

BAT PUSSY

AGFA/Something Weird Video Blu-ray

For those of you who thought that porn parodies of pop cultural properties like comic books and movies were a relatively recent invention, *Bat Pussy* bounces in to shatter your preconceptions and forever alter your relationship with cinema and sexuality. But not necessarily in a good way. *Bat Pussy* has actually been available from Something Weird Video (hallowed be their name) for a couple of decades but has risen to prominence once again with the release of this handsome new

Blu-ray, produced in cooperation with the fine folks at American Genre Film Archive.

The discovery of *Bat Pussy* is another one of those cinematic treasure hunt narratives that make niche genre buffs drool. Filmmaker Mike McCarthy told Mike Vraney, the founder and primary driving force behind Something Weird, about a Memphis porn theater that was finally shutting its doors in the early 1990s and had a backroom full of assorted reels it wanted to try selling before they went into the dumpster. Vraney paid about a thousand bucks for the lot and began sorting through his haul. Buried among the mostly pedestrian 8 and 16 mm materials was *Bat Pussy*. This was well before the current vogue for golden age porn, or really, early exploitation cinema of any kind, had gotten rolling. In fact, it was largely due to the efforts of Vraney and a few other pioneers like him that nudies, roughies, loops, and the comparatively lavish x-rated offerings of the 70s now enjoy respectable home video sales and sustained attention from critics, historians, and fans alike. Joe Sarno, Wakefield Poole, and Radley Metzger, among other filmmakers, have finally begun to receive the credit their work deserves.

And then there's *Bat Pussy*.

We actually don't know the auteur behind *Bat Pussy*, who the cast were, or any of its production details. The film has no title or credits of any kind attached and has simply been bestowed with its current title for reasons which should become obvious. Several clues point to the film being made in or around the Memphis area: everyone's thick southern accents, an Arkansas Razorbacks tattoo on somebody's ass. One popular theory is that it was produced by theater owner himself (or an associate) either in an effort to generate cheap product for the screen or to make a few bucks selling prints to other theaters. Whatever the case, it's tough to imagine what first run audiences made of this thing.

First of all, it should be noted that *Bat Pussy* probably qualifies as hardcore pornography, though only by the barest of margins. Thus, while it has the potential to be a fantastic party video, it better be the right kind of party. As the film opens, we are introduced to Buddy, an affable, Schlitz-drinking, Tennessee truckdriver type with more than a hint of Jerry Reed about him, and his girlfriend-maybe-wife Sam, a freckled redhead with one of the biggest bouffant hairdos I've ever seen. Buddy is reading an issue of *Screw Magazine* published in 1970, which helps date the production. Sam is lying in bed, begging him to join her. After he finally does so, we are treated to what seems like hours of the couple rolling around naked, berating and insulting each other, and unsuccessfully attempting to have sex. Buddy is having problems, and I don't think it was in the script. Apparently in the spirit of cinema verite, the bold, unflinching director leaves all this stuff in.

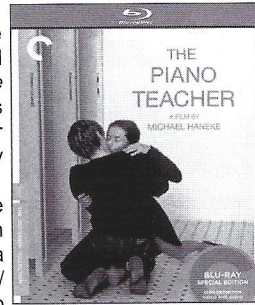
Although it seems like hours, the entire film runs less than one hour, so it is really many endless minutes. Then, just when even the most game viewer has about run out of patience, we abruptly cut to the secret hideaway of superheroine Bat Pussy, which seems to be a garage or warehouse somewhere. In much the same way that Batman's batcave is decorated with a giant coin and a stuffed dinosaur, mementos of past adventures, Bat Pussy's sanctum is appointed with a threadbare couch and a desk with cans of Pledge and Comet on it. Sensing that someone in the city is making a sex film without her (I think; it's sometimes difficult to completely suss out Bat Pussy's motivation), she awkwardly dons a homemade costume which looks only slightly worse than Lewis Wilson's in the 1943 *Batman* serial. From there, she traverses the city on one of those bouncy balls with a handle on top, the crowning WTF moment in a film packed with them, before ending up in the bedroom of Buddy and Sam. We are then treated to the film's climactic threesome, one of the most frantic and out-of-control such scenes this reviewer has ever witnessed, although the sex appears to be largely simulated. I genuinely feared for Bat Pussy's safety at one point and so did Buddy, breaking character to ask if she is OK and speaking to the off-camera director. Buddy actually talks to the director a lot during the picture, and while most of the responses are simply blanked from the soundtrack, a few remain. Buddy also keeps referring to Bat Pussy as "Bat Woman" and has to be corrected a couple of times. Then, the film just stops.

