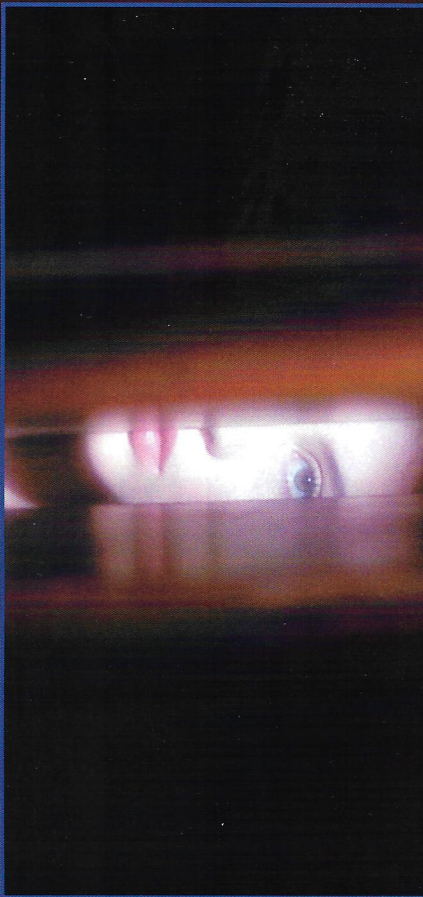




SPOTLIGHT

The Strange Case of DR. JEKYLL and MISS OSBOURNE



Marina Pierro spies on the transformation of her fiancé in Waterlian Borowczyk's THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MISS OSBOURNE.

By Tim Lucas

The diadem of this two-disc set is a remarkable 2K restoration of Waterlian Borowczyk's thrilling, anarchistic essay on the Jekyll-Hyde myths of Robert Louis Stevenson, a film subject to uneven distribution and censorship during its theatrical release, then to cutting and optical digitizing in a limited few video releases. Above and beyond looking beautiful, above and beyond including decades of forbidden imagery, the restoration of this film required its technicians to preserve the haziness essential to its *mise en scène*, the depth of its blacks, the occasionally piercing quality of its brightness; there was so much to juggle here on a consciously discerning, aesthetic level, we can only be grateful that the film fell into such loving hands.

I call the film an essay on the Jekyll-Hyde myths not because it eschews narrative or because

its point of view stands somewhat outside its unfolding story, but because it is thoroughly ornamented with objects and artifacts that venture comment on the story at hand. Also, it is not a remake or retelling of Stevenson's book in the accepted sense; in preparing this film, Borowczyk

THE STRANGE CASE OF
DR. JEKYLL AND
MISS OSBOURNE

aka *BLOODLUST*,

DR. JEKYLL AND HIS WOMEN,
DR. JEKYLL AND THE WOMEN

1981, Arrow, 91m 17s,

\$39.95/£18.99, BD-0/DVD-0

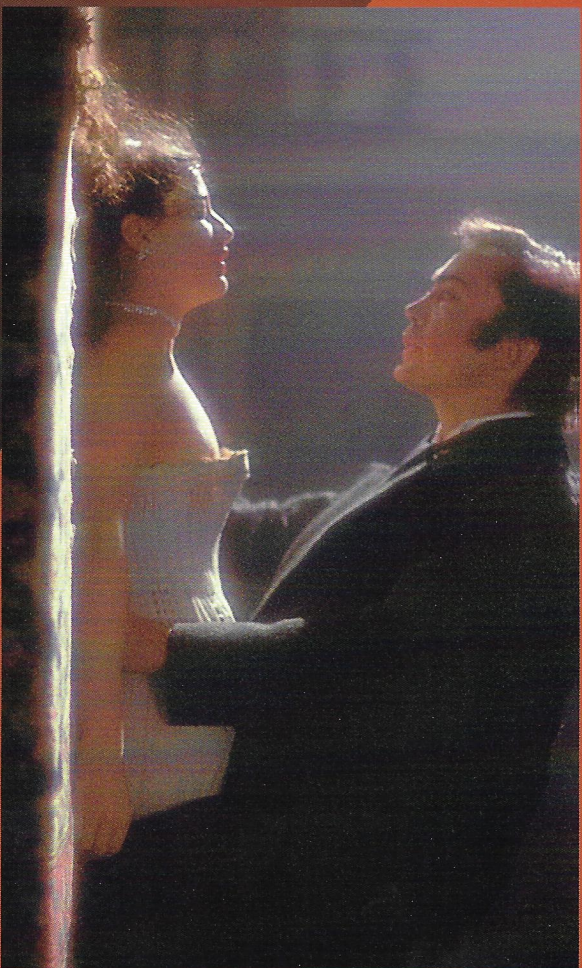
realized that, while earlier adaptations included a prominent female and even pending nuptials (as with Rose Hobart's Muriel Carew in Rouben Mamoulian's 1931 film), Stevenson's 1886 novella "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" features no female characters. Fanny Osborne, played in the film by Borowczyk's paramour Marina Pierro and depicted as Jekyll's fiancée, is not a completely fictional character; Fanny Osbourne, née Vandergift, was a real woman; indeed, she was the wife of Robert Louis Stevenson. She was also the emotionally scarred widow of a marauding womanizer. Stevenson, whose fledgling talent she encouraged, fell in love with her at the height of her marital torment and pursued her until they married in 1880, her fourth year of widowhood.

