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The Electric Chair

[Wild Eye](#) // Unrated // October 19, 2010

List Price: \$14.95 [Buy now and save at [Amazon](#)]

Review by [Kurt Dahlke](#) | posted April 15, 2011 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

The Electric Chair:

As the box says, this is "a lost treasure of New York City filmmaking." So what's up with New York City filmmaking anyway? Why so dark, bubby? It's not that there isn't a spark of hope and humanity, it's just draped in cynicism and despair. Full of loathing and rage, (not to mention a little bit of humor) this 80-minute black and white arthouse feature will first challenge your patience before kicking you in the crotch.

Notable New York character actor Victor Argo ([Taxi Driver](#), [Ghost Dog](#)) plays The Comic, a beleaguered shoe salesman who's been nursing the avocation of stand up comedy for too long. Receiving a last-minute call for a 10PM gig at a dive on the Jersey Shore, The Comic reluctantly comes, loaded for bear. Ultimately, he's not very happy with life, and he's going to let his sparse audience know it.

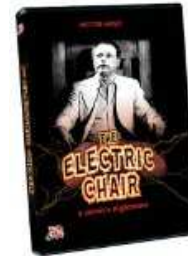
Essentially an acerbic 80-minute monologue full of vitriol and pathos, *The Electric Chair* follows ill advice, from the start squeezing in languid, moody shots of this Jersey Shore town. Argo's stylized voice-over musings further this art-house trope - which certainly has its narrative place, but feels mostly like a bunch of irritating interstices that don't fit in. But the movie really exists for Argo's expert delivery of writer/director Mark Eisenstein's ranting monologues. He hits the stage to the accompaniment of a drummer - perfect to provide rim shots for the lame jokes or a hip-hop backbeat for some Jewish comic self-loathing rap. A little bit of soft-shoe, jokes falling flat on an audience of his friends and family, and a horribly bleak-but-realistic world view grind on, grinding you down. (I guess like life, if you feel that vibe.)

If not for Argo's awesome delivery, I couldn't stand all this negativity: "Each morning all I want to do is hit my wife." "Why the hell should I try to be a comic? I stink." "Life sucks, and I hate being a shoe salesman." Surely, we get the point. When adding a clearly fake Rabbi playing saxophone and impossibly lit shots of a seemingly handicapped boy throwing food in The Comic's mother's face, gives you New York filmmaking at its most challenging. Like film that challenges you to keep watching. Oh yeah, there's an electric chair on stage, too, complete with the deadest of deadpan hecklers in the audience, reminding The Comic to **not** strap himself into the chair, yelling, "throw the switch!"

OK, maybe the jokes aren't ever really funny, and the vast majority of viewers would never even consider watching this movie, much less making it through the meandering first hour. However Argo's nihilistic, sermonizing passion, if not Eisenstein's static direction, eventually pays off. True, Eisenstein makes this at least a little bit more visually interesting than it has a right to be, given that nearly everything seems to be lit with a single spotlight, however Argo and the script, do all the heavy lifting, building up to a pathetic frenzy of self-loathing and despair, with real tears rolling down his face as The Comic indicates why we stick with all the shit, even though we think we deserve something better. It's a tour-de-force almost justifying, if not alleviating, all the pain we've been put through.

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Presented in a 1.33:1 fullframe ratio, *The Electric Chair* looks as ad hoc as The Comic's shtick feels. Lots of grain, starkly and (depending on your reading) poorly lit shots share stage-time with soft, washed out exteriors. One scene even appears to almost solarize itself, with that stark white lighting turning to grey instead. Yes, it doesn't look great, but probably as good as it can.

Sound:

Digital Stereo Audio is of the same caliber as video quality. At times dialog competes with the drummer, at times it seems to be sourced from muffled room sound, and at times (when it's dubbed on top of exterior shots) it is a lot more loud than usual. In all you can hear everything you need to fairly well, but that's all there is to say.

Extras:

Plenty of extras to be had here, including a moderated **Commentary Track** with the director and two blokes from Wild Eye releasing that's pretty fun and revealing, especially for indie-film buffs. A 24-minute short subject, *The Roach* (in color and fullframe) establishes a very quirky rhythm, with the same sort of life's-a-shit-heap attitude as the feature. A large number of additional **Short Films** by Eisenstein, and plenty of **Trailers** sweeten the deal.

Final Thoughts:

Mark Eisenstein's New York City school of film black and white feature, *The Electric Chair* is by turns maddening and depressing, before taking an attitude churned into butter and giving it a little twist. Character actor Victor Argo runs the show as a stand-up comic forced to reconcile his life with the hatred he feels toward his own failures and the arbitrary unfairness of it all. A very rough, at times extremely aggravating arthouse film, *The Electric Chair* ultimately redeems itself through the sheer power of Argo's preacher-like performance, even delivering a tiny ray of hope by the end. While hardcore avant-garde film buffs will find this recommended, it's probably a safe bet to **Rent It** first.

- Kurt Dahlke

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