies for Will Hay and Arthur Askey rather than genre movies, but this, his final film, came right after he directed *Fiend without a Face*, a sci-fi horror which had been even more financially successful than *Horrors of the Black Museum*; it made back thirteen times its budget rather than the mere seven that this film managed.

Desmond Dickinson was responsible for shooting the film and he did a great job without ever attempting to be flash. His camera is content to sit back and watch, often panning or dollying through a room with subtle voyeuristic tendencies, not only in Cunningham's scenes. There should be a shoutout for the production design crew, because I loved the sets. I want to buy Bancroft's mansion and fill it with the stuff that Aggie has for sale in her antiques shop. I'd keep Bancroft's dungeon and study, of course!

But for all the great dialogue and outlandish murder, the script is poorly paced and too easily distracted from its sadistic goal; the feature is only 78 minutes long and would have been much more memorable had there been an extra twelve minutes of murderous death gadgets. Instead, Jim Nicholson added a gimmick, as was the current trend in genre film.

William Castle, the maestro of such gimmicks, had begun a year earlier with *Macabre*, handing out a \$1,000 life insurance policy with every ticket in case the customer died of fright, but proceeded to get more and more elaborate. For *House on Haunted Hill*, he sent a skeleton over the audience on a wire; he attached vibrating motors to the underside of randomly selected seats for *The Tingler*; and, for *Mr. Sardonicus*, had the audience decide if the title character would live or die. Of course, audiences always wanted him to die, so the “live” reel never screened and nobody’s quite sure if it ever existed.

Castle’s pictures weren’t the only ones with gimmicks, of course; screenings of Crabtree’s previous film, *Fiend without a Face*, had a “living and breathing fiend” in a display case out in front of house, where it twitched its spinal cord and menaced the public with sound effects.

For *Horrors of the Black Museum*, Nicholson invented Hypno-Vista, as every cinematic gimmick just had to have a hokey name. This involved a twelve minute prologue from a registered psychologist and hypnotist called Emile Franchele, who later hosted a television show in California called *Adventures in Hypnotism* and spoke as a hypnotherapist in a 1975 documentary, *Death: The Ultimate Mystery*.

Franchele initially explains what hypnotism is, accompanied by basic special effects and the inevitable Archimedes spiral, before proceeding to, dare I say it, hypnotise the audience. First, he has us hold our hands together so that he can generate enough suggestion to part them against



our will, but he eventually gets to the point where he uses sound and enforcement to persuade us that we're in London, ready for the film to begin with red double decker buses and recognisable landmarks.

That means that, yes, we the audience become part of the film, mentally prepared to be right there in the room when poor Gail Dunlap triggers the needles in those binoculars she's been sent and falls lifeless on the carpet!

Well, that was the idea. Needless to say, it's completely ludicrous but audiences apparently lapped it up back in 1959, when they were expecting to have a hokey gimmick to spice up every movie.

To be fair, it's certainly not the worst thing about this picture. Beyond the troubled script, there are some truly awful make-up effects that supposedly age the murderer but only serve to lessen the impact of what should have been a relatively cool *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* type subplot; there's plenty of convenience for the sake of art, such as the thoroughly useful vat of acid that suddenly shows up at the right moment, having never been set up in an early scene; I could also include the bra that Shirley Anne Field wears as Angela Banks, the illicit girlfriend of Rick, Bancroft's assistant, because it's notably distracting and could easily have put someone's eye out.

What's least forgivable is that Bancroft, who's supposed to be a highly intelligent crime writer with delusions of grandeur, he really is a complete moron when it comes to covering his tracks.

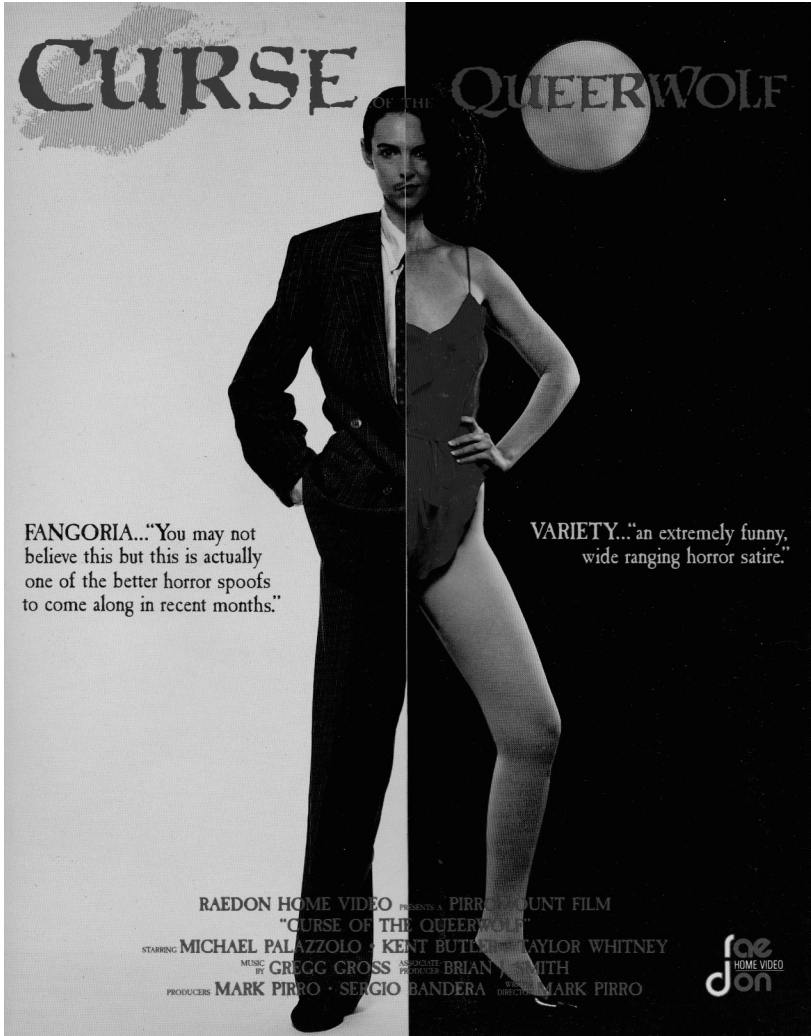


I won't say that it's easy to forgive those flaws, because I'd love to see a version of this without them, but they aren't as important in a film like this as they would be in something of another genre. This begins with a thoroughly memorable murder, proceeds to enforce that it's not a one off and so sets us up to expect the intricacies of future crimes. In this, *Horrors of the Black Museum* sets the stage for *Theatre of Blood*, the *Dr. Phibes* duology and, down the decades, even the *Saw* franchise.

The flaw that really matters most here is the one that takes us away from that, neglecting to set up another such murder every thirty, twenty or even ten minutes. It's easy to just ditch the Emile Franchele intro sequence and hurl us straight into the film proper, especially as it isn't included on most versions that are available on home release, but it's sadly impossible to replace it with the twelve never-filmed minutes that should always have been included from the get go.

This is an important, pioneering film and birthday boy Michael Gough is glorious, but it pales in comparison to *Theatre of Blood*.





Curse of the Queerwolf (1988)

reviewed on 24th November for the original fan, Forrest J. Ackerman

Director: Mark Pirro

Writer: Mark Pirro

Stars: Michael Palazzolo, Taylor Whitney and Kent Butler

During 2016, I reviewed 35 movies, those in this book, to remember important contributors to film on what would have been (and, in two instances, actually were) their centennials. *Curse of the Queerwolf*, released in 1988, was the most recent of them and by far the cheapest to make.

Low budget movie pioneer Mark Pirro shot it on 8mm film for an estimated \$10,000, a tiny sum that was still four times what he put into his debut feature, 1983's *A Polish Vampire in Burbank*. Yet, that picture grossed over half a million dollars in home video and cable television sales, allowing him to shoot *Deathrow Gameshow* on 35mm for a vastly more expensive \$200,000 (still insanely cheap by conventional standards) and see it distributed worldwide by Crown International. I own it on PAL VHS, a tape which contributed just a little to the million and a half dollars that it made. Perhaps because Pirro had to sue Crown for the royalties due him, he leapt a long way back down the budgetary scale to shoot this film, his third feature, which grew out of a small character role in *A Polish Vampire in Burbank* of a queerwolf in a hot tub.

Now, which “important contributor to cinema” could possibly be in a \$10,000 feature entitled *Curse of the Queerwolf*, you might ask?

Well, that would be one Forrest J. Ackerman, the original fan, whose importance to fandom simply cannot be underestimated. He coined the term “sci-fi” (which, I should add, does not contain a single letter “Y”) and he invented cosplay. He wrote for the first fanzines and lent his name to a character in the very first *Superman* story (published before the comic

book). He co-founded L.A.S.F.S., the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, the oldest continuously operating sci-fi club in the world; in addition to running LosCon, it also owns Westercon, a regional sci-fi convention which my better half will chair in 2017. He published *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and even represented some 200 authors as a literary agent, from luminaries like Ray Bradbury to outsiders like, well, Ed Wood. He also collected everything he could and, over half a century, exhibited it to over 50,000 fellow fans at his house, known as the Ackermansion. The fact that he appeared in over 210 films is almost a footnote to his incredible career.

One of those 210 films is *Curse of the Queerwolf*, in which he plays an alcoholic man named Mr. Richardson. Seeking treatment for his addiction at the Sweet Holy Mama Therapy Clinic, he's hooked up to a machine that feeds him an ounce of booze every few seconds, while his therapist, Richard Cheese (oh yes, he goes by Dick), waves his dirty socks under his nose. This is aversion therapy and, hey, it might work, if only Mr. Cheese didn't get continually distracted by his best friend, Larry Smallbut. Poor Mr. Richardson explodes and that's the end of Uncle Forry's part.

