



PSYCHOMANIA

CAST

George Sanders ... Shadwell

Beryl Reid ... Mrs Latham

Nicky Henson ... Tom

Mary Larkin ... Abby

Roy Holder ... Bertram

Robert Hardy ... Chief Inspector Hesselstine

CREW

Director of Photography **Ted Moore B.S.C.**

Film Editor **Richard Best**

Art Director **Maurice Carter**

Stunt Supervisor **Gerry Crampton**

Music by **John Cameron**

Screenplay by **Arnaud D'Usseau** and **Julian Halevy**

Produced by **Andrew Donally**

Directed by **Don Sharp**

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AN OUTSTANDING APPOINTMENT WITH FEAR THE PECULIAR POWER OF PSYCHOMANIA

by Vic Pratt

They say there's no accounting for taste. The first time *Psychomania* (1973) screened on the BBC, in July 1994, the *Radio Times* review gave it a one-star rating, which equalled "awful", despite the fact that it was being shown in that week's cult-movie celebration slot, 'Moviedrome' (1988-2000). It would seem their reviewer, the esteemed Derek Winnert, didn't dig sleazy seventies British exploitation flicks about frogs and undead-biker-teens, concluding "director Don Sharp wastes the talents of Beryl Reid and George Sanders in this violent, unsavoury and often unintentionally funny horror movie."

Each to their own, of course, but my mates and I – as nerdy fans of freaky films – begged to differ. My view was (and still is) that *Psychomania* was in fact the greatest, weirdest British post-psychedelic undead-biker horror movie ever made. Actually, I was pretty sure it was the only one ever made. And I was absolutely sure it was the only one to feature haunted Hollywood legend Sanders and the vigorously versatile Reid in outstanding, unhinged supporting roles; plus Robert Hardy, later Siegfried in *All Creatures Great and Small* (1978-90), playing a po-faced policeman, not to mention a bizarre bit by Bill Pertwee, aka Warden Hodges out of *Dad's Army* (1968-77), doing a rare turn – as a publican – without his ARP helmet. Personally, I thought Mr Winnert's review missed the point. But then I'd already fallen for *Psychomania* when it showed on ITV in the late eighties, having enjoyed and been astounded by it in equal measures with a motley band of drunken, similarly appreciative cohorts, when it was broadcast in the wee small hours in the 'Appointment with Fear' slot. *TV Times* critic David Quinlan, reviewing for the other side, had been kinder to it on that occasion, noting in his write-up, which had in fact been repeatedly recycled with slight variations every time the film was on ITV, from 1978 onwards, that "it sounds silly and it is, but Sharp ensures that you'll jump out of your armchair on at least one occasion and maybe more."

The thing is, kids, back before cable TV, Netflix or the interweb, old horror films were only shown on British telly late at night, in a slot clearly labelled 'Appointment with Fear', or, for the absolute avoidance of doubt, 'The Horror Film'. It did what it said on the tin. No frills. And if you didn't have a new-fangled VCR, and you wanted to see 'The Horror Film', you had to omit the Ovaltine, resolutely report to the aforementioned armchair around midnight, as Quinlan ordered, then watch – wearily but determinedly – propping your eyes open with matchsticks, if necessary, until those end credits rolled, even if it meant retiring at a thoroughly absurd hour, and consequently turning up late to school, or work, the next morning. Alternatively, you could skip it, go to bed, and wait a few years, hoping it would be on again.

Of course, if you did that, it never was. Ah, the good old days. But I'm not complaining, for by the time I was in my twenties, I'd developed a significant – if sleep-fogged – love for what we might now call 'vintage' British horror. Admittedly, once you'd seen the classics, things got a bit odd. I recall being freaked out big time by *Dracula A.D. 1972* (1972), which repositioned the Count in modern-day London (by the late 1980s, of course, that London looked about as modern-day as Stonehenge). It featured groovy young mod vampires in skinny-fit polo necks, cool shades, and Cuban-heeled boots. I was still more stunned by *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (1973), which had Drac looming uncomfortably over an office desk, ostensibly posing as one DD Denham, head of some kind of macabre multinational corporation. You might think that was about as odd as British horror got; but even these way-out reworkings of Hammer's fading franchise had not prepared my tender teenage psyche for *Psychomania*.

It looked a bit like a Hammer production, but gone weirdly and wonderfully wrong. Struck by the superbly eerie beginning – ominous prog-rock accompanied by sinister soft-focus slow-motion shots of motorcycles, mournfully weaving betwixt standing stones – I was bedazzled by its increasingly nutty, cheerfully nihilistic tale of bored bikers coming back from the dead. I never quite twigged what the secret was of that shadowy locked room everyone involved seemed so interested in; nonetheless, it was clear this apparent mixture of black almost-humour, bleakness, horror and strangeness was very special indeed, even if I didn't take it all in first time around (or ever). I did understand that somehow the exceptional oddness emanated from Beryl Reid's (yes, Beryl Reid!) incomprehensible frog-related pact with the Devil (or the Man from Del Monte, perhaps) and a solemn George Sanders had something to do with it – but it's hard to tell sometimes with those onscreen psychedelic-dream flashbacks, especially when you're drunk, or half-asleep. And I was. I remember thinking hunky, hairy Nicky Henson was super as stony-faced Tom, leader of marvellous, morbid motorcycle gang the Living Dead, and I loved the fact that Tom had good-girl and bad-girl girlfriends (Ann Michelle's character is pure evil, so wears a scarlet

leather jacket, while Mary Larkin's naïve innocent sports bashful baby-blue corduroy). With these two vying for his affections, Tom was kind of like an evil English inversion of wholesome American comic-book teenager Archie, with his similarly long-suffering love-triangle girlfriends Betty and Veronica.

That first time I saw *Psychomania* I spent the ad breaks wondering whether director Don Sharp wanted me to take it seriously or not. It was not until I saw a suicidal gang member attempting to do himself in by lumbering into a river wrapped in *Road Runner*-cartoon-style heavy chains that I twigged this might be a uniquely British comedy of the deathly driest kind, something almost akin to a 90-minute-long black-as-pitch *Monty Python* sketch. Further confirmation seemingly came along when I saw that the murdered coppers, neatly laid out on the morgue slabs, were still smartly wearing their helmets. Yet, despite all this absurd business – and *Psychomania* is splendidly, unflaggingly, excellently full of unremarked-upon absurd business, when you think about it – everybody in it plays it absolutely straight. Therein, I'd suggest, lies the secret of its own intrinsic locked room of bizarre brilliance.