While developing his interpretation of Stevenson's work, Borowczyk took these historical details into account and tried to imagine an earlier, more brazen story in which Fanny might have recognized herself, and her relationship with both her husbands, and been so upset as to burn the manuscript. By imposing Miss Osbourne on his story, Borowczyk holds in reserve until the film's concluding sequence a trump card of equality that saves the film from becoming another study of Jekyll's selfish tyranny; the film instead becomes a more balanced study of liberation from tradition and the constraints of civilized society, and a

speculative embrace of new possibilities, not so much monstrous as bestial, which Borowczyk considered—easily determined from his other films—an indivisible aspect of human nature.

The film, which unfolds over a single evening in something vaguely resembling real time, takes place on the evening of a party, given at the home of Dr. Henry Jekyll (Udo Kier) to doubly celebrate his and Fanny's engagement, and also the publication of his book "The Laboratory and Transcendental Medicine" (sic). The duplicity of the occasion in itself defines a schism between sex and work, or rather private and public life. As the guests begin to arrive, the couple are shown in the throes of passion in his laboratory ("knock before entering"), promising one another "a whole night of pleasure" once the others have departed, a plateau implicitly not yet reached in their relationship—and they will get it, though not quite as they anticipate. In addition to his fiancée and their mothers, present are Jekyll's colleague and mentor Dr. Lanyon (Howard Vernon); General Edward Carew (Patrick Magee) and his grown daughter; his priest, the Reverend Donald Ronald Regan Guest (Clément Harari, the mad doctor of Franju's *Nuits Rouges*); his lawyer; his lab assistant; and the Endfields, whose young adult daughter dances for the gathering before she becomes the first victim of a violent intruder who proceeds to victimize

Udo Kier and Marina Pierro in a moment of reckoning.





Udo Kier as Dr. Henry Jekyll.

the entire gathering, men and women, both violently and sexually. His victims are killed as they are raped by a large, bestial, upcurving member (depicted with a prosthesis) that penetrates them sexually and abdominally. As is often noted in discussions of the film, the layout of Jekyll's house is only vaguely defined, which simultaneously underscores the impossibility of escape from this internal raid but also makes it tempting to read as a collapsing analogy of Jekyll's own mind.

Each of the principal guests represents either authority or some shade of institution, whether it be military or marriage, but in the course of the evening, all are brutally overthrown. Not all are first overthrown by Hyde, however; in the case of General Carew, who signs the couple's remembrance book with something like arrogant condescension, he drinks a bit too much at dinner and attempts to manhandle Fanny, but her recoil from his advances sends the great soldier repentantly from the room like a child. When he attempts to take charge following the first attack, he ends up shooting an innocent man in the street. (Maggee's reading of Carew's apology—"Misfortune follows misfortune.... I have killed your coachman, madam."—is one of many tension-breaking instances of subversive humor, particularly his solemn entreaty that the good doctor "take plenty of cotton wool" to the scene.) But it doesn't stop there for the General, whom Hyde disarms with an insult alluding to impotence ("Old fool, go on and shoot: if you have bullets"), then ties to a chair, cuts with a sabre, trampling his medals and forcing him to witness the willing cooperation of his danger-thrilled daughter in an act of rear-entry sex across the bed of a vintage Singer sewing machine. The General's bizarre engagement gift to the couple, of a fistful of African poison-tipped arrows, go on to become a weapon of perverse Cupidity used by Hyde against the guests, including the General, Endfield dons a Teutonic helmet that Jekyll bought to commemorate his publication (Reverend Guest notes that it embodies "the beauty of evil") and is swiftly decapitated for his troubles, Borowczyk averting the viewer's eye from any bloody carnage to the bare breasts of the Carew girl, perhaps venturing comment on what is more shocking to some sensibilities.