He appeared in more substantial films than this one and in more substantial roles too, but this felt right as a choice to celebrate his career because he was such a fan of Z-movies. Sure, he played the U.S. President in *Amazon Women on the Moon*, Dracula in *Attack of the 60 Foot Centerfold* (and Dr. Acula in many films) and a club patron in *Vampirella*, a movie based on a character which he named, but this is the underground cinema that he adored. He returned for Pirro's later *My Mom's a Werewolf* and *Nudist Colony of the Dead*.

I love Z-movies too, when they're made with imagination and passion. It's been so long since I've seen *Deathrow Gameshow* that I'm not able to remember a heck of a lot about it but I do remember that I laughed aloud a lot while watching it and I did the same with *Curse of the Queerwolf*.

The story is the standard werewolf legend that we know from *The Wolf Man* and *Curse of the Werewolf*, among many others. Pirro even nods overtly to the classics that came before by giving torches to the men who trail the queerwolf (or dickentrophe) at the outset (and that's torches with fire like

angry villagers always carried to Frankenstein's castle rather than torches like British flashlights). Sure, this is firmly a contemporary story and one of these modern "villagers" is wearing sunglasses, but they still have old school torches which they never extinguish, even when travelling by car or using a phone booth. Either Pirro couldn't stretch his budget to afford pitchforks too or they were too dangerous to have sticking out of moving vehicles. However, it really doesn't matter. The torches rocked.

Their victim is a young lady named Paula McFarland, played in lingerie by a young lady named Cynthia Brownell, but the story has the character be a male transvestite, Paul McFarland by name, who had been bitten by a queerwolf and become one himself. Another nod to *The Wolf Man* is the tagline, repeated a couple of times during the picture to make sure we got it: "Even a wrist that is strong and firm and holds up straight by day may become limp when the moon is full and the queerwolf comes your way!"

I should mention here, just in case you hadn't noticed, that this is hardly politically correct. Sure, it's almost three decades old but it was notably over the top in 1988 and it's still there today. It isn't just the fact that gays and transvestites appear to be the exact same thing in this film, but other running jokes are willing to go to places that most filmmakers wouldn't dream of visiting. For instance, one of them involves Larry accidentally killing at least three puppies, one by microwave. This isn't



Troma so we don't see it happen but the sound effects are impressively gruesome.

I should add that Larry is a nice guy, but he's very easily led. He's managed to land a lovely girlfriend, Lois, and things seem to be going really well for them; he loves her, he cares about her and he wants to settle down with her, but it's a scary proposition, leaving his bachelor days behind, and his best friend, Richard Cheese, really doesn't help him to move forward. Dick is a complete lech, who is convinced that he should keep Larry from falling into matrimony. So he takes him to strip clubs ("We just got here four hours ago") and bars to pick up girls. Larry does feel rather guilty doing this but he gets talked into it anyway; that's how he finds himself on Dick's couch, necking away the evening with a young lady whom we know is Paula McFarland. It's only after she bites him on the ass that he realises that she's actually a man pretending to be a woman. The four "villagers" with their torches promptly invade the house and chase poor Paula out into the night so we can tie into that opening scene and start to move forward with Larry as the new queerwolf.

While this is a comedy, the actors wisely play their parts completely straight (pun not intended). Pirro is known for re-using the same cast members over and over again, but many of the key ones here are new.

Michael Palazzolo, who portrays Larry, has no other credits on his



filmography at all, but he's well cast nonetheless. Cynthia Brownell, playing the transvestite dickenthrope who bites him, only has one and that was in a small part in Pirro's previous feature, *Deathrow Gameshow*. Taylor Whitney, playing Lois, would go on to work for another director, but only once, acting alongside Erik Estrada and a cast of porn stars in a women in prison flick called *Caged Fury*. Only Kent Butler, the deliciously dry horndog of a best friend, made more than two movies, but almost all were for Pirro. He was the casting director for *Deathrow Gameshow*, in which he also played a stage manager; he was a still photographer on *Nudist Colony of the Dead*; and he appeared in *Buford's Beach Bunnies*, which starred Tom Hanks's younger brother Jim.

Not all the cast were this inexperienced, of course, and I'm not just talking about Forry Ackerman's 210 bit parts. Another victim of Richard Cheese at the Sweet Holy Mama Therapy Clinic is Conrad Brooks, a legendary Z-movie actor, best known for playing a cop in *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. He made a bunch of pictures for Ed Wood and also worked for Coleman Francis on *The Beast of Yucca Flats* in 1961, before calling it quits on his screen career. It was Pirro who talked him back for his debut, *A Polish Vampire in Burbank*, and he's appeared in many of Pirro's films since. He'd also go on to work for other modern day B-movie legends such as Fred Olen Ray, David DeCoteau and Donald G. Jackson, among many others, in a peach of a filmography that's packed full of movies with outrageous names that are either awesome or awful or both. Ackerman may well not have seen *Dr. Horror's Erotic House of Idiots*, *The Saturn Avenger vs. The Terror Robot* or *Test Tube Teens from the Year 2000*, but I'm sure that he would happily have done so and enjoyed the heck out of them to boot.

Without a doubt, my favourite character in *Curse of the Queerwolf* is the gypsy woman whom Larry accidentally runs over with his car. She's Madame Muddyooch and she's played by Sharon Alsina, who went on to be an anime voice actor and appear in a serious film that I would love to see called *Mr. P's Dancing Sushi Bar*. She's far from serious here, of course, and the joke at which I laughed the loudest came after she sees the pansygram in Larry's hand, marking him as a queerwolf, just as she saw

one on Paul McFarland's hand before him. In her suitably exotic gypsy accent, she tells him, "I see all!" and he replies, utterly deadpan, "Did you see the car coming?" No, this is hardly sophisticated comedy but it made me laugh long and loud and I always appreciate movies that do that. I also enjoy comedies that are able to laugh at themselves, which this does often. "Fourth night in a row we've had a full moon," Dick tells his current squeeze, Holly. "Poetic license," she replies.

My reviews often act as recommendations, somehow even when I'm writing what I think are negative ones, but this film is going to polarise people without any commentary on quality. Some people are going to read this, be horrified that such a picture exists and make sure never to watch it (if not invade Mark Pirro's house with torches ablaze and sacrifice him in cold blood). Others are going to seek it out now just because they're finally aware that it was made; I'm certainly going to lend it to the gay couple in my family who didn't just enjoy the insanely over the top comedy called *The Gays* but laughed uproariously at it.

I'm sure that some prospective audience members won't be able to buy into the fact that a feature shot on 8mm for \$10,000 could contain anything of quality, but I'd suggest that there's quite a lot, even in places you might not expect. Every werewolf movie has to have a transformation scene, for instance, and this one has the one you might expect, with Larry



watching in horror as his wrists go limp, but it also has a very believable shot of fingernails extending, complete with bright red nail polish. It's far from Rick Baker's *An American Werewolf in London* but I was still impressed.

I have to own up and say that I loved this movie, far more than I ever expected to. Sure, it's often inconsistent, usually stupid and sometimes not as funny as it wants to be. It also loses its focus, mostly mirroring the classic werewolf story but veering off on occasion just because. I don't just mean the gloriously named Det. Morose from *Homocide* (geddit?) with a loose Sean Connery accent who comes out of nowhere, I mean the way that the parody veers off into other movies. There's a scene that parodies *Deliverance*, set to the *Beverly Hillbillies* theme in lyrics reworked to better suit the occasion, but that diversion can be accepted as a nightmare. The eventual shift into *The Exorcist* isn't as appropriate because, even though it's written carefully enough to wrap up the story, it's not the parody that we followed for most of the picture and diversions only work if we come back from them.

However, my takeaway from this film was to watch *Deathrow Gameshow* again and then proceed to track down every other movie that Mark Pirro made. Thank you, Forry, for everything, including this.



WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WOMEN AT 10 RILLINGTON PLACE?

THE MOST SHOCKING STORY OF THE CENTURY!



VICTIM: Pretty Beryl Evans had a medical problem. When she sought help she disappeared without any trace.



10 RILLINGTON PLACE: An ordinary rooming house on an ordinary street hid an extraordinary murderer's secret.



SUSPECT: Timothy Evans' mistake was renting a room at 10 Rillington Place. He would soon be accused of ghastly murder.



VISITOR: Alice, girlfriend of Beryl Evans, Christie's attention aroused her curiosity and almost led her to a similar fate.



ETHEL CHRISTIE: She knew a grisly secret that was to lead her to an even more grisly death in the house at 10 Rillington Place.



EX-POLICEMAN: John Reginald Christie was chief prosecution witness. Later he would appear in the same court as a defendant.

COLUMBIA PICTURES and FILMWAYS Presents

RICHARD ATTENBOROUGH/JUDY GEESON/JOHN HURT in

10 RILLINGTON PLACE

A MARTIN RANSHOFF-LESLIE LINDER PRODUCTION

Screenplay by CLIVE EXTON • Associate Producer BASIL APPLEBY • Produced by MARTIN RANSHOFF and LESLIE LINDER

Directed by RICHARD FLEISCHER • COLOR



10 Rillington Place (1971)

reviewed on 8th December for director Richard Fleischer

Director: Richard Fleischer

Writer: Clive Exton, from the book by Ludovic Kennedy

Stars: Richard Attenborough, Judy Geeson and John Hurt

Somehow I let this feature get past me and I have no idea why. I can safely get a pass from seeing it on initial release because I was too busy being born, but it must have played on British television while I was growing up and, as a boy who had both an interest in true crime and a tendency to read the *Radio Times* each week to figure out what I wanted to watch (this was in the dark ages before VCRs let alone DVRs), I would surely have noticed it.

After all, the address of the title is a standard trivia question in the U.K. Where did John Reginald Halliday Christie commit eight murders between 1943 and 1953? That one's a gimme.

