

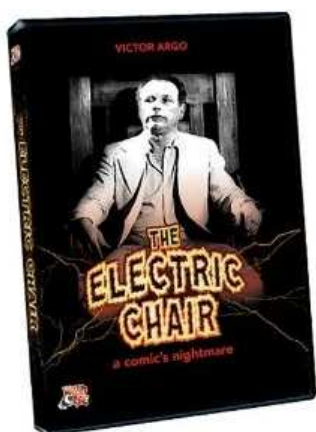
# THE ELECTRIC CHAIR

**Directed by Mark Eisenstein**

**Starring Victor Argo**

**Black and White, 105 min. DVD**

**Available through Music Video Distributors.**



Shot in 1985 (with some outdoor footage from 1971 of a small New Jersey island and landscape), this experimental film (inspired by a Bukowski story as much as by the films of Scorsese and Jarmusch) is about Arnie Schwartz, a shoe-store manager by day and a failed nightclub standup comic at night. When Harvey Keitel was unavailable to essay the central role, Eisenstein recruited New Yorker Victor Argo, who had done character parts in films by Scorsese, Jarmusch, and Abel Ferrar (*Bad Lieutenant, Ghost Dog, The Last Temptation of Christ, True Romance, Taxi Driver*). Argo's portrayal grows in intensity as Arnie's nightclub routine deteriorates into a savage rant against his audience, parents, ex-wife, and life in general, culminating in an eerily grotesque execution on stage via the electric chair he introduces into the act to shock his audience by turning his act upon his malcontent self. In some senses, this is an absurdist black tragicomedy, and it does have some remarkable touches, but there is also an unmistakable aura of exaggerated "indie" experimentalism.

Technically inconsistent, with the outdoor footage showing yellow stains and a frayed edge, there are moments of genuine craft, especially in the harsh close-ups of Argo's weathered face shot in white light against a deep black background; the expressionistic style of other sequences that seems to have come from German cinema, as well as from cinema noir; and the jazz fugue performed for the electric execution by the saxophone-playing Rabbi and Larry the Drummer. The long, slow tracking shots (with a hand-held camera) of dilapidated homes, fading porches and clapboard sides, dirt-flecked tombstones, and an abandoned rowing boat in tall reeds along the shoreline are obviously a symbolic correlative for the comic's interior feelings of desolation and abandonment. However, these shots seem unnecessary, given the long standup routine that makes the comic's existential predicament abundantly clear—even to the point of excess. Argo, of course, relishes his opportunity for virtuoso acting, and he marks every note with distinction from lame comedy to desperate defiance, with articulations of burlesque comedy, black vaudeville, and bitter irony added for extra measure.

Eisenstein's script, however, is sometimes overwritten and portentous, without in any way being as funny as Lenny Bruce's daring routines. It uses Sheldon, the nightclub owner, as a sort of off-camera voice of conscience for Arnie, though it is also possible that the voice is actually Arnie's own thoughts projected in Sheldon's voice. The script also uses the nightclub audience as a silent, staring chorus, and draws a link between certain characters and the comic's autobiography. The mystical Rabbi, for instance, is the comic's orthodox father; the overbearing blonde woman who forces her young son to eat what she decrees represent the comic's mother and Arnie's boyhood self. The portentousness continues with the side-attractions, especially a randy couple that performs their own exhibitionistic act with utter indifference to their surroundings.

*The Electric Chair* has a philosophic bent. Arnie believes that the purpose of the human mind is to defy what it sees. But his memory won't let him forget what he would probably prefer to forget. As a study of a single character's existential despair, this little, long-forgotten film is instructive. Arnie is certainly no Archie Rice: he doesn't represent the fading fortunes of a country or a theatrical tradition, and his characterization is not given the benefit of an offstage life, except through what he tells us of it. He is merely a failed comic who also fails at life. His routine is more like clichéd baggy-pants comedy, though (like Archie Rice) he insults his bored audience. We never get to see his true boyhood or his parents except symbolically in the nightclub figures, and so the characters have little flesh-and-blood reality. We never see Arnie in direct interaction as an adult with any of the figures from his life, except for Sheldon, the nightclub owner. Moreover, where Archie Rice is moving in his vulnerability, Arnie is not. He announces his nature and fate too baldly. "I am Electric Man. The Man of the Future," he declares, also stating that he is plugged into the Ultimate Reality. In this way, he is a set of symptoms rather than a character, and by straining too hard for allegory ("we're all on Death Row"), the film loses contact with the human scale.

The DVD has special features that should be skipped for the most part because (with the exception of a very informal audio commentary by Eisenstein and a short on a brilliant but ill-fated young female student who writes term-paper riffs on tragedy) they demonstrate the lousiness of Eisenstein's cinematic experimentation rather than its occasional brilliance.

[Go Back to: Opera/CD/Film Reviews](#)