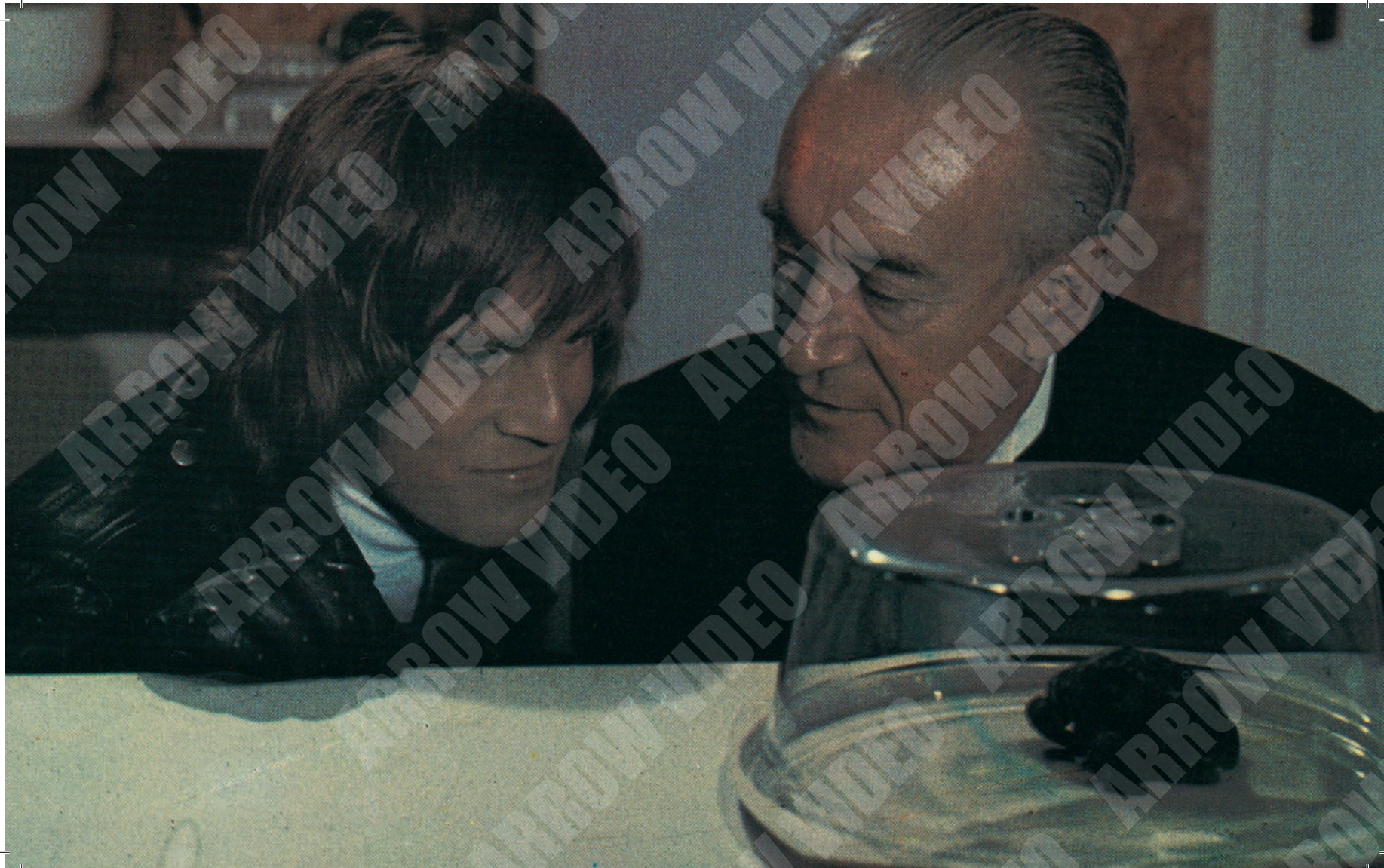
Psychomania was made at a time when British cinema was in crisis and increasingly desperate producers were concocting some extremely strange, mixed up movies. This is one of them. After the 1960s boom, which had seen US execs flock to make films in 'Swinging London', the bubble had burst. The Americans had cleared off and major studios were struggling. To make a quick buck, enterprising entrepreneurs were knocking out cheap exploitation films that promised (even if they didn't deliver) stronger stuff than you could see on telly at home: sex and violence. Desperate to snare that elusive youth audience, producers gambled low budgets on far-out features combining multiple genres, hoping that kids with a couple of quid to spend would 'dig' it, daddy-o.

You needed a trendy gimmick. Since *Easy Rider* (1969), biker movies had been money spinners in the States, and a home-grown variant presumably seemed like a good idea – on paper. But whereas across the Atlantic directors had miles and miles of highway-endless cost-effective open space to provide a stylish two-lane blacktop backdrop – the chances were that in Blighty you'd most likely end up shooting your masterpiece on some suburban one-way system. Thus in the motorcycle odyssey that is *Psychomania* you do not see bikers tripping out across barren, sun-bleached desert realms. Instead, they upset workmen up improbably positioned ladders in the town centre, harass young mums out to buy a few bits, and chuck cardboard boxes about in a Walton-on-Thames supermarket. Paradoxically perhaps, this undisguised location-dictated smallness of scale provides another wondrous reason why *Psychomania* remains an unparalleled viewing experience.

Psychomania is also an excellent example of that increasingly discussed British exploitation film sub-genre, the creepy-folk-horror, which flourished briefly but beautifully in the rubble-strewn wreckage of the unfulfilled 1960s counter-cultural dream. Made at a time of significant social change, while city worryingly encroached upon countryside, *Psychomania*, like other creepy-folk-horror examples *Robin Redbreast* (1970) or *The Wicker Man* (1973), seems to reflect, in its fractured, frightful, fantastic prism, social anxiety about what had gone before, what was being lost in the rush of the modern, and what was to come. The peaceful, spiritual revolution preached by bearded Beatles never came to pass. But its semi-Wiccan underpinnings lingered on into this grubby, uncertain new decade. Amidst the urban sprawl, the young still yearned for the old ways, dreamt of possessing strange arcane powers, and practised the occult, perhaps as a means of coping with all that creeping concrete. The Living Dead – gleefully molesting the new, sleepwalking suburban bourgeois classes – are modern-clad witches, sorcerers' apprentices maybe, messing with powers they don't understand, until finally the experienced, devilish old-guard necromantic (Sanders) arrives in his big black car and smart stiff collars to see them – quite literally – put in their place.

Let us not forget, though, that despite their energetic efforts at aggro, those kids briefly – and beautifully – swapped their leathers for tie-dyes, polyesters and multi-coloured patchwork-crochet clobber, to take a gloriously incongruous glimpse back towards every flower-child's faded dreams with their sun-dappled folky funeral anthem 'Riding Free'. Perhaps the Living Dead's need to return from the grave and cause murderous mayhem simply masks a heartfelt plea, by some woefully misunderstood teens, for a little more love and understanding. Don't forget that, folks, as you polish up your leathers, rev up and revisit the singularly bizarre biker movie that is *Psychomania*.

Vic Pratt is a writer and film historian at the BFI National Archive.



THE LAST MOVIE GEORGE SANDERS AND PSYCHOMANIA

by William Fowler

"Dear world. I am leaving because I am bored. I feel I have lived long enough. I am leaving you with your worries in this sweet cesspool. Good luck."

So read the note found alongside George Sanders' naked body on 25 April 1972. The famous Hollywood actor had consumed five tubes of the drug Nembutal plus several bottles of alcohol, bringing his life to a close at the age of 65. *Psychomania*, his last film, was released shortly afterwards. It was sudden but not unforeseen: Sanders regularly played the world-weary cynic in full public view, casually threatening suicide over and over. He told the *Sunday Express* in 1966 that he planned to go at 70, via "poison perhaps. Or then again a slow walk into the ocean." Whilst later: "another ten years will do me. I have no wish to be old and incontinent."

Reports of his death reflected on more than Sanders the man, however. He'd been married to the renowned socialite Zsa Zsa Gabor and for many symbolised Hollywood, caddishness and glamour. George Melly said his passing signalled the end of the cad role itself; he was "the personification of enviable baseness – able to order wine, betray women, or blackmail his betters with equally elegant aplomb." Anne de Courcy meanwhile speculated on how it must feel to grow old when your youth has been writ so large on screen. Sanders, with his final act, and the critics, thereafter, seemed to be mourning the death of cinema itself, or rather a certain type of cinema. The studios were changing, struggling in light of the post-*Easy Rider* (1969), post-New Wave scene, whilst also becoming more like corporations, with their multiple owners and interlinked businesses. "How do you find work [and] money when the market for charm is at a low?" asked the *Daily Mail*.

The market was very much open for business in his early days. Born in St Petersburg on 3 July 1906 and growing up in the UK, he quickly established himself as a major Hollywood player. *Rebecca* (1940), *The Moon and Sixpence* (1942), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945)

and *Call Me Madam* (1953) were all hits, and *The Saint* (1939-41) and *Falcon* (1941-42) detective films, once syndicated, would keep his face on TV for literally decades to come. But after winning the Academy Award for *All About Eve* (1950) he remarked, "I do my job, pick up my paycheck, and go home like a factory worker." Parts were played with presence and panache – he was brilliant – and yet acting as a life choice seemed to bother him. Was he ever really happy?

