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The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two Horror Films from the early 40's

"THE LADY AND THE MONSTER" (Republic, 1944) Producer/director: George Sherman Screenplay by Dane Lussier and Frederik Kohner from "Donovan's Brain" by Curt Siodmak; Camera: John Alton; Music: Walter Scharf; Art Director, Russell Kimball; Special effects, Theodore Lydecker; 8 reels


Although, quite coincidentally, both of tonight's films deal with the fun and frolic involved with human brains removed from their original source, "The Lady and the Monster" is only nominally a horror film. Obviously, for commercial purposes, it tries hard to supply the superficial trappings of that genre, and horror devotees will not be disappointed. But Stroheim's film really appeals to the time over-enthusiastic a speedy and it is definitely maligned by the inconsiderate title; the laboratory scenes are efficient, but not markedly eventful, and there is little real menace in the usual sense. The film's major asset of course is its strong original story by Curt Siodmak - a story that holds interest on a dramatic as well as thriller level - and it is the story that sustains the film over an eight-reel length that would certainly be superficial if it were merely a chiller. medically, it even makes some sense, and for once the experimentation seems to have both point and justification.

Unusual care has been lavished on the production, and in fact one of its flaws is that it is an over-produced movie. A dance number in a night-club is quite unnecessary, and it seems unlikely that the decor in an ordinary Arizona hotel room would include a glossy chandelier. Republic's familiar slick back projection and studio "exteriors" smacks of Hollywood a little too much, but Lydecker's miniature of the castle (well-matched in partial sets) is a top-notch job. There are reasons for the budgetary generosity of course; Republic were then riding a boxoffice crest, seeking to find acceptance as a major company, and were giving the "A" treatment to many properties than in other years would have been given run-of-the-mill "B" budgets. More importantly, the film was designed to introduce Vera Hruana Ralston (later the wife of Republic president Herbert Yates) as a dramatic star instead of just another runner-up to Sonja Henie. (Belita, another skating star, likewise found it difficult to duplicate the Henie success.) The Republic method was to put Miss Ralston into as many varied roles as possible, co-star her with other big Republic names (John Wayne, Bill Elliott, Fred Macmurray), give her the full treatment in glamor photography and well-crafted dialogue, and surround her with veteran actors. Curiously enough, Republic didn't try to ease the acting load off her own shoulders. Here they explain away her European accent by throwing in a one-liner about her father dying in Czechoslovakia - but she still has a lot of key dialogue, delivered in closeup. It was a rough chore to throw at her, and it is not to be wondered at that the master scene-stager of all time (Stroheim) and the veterans Arlen and Blackmer rather emphasize her lack of experience. Under the circumstances, she holds her own quite well. (A follow-up, "Storm Over Lisbon", with the same two co-stars and the same director, treated her in the same way, and was a much inferior film, with its "B" plot really emphasised by the closeup sets and excessive running time in which nothing happened.) Later she did return to skating in some Republic musicals, but there were some good straight performances too, most especially in Allan Dwan's "Belle le Grand".

It's good to see Stroheim in a big role again, and John Alton (a top cameraman somewhat of a stranger to the Republic lot) creates some good effects, though he is sometimes careless in the long and medium shots, and he is decidedly unskilled in his use of low-key lighting of Arlen's face. However, it's an enjoyable and well-written thriller, and a complete print of a film not often (recently) seen in its entirety. In England, it was cut out of some of its grimmer scenes, retitled "The Lady and the Doctor" and in the US it was later cut down to second-feature length and retitled "Tiger Man" for reasons beyond explanation. The film was later remade of course - under the title "Donovan's Brain" with the same two co-stars and the same director, in a version more faithful to Siodmak's original, but even less exciting than this adaptation. George Sherman, brought up on westerns and "B" thrillers, may not inject much Gothic style into it - but he does keep it briskly on the move, and dear old Ethel offers all the Gothic flavor one could ask for.

--- intermission ---
"THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN" (Universal, 1942) Director: Erle C. Kenton
Produced by George Wagstaff; Screenplay by Scott Darling from a story by Eric Taylor; Camera: Milton Krasner, Woody Bredell; Art Director, Jack Otterson; Music Director, Charles Previn; 6 reels


The last good and reasonably serious entry in Universal's Frankenstein series (and the last one to be able to produce a genuine Frankenstein as the scientist!), "Ghost..." is probably the least appreciated of the entire series. Too often dismissed because it isn't as good as the first three (and there's no denying that it isn't) and because it heralds the reduction of the series to programmer standard, it is still vastly superior to the three penny-dreadfuls that followed (each one sinking a little lower than its predecessor) until Universal killed the series off with an Abbott and Costello lampoon. In its own way though, it is almost a model of its kind, and almost matches that other 65-minute gem "The Most Dangerous Game" in the story values, incident, cast, production values and pacing that it crams into its fast-moving six reels.

If it has less style and more stress on action and sensation this time, it's partly because the expert and versatile Erle C. Kenton was still no James Whale, and because Lon Chaney jr., taking over from Karloff, played the Monster purely as a beast with none of the inmate sympathy that Karloff brought to the role. Some of the physical detail in the film -- the brain being wheeled into the lab on a trolley like a tray of desserts, and the monster's face blistering in the climactic fire scene -- seemed fairly strong stuff in 1942, and are not overdone to a point of tastelessness, but of course they have less impact today when we have been hardened by the nauseous physical gore of current horror films.

As usual in this series, there are some glaring inconsistencies from picture to picture, and "Ghost" has its full quota. The villagers, so radiantly happy at the end of "Son....", are full of gloom and despair again with the first frame of this one. "My child is hungry ... there is no bread!" complains one whimpering mother, as though the poor monster were to blame for that too. At least two of the town council, killed off in "Son.....", are still in office here. The monster, who learned to talk in "Bride", was mute again in "Son", here talks again with Lugosi's brain in his skull. But in the sequel, where Lugosi himself plays the monster, he loses his voice yet again! The dialogue has some curious anachronisms -- "There'll be a new Mayor after the fall election" is a threat that seems far too American to apply to middle-Europe. But the supporting players are in grand form; Dwight Frye rushes forward to urge the destruction of Frankenstein's castle, and Atwill underplays with superb aplomb as he talks about the "slight miscalculation" which had him drummed out of the medical profession! Evelyn Ankers, the 40's reincarnation of Fay Wray, looks lovely and ladylike as always, Cedric Hardwicke is a logical blood-relations to Colin Clive and Basil Rathbone, and Clive himself is seen briefly in some flashbacks to the original "Frankenstein". As always at Universal, the special effects -- lab scenes, exploding castles -- are flawlessly done, the miniatures well nigh perfect.

"The Ghost of Frankenstein" is in many ways the last of the vintage horror films. Val Lewton, "The Uninvited" and "Dead of Night" were about to bring a new sophistication to the genre. If it's already an assembly-line job, it's a good one and a solidly entertaining one, certainly an honorable close to a solid decade of first-rate chillers.

William K. Everson

Footnote: it is perhaps worth pointing out that the grandmother of the child-witness in "Lady and the Monster" is played by Josephine Dillon, the first Mrs Clark Gable.