Though it would be impossible for anyone to watch any film based on the Stevenson novella and not know Hyde's alter ego, Borowczyk's film proceeds in a manner that protects Jekyll's involvement in the mayhem until his first graphic

transformation—which, remarkably, takes place via full body immersion in bath water saturated with chemical salts that turn clear tap water to the ruddy, earthy color of very old, turned wine. The question of identity is covered with plausible absences by the good doctor, by the casting of a different actor (Gérard Zalcberg) as Hyde, and by the fact that the first of the indoor assaults that we see is a beating and kicking of his fiancée, who does not recognize him for who he is. As played by Zalcberg, with a feral yet feline narcissistic air, Hyde (who inscribes the remembrance book with a signature that might have spilled from the pen of artist Ralph Steadman) is not simply the gleeful sadist of earlier adaptations; he is an embodiment of tyranny, anarchy and even the Surrealist spirit, not unlike Fantômas. Thus he also carries a political charge, as does the fact that Jekyll's servants are respectively Indian and African, products of Victorian England's imperial outreach. Hyde, who wears all the trappings of the English Gentleman, represents a catalyst to change rather than a simplistic inversion of human nature. The institutions he topples are constraining, and the finale of the film, rather than being simply catastrophic, is compulsive, apocalyptic, and constructive (in that Hyde is joined by a mate of his own) and liberating of the anima from the bonds of all dogma. The fact that one watches this spectacle unfold alternately mortified and amused speaks directly to the duplicity of our own natures.

The film is ravishly photographed by Noël Véry, beginning with a startling, predominantly blue night scene in which Hyde pursues, canes and tramples a young girl to death, prevented from violating her only by being discovered by a woman overhearing the child's cries. As the film cuts indoors, warmer colors generally prevail, but the angles and compositions likewise turn more oblique, sometimes shot in depth but, at the same time, flat. Hyde is frequently viewed from behind. One of the bonus supplements, "Phantasmagoria of the Interior" (14m 39s) by Adrian Martin and Cristina Alvarez López, does an extraordinarily perceptive and clearly shared job of revealing the rationale underlying the film's visual choices. One particularly helpful annotation offered herein concerns Fanny's dowry gift, the original of the Vermeer painting "*Brieflezerde vrouw in het blauw*" ("Woman in Blue Reading a Letter"), which we told depicts Vermeer's own wife Catharina, whose pregnancy was physically tormented by an abusive brother whose methods of sadism were not unlike Hyde's. Throughout the film, there are also individual shots evocative of Vermeer's style.



Henry gazes with narcissistic satisfaction at the visage of his alter ego, Edward Hyde (Gerard Zalberg).

Borowczyk's revolutionary take on the material is so bracingly volatile and stylish that it is tempting to overlook, or at least seek rationalization for, its faults. The relationships of the individual characters tend to be sketched in terms of their resolutions rather than developed in advance; for example, we are not prepared for the General's betrayal by his daughter in such explicit terms—it simply happens, giving it the force of shock without lending it dramatic meaning beyond what is offered in the broad strokes of caricature. However, this perceived shortcoming might have been a deliberate approach taken to ensure that the viewer absorb the events of the story from a more amoral stance. Less easily defended, I find, is the film's handling of the classic scene of Hyde's self-revelation to Lanyon (played so memorably by Frédéric March and Holmes Herbert in Rouben Mamoulian's 1931 version), with Lanyon described as being in constant possession of Solfeor, a vital ingredient of Jekyll's elixir, which indeed he is—and which Hyde proceeds to simply mix with water and swallow to effect his transformation, though every other such scene in the film seems to insist that the formula be applied externally. Also, the addition to water of a single chemical makes Jekyll's discovery seem more fortuitous than a product of complex chemistry.