The rot appeared to really set in in the mid-1960s. The Royal British Board of Trade was sent in to investigate CADCO Developments Ltd; Sanders was a major partner. The business made light, durable phonographic records and, along with the affiliated Royal Victoria Sausages, collapsed in 1964 after using counterfeit notes to pay debts. "I am happy to inform you that I have succeeded in increasing my alcohol tolerance to three large vodkas before lunch," boasted George to a friend as the company papers were sifted and sorted. When all was said and done he lost \$150,000, though other partners went to prison – he was lucky.

Writing in November 1966, he proffered: "I am trying to set aside the mental anguish I have had to endure for the past three years and cultivate an insouciant, *désinvolte* and flippant air... in order to restore my self-esteem and bank balance." He seemed restless, unhappy, vacillating between high-profile theatre performances and whatever films were available. The inevitable travelling, however, frustrated him, particularly after the death of his beloved wife Benita Hume in November 1967. Highlighting a restlessness and a rootlessness, he wrote to a friend: "THINK ONLY THIS OF ME – that in some corner of some crummy foreign village there lives, for the time being, that old shit-heel from St. Petersburg, Sanders."

But the parts kept being offered. Lorraine Chanel, his companion towards the end, said *The Candy Man* (1969) was a "dreadful piece" that "everyone has forgotten". Not her though apparently. Whilst about *The Body Stealers* (1969), Sanders said: "I don't know what it was about. I never see any of my films. All I know is there were some big planes going over and parachutes fell out and there was a big mystery of some sort because there were no bodies attached. I played a General or something."

The Kremlin Letter (1970), meanwhile, was considered "the most professional production" of his late career, according to biographer Richard Vanderbeets. Sanders played a sexually ambiguous American agent who appears "with blond wig, black satin sheath dress slit up the thigh, and long feather boa draped around his neck." "I feel rather silly but acting queer seems to be all the rage these days," quipped George.

Despite his cynicism and declining health, he kept busy, shooting at least one film a year, usually more, even if the parts baffled him. However, in 1970, after having being diagnosed with deterioration of the cerebellum, and discovering problems with his speech, he was forced to turn down Billy Wilder's *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (the story goes he was up for the part of Holmes' older brother). Angry about almost everything, he moved his heavy piano out into the garden and destroyed it with an axe.

Shot in the months preceding his death, *Psychomania* seems to have been a more upbeat affair. As with most of his late pictures, he was the most expensive member of the cast and, to compensate, director Don Sharp squeezed all his scenes into five or six days shooting. He also enjoyed laughs with his co-star Beryl Reid and, revelling in the weirdness of it all, even 'corpsed' on set, according to Nicky Henson. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* singled out his performance: "Sanders – whose dialogue is confined to a few sinister asides – presides over the mayhem with a general air of satisfaction." And when not on set he was looked after by Helga Moray (former wife of director Jack Clayton). His charm was no doubt in full flow. He was, after all, playing a devilish, frog-worshipping, occultist butler.

Still, a restlessness remained, and even when shooting this most bizarre of English movies his failing star seemed to haunt him. Feeling bad about the low-budget nature of the production, the crew had a chair made up with his name on, except his name was written in biro and the spelling was incorrect. "It's a wonder he didn't kill himself then," reflected Henson recently. Soon he was looking for a place in Biarritz – he could never settle down.

He then took a supposedly accidental overdose in March 1972, and for the remaining few weeks of his life drank straight vodka in vast amounts. *Psychomania* may have been his last movie but it wasn't strictly speaking his last appearance on film. Returning to Spain on the night of his suicide, he was traced to his hotel bar by a local TV crew. He'd been on the whiskeys and then insisted on consuming an entire bottle of vodka. He was drunk, dishevelled and truly in a state; the drink and drugs that would kill him were already taking effect. No-one knew what was to come but, nonetheless, it must have been horrid.

But Sanders was a star. He remained tremendously popular, and despite claims to the contrary, was still able to turn it on when it really mattered, as in *Psychomania*. He was tall, cool and detached, and a formidable physical presence – his glamorous ex-wife Zsa Zsa Gabor remained smitten by him, right to the end. She'd even recently persuaded him to marry her sister, though it didn't last long.

Sanders may have been bored but the world wasn't bored with him. Looking back, comedy writers Ray Galton and Alan Simpson said: "the most exciting part of [shooting their film

The Rebel (1961)] was meeting and working with the legendary George Sanders. A true star! A Hollywood star! One of our boyhood heroes – *The Saint*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Moon and Sixpence*, *All About Eve*, *Call Me Madam*, dozens and dozens of them. And what a charming, lovely man." They were enthralled, as was comedian Tony Hancock, the lead, and they made bets about what the movie giant was up to when he was away from the set. Finally, Tony asked him directly about his past: had he slept with "some of the most beautiful women in Hollywood?" Always candid, always ready with a quip but perhaps always slightly depressed too – the Hollywood lifestyle was never really for him – he replied: "Quite true, but you know, dear boy, I am fast reaching the stage in life where a satisfactory evacuation of the bowel is far preferable to a good fuck." He was dour, depressive, charming and brilliant – and that was why the camera loved him.

William Fowler, Curator of Artists' Moving Image, BFI National Archive



PSYCHOMANIA

RIDING FREE

by Andrew Roberts

Post-war British horror films had an often-vexed relationship with 'youth'. There was Oliver Reed and his gang of bikers in *The Damned* (1961) with their theme song 'Black Leather Rock'. There was Johnny Alucard, the only vampire to favour a Triumph Stag, urging the 28-year-old 'teenagers' of *Dracula A.D. 1972* (1972) to "dig the music, kids". And there was *The Haunted House of Horror* (1969) starring Frankie Avalon as the unlikely leader of a gang of hippies; a 30-year-old with Brylcreemed hair did not embody the Age of Aquarius.

Best of all was *Psychomania*, an epic at least partially born of the tribulations of British cinema in the early 1970s. This was a time of transformation of ABCs and Odeons across the land into bingo halls, but the independent producers Scotia International had a cunning plan to entice teenagers back to their local picture houses. In 1971 production in Shepperton Studios commenced on the first ever quality zombie-biker-in-Walton-on-Thames horror film to star Beryl Reid.

The script by Arnaud d'Usseau and Julian Zimet is a deeply personal work of art, encompassing disparate elements of motorcycles, black leather, folk rock and toads with equal aplomb. Our anti-hero is Tom Latham (Nicky Henson), an upper-class delinquent who still lives with his mummy (Ms Reid), a medium whose butler Shadwell (George Sanders) works as an agent of Lucifer on his afternoons off. On returning home, Mrs Latham moans that the police have been complaining again, prompting Tom to respond that "The word, mother, is 'fuzz';" as *Psychomania* contains some of the most quotable dialogue of any British film since *Beat Girl* (1960).

It soon transpires that Tom is not merely satisfied with wearing white rollneck jumpers in a menacing fashion and kicking over the odd traffic bollard as part of his duties leading the Living Dead biker gang. He demands of Shadwell, "Why did my father die in that locked room? Why do you never get any older? And what is the secret of the living dead?" Tom then learns that all that is necessary to return from the grave as an invincible zombie is to enter a wardrobe while carrying a pair of NHS glasses. Don't try this at home, children.

In the following scene, one that Werner Herzog or Ken Russell might have spurned on the grounds of sheer weirdness, Tom further learns that some two decades ago mummy made a pact with Hell. This explains the presence of her demonic butler although, even at the height of the post-war domestic staff shortage, there must have been easier methods of hiring servants than approaching Beelzebub.

