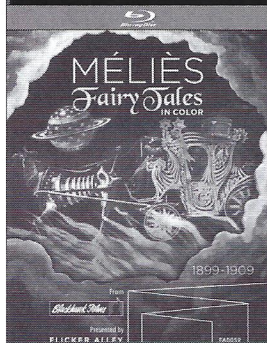


MÉLIÈS: FAIRY TALES IN COLOR 1899-1909

Directed by Georges Méliès
Flicker Alley Blu-ray



It isn't difficult at all to find and view many of the works of Georges Méliès, the French magician, showman, and film pioneer who essentially invented the concept of the special effects film. Working with a combination of traditional stage props and backdrops and an inventive range of in-camera trickery, Méliès concocted fantastic spectacle after fantastic spectacle at the turn of the 20th Century. At a time when most motion pictures were essentially filmed stage plays or slice-of-life documentary clips, Méliès was one of the very first cinematic visionaries to present his audiences with art which could only exist on celluloid. While a

portion of his oeuvre has been regrettably lost, that which remains is pretty much all in the public domain. Multiple compilations have been released over the years on home video, and YouTube and other online resources have plenty of Méliès material easily available for free. *A Trip to the Moon* can be accessed on a phone in about 30 seconds.

Unfortunately, many copies of Méliès material are in rough shape, with serious print damage, faded imagery, and all the other ills that typically afflict 115-year old film elements. This presents a serious problem for viewers, since the average Méliès film is filled with dense, constantly shifting imagery and packed with crowds of tiny figures. Happily, there have been a number of painstaking restoration efforts over the years that have cleaned these things up considerably. Most recently, the folks at Paris-based Lobster Films have spent the last few years working their magic on newly discovered elements of some key titles (including *A Trip to the Moon*), and their freshly restored versions are now available in an affordable one-disc Blu-ray compilation from Flicker Alley.

The Blu-ray title, *Méliès: Fairy Tales in Color: 1899-1909*, may be off-putting to some at first, lending the impression that this is one of those "colorized" classic releases for people who can't stand black and white. Nothing could be further from the truth. What we actually have here is a curated collection of 13 Méliès fantasies which were originally released with hand-tinted color elements. Each has been painstakingly restored to a close to its original visual glory as we are likely to get. The results, in many instances, are a revelation. The many moving parts of each visual composition are clearer, easier to see, and carry a much more immediate aesthetic impact compared to muddier versions where much of the viewer's concentration is spent trying to decipher what he or she is looking at or what those frenetic, gesticulating players are up to. Also quite helpful is the original (translated) narration originally intended to

accompany several of the films, here read by Serge Bromberg.

Flicker Alley's selection of films for this set is stellar, with several of Méliès' 16-20 minute epics taking center stage, supported by a few shorter pieces. If your experience with this filmmaker is mostly limited to *A Trip to the Moon*, check out the

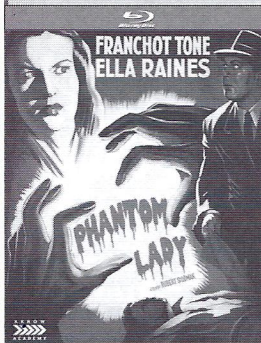


brehtaking *The Kingdom of Fairies*. The films are accompanied by modern, but mostly appropriate and respectful scores by a range of composers, including Bromberg and Robert Israel. A booklet with the narration text and an essay on the collection is also included with the package. Viewers in search of a solid introduction to Méliès should look no further. Turn out the lights, fire up the player, watch these on a large screen, and prepare to be transported. The films included are: *The Pillar of Fire* (1899); *Joan of Arc* (1900); *A Trip to the Moon* (1902); *Robinson Crusoe* (1902); *The Kingdom of Fairies* (1903); *The Infernal Cauldron* (1903); *The Impossible Voyage* (1904); *Rip's Dream* (1905); *The Inventor Crazy Brains and His Wonderful Airship* (1905); *The Merry Frolics of Satan* (1906); *The Witch* (1906); *A Diabolic Tenant* (1906); and, *Whimsical Illusions* (1909).