Borowczyk's film was released in Canada in 1982 as **DR. JEKYLL AND HIS WOMEN**, but



Jekyll's fiancée insists on being his wife in all ways in the film's Dionysian finale.

never made it to US theatres. The reputation it enjoys today among the American cognoscenti began in the 1990s with a bootlegged Canadian VHS release under the title **BLOODLUST**, which was slightly cut. Some of its missing footage subsequently surfaced in a Japanese VHS release albeit with digitally censored imagery. Any other version that has come along in the meantime, including a Dutch source, has been either censored, opaqued, incomplete, or ineptly subtitled before now. Therefore, Arrow's 1080p presentation of the film (bearing the onscreen title **Dr. Jekyll et les Femmes** with the **STRANGE CASE** title bracketed beneath), a lustrous 2K scan from the original 1.66:1 camera negative approved by cinematographer Noël Vey, is more than a nice surprise: it's a feast of *fissons* forbidden. The BD/DVD set includes English and French soundtracks in LPCM 1.0, with optional English and English SDH subtitles. Both soundtrack options are well presented, but neither is quite definitive; the French track contains more live sound recording, but the cast appears to have acted in English and only Patrick Magee's vocal performance in English is preserved, with even the performance of Howard Vernon (who often dubbed his own performances for export) dubbed by an ill-fitting voice evidently provided by the same actor who dubbed Udo Kier. One might complain that Kier's vocal performance is

preserved by neither track but, instances of anarchistic humor aside, this is a serious film and the presence of his voice would likely have pushed the whole that much closer to farce. Though the French voice used for Magee's General Carew is well-cast, the film loses a tremendous lot without Magee's reading of his English dialogue and many viewers will likely embrace the English track for this reason alone; it helps that the English dialogue is so well-crafted, if indifferently acted by the dubbing crew.

The film is also viewable with the accompaniment of an audio commentary—less a commentary, perhaps, than a collection of audio documentation pertaining to the film and its creator, culled from Daniel Bird's interviews with cinematographer Noël Lévy, editor Khadicha Barina, actor/production assistant Michael Lévy and filmmaker Noël Simolo, and an important archival interview with Borowczyk conducted by Frédéric Albert Lévy at the time the film was being edited. The film is introduced at length (32m 57s) by critic Michael Brooke, who reminds about his chance discovery of the film in a way that will resonate with most viewers, before going on to discuss the film and the particular spell it casts. There is an on-camera interview with Udo Kier (11m 19s), an audio interview with Martha Pierro (20m 17s, in Italian with English subtitles) that reveals her as a

genuine intellectual and an articulate champion of Borowczyk and his work: "Himorogi" (2012, 16m 58s), a sensuous, experimental tribute to Borowczyk by Marina Pierro and Alessio Pierro in which the otherwise now-camera-shy actress seems to appear; the aforementioned "Phantasmagoria of the Interior" (14m 39s); "Eyes That Listen" (10m 2s), a featurette on Borowczyk's collaborations with electro-acoustic composer Bernard Parmegiani; "Sarah Mallinson on Peter Földes and Walterian Borowczyk" (10m 10s), an interview with a former Borowczyk assistant who married Földes, a fellow animator and colleague; Daniel Bird's featurette "Return to Mèlles: Borowczyk and Early Cinema" (6m 50s), and a recently recovered animated short by Borowczyk, "Happy Toy" (1979, 2m 17s), which is identified as inspired by the Praxinoscope films of Emile Reynaud. The set is accompanied by a handsome 40-page color booklet that is anything but ornamental: it includes original character sketches and script pages by Borowczyk, a foreword written for a French book about the film by novelist André Pieyre de Mandiargues, never before available in English, an assortment of review clips dating from the film's original release ("a handrously dotty farrago" ... "a mess" ... "repellent" ... "fisible and often emetic"); and illuminating essays by Daniel Bird on "Happy Toy," "Himorogi" and the main feature.