Thus, refreshed by his trip to the wardrobe, Tom meets with his gang, virtually all of whom sport the same brand of stage-cockney heard in *Here Come the Double Deckers!* (1970-71). First, it's off on a jolly trip to the shopping precinct where they immediately indulge in foul deeds. Shopping trolleys are re-arranged, workmen's ladders are knocked over, and the Living Dead go so far as to invade a supermarket, presumably to check on the price of Digestive biscuits (10 ½ New Pence Special Offer!). With the addition of 'Yakety Sax' and Bob Todd as an irate manager, this would have made an excellent sequence for *The Benny Hill Show* (1969-89).

The police eventually arrive, but their 1967 Jaguar S-Type is no match for your typical determined would-be zombie and Tom ends the pursuit when he speeds off of the M3 motorway works into the Thames. "Goodbye Abby!" he cries to his understandably concerned girlfriend (Mary Hopkins), followed by a well-timed "Arrgh!" There then ensues one of the most bizarre scenes in the history of British cinema as Tom is buried (sat upright on his bike) on the village common, near to his favourite haunt of the Seven Witches, a ring of stones once believed to be a punished coven. And so, on a backlot of Shepperton Studios decorated with plastic looking monuments, the ceremony unfolds to the folk-rock accompaniment of Harvey Andrews's 'Riding Free'. This sequence allowed the audience to enjoy some truly inspired lyrics – "To the sound of holy revving" and "Come join his company – riding free". Enter Shadwell, who drops a frog pendant into the grave...

On the following day, an unfortunate motorist breaks down on the edge of said common land. Urged by his nagging wife (no stereotype is left unturned in this picture), the hapless Morris Minor owner edges across the green only to encounter a reinvigorated Tom who rides out of the grave with powers that are such that he can run over passers-by who are standing some four feet away. His reign of terror across the home counties is about to commence, but first, he needs to order some Trident Four Star from the local garage. After strangling the owner with his petrol pump nozzle for a general lack of respect towards ton-up boys – "I'll teach you a lesson, you long-haired git" – Tom repairs to the pub for a well-earned pint. He also borrows 2p from an admiring young lady to telephone mummy; only in a British exploitation picture would a member of the undead use a public call box to speak with his mother, and take advantage of the cheap evening rate into the bargain.

On being reunited with his gang, Tom impresses upon just how easy it is to become a zombie and they all follow suit – throwing themselves off of yet more motorway bridges, drowning themselves in the River Thames and driving through the trailers of TK series Bedford trucks. Most notably, a gang member hurls himself off of a tower block, which is the cue for yet more splendid dialogue:

Biker (*from the 14th floor*): Hey constable – that’s my bike!
PC (*issuing a parking ticket*): Is it now? Then come on down here!
Biker: Okay!
(*Thud*)

Walton-on-Thames is now under constant threat from the newly-zombified Living Dead, although their main traits still appear to be a limited dress-sense and a truly bizarre hatred of major retail outlets. They even return to their old haunts to hurl boxes of baked beans about and possibly take advantage of Custard Creams at only 5p a packet. The law manages to take some of the gang into custody, but Tom has the ability to invade all police stations at will, especially ones apparently constructed of cardboard.

By now Mrs Latham is slightly worried that her son’s attempts to take over the world, via his band of zombies riding a phalanx of clapped-out motorcycles, has led to the streets of Middlesex being littered with corpses. Worse still, Tom’s next plan involves the murder of, to quote an incredulous Shadwell, “the entire establishment” – judges, policemen and teachers. The last-named further establishes that *Psychomania*’s England is one akin to *The Beano* as opposed to *Easy Rider* (1969). As young Latham is clearly a very naughty member of the undead, there is obviously only one solution. The butler will have to turn mummy into a toad “for all eternity” and the arrival of a rather startled-looking amphibian at the dinner table is accompanied by a sound effects record of a clap of thunder played at full volume.

After this scene of rare dramatic power, Shadwell decides to turn the entire gang into stone, at which point some of them give their only convincing performances in the whole picture. Only Abby, who decided not to join the death pact, and the lugubrious servant survive. Cue the closing credits and the faint hope that Mark Gatiss will attempt a remake in the very near future.

The director of this gem was Don Sharp, a veteran of British horror films and television who was also responsible for second-unit duties on *The Fast Lady* (1962) and *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* (1965). He brings to *Psychomania* a sense of pace and po-faced wit to its inherent absurdity. The fact that any gang including bikers

called Gash, Chopped Meat and, best of all, Bertram is closer in spirit to the Bash Street Kids than *The Wild One* (1953) does not cause Sharp to let up the pace on Britain’s first, and possibly only, frog/biker drama. Nor was he deterred by a budget, which was limited even by the standards of early 1970s exploitation pictures. In a 2008 television interview, Henson recalled how he asked the producer Andrew Donally, “How did you get the money for a piece of crap like this?” The reply was that the filmmaker approached “the money men” with the memorable pitch: “I’ve got a script here – teenage motorcycle gang commit suicide and come back from the dead and terrorise the neighbourhood.” The response was virtually instantaneous: “How much do you need?”

The eventual funds were still so restricted that the picture could only afford to use Sanders for a few days’ filming, and there was even a lack of seats for the junior stars. The American ‘hogs’ promised to the Living Dead materialised as second-hand BSAs and Triumphs, with the same vehicles repeatedly appearing on the road scenes shot on the MOD testing ground near Longcross. However, Donally was still able to hire an excellent cast of some very familiar faces. Roy Evans played the unfortunate Morris owner, and June Brown was the mother of Jane Pettibone (Ann Michelle), Tom’s second in command. Further down the cast list, the hapless road haulier who orders the gang to “git aht of it!” before they stab his tyre, was the veteran stuntman Larry Taylor, whose son Rocky portrayed the brilliantly-named Hinky. Representing the forces of law and order are B-film veteran Patrick Holt as a police sergeant and Robert Hardy as the determined Chief Inspector Hesseltine, with an accent ranging from Brummagem to Bulgarian.

Of the central characters, Reid has the fixed expression of despair of one who has already endured appearing in *The Beast in the Cellar* (1970), but the real shock is to see Sanders in such a production. The actor had relocated to Europe from Hollywood at the end of the 1950s and appeared in a variety of British films throughout the 1960s, but when *Psychomania* commenced filming Sanders had suffered a stroke, and the recent death of his wife Benita Hulme had exacerbated his lifelong depressive tendencies.

Throughout the film, Shadwell appears less sinister and more vulnerable; the work of a tired and ill man whose Academy Award for *All About Eve* (1950) now seemed very distant. And there is Nicky Henson, then a member of the Young Vic, whose performance as Tom is never short of magnificence, with every memorable line of dialogue perfectly timed. Few actors could have coped with asking their screen girlfriend, “What happened? You’re not dead!” But Henson makes every scene work by playing them straight.

Henson believed that no-one would ever see the film, but in that he was very much mistaken, for after its cinema release, *Psychomania* went on to roam the schedules of late-

night television. For years, TV viewers of the 1980s fell asleep during a public information short about the dangers of polished floors only to awake to hear John Cameron's theme tune and such lines as "Hello, little green friend". It is very understandable that not a few people believed that the adventures of Tom and company were a nightmare, but this release is conclusive proof that Sharp's masterpiece is very real.

Today, *Psychomania* is worth viewing for the shots of 1971 suburbia, and for its delightfully idiosyncratic nature. It remains unique in the annals of cinema, a horror film with overtones of *Dennis the Menace* that was made with a verve that belies its limited budget. And, who would not prefer a low-budget British film that merely sets out to entertain to an elaborately funded, overblown epic? So, come and join Tom Latham as he "rides his sweet machine like a bomb".

Andrew Roberts is a film historian who has contributed to Sight & Sound, The Observer and The Encyclopaedia of British Film.