However, I find it more chilling that I'd also let the importance of what the film, and the book by journalist Ludovic Kennedy upon which it was based, has to say get by me too. Perhaps like many, I'd associated it with murders rather than hangings and it's the latter that has more resonance today. Put simply, the hanging of Timothy Evans, an innocent man, is a key reason why capital punishment was abolished in the UK.

Contemporary critics didn't like *10 Rillington Place* much because it didn't do what they expected. It's not a thriller, surviving on the use of tension and suspense; neither is it a traditional serial killer story, in which we delve into the mind of a madman. It's an exercise in inevitability and that's the entire point. It follows an inexorable path towards a miscarriage of justice that cannot be undone or even mitigated and the fact that the guilty man was also eventually hanged is only a small saving grace.

It's not an enjoyable picture to watch in many ways, though film fans can't fail to appreciate the performances, especially those of Richard Attenborough as John Christie and a young John Hurt as the man whom he manipulated so easily. The direction, which is what disappointed those critics in 1971, is impeccable too, courtesy of Richard Fleischer, who would have been a hundred years old on 8th December, and I was as stunned by his directorial restraint as I was by Hurt's bravado portrayal of an illiterate Welshman in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The script, adapted from Kennedy's book by Clive Exton, who had the benefit of the author's technical advice during production, is relatively close to the accepted course of real events. It even boldly states at the beginning that, "This is a true story. Whenever possible the dialogue has been based on official documents."

However, that doesn't mean that it tells the whole story. The murder that we watch as the film begins is Christie's second rather than his first and a great deal is compressed at the end, all for the sake of narrative flow, but it doesn't depart from the pertinent facts in any dangerous way. Also, like its source book, it makes a number of educated guesses, but none of them ring false and they're still the best guesses almost three quarters of a century on. This was a problematic case, in that the innocent man, for reasons that we'll soon get into, made three official statements to the police, two of which were untrue. While he's honest on the stand, his credibility has been shot and he's missing certain key information that would have backed up his case. Are you confused yet? Well, let us begin.

John Christie, in the recognisable form of Richard Attenborough, is at once a creepy and calming fellow, an odd mixture that helps us understand why so many women trusted him. He's a short chap with a severely receding hairline who wears glasses and speaks so softly that his voice could be described as a whisper. It's a particularly unthreatening combination, out of context, though one a little more sinister today now that pop culture has associated this look with the Nazi officer next door.

It's simple to suggest that Anthony Hopkins borrowed some of this performance for his famous take on Hannibal Lecter, but it's misleading

too as there's none of his dominant genius here nor a hint of his devilish good taste. I've always pictured Brian Cox rather than Hopkins whenever Lecter (or Lecktor in his instance) comes up in conversation, but I can see myself blurring Attenborough's Christie and Hopkins's Lecter together because I'd dearly love to have seen Attenborough play Hannibal the Cannibal as the shabby little man he makes Christie.

We begin in London during the Blitz, but the air raid siren seems to carry an additional warning, pleading with Muriel Eady not to trust John Christie to cure her bronchitis using what he calls his "special mixture", which is Friar's Balsam so as to mask the influx of domestic gas, which has a strong carbon monoxide content. "You may feel just a bit dizzy," he tells her, as he puts a makeshift mask over her face; when she fights, he holds it there until she drifts into unconsciousness. After he strangles her to death, it's implied that he sexually assaults her. He buries her in the communal garden behind his terrace and we see that she's not the first body to go into that ground.

We then skip forward five years to meet the other key players in this sordid and sorry saga: Tim and Beryl Evans, who move into a flat upstairs with their baby daughter, Geraldine. The war is over, but Rillington Place still looks shabby, even in the daylight. And it's worth mentioning that this really is Rillington Place, even if had been renamed to Ruston Close



and they shot at number 7 not 10 because the current occupants, perhaps unsurprisingly, had no plans to open their house to a film crew who were documenting the mass murders that occurred there.

The Evanses are recognisable faces too. John Hurt looks scarily young as Tim, even though he was a decade into his film career and I've seen him five years earlier in *A Man for All Seasons*. Judy Geeson, by comparison, looks old as Beryl, because I tend to picture her as the schoolgirl she played in *To Sir, with Love* in 1967; I really should delve more into her work of the seventies. Both are excellent in this picture, matching the quality of what could easily have been a dominant performance from Attenborough.

Geeson, who was the Meg Ryan of her day, is eminently desirable and easily led, attributes which would be seen as complementary by the gentlemen of the time; but it has to be said that she's rather annoying, the catch in her being a catch, as it were. She sells both aspects of Beryl Evans capably in a way that seems passive but avoids her being overwhelmed by the more overt performances of her male co-stars. After all, it has to be said that Christie and Tim Evans are gifts of parts to actors who know what to do with them.

Attenborough is the lead, playing a role that he knew full well he wouldn't enjoy. "I do not like playing the part," he explained to *The Times*, "but I accepted it at once without seeing the script," adding, "I have never



felt so totally involved in any part as this.” The actor thoroughly inhabits the character, not letting his creepy calmness lapse even once. The chilling nature of the man is there in the way he smiles and the way he hovers. It’s in the way he’s constantly helping people in ways that enforce his own importance; he might seem like the landlord but he isn’t. And, more than anything, it’s there in his quiet manipulations, like when he realises that Beryl wants to have an abortion and plants the seed that he used to be a doctor and could take care of it for her on the cheap. The scene where he’s preparing to conduct that abortion is blistering; he’s killed already but he still shakes, whether from nerves, anticipation or both. There are workmen outside but he just can’t resist the temptation to take one more victim.

And, if Attenborough is chilling as Christie, Hurt is award-worthy as Evans. I’ve seen him in so many films over the years that I’m well aware just how much of a considerable talent he has, but he plays very believably stupid here and that’s really tough to do, especially for an actor who so believably plays professors and other educated men. Evans wasn’t inept, idiotic or imbecilic; he simply had a below average IQ and little enough education that he was illiterate and even more easily led than his wife. It’s in his eyes and in the subtle movements of his head. It’s in his overblown reactions to his wife’s hints and barbs, because he can’t argue his way out of any of these situations and thus has to scream and shout, even if he wakes up the whole terrace. And, of course, it’s in the moments in which he uses physical strength to reinforce his dominance. He may not be a killer, but he’s a violent man with a violent temper. Hurt plays those scenes just as well as the happy or bewildered ones. I can’t remember seeing a more credibly lost man than Hurt in his later scenes in this picture.

Holding these two exquisite performances together is Fleischer’s direction, which is utterly controlled and was misunderstood at the time.

An anonymous *Variety* critic praised both Hurt and Fleischer and called *10 Rillington Place* “an absorbing and disturbing picture”, but fails to acknowledge the film’s point and even expresses surprise that anyone

might find more interest in Evans than Christie. The point is not that Christie killed a bunch of people, it's that Christie killed a bunch of people and then persuaded the powers that be into hanging a mental midget for those crimes instead of him, even testifying on the stand in front of the man he was setting up.

By comparison, Vincent Canby, writing for *The New York Times*, nails the film's purpose, starting his review with the fact that Evans was executed but posthumously pardoned, an act which prompted the abolition of the death penalty. However, he suggests that "small, unimaginative people" lessen the entertainment value of the film, whereas I'd counter that the dreary folk in working class grime heighten it.

You see, Fleischer steadfastly refuses to sensationalise any aspect of this case. Christie wasn't remotely as clever as he thought he was and he made a string of stupid mistakes, but none of them were caught by the police, who were hindered by being initially brought in through an obviously false confession by Evans.

This is another masterpiece scene for Hurt, because it's a real mess of a confession that, incredibly, aims to protect his wife's killer, all because he believes him to be a friend who tried to help them and merely failed to keep Beryl alive through the abortion procedure. "He's a bit simple," one cop tells another. Caught out by inescapable truth, he's forced to come clean on his second attempt which, of course, isn't believed in the wake of the first.

And, even though many of us know what is to come, we still root for the poor simpleton, not because he's remotely sympathetic but because we know that he's innocent. The whole point of the film is for the hangman to fail to listen to us in the cheap seats screaming at him that he's hanging the wrong man.

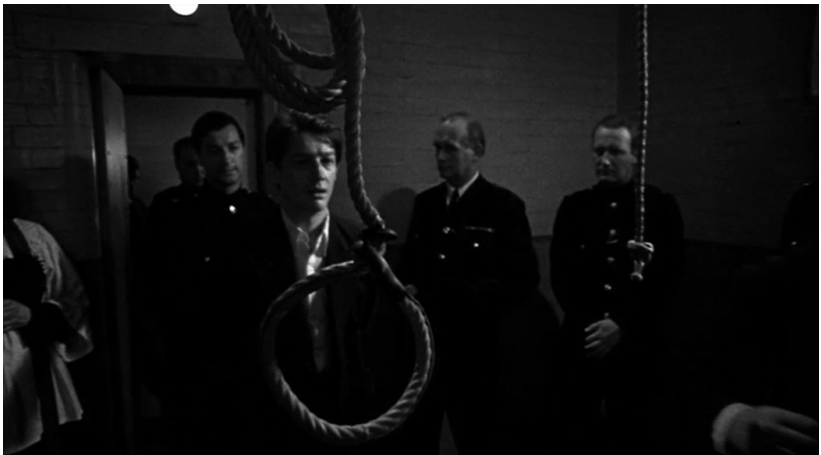
The hanging of Timothy Evans is an incredibly brutal scene, not for any of the reasons we might reasonably expect with our 21st century history with brutal film, but because it happens so quickly. The camera shifts to handheld as Evans is walked from one room to the next and, before we know it, it's all over. There's no procession, no prayer, no last words.