Something Weird and AGFA bring this treasure to us in a nice 2K scan of the original 16mm theatrical print Vraney purchased, the only print of the film known to exist. They've spiced the package up with a solid list of extras, starting with a giddy commentary track featuring Lisa Petrucci and others from Something Weird and AGFA and liner notes by Petrucci and Mike McCarthy which, together, provide most of the details about the discovery and known history of *Bat Pussy*. The disc also contains a bonus feature, *Robot Love Slaves*, an interesting software effort from roughly the same period with a mad scientist theme and a few WTF moments of its own. It also has a sweet, early 70s synthesizer musical score that sounds like Keith Emerson testing out a piece of new equipment at length while trying to decide whether to buy it. The second feature is provided in a new 2k scan from a theatrical print. If you enjoy *Bat Pussy*, it's probably worth a spin. The disc is rounded off with a few entertaining shorts and trailers from the Something Weird vault that seem almost randomly selected. Kudos to all involved.

Chris Herzog

THE PIANO TEACHER (LA PIANISTE)

Directed by Michael Haneke
(2001) The Criterion Collection Blu-ray / DVD



An obsessed woman with strange sexual proclivities is a trope visited endlessly in thrillers and film noir. *The Piano Teacher* starts with a relentless tension that never lets up but it never settles into tidy genre clichés or easily charted territory.

Isabelle Huppert, plays Erika, the titular piano instructor. Erika lives with her mother (a chilly Annie Girardot), in a stifling Vienna flat. Their mother/daughter dynamic runs through a psycho-sexual loop of aggression, passion and repression. It's a grim, relentless tale that simultaneously evokes and reaches far beyond the Freudian dread of *Black Swan*, *Psycho*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* and *The Red Shoes*.

Erika is a stern, unforgiving instructor, a sadistic taskmaster who leaves her students in tears when they inevitably fail to meet her impossibly high standards. Her brutal, pedagogical style is an obvious parallel to her relationship with her domineering mother but credit director Michael Haneke for not allowing the proceedings to get too bogged down in the kind of haughty, backstage melodrama you would expect in a European art house film that name checks Franz Schubert. When she's not locking horns with her dear old mère, or humiliating her students, Erika spends her leisure time pursuing a panoply of completely dehumanizing sexual situations. This isn't the stuff of a campy Pedro Almodóvar sex romp, it's more like reading the table of contents of Kraft-Ebing's 19th century study of deviant behavior, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (like Freud, Kraft-Ebing made his name in Vienna. Draw your own conclusions.)

The real bumpy ride starts when Erika catches the eye of Walter (Benoît Magimel), a handsome young piano student at a recital. Despite his Kirk Douglas chin-cleft and a winning smile, Walter's romantic intentions are initially rebuked with robotic indifference by Erika. Eventually, the stone-faced teacher concocts some very specific, very strange rules of engagement that she soon makes clear to Walter in the most chillingly banal way possible. Whenever Erika seems poised to satisfy her carnal desires, she responds with gut-wrenching physical reactions that are visceral and chilling.

The Piano Teacher cleaned up at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival, winning the Palme d'Or and best actor and actress nods for Magimel and Huppert. The film also received a Golden Globe award the same year for best foreign language film. Despite being submitted as the official Austrian foreign language entry, the stodgy Academy Awards didn't even bother to give the Austrian/German/French production a nomination. Huppert's performance is incredibly restrained and blithely uninged in equal measure. She's fully inhabiting a role that is less than flattering, at times brutally so.

Haneke (with the help of cinematographer Christian Berger) take full advantage of Huppert's steely-eyed gaze, lingering on her expressionless face to great effect. Huppert spends an unsettling amount of screen time still and motionless, symbolically (and literally) backed up against a wall or frozen in a doorway surveying the damage she's done. (Doors seem to be a prominent visual motif throughout the film.) Stylistically, the film looks muted and naturalistic with a tendency to admirably underplay some of the most audacious moments. Despite mining the same sort of territory we have seen before in countless Hollywood tales of overly obsessive lovers getting just what they deserve, there's no cathartic moment of redemption or relief in sight here. The ending is shocking and inevitable without being a pat escalation of the weirdness that preceded it.

The Criterion Collection release features a crisp restoration, supervised by Haneke along with the original trailer and interviews with Huppert and the director. A unique behind-the-scenes extra follows Haneke and Huppert through a post-production looping session. ("Looping" is the process of recording dialogue after shooting is over to enhance or replace the original audio.) The French actress and the Austrian director have a fascinating and granular back and forth over seemingly minor points of language and intentions. It's a testimony to Huppert's extraordinary talent when you see her instinctive and naturalistic performance is the result of an analytical and painstaking process. And it's a great relief to witness Huppert smiling and enjoying herself (relatively speaking) after spending two hours of seeing her cloaked in Erika's tortured psyche.

Kevin Douglas