TASTE FOR EXCITEMENT AN INTERVIEW WITH DON SHARP

by Christopher Koetting

"Hammer? Don't they make horror films?" The question was posed in 1961 to British talent agent John Redway by an Australian *émigré* director, who had just learned that Hammer's house producer, Anthony Hinds, had requested a meeting. "Yes... So?" came Redway's impatient response. The surprised Aussie could only admonish his agent, "I can't make a horror picture! I'm from legitimate theatre!"

For 40-year-old director Don Sharp – Australian stage actor, British radio voice, screenplay writer, television director, and B-feature auteur – the chance to direct his first A-feature (albeit a horror film) was tempered by the fact that his only experience with fantasy had been his two-year stint (1955-56) as the intrepid rocketeer, Mitch, on the popular BBC radio series *Journey into Space*. Sharp certainly wasn't lacking in credentials, but his lack of experience with the horror genre didn't make him an obvious choice to join Hammer's ranks – a point not lost on him.

"I met with Tony Hinds and told him that I'd never seen a horror picture," Sharp recalls. "He said to me, 'From what I've seen of your work I think you'd be able to handle it, but why don't I run a few for you?' So over the next few days I saw *The Curse of Frankenstein*, *Dracula* (aka *The Horror of Dracula*) and *The Stranglers of Bombay* at Hammer House in Wardour Street. What intrigued me about them was that, 20 minutes into each film, I was totally hooked. I thought it was wonderful: here was a genre with its own ground rules and self-contained world, and you could be theatrical but treat it realistically to grab the audience; you could make them believe something absurd. Tony and I talked about this for hours afterwards; at the end, he said Hammer had a script he wanted me to do called *The Kiss of the Vampire*."

Kiss had been a composite piece in its formative stages, culled from disparate elements that had accumulated in Hammer's files since *Dracula's* success in 1958. But, right from

the start, Sharp made his intentions known: "What worried me was that, as Hammer progressed, the goal seemed to be for each picture to top the one before it and they were becoming satiated with violence. So, I persuaded Tony that it was better to suggest 'Is it going to happen?' and give the audience a little touch of it, and then go on and really get your big shock in the end. There could be a good size shock in the middle too, but not all the time. I quoted Robert Louis Stevenson: 'To travel hopefully is better than to arrive.' Tony saw the point immediately and we did a rewrite to reflect this."

Sharp was to play the composition of *Kiss* to a distinctly Val Lewton-esque beat: the air of suggestive foreboding was prevalent in virtually every scene. "I've always believed that there needs to be a separation between suspense and shock," Sharp contends. "You lead on a mood but, if you introduce the shock moment too quickly, it's expected. It's when you hold on, keeping the same mood and tempo as the rest of the sequence, and then shatter the mood with a sudden violent moment, that it really works."

The desire to structure the picture differently from other Hammer offerings led to evil being portrayed as a literal cult – led by a vampire guru, clothed in white robes and indulging in its own *bal masque*. "That was Tony's idea," Sharp points out. "I queried it, but he persuaded me that it would be great if, instead of just one person, there were a whole lot of people who couldn't come out in the daylight. Once we had that kind of approach, the designing and the costuming grew from it."

For all its tension and suggestiveness, it is the striking finale – a swarm of vampire bats attacking the sect itself – that endears *Kiss* to aficionados of horror cinema. Sharp recalls, "We had plastic bats on thin nylon rods and they were waved across from out of shot like marionettes. They were lit flatly from the front to hide the wires and, in doing so, you got a very clear shadow of the bat on the wall beyond, so it looked as if you had twice as many bats flying around! It was a chaotic day shooting that scene, but everyone seemed to believe that we were on to something and put their all into it. So, in the most marvellous way, the sequence worked and I'm proud of it."

Despite being shot in the fall of 1962, *The Kiss of the Vampire* was not premiered in England until January 1964, during which time Sharp added the Tommy Steele musical *It's All Happening* (aka *The Dream Maker*) to his repertoire. But Tony Hinds had not forgotten the fine job Sharp had done, and he set his sights on getting Sharp to take over from John Gilling on Hammer's swashbuckler series. In August '63, Sharp was back at Hammer for *The Devil-Ship Pirates*. But, this time around, with Hinds serving only in an executive capacity, things would be a little different.

Instead of working with Hinds as both screenwriter and producer, Sharp was now filming a Jimmy Sangster screenplay and dealing with a new producer – Anthony Nelson Keys. “Tony Keys was a general manager type and any idea he had was always the most obvious,” Sharp declares. “I remember him telling me that he wanted Christopher Lee’s pirate, Captain Robeles, to be clad in blue and I said, ‘A *blue* pirate, Tony? What shall we call him, Little Boy Blue?’ So he asked me what colour I wanted. I told him grey, which he thought was dull and unthreatening until I reminded him that it was threatening enough for the Nazis!”

The picture opens with a barnstorming sea battle between a naval warship and a pirate ship commandeered to fight with the Spanish Armada – all the more impressive when one realises the circumstances of its creation. “That was shot in a flooded gravel pit a couple of miles up the road from Bray,” reveals Sharp. “One of the reasons there was so much battle smoke was that, on the other side of the lake, they were building the M4 motorway, and we didn’t want all the trucks in the background!” But motorway construction turned out to be the least of Sharp’s problems as he stood at the helm of the aptly-named Devil ship, *Diablo*: “The super-structure was designed to sit on a raft, with huge petrol drums making it buoyant. It was so heavy that it took two cranes to pull it into the water. On the second or third day of shooting, we had just finished a scene and someone announced that the tea-boat was coming, so everyone rushed over to one side and tipped it over! There were bodies in the water, people swimming for shore – absolute chaos! The scaffolding went to the bottom and was there for two years, with the company who owned the pit still charging hire for it!”

Sharp’s services were enlisted by Hammer’s former business partner, Hollywood’s ‘old boy’ Robert Lippert. In late ‘63, Sharp directed the first of two pictures for Lippert, the low-budget but well-regarded horror film, *Witchcraft*. “Jack Parsons, who was Bob’s English producer, sent me the script by Harry Spalding, which was lovely. I fell for it – the idea of doing a witchcraft presentation in modern times. It was a double challenge in its way: not only did you have to take a ridiculous situation and make people believe it, but you had to do it without the surround conventions of period horror that I’d had on *The Kiss of the Vampire*. We shot *Witchcraft* in only a couple of weeks at Shepperton Studios; in fact, it was the only picture shooting in an English studio at the time.”

“Ironically,” Sharp continues, “a lot of what worked so well in the film was actually motivated by the fact that we were so rushed and had no money. That scene in the car, for instance, when [witch] Yvette Rees appears in the rear-view mirror and causes Viola Keats to drive into a quarry – if you’d had money and special effects people, you might’ve been able to conjure up something fanciful. Here, you had to hit on something really simple: there she was in the mirror, and there she wasn’t. Once we did something like that, it became the

style for the whole movie. So it was these sudden appearances, which is more shocking than materialising, as so many ghost things are done. It helped greatly, of course, that Yvette was so naturally striking; we had a lot of consultations between the cameraman, Arthur Lavis, and the make-up artists about her appearance. Her eyes, in particular, were tremendously effective.”

Unfortunately, the high of transforming Rees into a 300-year-old witch was countered by the low of watching co-star Lon Chaney Jr. transform himself into a 57-year-old alcoholic. “Even though he was there all the way through the shoot, Lon didn’t have much of a part and was really in it for name value,” reflects Sharp. “In the morning he was lovely; so simple, gentle and almost childlike. But he drank a lot and by lunchtime, the bottle was empty. He was a different man in the afternoon; you couldn’t work with him.”

