

MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES

Directed by Joseph Pevney
(1957) Arrow Academy Blu-ray

Born April 1, 1883, Leonidas (Lon) Chaney was one of the greatest stars of Hollywood's silent era, alongside such icons as Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Valentino, and Greta Garbo. The son of deaf and mute parents, Chaney learned sign language and pantomime at an early age. He was a keen observer of human behavior, a trait that would serve him well as he gave life to cripples and convicts, monsters and Marines, in the 80 feature films and 77 shorts he made in his career.

Chaney cut his showbiz teeth in vaudeville where, in 1905 at the age of 22, he married singer Cleve Creighton, who was six years his junior. They had one son, Creighton Chaney (who would go on to his own renowned career as Lon Chaney, Jr.). However, marital problems mounted and in 1913, Cleve attempted suicide by swallowing mercuric chloride (used at the time to treat syphilis). Cleve survived but her singing career did not. A scandal ensued, followed by divorce, forcing Chaney out of the theater. He set his sights on the explosive new medium of moving pictures, performing in shorts and as an extra, slowly drawing the attention and critical acclaim of peers, reviewers and fans.

Chaney was not only a skilled actor; he created unique makeups for each character he portrayed, leading to his nickname "The Man of a Thousand Faces." He utilized collodion, spirit gum, monofilament, dentures, hooks, body harnesses, and greasepaint to become whatever the scripts required. His two most famous creations were Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and Erik in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925).

But his giftedness went far beyond those two tragic souls. He also portrayed clowns (*He Who Gets Slapped*, 1924; *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*, 1928), literary characters (the Blind Pew/Merry in *Treasure Island*, 1920; Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, 1922), Asians (*Shadows*, 1922; *Mr. Wu*, 1927), old ladies (*The Unholy Three*, 1925, remade 1930), monsters (*A Blind Bargain*, 1922; *London After Midnight*, 1927), and criminals (*Outside the Law*, 1920; *The Ace of Hearts*, 1921). Aside from Quasimodo and Erik, Chaney is best known for his portrayals of brutish, cruel-but-redeemable, handicapped characters in such works as *The Road to Mandalay* (1926), *The Unknown* (1927), and *West of Zanzibar* (1928).

When sound arrived in 1930, Chaney was ready to make the jump. That year he remade *The Unholy Three*, performing five different voices in the film. Sadly, two months after its release, he died of throat cancer on August 30, 1930.

Director Joseph Pevney (*Twilight For the Gods*, 1958; numerous television episodes from *Bewitched* and *Star Trek to the Munsters* and *The Incredible Hulk*) brought Chaney's life story to the screen with 1957's *Man Of a Thousand Faces*.

James Cagney (*Angels with Dirty Faces*, 1938; *White Heat*, 1949) headlines as Chaney, and does so with incredible skill and finesse. His facial expressions and mannerisms were the result of hours spent studying Chaney's work.

The film begins with a short vignette of an adolescent Lon coming home from school after getting into a fight, setting up the chip he would always carry on his shoulder for the handicapped and marginalized. The film jumps ahead to introduce Cleve (Dorothy Malone, *The Big Sleep*, 1946; *The Being*, 1983), a selfish and unstable artist who places career above her family (something unheard of in the early 20th century). Lon and Cleve's domestic troubles end in separation, where we join Chaney as he begins to nudge his way onto Hollywood backlots. The demure and compassionate Hazel (Jane Greer, *Station West*, 1948; *Against All Odds*, 1984) eventually becomes his second wife, and provides the support that Chaney needs to temper his hard, angry personality. Press agent Clarence Locan (Jim Backus, *Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955; the voice of cartoon character Mr. Magoo) serves as an anchor and friend as Chaney navigates his career.

Makeup artist Bud Westmore developed foam rubber pieces for Cagney's soft, round face while still paying homage to Chaney's iconic creations, and the work holds up well today. While the Blu-ray upgrade makes the foam rubber masks and body suits more obvious, they don't take away from the film.

Pevney directs with a confident hand, drawing an exceptional performance from Cagney (already 10 years older than Chaney was when he died). He keeps the story flowing and doesn't allow things to become overly melodramatic, although there are the requisite sappy moments. *Man Of a Thousand Faces* is by no means a perfect biopic but it is a valuable one, giving us a glimpse into the life and work of one of Hollywood's greatest legends—who has inspired makeup artists such as Greg Nicotero, Tom Savini, and Rob Bottin for nearly a hundred years.

Arrow Video's release of *Man Of a Thousand Faces* starts with sumptuous reversible sleeve art by Graham Humphreys. The first pressing also features a fully illustrated booklet with an essay by Vic Pratt of the British Film Institute. The original 35mm camera negative has been scanned in 2K resolution, providing the viewer with a consistent level of blacks and grays. The film was first released on DVD in 1998 and re-released in 2008, but this is by far the best looking presentation. There is no grain or scan issues; depth of field is strong, and details are abundant.