There's no ritual at all and we can fairly believe that, given that Albert Pierrepoint, the man who hanged both Evans and Christie, advised the production to ensure that it would handle the scene accurately. Evans is there to be hanged and that's what happens, quickly and efficiently, to the degree we can totally buy that, even as it's happening, he still can't believe that it will. What's more, as Evans falls to his death, we're shifted in a truly twisted segue to Christie straightening his bad back two years later. Canby describes that as a common cinematic trick, but I thought it epitomised the film because the death of an innocent man had been utterly accepted and forgotten amidst the routine of everyday life.

Fleischer, who was an American by birth and residence, must have been acutely interested in the subject because he addressed it in more than one of his films.

In 1959, he directed *Compulsion*, a drama based on the Leopold and Loeb murder case, in which they're saved from the hangman's noose by an impassioned speech by their lawyer, in the able form of Orson Welles, against capital punishment.

In 1968, he made *The Boston Strangler*, with Tony Curtis as Albert DeSalvo, who was convicted not for a string of thirteen murders, to which he had confessed, but for a series of rapes too. His lawyer had the death penalty removed in exchange for admitting guilt in a plea bargain.



DeSalvo later withdrew his confession and nobody has been convicted of any of the murders that he is suspected to have committed.

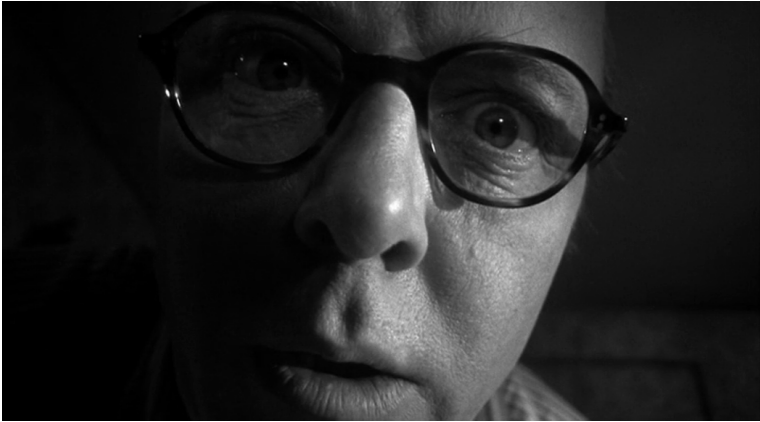
Capital punishment is an odd focus for a versatile filmmaker born into the film world, the son of Max Fleischer who is still my favourite American animator; I'll take his *Snow White* over Walt Disney's any day of the week.

Then again, the Oscar he won in 1948 wasn't for any of the films for which he would later become known. He made films noir like *Armored Car Robbery* and *The Narrow Margin*; big budget blockbusters like Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*; action movies like *Violent Saturday* and *Mr. Majestyk*; sci-fi classics like *Fantastic Voyage* and *Soylent Green*; fantasies like *Red Sonja* and *Conan the Destroyer*; period pieces like *The Vikings* and *Barabbas*; and crime pictures like *The Last Run* and *The New Centurions*. He was a versatile director, who even ventured into notably odd territories for *Che!* and *Mandingo*, but none of those won him an Academy Award.

That Oscar came for a documentary feature he produced in 1948, *Design for Death*, to explain Japanese culture to American soldiers occupying Japan after the Second World War. It was written by Theodore Geisel and his wife; Geisel is, of course, better known to us today as Dr. Seuss, an odd fact that mirrors how odd it was for this film to be what the Academy would remember Fleischer for. We remember him for much more.



A Hundred in 2016



A Hundred in 2016

KIRK DOUGLAS
ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER
FOSTER BROOKS

ANN-MARGRET
RUTH BUZZI
MEL TILLIS
PAUL LYNDE

...the fastest fun in the west!

The Villain

COLUMBIA PICTURES PRESENTS A RASTAR-MORT ENGELBERG PRODUCTION
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ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER "THE VILLAIN"

Co-Starring FOSTER BROOKS · RUTH BUZZI · JACK ELAM · STROTHER MARTIN
ROBERT TESSIER · MEL TILLIS Special Guest Star PAUL LYNDE BILL JUSTIS
Executive Producer Produced by
PAUL MASLANSKY ROBERT G. KANE MORT ENGELBERG
Directed by Produced by Screenplay by
HAL NEEDHAM RASTAR FILMS, INC. RASTAR PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN

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The Villain (1979)

reviewed on 9th December for actor and producer Kirk Douglas

Director: Hal Needham

Writer: Robert G. Kane

Stars: Kirk Douglas, Ann-Margret and Arnold Schwarzenegger

It has to be said that *The Villain* is unique as a live action film.

Beyond being a true statement, it may be the greatest success the film can boast. Certainly it's an interesting picture, but it's also a trainwreck that unfolds at such a relentlessly slow pace that we're effectively watching it crash and burn for ninety minutes. I sat and watched it in befuddlement, with my mouth open as I attempted to figure out who thought that this was such a great idea and where it all went horribly wrong.

After much thought, where I ended up is that it is a great idea and it's cast amazingly well for the most part, but it's directed with such a lack of understanding of what it actually needs to do that I have to wonder if the Hal Needham credited as director is really the Hal Needham who brought us *Smokey and the Bandit*, *The Cannonball Run* and, the same year as this film but earlier in this project, *Death Car on the Freeway*. It could always be a outrageous typo for Alan Smithee, the name that takes credit when the people who earned it disown their resulting film.

Given the cartoon logic that's applied to this live action movie, it's also within the bounds of possibility that the film was directed by its lead character, Cactus Jack Slade, who is as inept as he is dedicated. He's Wile E. Coyote brought to life and, in the first great casting choice, he's played by Kirk Douglas, who celebrated his one hundredth birthday on 9th December and is still going strong.

That's not surprising, given that he was an amazingly spry 62 years

young when leaping around in this film; perhaps he's really dyslexic and thought that he was 26. His effortless performance here reminded me of Douglas Fairbanks, Senior rather than Junior, decked out to play Zorro but actually playing a cartoon character instead. It's not merely that Douglas's 62 year old frame is still in great shape, it's that it seems to be infused with a boundless energy that mere years can't diminish and mere flesh shouldn't be able to contain. I'm assuming that some of his falling off hills and being crushed by giant boulders was the work of stuntmen, but still. It's impressive.

Cactus Jack, and his scene-stealing horse sidekick, Whiskey, are an endearing partnership if not a particularly successful one. The first time we see them at work is when the outlaw leaps onto a moving train from a great height in order to rob it. Unfortunately, he misses the train completely and so lands face down in the gravel between the tracks, apparently uninjured through application of the last of nine golden rules that Chuck Jones compiled to govern the *Roadrunner* cartoons: "The coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failures".

Writer Robert G. Kane (no, not Bob Kane of *Batman* fame) was careful to follow many of these rules, excepting the ones that apply only to the *Roadrunner*. We have a live action Wile E. Coyote, but he's not chasing a live action *Roadrunner* in this picture. Maybe Arnold Schwarzenegger is playing Sam Sheepdog, the foil of Wile E. Coyote's clone, Ralph E. Wolf. Maybe he's just an archetype from old time westerns rather than a cartoon character. Either way, both his name and his role are Handsome Stranger.

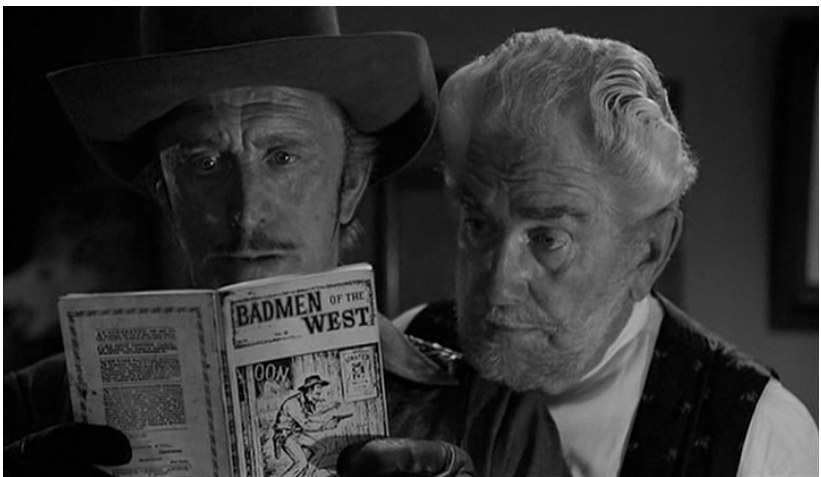
Everything else can be extrapolated from those two sources. We're in the old west for an old western with a simple plot and black and white characters, even if the film is in colour. Nobody has any depth here; they're all playing either archetypes or cartoons. And the unfolding story is governed by cartoon rules.

At one point, Cactus Jack even resorts to that old Wile E. Coyote faithful: painting a tunnel on a mountain and hiding behind a tree until the roadrunner crashes and burns. Sure enough, Handsome Stranger drives

his carriage straight through this imaginary tunnel which promptly ceases to exist when the confused Cactus Jack tries it out himself. At another, he leans off a hillside to better spy on the leading lady, Charming Jones by both name and nature, when the grass or whatever he's holding rips away. Instead of simply falling, he looks at it first in disbelief before his recognition of his fate kicks the laws of physics back into effect and he falls down into the river. That's rule eight: "Wherever possible, make gravity the coyote's greatest enemy."

Initially, things feel really strange, because we're breaking the sixth rule: "All action must be confined to the natural environment of the two characters - the southwest American desert." Instead, we follow Cactus Jack into town, which I recognised as Old Tucson by the mountains rather than the buildings, as this predates the fire in 1995 and my time there is all this millennium.