After extensive second-unit work on *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* in spring/summer 1964, Sharp returned to Lippert that October for the final entry in Fox’s *Fly* trilogy, *Curse of the Fly*. “I adored *Flying Machines* but, day after day, you’d sit and not shoot a foot of film. The aeroplanes were such that if there was a wind of more than 12 miles-per-hour, they couldn’t fly. So you might grab one shot and you might not. After six months of this, I said to my [new] agent, Dennis Selinger, ‘For God’s sake, get me something that I’m going to have to shoot fast!’ I took *Curse* for that reason and also because it was a Harry Spalding script. Harry loved what we did with *Witchcraft*: he said it was the first time he’d seen one of his scripts exactly as he imagined it, which was very flattering. And the opening scene he wrote for *Curse* [Carol Gray’s escape from a mental institution] was so striking, it jumped right off the page; we filmed it exactly as written. There were, however, certain things that Harry had taken for granted which weren’t clear to people who hadn’t seen the other *Fly* movies. So we had to add some expository things about the Delambre family history and their experiments in matter teleportation.”

Immediately following *Curse of the Fly*, Sharp entered into his most prolific relation of the ‘60s when his path crossed that of maverick independent producer Harry Alan Towers. Towers’ dubious reputation made Sharp skittish, but the producer’s equally infamous charm won out and Sharp agreed to take the reins on *The Face of Fu Manchu*, the first of what would be four pictures for the due. “Harry had been making a series of low-budget pictures in South Africa and the Middle East, and he never had enough money to finish them,” observes Sharp. “So he was forever starting another movie to get money to finish the previous one. Harry somehow got the rights to Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu character and he wanted to use the same director from his other pictures. But the completion guarantors refused to go with that director and suggested me – I always brought things in on budget and schedule. Also, being an action-type picture, they thought it was my scene. So I met

Harry and, even though I'd been warned, 'Don't believe a word he says,' I fell for him in about ten minutes flat. Harry's one of the greatest salesmen of all time; he's got this terrific enthusiasm. I liked the subject very much but, within a week of shooting, I realised Harry was trying to cheapskate. He didn't have the costumes he said he was going to have, and I also found other things that hadn't been done. We had this big confrontation and I told Harry I wasn't going to direct the picture unless it was done properly. Within a half-hour, after he'd made some phone calls, I got what I wanted. From then on, we had a marvellous relationship."

To fill Fu Manchu's flowing robes, attention turned to none other than Dracula himself, Christopher Lee. "Chris was part of the whole deal when it was being set up," Sharp recalls. "Harry had approached him and the idea was for Chris to play Fu Manchu in an entire series. In principle, I don't think an Anglo playing an Asian works, but there was no Asian who had the stature to command box-office. Chris and I really hit it off during *The Devil-Ship Pirates* so, as we did with Captain Robeles, we talked through the character. Fu Manchu was a narrow character; it didn't have a lot of depth, being evil all the time. But there was delight in it because it was so gratuitously cruel. Chris has so much threat to him by his height, and he only needs to stand still to come across as someone who's about to go like a thunderbolt. His stillness can suddenly go into swift movement without being ungainly – the transitions are so smooth. And even though, as Fu Manchu, his eyes are half-closed, there's still that piercing quality."

Filming for *Fu Manchu* took place in Ireland during the early months of 1965 and, while winds blew cold in Wicklow and Kilmainham Gaol locations, they were nothing compared to the chill the crew encountered when faced with Irish patriotism. "None of the crew knew about the history of Kilmainham Gaol," remembers Sharp. "One night, while we were shooting there, we had some animals brought in and put in one of the courtyards. But we didn't realise that the courtyard was where the British had shot Irish nationalists during the 1916 Easter Rising. It was a sacred place to the Irish and they were insulted by our stabling animals there. Things got very hairy but, by making a large donation to restore Kilmainham as a memorial, it was suddenly okay and we went ahead."

At the conclusion of *Fu Manchu*'s shoot, Sharp was looking forward to reuniting with Hammer for a film he had agreed to do before leaving for Dublin: *Rasputin the Mad Monk*. Unfortunately, the picture he went back to in June '65 was not exactly what he thought he'd signed up for, inheriting as he did the cast, crew and sets from the just-completed *Dracula Prince of Darkness* and a similar budget in the bargain.

"Tony Hinds came to me and said we were running over budget and asked for my input on scenes to be cut," Sharp contends. "We ended up losing a whole ballroom set and cutting scenes involving the Tsar's court. Originally, the part of Renée Asherson, as the Tsarina, was intended to be bigger, which is why we were able to get her; she ended up being wasted and was very uncomfortable. I had had two very happy associations with Hammer previously, but that regime had ended and Tony Keys had taken over. He had this idea of doing four films back-to-back [which included *The Reptile* and *The Plague of the Zombies*], with no gap in between, and it all became like a factory line. You could talk about a picture with Tony Hinds, but Tony Keys didn't really seem to care – he was only interested in getting things done on budget and schedule."

As if this wasn't bad enough, Russian Prince Yousouppoff, who had sued MGM in 1932 over *Rasputin and the Empress* and won, decided this production, too, would have to answer to him. "Just before we went on the floor," relates Sharp, "we had trouble with Yousouppoff's lawyers and we had to a major reconstruction of the script; things like people's names and manner of Rasputin's death had to be changed. The script then had a disclaimer." Of course, making a historical biography had never been the intention anyway. "It was a Hammer picture made for a Hammer audience. It was an entertainment – so you had to take the real possibility of Rasputin's hypnotic power and treat it as fiction."

Rasputin was Sharp's third film with Christopher Lee, and he was able to work with the actor on a role that Lee had coveted. "There was total trust between us," Sharp claims. "We worked out exactly how to play the hypnotism routine, and he used to be quite exhausted after filming some of those sequences. However, Rasputin's dance was a bit freewheeling, and what I did with the poisoning scene was to tell him to sketch out how we wanted it to start and where we wanted it to end and then just do a half-paced rehearsal of what he might do in-between. We then lit for that and did it following him with handheld cameras. You can't choreograph that sort of emotion – it's like a jazz musician in that, once he's got the basis of it, he takes off and you've just got to stay with him."

Unfortunately, Sharp was unable to stay with *Rasputin* beyond the first cut, due to a September commitment to start filming the Tony Randall spy spoof *Our Man in Marrakesh* (aka *I Spy, You Spy, We All Spy* and *Bang, Bang, You're Dead!*) in Morocco for Towers. As a result, certain sequences of *Rasputin* – including much of the climactic fight scene – were shorn for time by an unopposed Keys.

Rasputin was the last Hammer feature to be directed by Sharp, though he would be back at Bray in January '66 for *The Brides of Fu Manchu*. In the minds of most, including Sharp, *Brides* was markedly inferior to *The Face of Fu Manchu* – and the director makes no

bones about why the sequel failed. "That's Harry Alan Towers," Sharp asserts. "He gets a subject like Fu Manchu, comes up with a really good script, good casting, and away you go. The picture comes out and all the notices say, 'Here's a little goldmine. These will go on.' So, when it comes to sequels, it's all too easy. And with Harry there's always got to be a gimmick: here, it was to have beauty contests all across Europe to get a girl from each country, because this was supposedly going to guarantee distribution. And, back in those days, they used to have what they called 'the Japanese version' or 'the Continental version' – so there were one or two scenes where the girls were topless, which were left to somebody else to shoot. I was very disappointed with *Brides*. The script wasn't as good as *Face*; the whole plot wasn't as good. Douglas Wilmer was a great disappointment as Nayland Smith – we couldn't have Nigel Green again because he'd gone to America. While *Face* was atmospheric, *Brides* was just a standard action picture."