Chris Herzog

PHANTOM LADY

Directed by Robert Siodmak
(1944) Arrow Academy Blu-ray



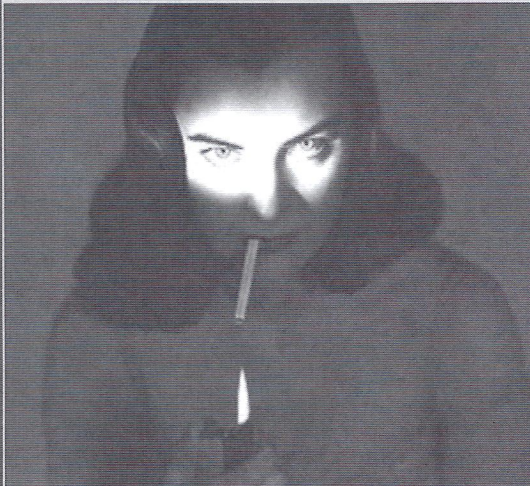
Director Robert Siodmak made better noir films than *Phantom Lady*, but this crackerjack thriller isn't far removed from his best work—which means it isn't far removed from the best noir films, period.

The set-up is straightforward: Architect Scott Henderson (Alan Curtis), following an argument with his wife, spends a night on the town with a strange woman (Fay Helm) he meets in a bar; she refuses to give her name. When Scott returns home, he discovers his wife has been strangled, and the unnamed woman is his only alibi. The police try to confirm his story, but no one will admit they saw Scott or the eponymous "phantom lady." With no alibi, Scott is quickly convicted and sentenced to die. While Scott awaits execution, his loyal secretary Carol (Ella Raines) takes up the case,

determined to find the missing witness and free the architect, who she secretly loves.

As is so often the case with noir films, what makes *Phantom Lady* special isn't so much what happens as how it happens. Two sequences exemplify this. Carol stakes out the bar where Scott met the mysterious woman. She sits silently, nursing a drink and staring at the bartender (Andrew Tombes) night after night until closing time, three nights in a row. After the third night she follows him home. Halfway there, he finally turns and confronts her. Confused and riddled with guilt, he rushes out in front of a passing truck and is killed. Later, Carol allows herself to be picked up by a drummer (Elisha Cook Jr.) in the band at a theater where Scott and the woman took in a musical revue. He takes her to a grimy rehearsal room where, slightly drunk and extremely aroused, he plays an absolutely maniacal drum solo. Both these sequences practically leap from the screen because Siodmak and company present them with such verve and coiled tension.

Cinematographer Woody Bredell, who lensed the Universal horror gems *The Mummy's Hand* (1940) and *Man Made Monster* (1941) and would later shoot Siodmak's hardboiled masterpiece *The Killers* [1946], turns *Phantom Lady* into a veritable smorgasbord of noir motifs: Wet pavement, neon signs, wreaths of cigarette smoke, and shadow-filled alleyways seldom looked so gorgeous. Siodmak's signature pans, dollies, and crane shots provide additional visual interest.



The performances are all very strong as well; unusually so for Raines and Curtis, B-movie stars whose work was never bad but seldom terribly exciting either. *Phantom Lady* represents a high water mark for both; they're convincing and likeable. Character actor Thomas Gomez contributes a better-than-necessary turn as Inspector Burgess, who helps convict Scott then has a change of heart and assists Carol in her investigation. But Franchot

Tone steals the film, cast

against type a remorseless killer. Arrow's Blu-ray presentation of *Phantom Lady* is rock solid. Although the label didn't undertake a restoration, as evidenced by the mild speckling and other minor blemishes visible throughout, they present the film in pull 1080p, scanned from what must have been a very clean source print. Offered in its original Academy aspect ratio, image definition and gray scale are rendered beautifully, and the uncompressed mono sound is clear and sometimes (like during that drum solo) punchy. In all, this disc represents a modest but noticeable upgrade from *Phantom Lady's* prior DVD release, as part of the TCM *Dark Crimes: Film Noir Thrillers* boxed set.

Supplements for Arrow's edition are relatively modest, but everything here is worthwhile: A 53-minute archival documentary on film noir produced in the 1990s, featuring interviews with noir directors Robert Wise and Edward Dmytryk and cinematographer John Alton, among many others; an hour-long 1944 radio dramatization of *Phantom Lady* starring Curtis and Raines; and the inevitable gallery of stills and promotional materials.

Viewers with a *Phantom Lady*-shaped gap in their film noir collections should add this release to their shopping lists.

Mark Clark