

## THE CURSE OF THE WEREWOLF

Directed by Terence Fisher

(1961) Universal / Final Cut Entertainment Region 2 DVD  
(limited edition: 2000 copies)

Hammer's first (and only) take on the werewolf theme was also the first "classic" monster movie from the studio to not feature the team of Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee. Instead, the spotlight was placed on a young up-and-comer by the name of Oliver Reed, and the rest, as they say . . .

But for all that, Reed doesn't appear until fully halfway through *The Curse of the Werewolf*, adapted by producer Anthony Hinds (as "John Elder") from Guy Endore's novel *The Werewolf of Paris* but transposed to a Spanish setting so as to take advantage of sets built for an unrealized Hammer production. The buildup is a nasty horror story in its own right, as a mad beggar (imprisoned by a cruel Marquis, unforgettably played by Anthony Dawson) rapes a mute servant girl (Yvonne Romain) before she can make her violent escape. The nameless young lady is eventually taken in by the kindly Don Alfredo (top-billed Clifford Evans)—along with her unborn, unplanned offspring. The unfortunate child (named Leon) is born out of wedlock on Christmas Day itself, and "Heaven" (as depicted through a filter of intense Catholic morality and guilt) takes that as an insult and strikes the infant with a curse (in one of the most memorable scenes in the Hammer canon, the baptismal font literally boils at his approach). But all is not necessarily lost—a strong, loving upbringing eventually helps to keep the manifestly bestial nature of young Leon at bay until he's ready to face the world as a young adult (Reed, of course). And so long as he works hard, keeps his nose in his books and accepts only the love of a "good" woman (even though Christina, as played by Catherine Feller, is promised to another *and* just happens to be the daughter of Leon's employer), his future remains bright . . . but when he gives in to peer pressure for just *one* evening devoted to pleasure and revelry, the wages of sin are even worse than death.

The lead actor may only appear in half of the movie, and the full-fledged werewolf (a stellar make-up job by Roy Ashton, recognizable to fans whether or not they've seen the actual film) isn't glimpsed until the final ten minutes, but none of this works against the film in the slightest: Reed's ferocious performance, the sumptuous sets, the empathetic direction of Terence Fisher and a strong score by Benjamin Frankel keep *The Curse of the Werewolf* rich and entertaining from beginning to end. The question now is this—just how necessary is the new 2-disc import from Final Cut Entertainment? The film itself is an extremely worthwhile acquisition, but if you already happen to own Universal's eight-feature "Hammer Horror Series" Region 1 DVD set, then you already have a copy of *Curse* that's just as good as the one on display here. Disc One of the import set is strictly the bare-bones movie (albeit completely uncensored, which was not always the case in Great Britain). The set's desirability will be determined by one's interest in the 45m documentary "The Making of *Curse of the Werewolf*," which dominates Disc Two and which should certainly please fans of the film. The proceedings are led by Mike Hill, a devoted aficionado and artist who happily displays his amazingly detailed recreation of Ashton's werewolf head (among other three-dimensional goodies) throughout. Hill sets up the story behind the film as he makes the case that Oliver Reed was the single greatest werewolf performer in movie history (sure, it's one thing to compare Reed to Lon Chaney, Jr., but countless eyes will roll when Hill invokes Michael J. Fox in the same breath!). Along the way, we hear from surviving members of the cast and crew, including actresses Catherine Feller and Yvonne Romain, art director Don Mingage and sculptress Mary Robinson, all of whom share their experiences on the set as well as their memories of such departed players as Reed and director Fisher. Oliver Reed himself is heard from in archival audio recordings from 1999 (*Curse* remained one of his favorite films and he had nothing but good things to say about Fisher and Hammer Studios in general), while Hammer screenwriter Jimmy Sangster (who had nothing to do with *Curse*, but who worked with Fisher on many other occasions) appears via a 2011 video interview: ironically, both men made their statements shortly before their respective deaths. Outtakes from the main documentary are distilled into a 3m extra in which the participants discuss the true-life phenomenon of lycanthropy, while a still gallery covers plenty of familiar ground but manages to unearth some previously-unseen promotional materials in the process. The import set (which is limited to 2000 copies) also comes with exclusive liner notes and a set of collector's postcards. As always—the next move is yours.

