

<http://ffanzeen.blogspot.com/2010/12/dvd-review-electric-chair.html>

The Electric Chair

Written, produced and directed by Mark Eisenstein

Wild Eye, 1985 / (rereleased) 2010

105 minutes, USD \$16.95

Wildeyereleasing.com

MVDvisual.com

Whether Mark (Marcus) Eisenstein's work could be put into the transgressive film category is borderline, but he does have an aggressive style that has a large dose of religion (mostly Jewish), confrontation, and imagery.

His *The Electric Chair*, from 1985, has long (well, for 25 years) been considered a piece of "lost cinema," directed by this film professor from Jersey City State College. Fortunately, Wild Eye Productions has not only seen fit to release this piece of unorthodox cinema, but has also added in a whole bunch of Eisenstein's shorter pieces as extras, along with some trailers and a track commentary. But more of that later.

Written originally as a play that was mounted but once, Eisenstein (okay from now on I'm just referring to him as ME...deal with it) decided to make a film out of it, and offered the lead role to Harvey Keitel, who actually wanted to direct it as well. ME was all for it, but due to prior commitments, Keitel backed out and offered up his pal Victor Argo in the lead. Yes, the heavily Jewish role was handed to an actor of Puerto Rican heritage, who just nailed the role perfectly. There is a *lot* of dialog in long bursts, and being trained as a stage actor, Argo was more than up for the part. After filming for no pay, the film sat in the can in minimally edited form for years, even after Argo's death in 2004.

Though filmed in the '80s, ME finally finished the black and white film by editing in some footage he took of decrepit buildings on Block Island in the Long Island Sound (or would that be considered the Atlantic?) in 1971, in splashes throughout the narrative, effectively adding a layer of mood to the zeitgeist of the story.

The basic premise of the plot is centered around a shoe salesman, Arnie Schwartz, a lonely man whose marriage is grown as tired as he is, and who spends nights doing a stand-up comedy and music show at a local bar in New Jersey (where most of ME's films are located). An electric chair appears on the stage as he is bombing, and in front of an audience that represents his whole life, he is warned not to achieve several levels of intimacy with the object.

As the gig does on, the comedy act turns into a rant about the philosophy of comedy, and bit by bit focuses in on his life, God, and *schtupping*, which uses up most of the film. It takes a strong actor to be able to portray this level of anger and still remain somewhat sympathetic (though in the commentary, ME states that he was not going for sympathy, just the anger), if not pathetic. In front of his mother, himself as a young man dominated

by her, his kid sister, a sax playing rabbi, a couple engaged in their own intimacy, and others, Arnie rails right to the climax, which comes as no surprise. However, it is the last shot of the film that I found the most effective and unnerving.

The time goes quickly, and Argo is more than up for the task of possibly his only starring role in his long career. Keitel would also have done well, but Argo brings some depth to his emotions, and can punch out the lengthy gunfire dialog, while in close-up, without ever making it redundant or boring. It's hard to turn away as he gives his all, which is even more impressive considering, as I said, he wasn't even paid for it. That's dedication to a craft.

The images of the super 16mm film (except for the Block Island footage, which is a grainy 16mm) is exceptionally sharp, giving a near German Expressionist pastiche, with high contrasts and an occasional glow, with Argo's white suit against a black background. It's the facial close-ups where the shadows are the most effective. My only qualm is the editing, sometimes a bit too sharp and jarring, or perhaps that was the meaning (the other Eisenstein filmmaker, Sergei, was famously noted for proclaiming that "editing is motion").

This is definitely not a date movie, nor is it a backdrop film. It needs special care and attention from the viewer to see the slow build-up to the finale, and all the subtlety in-between as the tone of the film changes.

The commentary was interesting all the way through, though I felt like I wanted a second one. ME is paired up with indie filmmaker Peter Crocker (I may have this name wrong) and Rob Hauschild of Wild Eye Productions; Crocker is an "expert" on the film, and runs off with the conversation a number of times I just wanted to say "shut-up, this isn't your film" more than once. A lot of technical questions are discussed about the film, the "hardware" as it were (pre-production, production, and post-production), but not enough, I feel, on the "software" (plot, meaning, intentions). I would have like more insight on what ME was trying to "say," and at key moments, such as the ending, I thought, "why are you talking about that instead of what's on the screen?" Don't get me wrong, the commentary is full of fascinating facts, it just left me wanting more than it offered.

The shorts by ME that are included, and there are several of them, run from the "mini-feature" of "The Roach," which lasts more than 20 minutes, to a couple that are just a few minutes.

"The Roach" is an interesting set piece of a waterbug that suddenly becomes human, but still scuttles about, played well by 20-something hipster type Eric Mednis. He has no dialog, and flops around when he's on his back. The Roach is as confused about the human world as it is about him. He keeps following a profane exterminator named Mr. Acme, played by Nick Taylor, and is nearly seduced by a lonely woman (Joan Moossy, who is in many of ME's productions), before the film ends, Nero-and-Poppaea -style. The film is simple and smart, and obviously a reversal of Kafka's infamous "The Metamorphosis," and is one of his few works here in color.

Some of the shorts are extremely esoteric, such as “The Smog” (1967; 6.5 min.), where people are filmed talking in a smog while their voices are re-recorded; “Eight Tragedy Term Papers Plus Three by Maggie Murphy” (1967; 15 min.) in which a real-life poetic term paper by a student who passed away is read by ME as a typewriter types out newswire stories; and in “Mark Eisenstein: Inventor of the Frame” (1982, 1.5 min.), the director explains how he “invented” the frame for cinema (before, supposedly no one knew where to look). There are a couple of others of varying success, but interesting to help put *The Electric Chair* into a larger picture of Eisenstein’s process.

There are also some trailers put out by Wild Eye Productions, though there is also one for an unreleased Eisenstein film called “God Is On Their Side,” an (I am assuming) allegorical tale of trying to get God on one side or another during a war, while all he wants to do is sing, dance, and smoke cigars. Why am I so interested in this? Simply because God is played by (and credited to) Buster Poindexter, also known as New York Dolls’ vocalist and Staten Island’s own David Johansen.