It's called Snakes End in this picture and Cactus Jack is there to rob the bank, of course, because that's what bad guys do. He's so dedicated to his archetype that he even has an instruction manual called *Badmen of the West*. However, even though it successfully guides him through all the steps needed to dynamite the safe, it doesn't work; the safe remains stubbornly intact, though the entire rest of the building is blown to bits. I didn't see Kane and Needham following rule seven with their dynamite:



“All materials, tools, weapons or mechanical conveniences must be obtained from the Acme Corporation.” Maybe they didn’t own the rights.

Other than moments like that, things don’t feel like a cartoon in town; they feel like a cheap comedy. Handsome Stranger helps an old woman over Main Street in Snakes End, which is dangerously packed with horses and carriages; it turns out that she was on the right side to begin with. Mel Brooks could have got away with this but Needham fails dismally with it.

Before he was a director, he was a stuntman and one of the best there was, founding Stunts Unlimited; introducing innovations to the business, like airbags for high falls; and even licensing his name to a toy in 1977, the Hal Needham Western Movie Stunt Set, which is scarily rare but looks absolutely awesome.

To be a stuntman you have to have impeccable timing, but that’s technical not comedic timing, which is what’s sadly lacking here; Arnie didn’t have any idea either, so the whole thing falls flat. The best comedic timing actually comes from Mel Tillis, as he uses his trademark stutter to tell the heavily accented Handsome Stranger, “You talk funny.” Not politically correct, but hilarious.

Tillis is only one of many recognisable faces who show up briefly in *The Villain* to get our story in motion. Foster Brooks is the bank clerk who has to deal with Cactus Jack’s villainous robbery attempt. Strother Martin is



Parody Jones, a mine owner who's sending his daughter into town to pick up some money.

Jack Elam is the best of them, as the villainous Avery Simpson, who's lending that cash and wants it back again; if it's stolen en route, then he'll get Parody's mine. He's much more dapper than I've seen him, with an awesome hat and a wonderful demeanour as he frees and hires Cactus Jack all at once. I've seen Jack Elam many times, but he's becoming a firm favourite of mine and I just wish he was given more to do, in many pictures but especially this one.

Sadly, we get little of any of these folk, focusing in as we leave town on Cactus Jack, Handsome Stranger and Charming Jones. Of course, I can't complain too much, because that means lots of Kirk Douglas, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ann-Margret.

If Kirk Douglas was perfectly cast, then Ann-Margret followed suit. She's a delightful young lady from the first time we see her, as the boys on her train know. And she knows they know it too! At the Snakes End station, she leans over to show dangerous cleavage and ask Handsome Stranger, "Would you mind taking hold of these?"

She means the suitcases that aren't even in shot, but this sets in motion a running gag that, once again, Mel Brooks would have had a field day with but Needham mangles. By escorting his daughter home safely with his cash, Handsome Stranger is repaying Parody Jones for saving his life. That daughter would gleefully thank him in turn by jumping his bones but he's unable to see her attempted seduction. Sure, he's a dunce (Mel Tillis neatly steals his steak at the Broken Spoke by telling him that the five mile crossing is only half a mile down the track), but how could anyone not launch into a dozen sexual fantasies while accompanied by the Ann-Margret of 1979, especially when her lines are all come-ons?

Arnie looks the part, as much as anyone can in a cowboy outfit that would have worked for Marty McFly if he was 6' 2"; it's pale blue, it magically repels dirt and it's as dumb as the character who wears it. I can't even say that Arnie doesn't play the part the way it was given to him; he's certainly a good guy but a stupid guy, one who's utterly oblivious to

everything. He plays that well and, had the film been sped up either through direction or through editing, he would have been fine.

Still, he's always the third wheel when scenes feature Douglas and Ann-Margret. They could act around him in their sleep and almost had to, given how slow the whole film got. Arnie plays along with the pace, plodding consistently forward, getting more wood for the fire every time his companion attempts to coerce him into the sack. There are a number of scenes where I'm sure his co-stars are laughing not at what they were shooting but at how it played out off screen. At least they seem to have enjoyed the shoot!

With a quick shoutout for Gary Combs, who had the unenviable task of being a stunt coordinator in a film directed by a legendary stunt coordinator, and his team of stuntmen who all did great work here, the technical side really isn't where this picture shines; the camerawork is adequate, the music clichéd at best and the editing ridiculous. At least there was nine-time Emmy-winner Bob Mackie to design costumes for Ann-Margret; I have no idea how she didn't fall out of that dress but I kept waiting for it to happen.

I hated the Indian outfits though and, talking of Indian outfits, the one that Avery Simpson enlists is run by no less an actor than Paul Lynde as a very nervous Nervous Elk. It ought to be another slice of genius casting but, for some reason, it doesn't work at all. I often wished that Paul Lynde would have played the part instead of the actor we got in his place. The problem certainly isn't lack of talent or an incompatibility with the role, so I'm going to plump for bad direction again. Whatever it was, Lynde just couldn't make Nervous Elk funny.

That leaves one actor still worthy of mention and his name is Ott. He's the horse who plays Whiskey, in what IMDb suggests was his final performance. Back in 1971, he'd played Black Beauty in the movie of the same name, and the Black Mustang in a couple of episodes of *Lassie*. Other films and television shows followed until this one, which came after he had played the title character in a dozen episodes of his own series, *Thunder*, on NBC.

He won three PATSY awards, which are an Oscar-equivalent for animal performers (that acronym initially stood for Picture Animal Top Star of the Year), but I wonder if he had ever before had the opportunities he had in this picture, both to shine as a performer and to steal scenes from his co-stars. He saves Cactus Jack's life at one point, but he also drops him right in it on more than one occasion for no better reason than because he can. The only thing he doesn't get to do is to ride at speed, which underlines yet again how slow this movie is.

And so everyone moves gradually closer to the ending, which I won't spoil but is at once inevitable and yet somehow surprising. I can't say I didn't like it but I hated it too.

The Villain is too bad to be a guilty pleasure, but the concept is a peach and I'd suggest that it be revisited except that it would be done with CGI and that would be even more horrible. Perhaps a low budget filmmaker without much to risk could make this with what few stuntmen we still have doing real stunts and create a cult hit. The only reasons that this one would be recalled in the event of a similar movie done right are Kirk Douglas's energy, Ann-Margret's cleavage and the way that everything flies over Arnie's head just like Drax in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. It's totally within character for Handsome Stranger to suggest, "Nothing goes over my head. My reflexes are too fast!" If only Hal Needham had shot the



picture like those reflexes. There's a great twenty minute short here, perhaps half an hour, but it's stretched far too thin for an hour and a half. Watch it on fast forward!

I research the films I pick for my centennial reviews ahead of time and try to find interesting ones that well represent the star in question and allow me to talk about a facet of film history, without ever lumping for the obvious. Often, these interesting films are also great ones but this is a solid exception to the rule. It's not great but it is a great Kirk Douglas movie.

Regardless of what he happened to be shooting, he gave it his all and, in doing so here, created a character who might leap to mind for some viewers if the name Kirk Douglas is mentioned in passing. Of course, it's far from the only one and there are a slew of others that I could easily have picked for this project.

I could have selected his debut, *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*, made as far back as 1946, or *Empire State Building Murders*, a French "doc-crime-drama" and tribute to film noir made for television that sits at the other end of his career in 2008. In between, I'm utterly spoiled for choice, both for interesting movies and those which generate opportunities.

After such varied classics as *Out of the Past*, *A Letter to Three Wives* and *The Glass Menagerie*, there's a vastly underrated gem by the name of *Ace in the Hole*, made by Billy Wilder in 1951, that would have allowed me to talk



about newspapers in the movies and how far ahead of its time that film was. After more classics, such as *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Lust for Life*, there were a string of films produced by Bryna Productions, which Douglas established in 1955, including an anti-war movie in 1957 called *Paths of Glory*, directed by an up-and-coming director named Stanley Kubrick. Three years later, Douglas did his part to break the Hollywood blacklist by hiring Dalton Trumbo to write *Spartacus* and insisting he receive an overt on-screen credit. On we travel through his filmography to see classic after classic, each movie different from the last and each notable in its own regard, such as *Seven Days in May*, *There Was a Crooked Man...* or *The Man from Snowy River*, the latter of which gave Douglas a double role.

It's a heck of a career, especially for someone who started out during the studio system era as a Golden Age star because it's free of the routine stuff that most major names at the time got to churn out in between the films for which they're remembered. It bears deep exploration, whether through binge-watching or a more relaxed examination, unlike almost any of his peers.

And that's not bad for a man who spent his early life in poverty. He started out as Issur Danielovitch in Amsterdam, New York, the one male child of seven born to a couple of Jewish immigrants from what is now called Belarus. He became Izzy Demsky, then Kirk Douglas, the name he used to join the U.S. Navy in World War II. He worked forty different jobs to raise funds for acting classes but still only made it into the American Academy of Dramatic Arts with a special scholarship. Betty Joan Perske, a classmate, enabled his transition from stage to screen by recommending him to Hal Wallis, after changing her own name to Lauren Bacall.

The rest can mostly be watched on screen. He did turn down two Oscar-winning roles in his time, those which eventually went to Lee Marvin in *Cat Ballou* and William Holden in *Stalag 17*, but he was nominated three times, for *Champion*, *The Bad and the Beautiful* and *Lust for Life*, before eventually receiving an honorary award in 1996 "for 50 years as a creative and moral force in the motion picture community." He also received three

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Primetime Emmy nominations and even a Razzie nod for *Saturn 3* in 1980, among many other wins and nominations.

Yet, even as a Hollywood star, he's consistently refused to fish in only one pond, which is why he has more books to his name than I do, mostly written during the last couple of decades; his eleven titles include fiction, non fiction and memoirs. What's more, he hasn't quit yet and, like Olivia de Havilland in June, is still with us to celebrate his 100th birthday.

Happy birthday, Kirk Douglas!