Shane M. Dallmann

## HAUNTED CHANGI

Directed by Andrew Lau

(2010) Seminal Films/ MVD DVD

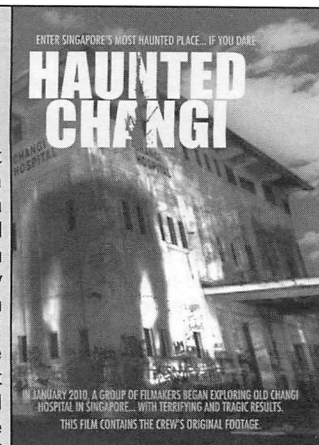
The Old Changi Hospital (formerly just Changi Hospital) stands amidst overgrown foliage at the eastern tip of Singapore as a monument to its revered past as a British Royal Air Force hospital, and the horrors of its duration as a prison camp under Japanese occupancy during World War II. After the state's Declaration of Independence in 1965, the facilities would eventually be handed over to the Singapore Armed Forces in 1975; whereupon it accommodated the public and military personnel until its closure in 1997. Thereafter strange stories began to emerge about the former POW camp and its grounds, leading the derelict site to become lauded as one of the most haunted properties in the Singapore region.

In January of 2010, it was that very reputation that draws a small independent film crew to document the facility and its grounds as well as explore the myths and urban legends that surround Old Changi Hospital as a Mecca for supernatural activity. Comprising of producer and director Andrew Lau, producer and presenter Sheena Chung, cameraman Audi Khalis and soundman Farid Azlam, the small team interview locals and map out the building's history whilst awaiting shooting permits. Once the permits arrive, the crew swiftly set about filming only to discover that there is indeed disturbing truth to the old stories and an unexpected malevolence amidst the forces trapped within the monolith's crumbling walls, shuttered rooms and hitherto unexplored underground tunnels.

The "found footage" genre has gone through something of a dramatic upswing in recent years, especially within the horror genre where titles like *[rec]* (2007), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008) have won favour (and disdain) with horror-fans and mainstream viewers alike. Arguably originated with Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1979), whose parade of reality-based atrocities initially drew strong censorship condemnation globally and made it virtually impossible to see in undiluted form (or at all, in some territories), the sub-genre sat dormant for almost two decades before Americans Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez revitalised the medium with *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). As much a product of its finely-tuned marketing campaign, that suggested the whole thing was "real" as well as highlighted overwhelming audience reactions with tales of vomit-inducing "motion sickness", *Blair Witch* proved a box-office champion. Unusually, for such a modest investment vs. return format, the formula never really caught on with Asian filmmakers and, outside of Kôji Shiraishi's *Noroi: The Curse* (2005) and Lee Cheol-ha's *Deserted House* (2010), there's been little to no experimentation within the genre from those regions.

Thus, it's something of a surprise that one of Asia's first major stabs at the "found footage" genre should originate from the relatively small enclave that is the Singaporean film industry. More so once you take into consideration that *Haunted Changi* (2010) was produced outside of the studio system (where domestic entertainment leader Mediacorp Raintree literally dominates the marketplace) on a shoe-string, with a cast of unknowns, and only a viral marketing campaign as promotion once its original backer pulled out a proposed distribution deal (over the film's shooting language, no less). It may come as something of a surprise for our readership, but even as a well-versed Asian cinephile, prior to a screener crossing my desk, I had *never* heard of the production. However I knew of the Old Changi Hospital and its much vaunted history as one of Singapore's most haunted icons, as that knowledge had come to me via a publication on regional paranormal experiences I'd picked up in my travels within Malaysia. However, apart from an official website, dormant filmmakers' production blog and a series of crew profiles on Facebook, turning up anything relating to *Haunted Changi's* production, history or the filmmakers themselves proved almost fruitless.

Designed and executed as an assembly of the footage the onscreen crew shot during production, there are indications here and there throughout the feature that hints things were a lot more polished, and an extremely clever appropriation of documentary style, than one would initially suspect. There's a little post-production digital trickery here, some highly effective editing tricks there, and so on and so forth; yet even with those tweaks the film retains its integrity as a (faux) documentary thanks to a believable cast and well-calculated structure. Following some exhaustive amateur sleuthing, my quest for more information on what had been a very impressive indie production (for me) led to the film's production house, Mythopolis Pictures, and an extended email conversation with the firm's American-born/Singaporean-based co-founder, Tony Kern. Tony imparted a wealth of material relating to the origins of *Haunted Changi*, its off-troubled production history and Mythopolis' handling of the end product as delivered on completion. What ultimately emerged from our correspondence was the highly textured canvas Kern painted; that the film was as much a product of its canny viral marketing campaign as the professionalism of the end product. Accordingly, some questions are better left unanswered and a heightened level of uncertainty maintained, as a good magician *never* reveals his secrets.