Despite a cast that included Burl Ives (as PT Barnum), Troy Donahue, Gert Fröbe, Lionel Jeffries and Terry-Thomas – plus a hyped budget of \$3 million – Sharp found the experience of his final Towers production, the Jules Verne spoof *Rocket to the Moon* (aka *Those Fantastic Flying Fools* and *Blast Off*), little better than what had been afforded him on *The Brides of Fu Manchu*. Filming began in earnest in August '66, but this *Rocket* was grounded before it took flight. "Dave Freeman, who wrote a lot of the Benny Hill shows, wrote a lovely, tight script," opines Sharp. "We had a marvellous cast. Harry had done a preliminary budget, we went to Ireland, visited all the locations, and then Harry did a realistic budget. He found that the actual amount it was going to cost was way in excess of what he'd budgeted, so we had to get more money. He first went to [Constantin Films in] Germany and they approved the screenplay and cast, but they thought if they were putting in more money, Gert Fröbe should have more screen time, to which Harry agreed. He then went to Nat Cohen [at England's Anglo-Amalgamated], who wanted more with Terry-Thomas and Lionel Jeffries. Then he went to America and [AIP's] Sam Arkoff wanted more with Troy Donahue. So, because of all these mandates, we had to expand the bloody script, and what had been a tight, fascinating comedy became overblown. If Dave and I had been as cynical as all the other buggers, we'd have written it in such a way that you could cut things out. Indeed, we worked our socks off to integrate all the new scenes and, eventually, you *couldn't* take anything out because it was part of the fabric."

This last piece of material marked the end completion of the Towers-Sharp patchwork. While there would be talk between the two of other projects – *When the Sleeper Wakes* with Vincent Price, a comedy in Hong Kong with Bing Crosby (who had been scheduled to play PT Barnum in *Rocket to the Moon*) and a version of *Casanova* with Horst Buchholz – nothing would come to fruition. With *Our Man in Marrakesh* serving as a case history, it's easy to see why Sharp was perfectly happy to pitch his tent elsewhere: "On *Marrakesh* we were staying

in two hotels. One morning, the camera boys came down and the lock had been changed on the room where we kept our equipment. The manager said, 'When Mr Towers pays what he owes us, we'll open the camera room.' So Harry sent his accountant to Gibraltar and he came back with a briefcase full of money. Harry paid the hotel, they gave him the key, we opened up the room and there was nothing in it. The manager had taken out all the equipment and sent it to the other hotel, who held onto it until *they* were paid. That was the sort of thing that happened when you worked with Harry."

Sharp was asked by Hammer's Aida Young to rejoin the fold in 1967 as director on her debut as a fully-fledged producer, *The Vengeance of She*. He wouldn't accept, however, because of his commitment to other projects, including the suspense thriller *Taste of Excitement* and three episodes of the cult TV show *The Avengers*, which would eventually be aired in the series' final season.

A full schedule precluded another proposed return to Hammer in early 1971, when managing director Michael Carreras sought Sharp's services to salvage *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* in the wake of director Seth Holt's death. That September, high on the positive reviews for his stunning boat chase finale through Amsterdam an Alistair MacLean's *Puppet on a Chain*, Sharp stepped behind the wheel of *The Frog*, a horror oddity featuring reanimated bikers. Given that no-one knew what the title meant, *The Frog* was rechristened twice – as *The Living Dead* and *The Death Wheelers* – before finally arriving at the equally nebulous moniker *Psychomania*.

"I got a call from Bob Goldstein," Sharp recounts, "who had been the head of Fox in England. He, Philip Yordan, Ben Fisz and a finance group called Scotia had gotten together with Arnold Barber, who had been head of Warners distribution, to form Scotia-Barber. They asked me to join them as a director, and Andrew Donally from Columbia joined them as a producer. They were one of those outfits that was going to do a number of pictures – one of the screenplays we were working on was the factual story of discovering Tutankhamen's tomb. But they wanted to start off with a small film and, since they fell apart pretty quickly, *Psychomania* ended up being the only picture they made.

"There were elements in it that I liked – the biking stuff, the opportunity to do some effective stunts... The side of it that didn't work was all the witchcraft stuff with Beryl Reid and George Sanders. Beryl, who'd been so marvellous in *The Killing of Sister George*, was just wrong for this – or the part was wrong or I was wrong. It was certainly wrong for poor old George. The first day I was shooting with him, I had something happening in the foreground and he was down the set as the butler; he was supposed to overhear what was going on and say something. I caught him cupping his ear and said, 'George, I don't want

you to listen *deliberately*.' It was from then that I found out he was practically deaf. So from then on, we had to give hand signals to cue him. He was such a sad man, one of the saddest I've ever met. He was at the end of his career and he'd lost a lot of money in Spain. He killed himself not long afterwards."

The increasingly dire state of the British film industry meant that Sharp would have to wait nearly a year before being offered his next feature, *Dark Places*. A rather tepid psychic-possession potboiler, with hammy Robert Hardy being haunted by the spirit of his wealthy alter ego, it placed Sharp in the unenviable position of gun-for-hire on a rookie producer's vanity project.

"James Hannah Jr., the producer, was a strange character," considers Sharp. "His father was very rich... As far as I could understand, James, who was in his 40s, had never actually done anything and decided to be a film producer simply because one of his classmates had been a huge success in that area. An awful lot of projects hadn't gotten off the ground after *Psychomania*, so I took this simply because the money was there. In casting the lead, I knew Robert Hardy and he stuck out as absolutely right. Otherwise, it was a package of known names – Joan Collins, Chris Lee, Herbert Lom, Jane Birkin (who was Robert's niece) – that came through the agents. But it was clear that horror was not what they wanted to be doing. Much like myself, they found nothing else on offer because the industry was in bad shape. I did my best with this, but wasn't proud to be doing it – it was a bit on the cheap and Chris, Joan and Herbert were on a tight few days so you had to shoot all their stuff at the same time. Meanwhile, each one was making excuses to the other about how they were doing this picture as a favour to somebody."

Dark Places sat on the shelf for two years, but Sharp's forte for action ensured he would not suffer the same fate. He was recruited in late 1973 to direct the blood-and-thunder of the TV spin-off *Callan*, featuring a pre-*Equalizer* Edward Woodward, while the summer of 1974 saw him at the helm of the thriller *Hennessy*, which aroused controversy over its sympathetic portrayal of an Irishman (Rod Steiger) who seeks revenge for the death of his family by plotting to blow up the British Parliament.

In late '74, a third attempt was made to re-hitch Sharp to the Hammer bandwagon. Attempting to get back into the mainstream, England's former king of horror was preparing to launch a new film based on occult novelist Dennis Wheatley's *To the Devil a Daughter*. This time, Sharp was both interested and available – at least in the beginning. "Chris Lee and Tony Keys had asked me, quite some time previously, about doing *To the Devil* – their company, Charlemagne, had the rights to all the Wheatley books – and nothing had happened. Then, it suddenly started up again at Hammer and I was provisionally attached

to the project. I wasn't happy at the way it was developing, though; Hammer wanted to stay with the book and I didn't think it could be made to work properly. So, I pulled out." After much deliberation, it was finally agreed that Peter Sykes would take Sharp's place, and the picture went to the floor in September 1975.

That August, Sharp found himself in yet another brief engagement when he agreed to direct *The Micronauts*, an \$8 million sci-fi extravaganza from ex-James Bond producer Harry Saltzman and AIP. Scripted by *Soldier Blue*'s John Gay, *Micronauts* was designed as part-*Incredible Shrinking Man* and part-*Fantastic Voyage*, with a dash of *Soylent Green* for good measure. "The premise," Sharp outlines, "was that the crops of the Earth are running out and since production can't be increased, intake must be lessened. If people aren't so big, they won't need as much food. So, a way is found to shrink a man down, but how will he survive? It's decided to put a test subject into an English country garden and see how he survives the rain, the stag beetles, and so forth. The script was good and Gregory Peck, who was going to play the lead, was very excited about the whole thing. We built some sets at Shepperton Studios where the leaves, for instance, were 80 feet long – everything had to be extended against the scale that the man was reduced to. But Harry, despite spending millions of dollars, couldn't beat all the technical problems, so the film never got made."

