

THE OLD DARK HOUSE

Directed by James Whale
(1932) The Cohen Film Collection Blu-ray

Young creature-feature fans raised on the Universal classics via weekend television often supplemented their education with picture-packed "monster movie" history books checked out repeatedly from the public library. (hardcover volumes that were either out of print or a bit out of their price range). Only thus were they made aware of a Boris Karloff title that *should* have been part of the "Shock Theater" package. It was a Universal release directed by James Whale between *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein*, and there were photos galore of Karloff as a hulking, menacing, scar-faced figure . . . so why hadn't *The Old Dark House* ever been a part of their scary weekend entertainment? Who was holding out on them? It wasn't fair!

Truth be told, *The Old Dark House* wasn't a particularly successful outing for Universal and nobody at the studio bothered to take care of or keep track of it. No effort was made to resurrect it for television syndication, and the film was very nearly lost forever, but for one filmmaker's dedication (more on that later). And while it's true that the film didn't deliver what the post-*Frankenstein* audience expected from a film heavily pushed as a starring vehicle for Karloff, it's a treasure all the same.

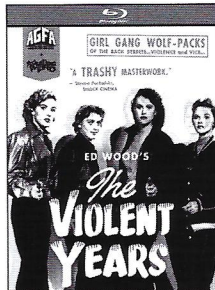
And what a cast! Raymond Massey (who assumed Karloff's stage role in the film version of *Arsenic and Old Lace*) and Gloria Stuart are the Waverlons, out for a drive in the Welsh countryside with their friend Roger Penderel (those *Scream* readers who first came to know Melvyn Douglas through his stern, elderly persona in such early 1980s thrillers as *Ghost Story* and *The Changeling* might be surprised by his status as a dashing, romantic leading man in the 1930s) when inclement weather and perilous road conditions force them to seek shelter at the title abode. But they've got to deal with the intimidating, mute butler Morgan (as with *Bride* to come, the actor was simply billed as "KARLOFF") before they can even get past the door and meet their reluctant hosts. Accomplished stage actor Ernest Thesiger was just warming up for his immortal turn as Dr. Pretorius as Horace Femm, and Eva Moore hams it up ("No beds! No beds!") as his fanatical, deaf-as-a-post sister Rebecca. And before you can say "Castles don't have phones . . ."

Yes. It started here with an official adaptation of J.B. Priestley's novel *Benighted*. Of course *The Old Dark House* doesn't begin to approach the excesses of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (nor is it a musical), but the template was clearly laid down once James Whale and company got their hands on what was originally written as a serious thriller and infused it with a healthy dose of camp. The prissy Thesiger establishes the tone almost as soon as he's introduced (all together now, "Have a potato!"), but all bets are off once Charles Laughton shows up with Lillian Bond as his showgirl companion (of convenience). Naturally, Bond quickly pairs up with Douglas to provide the obligatory boy-meets-girl element. And for those purists who know that camp isn't truly "camp" without a drag element of some sort, we have yet to meet "Sir" Roderick Femm, the 102-year-old bedridden patriarch played by Elspeth Dudgeon (as John Dudgeon) under convincing old age makeup but making no attempt whatsoever to affect a male voice!

Yet none of the above should be taken as a suggestion that Whale neglected to provide the thrills and chills promised by the title and advertising. The Femms have more than skeletons in their closet, and while Karloff's Morgan is ultimately a peripheral character (word of mouth to that effect quickly drove down American attendance), he's more than a credible threat to the principals, especially when he drinks (which is often). And he'll do anything to protect the final family secret . . . but does brother Saul (Brember Wills) truly deserve to spend his life in a locked room, or is his mad family conspiring against him? The climactic revelations and subsequent action of *The Old Dark House* are as intense as anything in the classic Universal library.

It's all completely innocuous by today's standards, of course, but this slice of pre-code horror/comedy was sufficiently provocative in its day to require the removal of certain bits of dialogue for its re-issue, such as those pertaining to the nature of the friendship between Laughton's and Bond's characters (of course everyone on Whale's set knew what the deal was, but there were some things you just didn't talk about back then!). From that point on, it seemed that nobody would ever see any version of Whale's film again. (In 1963, England's Hammer Films teamed up with American director William Castle to produce a remake starring Tom Poston: the results were pleasant enough but scarcely memorable.) Ultimately, it was the tenacity of filmmaker Curtis Harrington (*Games, What's the Matter with Helen?* and much, much more) that finally restored the original *House* to the light of day. Harrington describes his fandom of and eventual friendship with James Whale and his dedication to locating the sole remaining print of his lost masterpiece in a short supplemental feature. The (uncut) film first bowed on a Kino DVD years ago; that release also featured an audio commentary by Gloria Stuart (who died in 2010) which has been ported over to this truly dazzling and pristine Blu-ray rendition offered by the Cohen Media Group. An all-new and thoroughly researched commentary is provided by official James Whale biographer James Curtis, while Dean Otto interviews Sara Karloff (daughter of Boris, of course) for an additional round of memories. Unsurprisingly, the "trailer" on hand is a video advertisement for the release of this restoration; as no original preview material has survived the ages. Consider this release indispensable.