Those expecting a gruelling experience in unrelenting terror, or shocks and horror every other moment, will largely come away disappointed from *Haunted Changi* as it's the antithesis of that proclivity. The production closely follows the young filmmakers and their varied concerns and interests as they plot out the history of the OCH, with archival WWII footage and "on-the-street" interviews, in the build up to what is the film's drawcard: the shoot inside Changi itself. The whole aesthetic is one of slow-burn, mounting intensity and Lau and his team are utterly believable as the stage is set. Once inside the abandoned premises, everything tips upside-down and proceedings lurch into a wild-eyed madness that is amplified by Kern's impressive high-definition cinematography (which is about the limit of what I'm willing to reveal). The filmmakers have impressively managed to evoke and capture that childhood sense of burgeoning unease that anyone who ever poked around derelict buildings or ruins as a kid has felt. OCH is an imposing structure, and it's rendered perfectly as that eponymous nexus of the paranormal that local legend has created. Of course, once the unearthly denizens of the facility begin to manifest themselves for the cameras we're in really eerie territory. Be it doors suddenly slamming shut of their own accord, inexplicable shadows showing up on footage post-shoot or, in one skin-crawling sequence, the presence of a mysterious figure appearing out of nowhere in front of the lens, before disappearing into darkness, *Haunted Changi* makes for an unsettling, frequently chilling ride through Singapore's ultimate haunted house.

What really sets *Haunted Changi* apart from many of its peers is the youthful exuberance that twenty-something director Lau (not *the* Andrew Lau, of *Infernal Affairs* fame, I must stress) and his similarly young crew invest the production with. The usage of *Singlish* (colloquial English peppered with vocabulary from the region's varied cross-cultural dialects) adds to the regional flavour of the film, even though its presence was heavily criticised by audiences and reviewers on original release, and lends an even more uniquely Singaporean feel than I would suspect isolated pockets would agree. In essence there is something of TV series *Ghost Hunters International* about the production, albeit on a smaller, non-professional scale and Lau and crew make effective use of night vision photography, motion sensors, time-lapse and hard-hat mounted digi-cams to milk their frightening experience to maximum effect. Whether it's the sudden realisation, thanks to thermal imaging, that they are surrounded by headless ghosts at one point, or Lau's own frenzied point-of-view as he dashes hopelessly lost through the hospital's long rumoured, previously unexplored, underground tunnels there is always an exhilarating sense of dread that something horrific is going to jump into camera range at any second. In anyone's books, that is what good genre filmmaking should be about: loss of control and fear of the unknown. As it races to its shock conclusion, *Haunted Changi* is swamped in exactly that tension-laden atmosphere.

As anyone who has read this far will have guessed by now, I was not only extremely impressed with *Haunted Changi* as a wholly successful South East Asian attempt at the "found footage" genre but, from conversations with *Mythopolis Pictures'* co-founder Tony Kern, am also privy to the elaborate secret behind the enigma that is the film itself (as, excepting a company logo and title card, *Changi* features no credits). *Haunted Changi's* strengths stem not only from its classically Singaporean appropriation of what had previous been a largely western-dominated sub-genre, but also from the carefully constructed cult of curiosity and cryptography that surrounded its production from inception to release. Far be it from me to spoil that mystery when, almost eighteen months after its release (as of this writing), online forums and social media are still abuzz with lively discussion as to the film's veracity. It may not be the most earth-shattering "found footage" genre piece international viewers will ever see, but *Haunted Changi* belies its modest roots enough for me to recommend it as an impressively unsettling excursion through a major Asiatic paranormal phenomenon.

For more on *Haunted Changi*, inclusive of the archived production blogs, check out the film's official website at <http://hauntedchangi.com>. *Mythopolis Pictures'* next feature will be the supernatural detective thriller *Third Eye Open* which can also be reached online at <http://thirdeyemovie.com>.