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The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend (1949)

reviewed on 18th December for actress Betty Grable

Director: Preston Sturges

Writer: Earl Felton, from his own story

Stars: Betty Grable, Cesar Romero, Rudy Vallee and Olga San Juan

I've enjoyed a lot of Preston Sturges comedies, some more than once, but then I've only seen the first half of his career.

He started off amazingly well with *The Great McGinty*, *Christmas in July* and *The Lady Eve*, then somehow got even better, with *Sullivan's Travels*, *The Palm Beach Story* and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, all as universally acclaimed as they are criminally underseen. However, he made thirteen features and I hadn't got past the one in the middle, *Hail the Conquering Hero*, which is just as strong as its predecessors.

The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend sits firmly within the second half of his career, an era that critics often pretend doesn't exist, unless it's to acknowledge *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock*, the film that saw Harold Lloyd come out of retirement after nine years away for one final shot. I hadn't seen any of these last half dozen until now and this bodes poorly for the rest of them, even with Betty Grable in the lead with what the poster calls "the biggest Six-Shooters in the West!!!" That's three exclamation marks for Betty, who would have turned a hundred on 18th December.

In fact, the poster sums up the picture pretty capably: it over-suggests but under-delivers.

The Modernaires sing the theme tune behind the opening credits to set Grable up as a "hard tootin', freebootin', high falutin', rootin tootin', six-shootin' beautiful blonde from Bashful Bend", which is enough to believe

that this whole thing started with the song, but it really came from a story by Earl Felton, writer of a whole slew of Richard Fleischer pictures, as varied as *Armored Car Robbery*, *The Narrow Margin* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. I wonder which film brought him to Fleischer's attention, as this broad farce wouldn't seem to be a likely candidate!

I see this mostly as a great example of getting what you wish for. Grable's boss at 20th Century Fox, Darryl F. Zanuck, had tried for a while to push her towards more substantial roles but she was able to successfully fight him on it, continuing on in bright and cheery musicals with paper thin plots summed up by how critic Bosley Crowther described her picture of the previous year, *That Lady in Ermine*: "a bright and beguiling swatch of nonsense".

And this is as surely bright and beguiling as it is a swatch of utter nonsense at first glance. At a second, it's not much better, but it's a little more forward looking than most have generally given it credit for. It has a feminist edge, not only because it has a female lead but because she's clearly able and willing to take care of herself.

The scene that kicks the film off is eye-opening today because it features a six or seven year old girl being taught how to shoot but, at the time, it was eye-opening because it features a girl not a boy. Little Winifred wants to play with her dolly, but her grandfather makes her practice for a while with her pistol first. "It won't get you into trouble," he suggests, "but it may get you out of it."

Now, that's irony because it does precisely nothing but get her into trouble and we simply wouldn't have a picture without that, but it does give her a confidence to allow her to survive in a world dominated by men. As uneducated as she may be, she's still fully in charge throughout, whoever she's facing off against and with what.

It's also notable today that this white woman who passes for a Swede has a Spanish-speaking boyfriend and a Hispanic companion who passes for Native American. No wonder the Hays Office had problems with this script as, after all, miscegenation was against the Production Code! Certainly Joseph Breen, the head of the Code, had as much trouble with

Judge Alfalfa J. O'Toole indulging in an illicit relationship with a girl named Conchita as with him having extra-marital relations in a old west saloon's hotel room.

Irony abounds here. While Olga San Juan, who plays Conchita, seemed as Hispanic as her nickname of the Puerto Rican Peppercorn suggests, she was born in Brooklyn and grew up in Puerto Rico, which is a U.S. territory. However, Cesar Romero, as the Latin lover who so upsets our heroine, had Cuban parents, even if he was born in New York and raised in New Jersey. How Puerto Rican blood (ie American) falls foul of the Production Code's miscegenation rule but Cuban blood (ie not American) doesn't, I have no idea. Then again, Betty Grable, born in St. Louis, MO, but with Dutch, Irish, German and English ancestry, spends half the movie masquerading as a Swede.

Her star has faded somewhat over the decades, partly because she was insecure enough about her talents to make fluff that hasn't dated well but also partly because it was a very bright star at the time. If we think of her today, it's usually because of a cheeky 1943 photo that was the most



popular pin-up poster for GIs serving in World War II. Maybe that also sparks a memory that her studio had insured her legendary legs, so prominent on that poster, for the princely sum of a million dollars; she'd even made a movie called *Million Dollar Legs* in 1939. What we don't tend to remember is that she was the best paid actor (of either sex) in 1947 (some sources call her the highest salaried woman in America), or that she was a top ten box office draw for ten years running (only Clark Gable and Bob Hope had had longer runs at that time). She even topped that poll in 1943 above Bob Hope, Abbott and Costello and Bing Crosby.

Here, she's that gunslinging kid, Little Winifred, grown up. Now she's Freddie Jones, a saloon singer who plays cards and drinks as well as any of the guys at work. Presumably she can still shoot too, but her gun has just got her into trouble.

You see, her boyfriend, Blackie Jobero, is a wolf who's happy to bring a fancy girl called Roulette into Freddie's bar and waltz on upstairs with her to the private rooms. Freddie naturally sees red and sidles off stage during her number to retrieve her gun from behind the bar, then follow them,



singing all the way, and break into their room to shoot the lowlife dead.

Surely we should be with her, but there are two reasons why not. One is that this all unfolds during one of those annoying Hollywood musical numbers which defy the laws of physics; no, folk, there were no wireless microphones in the Old West (or in 1949, for that matter)! The other is that she doesn't shoot Blackie at all; she accidentally hits the Honorable Alfalfa J. O'Toole instead. "Right in the caboose," as the doctor says. That the judge is played by Porter Hall merely makes it funnier.

Hall, a regular in Preston Sturges comedies, is merely one of many recognisable faces here. His wife, Elvira O'Toole, is an uncredited Margaret Hamilton who plays the shrew to perfection, especially when Conchita flounces in to ask her sweetie, "Why is your mother upset?"

Musical number aside, I had a lot of fun with the first half hour of this film and the cast are a lot of the reason behind that. Casting Hugh Herbert as the mostly blind doctor trying to retrieve the bullet is genius!

No wonder the judge is boiling, but he calms down when Freddie shows up. She does apologise very well and he might even be about ready to forgive her. After all, she was merely mad at a man for whom she had slaved and was found "playing puss in the corner with some beezele"! Unfortunately, then they bring in Blackie and Roulette and, after saying that she's the mild type, she promptly grabs a gun and tries to shoot him again. Oh, guess what? Somehow the back end of Alfalfa J. O'Toole manages to get in the way for a second time! So, off go Freddie and Conchita to skip town on the next train.

It's once they arrive in Snake City that the quality starts to drop. They get there after Conchita steals some travelling bags which conveniently drop them into neat new identities. So Freddie Jones becomes Hilda Swandumper from Wauwatosa, WI, who's to be the new schoolteacher in Bashful Bend, and Conchita is her "little Indian maid".

You can just imagine the political incorrectness that leaps out to play with that situation! Oh yes, the ticket collector tries it on with her immediately. "You leave mama and papa home in tepee?" he asks. "How would you like to go with me and see white man's choo-choo. Puff puff

engine, huh?” The moment they alight from the train, the chairman of the school board, Mr. Hingleman, pinches her cheek, calls her Little Firewater, and asks, “Everything heap good back in wigwam?” Now, I do understand that we’re setting up contrasts in Snake City: half the town are redneck miners and cowboys howling like wolves at the purty ladies while the other half are respectable citizens, but it’s the latter spouting this idiocy!

I should add that these lower class citizens are played by some formerly major names in western movies, such as Kermit Maynard, Tom Tyler and Tex Cooper. Richard Hale is also uncredited, oddly given that he gets some solid screen time as Mr. Gus Basserman, an ornery local who proceeds to start a gun battle in town and lynch a couple of people to boot.

You’re getting that this is a comedy, right? Well, one of the reasons that it may have failed both critically and commercially at the time (though it did eventually make its money back) is because it’s really not the usual late forties musical. The tone of the piece is inconsistent to crazy degrees. The first third is farce, but written rather cleverly. The middle third, as our fake Swede tries to outwit Basserman’s two idiot kids, is so far into



pantomime that I expected someone to shout “He’s behind you!” The final third is a very slow Keystone comedy and slapstick was long dead in 1949. Then again, oldtimers Chester Conklin and Snub Pollard are here too. This cast has everyone!

And, if you hadn’t guessed, this makes the last two thirds very silly indeed. Naturally, the inept authorities fail to realise that their wanted woman has just hopped down the track a ways and the one man who does is Blackie Jobero. So, her story comes out while those pesky Basserman boys are camped outside the window, dressed as Indians, and she sets them up to knock her boyfriend out. This long scene feels like a stage farce with its long takes in a single location, its lights going on and off (not always in sync) and its wildly overblown “death scenes”.

Then it’s Keystone fight time, merely with guns instead of pies. One bad guy gets shot off of the top of an outhouse four times but gets back up four times to rejoin the battle. Another picks up his hat four times after it’s been shot off four times before aiming his gun. A third is stationed in front of a cattle trough; every time he shoots his gun, the water erupts into his face and he starts trying to outwit the water. If anyone expected the clever wit of early Preston Sturges in this picture, they must have been utterly lost by now!

What’s more, not a single person gets hurt. It doesn’t matter how much lead flies and there’s a great deal winging its way down Main Street. It doesn’t matter how close a shooter happens to be to his target. It doesn’t even matter when we know that they got hit, like the judge, whose wounds set the whole story into motion. Nobody gets hurt and not one lick of blood is spilled. It’s like watching an episode of *The A-Team*, but with musical numbers and Betty Grable periodically stripping down to her abundant underwear to show us her pair of million dollar legs. Even when we want someone to get hurt, like the highly annoying Basserman boys, they don’t, even as Freddie gets overly serious about disciplining them on her first day in class as Hilda Swandumper. She pulls out her pistol to shoot a bottle out of one’s hand, a cigarette out of the other’s mouth and then a couple of ink bottles off the tops of their heads. Now I’m seeing

how Donald Trump could get elected President; lily livered liberals would never stand for this sort of discipline!

