THE BODY SNATCHER


The combination of THE BODY SNATCHER and THE CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE is a particularly fortunate one, for it offers at one fell swoop one of the best (and least appreciated) of the Val Lewton series with one of the best (and least known).

There were nine Lewton horror films in all. CAT PEOPLE was the first and undeniable the best, even though it has been so acclaimed in later years that those coming upon it now (for the first time) must inevitably be disappointed. The great material is all concentrated in the second half, and the literate but very slow first half makes one wonder (at first) what all the shouting was about. All of the Lewtons were interesting, but their standards were somewhat uneven. THE LEOPARD MAN had brilliant individual episodes, but also much tedium, a weak climax, and sets that too often revealed the paucity of budget. Despite its well-composed atmosphere of climactic proportions, THE SECOND VICTIM was a misfire, and THE GHOST SHIP seemed to be striving too hard to turn a melodrama into a horror film just because it was a Lewton production. The others—Toucan’s I WALKED WITH A ZOMBIE, Nabok’s ISLE OF THE DEAD and REHAB (defeated by its own pretensions and enlarged budget, but still offering some beautifully bizarre moments)—are all much better known. (Although, alas, TV audiences hardly know them as they were at all. Even the famous swimming pool sequence from CAT PEOPLE was edited from its initial television presentation.)

Next to CAT PEOPLE, THE BODY SNATCHER is quite certainly the best of the series. (It may well be the best, but somehow I feel that the swimming pool scene and the stalking through Central Park, transfers still give CAT PEOPLE a slight edge.) But strangely, THE BODY SNATCHER is one of the least regarded. Perhaps its trouble is that it sounds like a horror film. For boxoffice reasons, Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi were given the best billing—another misleading suggestion, that it was ‘blood-and-guts’ of the old school—regardless of the fact that it was Henry Daniell who really had the lead, with Karloff in the top supporting spot.

Despite the fact that its very theme indicates more ‘physical’ horror than many of the other more psychologically-activated Lewton films, THE BODY SNATCHER is quite one of the most literate and restrained of all horror films. There are the odd shock effects to be sure, and a climax of pure and mellow nightmare quality, but the film’s finesse—achievement surely is the image of latent malevolence created by Karloff. As a sort of outside-the-law Urash Heep, kind to children and his horse, yet persecuting a basically decent man above his station purely for the sense of power and converted self-respect it gives him, Karloff is superb. How sadly he has been wasted in routine horror roles. His dialogue is beautifully written to begin with, and how well he delivers it. Henry Daniell is somewhat overshadowed by Karloff, but his performance too is first-rate, and the whole film reflects all the care, photographic excellence and production ingenuity (not least in the utilization of sets from bigger pictures) that distinguished the best of the Lewtons.

Incidently, just how good a film THE BODY SNATCHER really is may be brought home to you shortly when (if) you see the new Hammer blood-bath about Burke and Hare, called in England THE FLESH AND THE FIBRE, and over here MANIA—presumably to suggest that it’s another PSYCHE.

THE CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE

1944 (Sound) Directed by Robert Wise and Gunther Fritsch; produced by Val Lewton, screenplay by Philip MacDonald, photography by Nicholas Musurac, art direction by.
The Curse of the Cat People was handicapped by the double misfortune of a title that tried to pass off a fairy tale as a horror yarn, and by being touted as a sequel to the original Cat People. As such, it could hardly fail to disappoint the straight horror market, and its distribution was slight. Apart from re-employing some of the same characters, CURSE is really no kind of sequel to the original, and indeed, to explain how a meek and spook supernatural entity could beseech, after death, a kindly and protective spirit, the writers had to insert several explanatory lines of dialogue which quite falsified and distorted the events of the original.

The menace is THE CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE (which contains neither curses nor catpeople) is nebulous and deliberately vague. Nothing more horrifying occurs than the hair-raising telling of the Deadman Horseman legend to a child by a half-insane old actress. Yet the moments of terror, largely built on nothing—

as indeed the majority of a child's fears are—reach heights quite equal to those of the awakening from within the coffin in ISLE OF THE DEAD or the sudden stopping of the bus with its outside bias in CAT PEOPLE. And, as in all good fairy tales, there is a great deal of poignant beauty too. It would be exasperating to say that THE CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE approaches the beauty of IA BALLE ETIA BERE or more appropriately Autant-Lara's SYLVIE ET LE FANTOME (one of the loveliest and most sensitive films ever made; why was it such a flop here?)—but it does have the same kind of beauty, if on a less accomplished level.

One suspects that no one was quite sure whether this film should have been complete fantasy or complete horror film. Certainly the effects of compromise and indecision show. Many scenes were shot a number of ways. In one version of the climax, for example, the ghost of the former catwoman played a far more positive and melodramatic role, including the unlocking of a jammed closet to enable the child to escape in the present climax, fairy tale magic wins out over prolonged suspense, and it's a preferable solution. Despite the occasionally uneven quality throughout, one feels that this is one of those rare cases where fusing was justified, and where the released version is not a "butchery" of what might have been.

WILLIAM K. EVERSON

(Mr. Everson, film collector and historian, is research director for the television program, CLASSICS PLEASE, and collaborated with Joe Franklin on the pictorial treasury, CLASSICS OF THE SILENT SCREEN.)

** MOVIES: SPRING-SUMMER '61 **

THEATRE PROGRAM

NOTES BY ANDREW BARRIS

MAY 22 - DESTRY RIDES AGAIN

George Marshall, 1939
The inspired director of Wind Chill, as a Western saloon
singer opposite a.Prudence is Jeanette Stewart.
....

MAY 23 - MY LITTLE CHICAREE

(Also known, 1940)

Another example of the classical stage spin, and another ins-
stance in which the producer (who handled the casting) 

deserves some sort of congratulation. Imagine putting a real
westerner and a young southern girl in the same picture! And they've

got just the right combination — West with her frank sexuality, rather like a

walking parody of Wallace and Field's in his bandit,

bawling unplayed conversations. Their only picture together,

their only picture together,

this sequence takes off on the Western as the usual masked good-

man, the stern-faced Indian attack, the inevitable love

story (with Field's trying to think how well he kicked an old

....

Starring Times: 9:45 and 10:00 P.M.

(Note That This Showing Is Three Weeks From Tonight, Not Next Week)

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