

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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The Cat and the Canary (1927)

Saturday 23 March 2019

Performing live: Frank Bockius & Günter Buchwald

John Willard's 1922 comedy-thriller play *The Cat and the Canary* has been filmed four times: probably the 1939 version with Bob Hope is the most-screened; the second version, *The Cat Creeps*, from 1930, sadly seems to be lost, apart from a few fragments; the 1978 remake, a rare fully-clothed outing from soft-porn specialist Radley Metzger, is an oddity. But it's this 1927 production from the German émigré director Paul Leni that really tickles the ribs and sends shivers up the spine at the same time: a cinematic workout for the whole skeleton.

It's also a highly cinematic spectacle, with a mobile camera that looms and lurches (at one point even taking the point-of-view of a painting as it falls from a wall), expressionistic sets, eccentric title cards and artful superimpositions – the invalid Cyrus West, encased in the medicine bottles that give him life, is attacked by giant black cats, embodiments of his greedy relatives: a startling image! And that's just the opening sequence.

Leni had directed *Waxworks* in Germany, likewise a riot of visual ideas, but he had a playful side too: he seems to be the only man ever to adapt a crossword puzzle into a film. Sadly, he died too soon, but not before giving us a trio of superbly atmospheric, macabre movies, rounded out by *The Last Warning* (another horror-comedy) and *The Man Who Laughs* (indescribably: a Victor Hugo period drama which inspired Batman's ever-grinning foe, the Joker). Another hit, the Charlie Chan thriller *The Chinese Parrot*, is sadly lost.

An eerie mansion; a bickering throng of relatives; a will to be read at midnight; an escaped lunatic; sliding panels and hidden passages; a vanishing corpse – the story offers a dizzying array of melodramatic clichés, sent up with gusto and presented with all the shadowy spook-show atmospherics Hollywood could muster. While Lon Chaney's freaky revenge thrillers were certainly a major influence on the horror cycle of the thirties (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein et al*), this macabre caper provided a lot of the inspiration too. The sepulchral sets were designed by Englishman Charles D. Hall, who had come to the States to work for Chaplin and would go on to create the creaky castles for most of the later Universal Studios monster movies.

It's very much an international affair, reminding us how Hollywood has always sucked into its orbit the top filmmaking and acting talent of the world. Irishman Creighton Hale is the timorous hero, the kind of role he would reprise several times: he's one of HippFest's favourite actors, having previously been screened in *Annie Laurie* (HippFest 2015) and last year's hit *Seven Footprints to Satan*. Hale had played staunch leading man types in movie serials of the teens (e.g. *The Exploits of Elaine*) before donning Harold Lloyd specs here to embody a pasty milquetoast. The glamorous Laura La Plante, former bathing beauty, a big

star of the silent and early talkie era, is top-billed, but it's the grotesque supporting players who really bring out the goose-pimpily fun...

The cadaverous Tully Marshall, resembling a kind of silly-putty skeleton, makes a lugubrious lawyer; Martha Mattox as the housekeeper, Mammy Pleasant, manages to make any shot she appears in startling, then unsettling; Flora Finch flutters as daffy Aunt Susan, and even the small role of a passing milkman becomes an exercise in grotesquerie, thanks to the chinless Joe Murphy, who was best-known for embodying yokel Andy Gump, a newspaper cartoon character.

And that's what this is, in many ways, a live-action cartoon, with animated intertitles and a painted mansion to add to the funny-pages feel. Everything, from the actors to the sets to the exciting, swooping camerawork is designed to add to a heightened sense of macabre hilarity: Leni proves that German expressionism isn't just there for the nasty things in life, it can be good for a laugh, too.

By David Cairns. *David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at Shadowplay dcairns.wordpress.com*

Dir. Paul Leni | US | 1927 | N/C PG | English intertitles | 1h 48m
With: Laura La Plante, Creighton Hale, Forrest Stanley

Screening material courtesy of Photoplay Productions