For all the silliness, Betty Grable is a lot of fun here and she works very well with Olga San Juan; I haven't seen much of either of them before but I left this film confirmed fans of both. To be fair, they're the only actors who are really given parts to play; the rest of the cast are given routines instead, mostly the ones they were already justly known for, like Herbert, Hamilton and Holloway, to name just three beginning with the letter H. Cesar Romero holds back throughout, perhaps to leave the girls in charge. Rudy Vallee is so forgettable that I haven't talked about him once and it doesn't matter. The Basserman boys are even more overplayed than their screen father and that's saying something; I felt like Richard Hale was about to turn on me for looking at him cross-eyed and call me out for a good ol' fashioned gunfight. He was so ornery here that I expected the movie to transform into a commercial for something soothing. After all, if <insert brand name here> can sooth the foul temper of Gus Basserman, just imagine what it can do for you!

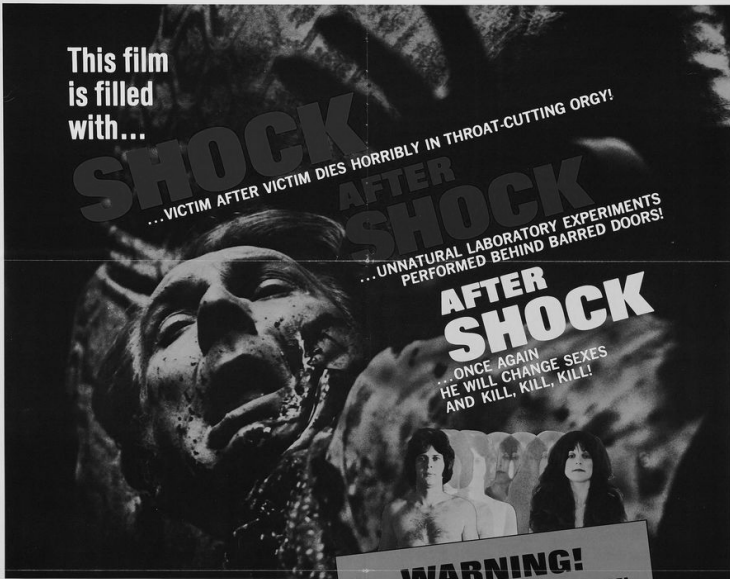
Apparently Betty Grable didn't like this film at all and said so. If that's true, she kept it from affecting her performance, which is a delight, even when the film gets silly. One reason why she does so well is that she was able to play up her status as a bona fide sex symbol but still appear to be just one of the boys. The theme can call her high falutin' all it likes, but she's thoroughly down to earth. I could fantasise about meeting any Marilyn Monroe character, but it's unrealistic in the extreme. Yet, if I found the saloon that Betty Grable sings at in this movie, I could totally believe buying Freddie Jones a drink. Of course, she'd probably fleece me at poker too.

Her career would last six more years and eight more films, which included *How to Marry a Millionaire*, but she was probably very happy to retire. Preston Sturges, on the other hand, probably wanted to keep on going, but he'd never direct another Hollywood feature. His final film was *Les Carnets du Major Thompson*, shot in France in 1955 and it was ignored even more than this.

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DR. JEKYLL AND SISTER HYDE

An American International Release

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 PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED May be Inappropriate for Children Under 13
 Screenplay by **BRIAN CLEMENS** · Produced by **ALBERT FERNELL & BRIAN CLEMENS** · Directed by **ROY WARD BAKER**
 in COLOR EMI Film Productions Limited presents A Hammer Production

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Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde (1971)

reviewed on 19th December for director Roy Ward Baker

Director: Roy Ward Baker

Writer: Brian Clemens, based on the novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, by Robert Louis Stevenson

Stars: Ralph Bates and Martine Beswick

Watching in 2016, this film seems surprisingly timely. The last decade has seen a strong rise in the number of folk who understand what LGBT means (though it's far from fully inclusive and I've seen many more letters added). However, this film, which came out (pun well and truly intended) in the year I was born, foreshadows that conversation.

Yes, it's another *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* story, but instead of Hyde bringing out Jekyll's dark side, it's Hyde bringing out Jekyll's female (though not necessarily feminine) side. To make this work best, the transformation of Jekyll wasn't achieved through make-up effects being applied to Ralph Bates, it was achieved by casting a woman as Hyde, Martine Beswick. The usual battle for control ensues and the two different aspects gradually merge into one. There's a potential here to explore the different sexualities of men and women and the film does start to walk down that road, but it's a long road and we haven't found the end yet.

What surprised me most about *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* is that it wasn't what I remembered at all. I saw most of the classic Hammer horrors when I was knee high to a grasshopper, watching late at night on my sister's television, this one included and I remember their movies of the seventies as being more and more obsessed with sex. Now, that's hardly a bad thing, says the red-blooded teen that I was when I saw these, but over time they blurred together and I tend to remember the boobs a lot more than the drama. For the iconic stories, I remember their films from the fifties and

sixties instead, with Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee reinventing all the old classics for a Technicolor age. Yet, this has surprisingly little nudity, especially given the sexual subject matter, and it's far from a cheap excuse to show Beswick's boobs.

There has been talk of a remake and, for once, that's a good idea as, done right, it could be fascinating. And no, neither *Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde* (a teen comedy) nor *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckel & Ms. Hyde* (a porno) count.

There are some other imaginative changes here too, that make *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* forward-looking. In the 21st century, we're used to creative concepts like the mashup, in which existing stories are transposed into a new genre; the crossover, in which multiple characters from diverse sources are combined into a new story; and remix culture, which can include both the above and add in real people from history as well. This is nothing new in the movies as, after all, Dracula met Frankenstein, Abbott & Costello met almost everyone of importance on the big screen and Jesse James even met Frankenstein's daughter, but the way that this film ties reality and fantasy without apparent comment feels a little ahead of its time. For instance, the central story is *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but this ties them both to Burke and Hare and to Jack the Ripper, real life British graverobbers and murderers from the Victorian era, and I wonder how innovative that felt in 1971. Jekyll as Jack? Nowadays, it just feels like an episode of *Penny Dreadful*.

The stage is set well. We're in Whitechapel and a gentleman with a tall hat and black cloak follows a prostitute into the foggy back alleys away from the lively pub and its mournful street singer; the whore screams before he stabs her and the arterial spray splashes the £200 wanted poster neatly. The murderer hasn't gone far when a policeman's whistle blows and a blind hurdy gurdy player in a pair of trippy glasses points the pursuers in the right direction.

None of this should be surprising, of course. Hammer had a long string of horror movies behind them by this point and the people involved knew exactly what they were doing. The screenplay was by Brian Clemens, an experienced hand in film and television who also co-produced the picture;

the cinematography was by Norman Warwick, who had recently shot *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*; and the director was Roy Ward Baker, who had made a number of iconic films for Hammer, including *Quatermass and the Pit*, *The Anniversary* and *The Vampire Lovers*. He would have been a hundred years old on 19th December.

Unlike today, when directors often end up stuck in a particular genre, the Hammer directors were a versatile bunch and Baker was no exception. He started out for Gainsborough Pictures, moving up from teaboy and runner to assistant director in only a year. His first directorial credit was as third assistant director on the Will Hay comedy, *Boys Will Be Boys*, and his most important movie there was surely Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* in 1938, for which he was the assistant director (never mind "third" at this point).

World War II got in the way of further movement, so he joined the Army Kinematograph Unit to shoot documentaries for the war effort. One of his bosses there, novelist Eric Ambler, gave him his break after the war, insisting that Baker direct *The October Man* from his novel.

The success of *Morning Departure* led him to Hollywood, where he directed Marilyn Monroe, Gregory Peck and Robert Ryan, but his greatest success came back in the U.K.: the Golden Globe winning *A Night to Remember*, from Ambler's screenplay about the Titanic disaster.



It was his experience with television that got him into the horror genre, because he clearly knew how to do a lot with a little; budgets on shows like *The Baron*, *The Avengers* and *The Saint* were not high but he still made them go a long way. Hammer combined one of his episodes of *Journey to the Unknown* with another for their feature length *Journey to Midnight* and put him to work on original movies: *Quatermass and the Pit*; *The Anniversary*, with Bette Davis; and *Moon Zero Two*.

Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde was the third of a second trio of films at Hammer, including *The Vampire Lovers* and *Scars of Dracula*, by which time Amicus wanted him too and he continued to shoot for both of them for a number of years, though he focused in on television towards the end of his career, retiring after three episodes of *The Good Guys* in 1992. The wildest movie he made is surely *The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires*, a co-production between Hammer and Shaw Brothers in Hong Kong, which he co-directed with Cheh Chang.

I was very tempted to choose that film for this project but, in the end, I stuck with this one as it resonates for a number of reasons.

One is the choice of leads: both Ralph Bates and Martine Beswick. Bates, who had already made three Hammer horrors within the previous year (*Taste the Blood of Dracula*, *The Horror of Frankenstein* and, his least favourite of all his features, *Lust for a Vampire*) was so appropriate a choice to play



Dr. Jekyll that I wonder if Clemens factored his family history into the script.

You see, he was the great-great-nephew of Louis Pasteur, the French scientist who's regarded as the "father of microbiology". Beyond the process of pasteurisation which bears his own name, Pasteur pioneered vaccination, which had been invented by Edward Jenner, and he created the first vaccines for both anthrax and rabies. Jekyll, in this feature, is working on an anti-virus he calls the "universal panacea", one cure for many diseases: diphtheria, cholera and so on. The trigger for our story is the observation that there are too many such diseases to conquer in only one lifetime, so he realises he needs to create instead an elixir of life.

