THE GOULI" (Gaumont-British, 1933) Directed by T. Hayes Hunter
Screenplay by Rupert Downing from the play and novel by Dr. Frank King and
Leonard Hines; Camera, Gunther Krampf; edited by Ian Dalby-Cole; 7 reels
With Boris Karloff, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Estelle Taylor, Ralph Richardson,
Douglas Hyon, Anthony Bushell, Kathleen Harrison, Harold Huth, D.A. Clarke-Smith,
Jack Raine.

For years "The Goul", while perhaps not the most in-demand, has been the most
elusive and mysterious of all the "lost" horror films. Elusive because it has
never shown up once since its original release, and even in England disappeared
from distribution within about five years. No prints are known to have survived
in this hemisphere, and even the tattered and unprojectible print held in
England is said to have been burnt up ten years ago -- the negative having decomposed, that print
was the only copy that was left -- is now more than ever. Every few years, as with the complete
"Greed", its re-discovery would be announced - and invariably of course it
turned out to be the much later "The Mad Ghoul", the original.

Happily however, the film is a very pleasant surprise. It was made right after
"The Old Dark House" and "The Mummy" and is a rather interesting combination
of themes and moods from both films. As the first major British effort to cash
in on the big horror cycle, it is quite remarkably effective and in terms of
production values, sets and mood, generally up to the average if not the best
Hollywood standards of the day. It may not be another "The Old Dark House", but
a comparison with "Murders in the Rue Morgue" would not be inapt. The sets are
handsome, the gothic mood well sustained, by the atmospheric sound track of
Gunther Krampf and the effective musical score. In terms of plot,
the film is actually more tense and close to farce at times. It was for not the
Karloff presence, it might well teeter more in the direction of "Thark" than
"The Old Dark House". In fact, in the early 60's it was remade as a knockabout
comedy, impure and simple, by some of the "Carry On" gang. Titled "What a Curve Up" in England, it was known over here as "No Place Like Homicide". Its
distribution was sparse, and mainly served only to make it legal. The film is as well as
physically impossible to get at the original. Even the original has its
pronounced comedy elements and some of the performances are so overdrawn as to
suggest that the actors were having a little fun on their own, but for the most
part Karloff manages to keep any levity in check. His makeup is still genuinely
horrific, and there are several grim closeups; it's never quite explained
why a scholarly if eccentric English gentleman should look and walk like the
Frankenstein monster, but that is perhaps the only major loose end.
Despite all the red herrings and the casual interminable of the occult, the supernatural
and the plain melodramatic, the plot (within the wide boundaries of its genre)
is quite a good one, with the convincing explanations made
of the role, Karloff still manages to extract a large extent of audience
sympathy from it. With many of you having seen "The Old Dark House" again -- or
for the first time - quite recently, there may be a tendency to expect a lot
from "The Ghoul". Be warned that it is certainly no classic re-discovered - but
as a piece of sheer horror hokum, it survives quite well, especially since T.
Hayes Hunter, a prolific but rather undistinguished director of the 20's and 30's
in both Hollywood and Britain, and incidentally Griffith's successor as
producer of "The Goul", is quite frankly a hack. In fact, the major weaknesses of "The
Ghoul" are all those that a really good director could have sidestepped. Ernest
Thesiger's role provides a good example: not only is it inconsistent in details
We were about to apologise for the print and say that it isn’t the best print in the world — but actually, since it is probably the only one, it really is the best! Some lines of dialogue are obscured by smudges though not drastically, and one brief scene seems to be missing, not through deliberate cutting so much as the wear and tear of old age. We’ve tried to minimise the loss of that scene by making the real change at that point. The one serious defect is the low sound track, caused by duping somewhere along the line from a very shrunken original, so that the sound track is printed off-centre and doesn’t pick up the full force of the light beam as it passes through the sound area of the projector.

Screened in a very small room the sound is all right — or screened through regular theatrical equipment (as it was in London on January 1st) it’s fully as loud and clear as one could wish. But screened in a large room like ours, with normal projection equipment, it needs an artificial boost by being hooked up to an additional amplifier. This we have done, and it does magnify the volume considerably. Alas, it also magnifies every plop, crackle and blemish on the track. But it can’t be helped, and after a few minutes of screening, a reasonable compromise in level and tone should be reached. In any case, for the chance to see such a rarity, we shouldn’t care at a few mechanical imperfections.

On January 1st we screened the film in London (double-billed with "Dr. X", a very unfamiliar item over there) to a very large and responsive audience that included two of its stars, Kathleen Harrison and Dorothy Hyson (who was accompanied by her mother, Dorothy Dixon, a star of the 20’s); Ralph Richardson had expected to attend too, but couldn’t make it. Dorothy Hyson is still a very charming and beautiful lady, and both she and Kathleen Harrison seemed universal in their dislike of T. Hayes Hunter, who seemed to have the tyranny of a strobe light, without the talent to match. Miss Hyson recalled that UPA’s top makeup man was imported to do Karloff’s makeup. They also brought with them a fascinating master-book set of all the original stills, and some of the production shots were most intriguing. The set for the exterior of the tomb for example was just a simple flat thrown up in the middle of a field, and looking for all the world like the sparse but effective sets that were thrown up for many German films of the 20’s. One suspects from these stills that Krampf and the art director probably had a good deal more to do with the physical design of the film than director Hunter.