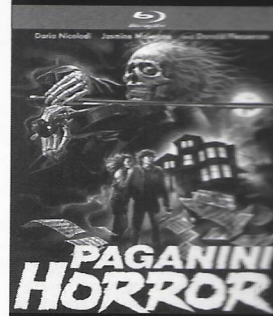
Special features include a theatrical trailer; an image gallery of production stills, posters and lobby cards; and "The Man Behind a Thousand Faces," a new 21-minute interview with always jovial genre historian Kim Newman, in which he places Chaney and this biopic in proper historical context. The highlight of the package, however, is the audio commentary by historian and scholar Tim Lucas. Chocked full of information about Chaney, his films, and *Man Of a Thousand Faces*, Lucas brings his considerable knowledge and easy going manner to what is arguably the best audio commentary of 2019. Details are plentiful and impressive and provide a whole new appreciation of the film and its subject.

If there's one thing missing from the package it's Chaney's biographer, Michael F. Blake. A retired, award-winning Hollywood makeup artist himself, Blake is the author of three definitive books on Chaney's life and career. His father, Larry J. Blake, even played an uncredited role in *Man Of a Thousand Faces*. Not only could Michael Blake's participation have made for an organic bridge to the film; his expertise on Chaney would've been invaluable.

J. Todd Kingree

PAGANINI HORROR

Directed by Luigi Cozzi
(1988) Severin Films Blu-ray



Desperate for a hit rock singer Kate (Jasmine Milan, Luigi Cozzi's *The Black Cat*) is facing a professional dumping from her producer Lavinia (Marie-Cristine Mastroianni, Tinto Brass' *Papillon*). Kate's drummer Daniel (Pascal Persiano, *Demons 2*) accidentally has a meeting with a

mysterious Mr. Pickett (Horror icon Donald Pleasance, *Horror Express*, *Halloween*) who sells Daniel what he claims is an unpublished manuscript by legendary Italian violinist Niccolò Paganini, written for use in occult rites.

Daniel turns the piece into a really cheesy rock song and Kate gets wildly inspired to shoot a "Michael Jackson's Thriller-type rock video based on the legend of Paganini selling his soul to The Devil. Nothing but the best will do, so she hires "horror movie king" Mark Singer (Pietro Genovardi, *Killer Crocodile*, *Dellamorte Dellamore*) to direct on location in the villa in which Paganini was living when he supposedly sold his soul.

As they begin to shoot the gory video (with Daniel playing Paganini in a gold mask, black cape and fedora), they somehow manage to summon the cursed soul of the Italian master himself, who immediately grabs a golden Stradivarius with a retractable 10-inch blade and starts offing the plucky thespians uno per uno. Things take an even freakier turn when the villa's current owner Silvia (Daria Nicolodi, *Inferno*, Mario Bava's *Shock*) discovers that there's some sort of alteration in space/time (or something) and none of them are able to escape . . .

Former Dario Argento assistant Luigi Cozzi (billed here as "Lewis Coates") collaborated with Argento's ex-wife Daria Nicolodi on the scripts for two projects in 1989, this one and *The Black Cat aka Demons 6*, which was originally conceived as the final chapter in Argento's "Mother of Tears" trilogy, but changed in focus when the distributor demanded a Poe tie-in, causing Nicolodi to leave the project. Their collaboration was a bit more fruitful here.

Paganini Horror has a pretty flimsy reputation, but it's not without its charms. This is clearly a low-budget film ("ridiculously low" according to Cozzi) that sometimes feels like a cheap retreat of Mario Bava's *Blood and Black Lace* (minus the Bava style), but its moments of sheer nuttiness make it worth viewing, especially for anyone with a taste for 80's Italian formaggio. The requisite gore effects by Rosario Prestopino (*The Church*) and Franco Casagni (*The Stendahl Syndrome*) are bare-bones but effective. The electronic rock score by frequent Fabio Frizzi collaborator Vince Tempera (*Four of the Apocalypse*, *The House of Clocks*) is suitably cheesy and reminiscent of half the Italian Horror films of the period. Cozzi's daughter appears as the little girl with an electric hair dryer in the flashback opening.

Severin's Blu-ray presents *Paganini Horror* in the best conceivable light and it's clearly never looked or sounded better. The décor may be drab but the colors look bright and true. Presented in the 1.66:1 aspect ratio with English and Italian 2.0 mono audio tracks. I prefer the English track, as the Italian-speaking cast spoke English phonetically during filming, and the whole thing was dubbed over later anyway. The original Italian track is featured here as well. The first 3000 copies came with a bonus CD soundtrack.

Lee Peterson