Michael Thomason

## MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

Directed by Cy Endfield  
(1961) Screen Archives Entertainment /  
Twilight Time Blu-ray

While some of the films featuring the classic stop-motion animation effects of the legendary Ray Harryhausen are memorable *only* for his work, the very best (including *The 7<sup>th</sup> Voyage of Sinbad* and *Jason and the Argonauts*) thrill and entertain from beginning to end—and *Mysterious Island* (freshly hot in the form of a contemporary in-name-only 3-D remake) most assuredly belongs in the pantheon. While the aforementioned variant sells itself as a sequel to *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Mysterious Island* is actually a follow-up to Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. The latter, of course, was best known and loved as a classic 1954 Walt Disney production starring Kirk Douglas and featuring James Mason as Captain Nemo, but this 1961 Columbia release wasn't offered as a "sequel" to the Disney film (for obvious reasons).

For those who need a refresher on the story, *Mysterious Island* starts off with a daring escape from a Confederate prison during the Civil War—the motley crew that

makes its getaway via hot air balloon includes the determined Captain Harding (Michael Craig), liberal journalist Gideon Splitt (Gary Merrill), happy-go-lucky Herbert Brown (dancer Michael Callan), a black Union corporal (Dan Jackson) and a captured Johnny Reb (Percy Herbert) whose life is spared by the escapees. A violent storm blows the crew wildly off course, and their only hope of survival is to make it to an uncharted island luckily spotted in the distance. While the castaways must set aside their political differences and work together to survive if there's to be any thought of escape or rescue, it soon becomes obvious that they're not completely alone. Not only are they quickly joined by two shipwrecked British women (high-living Lady Fairchild and her daughter Elena, played respectively by Joan Greenwood and Beth Rogan), but some unknown benefactor seems to be looking out for them... which is a good thing, because the island is also home to an assortment of deadly giant animals (enter Harryhausen) and a secret drop-off point for a crew of hostile pirates! There's no point in attempting to conceal the fact that Captain Nemo himself (Herbert Lom) is eventually revealed as both the invisible guardian angel and the brains behind the experiments that caused the gigantic mutations in plant and animal life alike—but while his fabulous submarine *Nautilus* is with him in all its glory, it can never take to the sea again . . .

*Mysterious Island* remains synonymous with "Harryhausen" for good reason, but the truth is that the film contains only four Dynamation highlights over its 100m running time. The vast majority of the film focuses on the characters themselves as they engage in combat, mutual survival skills and, of course, philosophical debate (Harding and Splitt argue intensely—but politely—over Nemo's determination to stop war by engaging in war well before they get a chance to take it up with the man himself), and the cast is up to the task of holding the viewer's attention throughout. The monster attacks themselves are well spaced out over the course of the adventure, leading off with the surprise appearance of a giant crab. Next up is one of the strangest and most entertaining sequences in the entire film, in which the survivors are had at by a weird, seemingly prehistoric bird-creature: the danger is very real, but even Bernard Herrmann's excellent, bombastic score here takes an appropriately playful turn. (While frustrating references to the incident were retained in the subsequent dialogue, this scene was always cut from the print on Chicago television to make room for the genial hosting of beloved television personality Frazier Thomas on his Sunday afternoon series *Family Classics*—I was literally a young adult by the time I ever saw the uncut movie!) Things get even better when a giant bee attempts to seal Herbert and Elena up inside a proportionately-oversized honeycomb, and a glowering chambered nautilus (not the submarine named for it) attempts to have its say about the climactic underwater efforts of the crew. The cast, the composer, the production design and the Harryhausen effects are expertly blended throughout, making this Charles H. Schnee production a rousing standout destined to outlast all of its various and sundry pretenders, though oddly enough, it was the only fantastic film directed by Cy Endfield (*Zulu*).

*Mysterious Island* was previously released on VHS, laserdisc and DVD with supplements ranging from an isolated score to the "This is Dynamation" trailer appended to all such Columbia releases. The limited edition (3000 copies, \$34.95 retail) release Blu-Ray rendition from [www.screenarchives.com](http://www.screenarchives.com) continues to offer the Herrmann soundtrack on a separate channel but limits the visual extras to a theatrical trailer and a television spot. This may disappoint those hoping for a true "Special Edition," but the film itself is surely a sufficiently strong selling point!



Shane M. Dallmann