--- intermission ---

"THE KING OF JAZZ" (Universal, 1929; rel: 1930) Directed by John Murray Anderson
Sketches by Harry Ruskin; Songs by George Gershwin, Nabe Wayne, Milton Ager, Jack Yellen; Musical Score, Ferd Grofé, arranger, James Dietrich; Dance Director, Russell Markert; Settings and costumes, Hermann Rosse; Camera: Hal Mohr; Ray Kemahan, Jerome Ash; Cartoon sequence (the first in Technicolor) by Walter Lantz; 10 reels


As the big all-star revues of 1929/30 have one by one become available again, we have all wondered whether or not "The King of Jazz" could live up to its reputation, or be as spectacular as its stills suggested. Warnings: "The Show of Shows" had the best star roster; MGM’s "Hollywood Review" was weak, and Fox’s entry abysmal. "Paramount on Parade" seemed to be the best of all, probably because its employment of diverse directorial talents did at least result in variety and many sequences that were genuine cinema and not just photographed vaudeville. Now the long-lost "The King of Jazz" can be seen again, and if it’s not quite the entertainment block-buster we might have hoped for, it is still quite easily the best of the whole group, and one can well understand the impact it must have had at the time.

Its pastel two-color Technicolor is a major asset of course, ensuring that it is always pleasing and often fascinating just to look at. Moreover, the film is surprisingly generous with its various optical effects, photographic tricks and elaborate crane shots; to find such devices used, even sparingly, in a 1929 revue would be unusual, but they are used quite unstintingly here. The spectacle naturally suffers by comparison with the latter Busby Berkeley material, but even so it is often impressive; how much more so it must have seemed in 1930 when its
big and often imaginative sets were contrasted with the limited theatre-stage environs of "The Show of Shows". Possibly some of its spectacle was accidental; reportedly John Murray Anderson was unfamiliar with film technique, and not knowing that the cameras could move around the sets, constructed the sets to move around the cameras! But quite apart from its size and color, it has far more filmic flair and imagination than any of the other big musical revues of the period; the Rhapsody in Blue (and incidentally, despite the reports claiming it is Whitman's own pianist and not Gershwin performing in this) and Melting Pot numbers use color really creatively, and the lively Tapping Foot number, with chorus girls descending on to a carefully constructed large-scale miniature of New York, anticipates the design of Berkeley's 42nd Street number. Music, it must be admitted, holds up rather better than comedy. Some of the songs are delightful, all of them enjoyable - even John Bolles' rather stiff "Monterey".

But the comedy blackouts are something else again, and even accenting the format of this now all-but-vanished comic routine, it's often hard to believe that they have come and gone, let alone squandered the talents of such as Laura La Plante. Curiously though, like the tried and true vaudeville routines that they were, these comic interludes - even the rather painful goldfish story - do seem to gain with repeated viewings. Apart from New York, I have now seen this film in London, and screened it at UCLA in Hollywood and at Eastman House -- and a concentrated exposure to this film over a very short period of time has made it all rather endearing. Certainly it gets a little more enjoyable each time, not least I think because it is also a kind of document of its time - not only an accurate reconstruction of a typical Anderson Broadway review, but an accurate mirror of the tastes in comedy, music, fashion et al of the period. This is the kind of thing that just cannot be reproduced - as witness the condemning and clumsy "Thoroughly Modern Millie". In fact, the only time that "The King of Jazz" really falters is when it tries to reconstruct music of an earlier era - the barber-shop ballad - and decides that it has to be parodied and gaggged-up instead of played straight.

Surprisingly, some of Universal's biggest stars weren't absorbed into the fun - no Reginald Denny for example - but it's good to see a young Bing Crosby and an even younger and leggy Nell O'Day, a decade before she became Johnny Mack Brown's stunt-riding cohort in Universal westerns. But perhaps it is the pert and vivacious Jeannie Lang who is the real hit of the show. Curiously, there is comparatively little orthodox "jazz" in the film - none at all of the Dixieland variety, and with but a passing nod to the Negro contribution to the field -- and it's an interesting reminder that jazz was once a term for purely popular, non-classical music. With the cacophony that passes for music today, the stately musical style of this film almost seems classical in itself at times. Whitman of course was always famous for his "formal" jazz, and Dietrich's film "Symphonie" took quite a swipe at him, by proxy, in condemning such organised, unspontaneous music. Whitman himself has rather an endearing personality however, and in mugging it up for the camera, fully exploits his facial resemblance to Oliver Hardy!

A technical note: tonight's print is a good new reversal made from an original 35mm print found in Europe. Apart from the brief dissolve wrap-up to "Ragamuffin Romeo", it's apparently fully complete - much more so than the Czech archive print, which is a mere 6 reels. This reversal was made primarily to discover the flaws existing in the 35mm; using this print as a guide, some of the bad sound has been re-recorded from original discs, and the sound track hum (caused by the printer picking up the sound of the shrunkene d sprocket holes) eliminated. The occasional bar of red light seen on the print is actually a reflection from the original print as it passed through the printer, a key gate having had to be loosened to allow the shrunkene d print to pass through. Tonight's perfectly acceptable print was thus a guinea-pig which has served to help correct and restore the original, which is now safely copied and preserved.

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