Shane M. Dallmann



THE VIOLENT YEARS

Directed by William Morgan
(1956) AGFA/Something Weird Video Blu-ray

Lumped in with the rest of Edward D. Wood, Jr.'s output, even though he's just the screenwriter, *The Violent Years* is a solid juvenile-delinquent programmer that's somehow retained a sizable cult cache through the years. Ministry used it to sample memorable dialogue on a track from their 1989 album "The Mind is a Terrible Thing to Taste"; it's turned up to be ridiculed on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, and there have been a number of past VHS and DVD releases, all ensuring to include front-cover mentions that the film came from the mind of Ed Wood.

In 2017, the AGFA and Something Weird teamed up for an exemplary and definitive release—represented in a stunning 4K transfer—with some bells and whistles, including a thematically similar second feature. It's inconceivable to think that this could be topped, and any self-respecting Ed Wood fan should have it in their collection. (Along with Vinegar Syndrome's recent release of *Orgy of the Dead*.)

The Violent Years has a snarling attitude about it, its lead characters dismissive of the normal standards of civilized society. Jean Moorhead, a Playboy Playmate the previous year, is Paula Parkins, a privileged daughter of a newspaper man (Arthur Millan). She scandalizes her small town by leading a gang of female peers through a litany of offenses: gas station stick-ups, the (suggested) rape of a young man, and the climactic destruction of a couple of classrooms and final shoot-out. These girls dress tough and act tougher, with home lives that have left them defeated and careless. As the theatrical poster ad-copy declares, these are "untamed girls of the pack gang—thrill girls of the highway."

The plot's also bookmarked by your standard moralizing courtroom scenes, the (surviving) girls and their legal guardians finally taken to task by the stern Judge Clara (I. Stanford Jolley). (It was the fifties after all. Careful moral posturing after depicting unrelenting havoc was the order of the day.)

Even though lasting just under an hour, there are a number of cheap set-ups that seem to last forever: sedentary shot-reverse-shots of two people talking in offices and living rooms, quipping clever comebacks between exchanges of expository dialogue. (Co-commentator Frank Henenlotter (*Basket Case*, *Brain Damage* and *Frankenhooker*), seems exasperated by these scenes just as much as I was.)

The director is William Morgan, an editor by trade. (He handled both Jack Arnold's *Tarantula* and Douglas Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow*.) He stages the material in a typical way of exploitation pictures at the time, but really, the film only sings when the bemused-with-himself Ed Wood dialogue really starts going. (Usually between Jean Moorhead and her mother, played by Barbara Weeks.)

Anatomy of a Psycho is a bonus co-feature on the disc. It's an under-the-radar 1961 revenge tale release starring Ronnie Burns, the adopted son of George Burns and Gracie Allen. "Larry Lee" is credited as co-writer, and it's been rumored that it's really a pseudonymous Wood, but indisputable proof is lacking.

Extras include commentary by the aforementioned Frank Henenlotter and Rudolph Grey (author of *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood Jr.*). The two sound off about the film's reputation in relation to Wood, while also pointing out just about every lead actor and bit player. It's crucial to have such experts on hand—they know their stuff, and can place faces and reputations through 1930s and 1940s Hollywood, remarking on how those actors may have ended up here. (That's Harry Keaton, Buster's brother, as a doctor. Timothy Farrell—a familiar Ed Wood face from *Glen or Glenda* and *Jail Bait*—appears, as does Glen Corbett—but it's not the Glenn Corbett from *Route 66* and William Castle's *Homicidal*.)

Other extras include 15 minutes of juvenile delinquent juiciness in the form of trailers, plus ten grainy minutes from *Hellborn*, a similar picture Ed Wood hoped to make shortly after *The Violent Years*—before running out of finances. These are essentially the uninterrupted rushes without dialogue, as none was recorded, and comprise a day's worth of footage. Ever so cannily, Wood used some of the footage in his *The Sinister Urge*.

The 2000s seemed a bit quiet on the Ed Wood front, after all of the 1990s recognition waned from the Tim Burton bio-pic and Rudolph Grey book and marathons on *Monstervision*, but AGFA/Something Weird seem to be rescuing such films for the HD market. Next up: a planned release of Ed Wood's notorious unfinished roughie, *Take It Out in Trade*. Keep them coming.

Aaron Graham