Micronauts would only be on Sharp's agenda for about six months before he was replaced by Richard Loncraine, who had just finished *The Haunting of Julia*. Over the next three years, the project went through another co-producer (Columbia), writer (Gordon Williams, who turned the concept into a trilogy of novels between 1977 and 1981), star (Charlton Heston), and three other directors (Ronald Neame, Michael Anderson and John Stears) before Saltzman finally gave up and set his sights on what would be his final production, *Nijinsky*.

Following in the 40-year-old footsteps of Alexander Korda and Alfred Hitchcock, respectively, Sharp was to spend 1977-78 remaking two of their most revered classics, *The Four Feathers* and *The 39 Steps*. He would subsequently journey to Canada, in late '78, to mark a return to Alistair MacLean territory with the all-star adventure, *Bear Island*.

In the wake of Michael Carreras's 1979 exit from Hammer came the replacement squad of Brian Lawrence and Roy Skeggs, whose contacts at Lew Grade's ITC fostered a new television series called *Hammer House of Horror*, which managed to finally bring Sharp and his former employee back together. "Roy rang me up and said, 'We've got this series going and we want to use as many of the old Hammer directors as possible. Are you interested?' So I said, 'Well, yes, but I'd like to see a script first.' So he sent me a story of devil worship – 'Guardian of the Abyss' – and, after a few rewrites, away we went. It was a bit more

ambitious than your regular television episode and was like making a mini-Hammer feature. It was a joy to do.”

Sharp would not be able to say the same about his last feature, *Secrets of the Phantom Caverns* (aka *What Waits Below*). Filmed during the late summer of 1983 in Alabama’s Cathedral Caverns and Tennessee’s Cumberland Caverns, the picture was *The Mole People* crossed with *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, as a team of soldiers and anthropologists discovers a monstrous reptile and a lost albino tribe in the caves of South America. With its infamous producer, Sandy Howard – synonymous with such turkeys as *Embryo*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *Meteor* – about to notch another loser on his belt, Sharp would have been well-advised to steer clear of this ill-fated opus. But it was a realisation that came too late.

“Dennis Selinger wanted me to do something for Sandy,” Sharp explains. “He said, ‘Don, we love your movies and we want you to do a picture for us.’ He had an outline which sounded interesting and he told me all about the caves where it would be shot. He sent the first draft [by Marvel Comics writer Christy Marx] and I thought, ‘This’ll never work.’ I said, ‘Look, this needs a lot of work. I’ll put down all my notes and get them to you in a few days.’ He immediately said, ‘Don’t worry about that. We’re all here, tell us your thoughts.’ So I gave him a brief rundown and he said, ‘That’s okay, Don, we’ll take care of it.’ Afterwards, I did all my detailed notes and posted them off. I waited and waited and finally got a phone call from Sandy saying, ‘We’re ready to go!’ I said, ‘But I haven’t seen the script rewrites.’ ‘Oh, that’s all in hand,’ he said. I asked, ‘What about the make-up on these people who’ve been underground for generations?’ He answered, ‘You’re going to love this – we’ve got one of the top men [Swamp Thing’s Bill Munn] and he’s already done the tests.’ I rang up Dennis and said, ‘What is this bullshit?’ and he said, ‘Well, we’ve got a contract – it’s going ahead.’ So I said, ‘What the hell!’ and went over. When I arrived, I read the so-called script [rewritten by Robert Vincent O’Neill] and they’d taken no notice of my notes. I swallowed that but, when I saw the make-up tests, I couldn’t believe it: it was amateur night.”

“We had a French cameraman,” Sharp continues, “who had this lovely idea for shooting in the caves: he had a helium-filled balloon that he’d float to the top of the cave and bounce a lamp off it, which gave a wonderful, soft light. But it was a bit time-consuming, so he was fired! The camera operator [Virgil Harper] was then put in to light it; I learned that he’d been lighting cheapie movies for years, so he’d obviously been hired with the intention that he’d take over. Then, I did a tendon in my back of my right leg and was in terrible pain for two weeks. On top of all this, when we had to shoot [in front of ‘Goliath’, the world’s largest stalagmite], instead of getting longer cables to the generators outside, they just moved the generators inside the cave. They filled the place with gas fumes and eight of us ended up in hospital. I couldn’t believe this outfit. Sandy was just cheap: I don’t think he was ever

interested in making the movie. At the end, we fell out and I came home.” [Howard would, incidentally, file for bankruptcy the next year.]

In the mid-to-late-’80s, Sharp made a permanent move into television, directing movies and miniseries like the top-rated *A Woman of Substance*, the Robert Louis Stevenson biography *Tusitala* and an early Sharon Stone effort, *Tears in the Rain*.

Now retired, Sharp admits that becoming a cult director was the furthest thing from his mind. Like many others, he’s found that being identified with fantasy cinema is a double-edged sword – it ensures you pride of place with the faithful, but it also tends to exclude the more conventional section of your résumé. “It’s very funny,” Sharp muses. “Fantasy was my start in features and I went away from it for what might be termed ‘bigger things’. But now, any time a film of mine is included in some retrospective or festival, it’s always one of the fantasy pictures. It irritates me slightly that the others don’t seem to be ‘good enough’. I’ve had some nice notices on them, and some made money. But the Hammers and such are the ones people remember. I think it was easier to stand out in fantasy because it was a relatively small field, and I was lucky enough to get two or three very good subjects, which I did well.”

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

When research began prior to the restoration of *Psychomania* it was discovered that the only surviving elements were a damaged Colour Reversal Internegative (CRI) held in Los Angeles, a heavily worn and faded 16mm print and miraculously, a set of 35mm black and white separation preservation masters (Promaster) held at the Filмотeca Española in Madrid. These separation masters were created from an original 35mm negative element in the 1970s.

Black and white separations come in three reels for every one reel of film and are a form of preservation aimed at combatting long term colour fading. They are black and white records of the additive primary colours (red, green and blue) created by printing the negative element three times through cyan, magenta and yellow filters. Each reel of the *Psychomania* separations was ultrasonically cleaned then scanned one frame per second in 2K resolution using a Northlight II scanner at Pinewood Studios. Digital tools were then applied to reduce flicker (the yellow layer being particularly problematic), neg sparkle and dust. The images were then recombined digitally to create a full colour image which was then graded before further picture restoration was undertaken. The film is presented in its original theatrical aspect ratio of 1.66:1.

A basic demonstration of this process is included on this edition as a special feature.

Audio was transferred from an original mono 35mm optical track negative using special audio scanning equipment. The track was then remastered and laid back to the new recombined master.

The results of this remastering and restoration process are raw 2K scans of each 35mm separation element, a pre-restored 2K master and a 2K master of the final restoration, as well as uncompressed audio files of the soundtrack, all of which are now held by the BFI National Archive.

Technical Producer Douglas Weir (BFI)

Pinewood Studios Post Production

Scanning Rob Langridge

Colourist Michael Davis

Image Conform Jon Mann

Picture Restoration Jake Chapman, Rob Langridge, Lucie Hancock

Audio Scanning and Restoration Jason Stevens

Thanks to Jan Willem Bosman Jansen (Ignite Films), Jon Mann, Patrick Wilbraham and Philip Lee (Pinewood Studios).

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield

BFI Edition Produced by James Blackford

Executive Producers Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni

Production Assistant Liane Cunje

Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

Blu-ray and DVD Mastering David Mackenzie

Artist Twins of Evil

Design Obviously Creative

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, James Blackford, Carl Daft, William Fowler, Kenn Goodall, Luke Insect,
Vic Pratt, Janet Schorer, Ben Stoddart



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