Beyond extrapolating neatly on Pasteur, Bates looked the part. He had dark hair and a pale complexion, which makes it easy to see him as a member of a goth band. That look continues on down the cast; his bandmates could easily be Byker, the necrophiliac coroner played by Philip Madoc, and Hare, of Burke and Hare, played by Tony Calvin. Fortunately, they don't haul out their instruments to launch into a music video, but there were points where I half expected that to happen.

More to the point, he's clearly male but he's also androgynous enough in that haircut to morph believably into Martine Beswick, whose well defined cheekbones have never looked more severe. She was a beautiful woman, enough to be a Bond girl twice and a fur-clad opponent to Raquel Welch in *One Million Years B.C.* too, but at points she seems cadaverous and could easily have sung for that imaginary goth band! The transitions, either handled with the aid of props, like a broken mirror and textured glass, or through clever overlays, are excellently handled and Beswick's "shock" when she discovers she has female parts is incredibly well done.

Everything comes back to this sex change and the ramifications that it brings. The concept has validity: Jekyll realises that women live longer than men, on average, so uses female hormones to try to extend the male life span. The source is young corpses but, as the supply is limited, he lowers his morals to allow for the supply to continue. Well, hello Burke and Hare!

At least it works, with flies, at least; while they should live for a couple of hours, he demonstrates one to his friend, Prof. Robertson, which has survived for three days under a bell jar. He's clearly a genius, though his arithmetic is awful; that only translates into the two hundred years in human terms he suggests if life expectancy at the time was about five! Naturally, the next step is a human trial and who better to experiment on than himself? Sadly, he skips over the importance of his discussion with Robertson; he knew the fly was male, but Robertson points out that it had laid eggs. He must be truly dedicated if an outrageous side effect like an impromptu sex change doesn't stop him from trying his serum out on himself! Clearly the man had large cojones, but not, of course, for long.

Now, Jekyll doesn't merely change from male to female; there are other changes as well, especially his sexual appetite. Susan Spencer, living upstairs, clearly has designs on the good doctor and she's not at all hard on the eyes, but he's far too wrapped up with his work to acknowledge her. He even declines when she invites him up to dinner because of a "prior engagement" and her brother Howard suggests that he's probably "impervious to women".

The ensuing transformation, which the Spencers can hear through the floor, prompts their investigation and Susan is livid to discover that Jekyll passed them over for a woman until he mentions that she's his sister, a widow named Mrs. Hyde, the name plucked from the front page of the paper. Howard is much happier about the new arrival, however, and we find ourselves in the awkward situation where Susan wants Jekyll but her brother wants Hyde, each unaware, of course, that the two are one and the same. This leads to great dialogue. "How's your brother," Howard asks Hyde. "He hasn't been himself of late," she replies.

The knowing dialogue shines around the most telling scene in the film. We've got to the point where confusion reigns. Robertson thinks Jekyll is having a relationship with Hyde, Susan believes she's his sister and we have to wonder quite what Howard must be thinking about Jekyll, even as we know what he's thinking about Hyde. He bumps into Jekyll, as the latter leaves a clothes shop for women, and asks how his sister is. Jekyll,

with a notably immobile expression, replies, “Fine. Excellent. I am in excellent health.” Then he reaches out tenderly, as if to touch Howard’s face. “Howard,” he sighs, almost pleadingly. Only then does he realise that he’s Jekyll and not Hyde and so rushes on, leaving poor Howard dumbstruck in his wake. After this scene, Robertson tells Jekyll, “One day you’ll look in the mirror and you’ll be a changed man.” Before it, he tells a cop, “It’s a queer business, sergeant. Very queer.” This has been an interesting film throughout but, at this point, it suddenly leaps into thesis territory.

In the classic story, Jekyll and Hyde are moral opposites. At its simplest, this manifests through Jekyll being good and Hyde evil, although novelist Vladimir Nabokov did point out that Jekyll was hardly a morally good person by Victorian standards. Like anything Victorian, class is part of the discussion too, with an easy reading that Jekyll is a respectable member of the upper class, maintaining control as required by polite society, while Hyde is a thoroughly disreputable member of the working class, eager and willing to let his base urges run wild. This includes sex, of course, because the base hypocrisy of the Victorian era is most ably highlighted by biographer J. R. Hammond’s description of “outward respectability and inward lust”. Jekyll can maintain the boundary between the two, while Hyde is either unable or unwilling to do so. It’s not only sex, though,



because Hyde gets up to a lot more than just sexual deviance, even in Stevenson's original novella, not least murder. Here, Jekyll prompts murder before Hyde ever appears, so it's all about sex.

And, given that *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* was the first film to use a scientific experiment to examine what happens to human sexuality as the genders change, blending both genders and the sexuality of both genders into a single character, I really shouldn't complain that it only starts that conversation. Everything has to start somewhere.

The problem with the Jekyll and Hyde framework, of course, is that it's a dichotomy: you're either one or the other and, if you try to be both, those two sides will fight each other until one wins out for good. Science nowadays suggests that human sexuality is far from a dichotomy; it's a sliding scale and we all have a little of both.

The logical remake of *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* is one where neither side wins and the title characters come to terms with each other, coexisting as halves in a yin yang fashion. It's surely time for a movie where Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde share a knowing partner, especially if they change back and forth during a sexual act rather than outside of it. Talk about a challenging role for an actor though!

Ralph Bates had good reason to remember this film because it's where he met his second wife. She's Virginia Wetherell, whom he murders on screen; she plays Betsy, a whore who takes Jekyll to her place, only for him to slice her right after her corset laces. Bates divorced his first wife in 1973 to marry her; they remained together until his death in 1991.

Martine Beswick made many more movies than Bates, who struggled after Hammer horrors fell out of fashion, but she never managed to eclipse her two Bond roles, in *From Russia with Love* in 1963 and *Thunderball* two years later. Hammer helped perpetuate her sex symbol image by casting her in *One Million Years B.C.* and *Slave Girls* aka *Prehistoric Women*, but this was a much better use of her acting talents.

The film itself has the potential to outlast them, as well as Clemens, Baker and others because it was always just a beginning. We don't have the end in sight yet, but it's going to be a fascinating road to get there.

A Hundred in 2016



About Hal C. F. Astell

While he still has a day job to pay the bills, Hal C. F. Astell is a teacher by blood and a writer by the grace of the dread lord, which gradually transformed him into a film critic. He reviews movies at his own site, *Apocalypse Later*, but has written for various others. He writes book reviews for the *Nameless Zine*.



Born and raised in the rain of England, he's still learning about the word "heat" over a decade after he moved to Phoenix, AZ, where he lives with Dee, his much better half, in a house full of assorted critters and oddities, a library with a guard ferret and more obscure DVDs than can comfortably be imagined. And he can imagine quite a lot.

Just in case you care, his favourite movie is Peter Jackson's debut, *Bad Taste*, his favourite actor is Warren William and he thinks Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is the greatest movie ever made. He's always happy to talk your ears off about the joys of odd and interesting films and their makers, whether they're pre-codes, fifties B-movies, obscure Asian horror flicks or whatever.

He's usually easy to find at film festivals, conventions and events because he's likely to be the only one there in a kilt and his fading English accent is instantly recognisable on podcasts and panels. He is friendly and doesn't bite unless asked.

Photo Credit: Dee Astell

About *Apocalypse Later*

Initially, Hal C. F. Astell wrote film reviews for his own reference because he could never remember who the one good actor was in otherwise forgettable entries in long crime series from the forties. After a year, they became long enough to warrant a dedicated blog.

The name came from an abandoned project in which he reviewed his way through every movie in the IMDb Top 250. Its tentative title was a joke drawn from covering *Apocalypse Now* last.



Gradually he focused on writing about the sort of films that most critics don't, avoiding adverts, syndication and the standard eye-killing horror of white text on a black background.

Four million words later and Apocalypse Later Press was born, to publish his first book, cunningly titled *Huh?* This growth eventually became the Apocalypse Later Empire, which now includes a review site, a publishing imprint, a set of mini-film festivals at conventions across the American southwest, a blog, a Facebook group dedicated to steampunk film and the only dedicated annual genre film festival in Phoenix, AZ: the Apocalypse Later International Fantastic Film Festival, launched in 2016.

Apocalypse Later will celebrate its tenth anniversary in 2017.

*See you next year for
A Hundred in 2017*

During 2016, I remembered important filmmakers by reviewing an interesting film from each of their careers on what would have been (or, in two instances, actually were) their 100th birthdays.

I covered films from 1936 to 1988 in a variety of genres, exploring such topics as the birth of 3-D, the Hollywood blacklist, the PATSY awards for animal performers, lavender marriages, the H for Horrific certificate and the work of the American Humane Society, not to mention baby farms, faith healing, Scotland Yard's Black Museum, Cockney rhyming slang, the postal service police and more!

Thrill to sights you thought you'd NEVER see!

- Jackie Gleason dropping acid in prison!*
- George Hamilton beating up Burt Reynolds!*
- Sterling Hayden bringing a harpoon to a gunfight!*
 - Terrorist Gregory Peck slapping a priest!*
 - Dorothy McGuire without a mouth!*
- Olivia de Havilland getting stuck in a lift!*
 - Clint Walker backhanding Ron Ely!*
- Blind Van Johnson solving a mystery!*
 - Vincent Price in dinky gold boots!*
 - Peter Finch going walkabout!*
- Oliver Reed turning into a werewolf!*
 - Forrest J. Ackerman exploding!*
- Richard Attenborough as a serial killer!*
 - Kirk Douglas playing Wile E. Coyote!*
- Betty Grable shooting a judge in the ass!*
- Ralph Bates turning into Martine Beswick!*
- and many more wild and crazy moments!*

*Cover art by Kris Michael
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