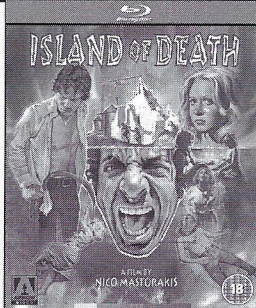


ISLAND OF DEATH

Directed by Nico Mastorakis

(1976) Arrow Films Blu-ray/DVD combo

Christopher and Celia (Bob Belling and Jane Ryall) have left their native England for an extended stay on the Greek island of Mykonos. The well-to-do couple seems to have no problem securing accommodations and making friends, and the stage is set for a picturesque travelogue adventure—except, well . . . Christopher's a little upset about Celia's insistent gift of a red diary (he believes it's bad luck); an ominous prologue has already



tipped us off that this lark is going to end in disaster for at least one of the travelers; and we soon find out that the couple (husband and wife? cousins? oh, you'll see . . .) are apparently on a puritanical crusade to violently wipe out all of the world's "perversion" as they define it. Christopher is especially hell-bent on imposing his version of morality on everyone else... what he does with goats in his spare time is his own business, of course. Yes, you read that correctly. Christopher will do whatever it takes to advance the "plot." He calls his own mother from a phone booth just to make her listen to him have sex with Celia (which tips a persistent London detective off to his whereabouts); and if the local population won't oblige him by making uninvited passes at Celia, then he'll go out of his way to force such a scenario just so he can have an excuse to play avenging angel with nails, swords, guns, ropes and any other implement of torture and murder he can obtain, through and including a chartered airplane and a steamroller (though, predictably, he doesn't find it difficult at all to obtain an invitation to a gay wedding in Greece). Meanwhile, shutterbug Celia is capturing all of this for posterity, developing the pictures and leaving them out for other people to find. She's the "reluctant" one, and we're apparently supposed to worry when bad things threaten to happen to her even though she's every bit as guilty as her partner. And all the while, the graphic sex (consensual and non-consensual, gay and straight alike) flaunts the female anatomy in its entirety but goes to near-comical lengths to steer clear male frontal nudity (as if they were trying to avoid an X rating?). In any event, *all* goat-related activity was simulated . . .

Nico "Nick" Mastorakis was thirty-five years old and had some previous television experience (such as *Candid Camera*) under his belt when he embarked on the notorious "Video Nasty" *Island of Death*. The astute aspiring filmmaker took note of the success of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and decided he'd make his own killing with a far more extreme horror movie. The result went virtually unnoticed in America and was almost impossible to see in its uncut form anywhere else for many years. But while it never really caught on as a "horror" movie (*Island* may be far "grosser" than *TCM* but is anything but actually "frightening"), the well-shot feature unquestionably opened the door to a prolific filmmaking career for the writer/director, whose over 20 features encompass such titles as *Blind Date* (not the Bruce Willis one), *The Zero Boys* and *Glitch*!

But thanks to Arrow's generous new all-region Blu-ray affair, you can now enjoy every nauseating moment of Mastorakis' opening salvo in gorgeous, colorful, sun-drenched scenic detail. And for those interested in where such extreme origins lead, the disc includes an exhaustive, four-part 150 minute documentary on Mastorakis and his films. This doc was not created specifically for this release and can be found elsewhere, but Mastorakis also returns to discuss this particular film (which he'd never want to watch on his own—he was simply trying to get attention with it) and pay a fresh visit to the authentic locations. Historian Stephen Thrower provides additional context and history in a separate interview segment, and Arrow goes on to provide a trailer, a pair of alternate opening title sequences and selections from the musical soundtrack. *Island of Death* scarcely ranks as an indispensable chapter in the saga of all things horror, but if you're still at all curious after putting it off for this long, you'll never see a better rendition than this one.

Shane M. Dallmann

THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME

Directed by William Dieterle

(1939) Warner Bros Blu-ray

As our society has, thankfully, become more enlightened in its view of disability and deformity, Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, has been excised from the roster of great movie monsters, and the numerous cinematic adaptations of his story have been reclassified as historical epics rather than horror films. Thus, it might be surprising for the uninitiated to learn that Victor Hugo's classic novel, originally titled *Notre-Dame de Paris*, is very much a horror novel—though Quasimodo is its least monstrous character. Influenced by Eugene Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* and *The Wandering Jew*—novels that combined macabre sensationalism with impassioned advocacy for social reform—Hugo's *Notre-Dame* is a remarkably cynical exercise in Gothic romanticism suffused with a suffocating air of oppression—both celestial and Divine.

In brief, *Notre-Dame* is the story of a naive and beautiful young gypsy girl, Esmeralda, caught in a tug-of-war between two men who seek to sexually defile her. The first, Phoebus, Captain of the King's Guard and the object of her childish adoration, is a vapid and misogynistic womanizer who sees her as nothing more than the latest in a series of sexual conquests. The second, Claude Frollo, is the monstrously malignant Archdeacon of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, who, thwarted in his attempt to master the occult art of alchemy, becomes obsessed with lust for the young girl on whom he projects his unattainable ideals. The plot of the novel is relatively simple. Raised by Frollo since his abandonment as an infant, Quasimodo, the deaf and deformed bell-ringer of Notre Dame has spent his life isolated within the great cathedral, hiding from the derision of the citizens who both fear and despise him. After being mockingly "honored" by the townspeople for his ugliness during a raucous festival, Quasimodo's devotion to his foster father leads him to serve as an unwitting accomplice in the priest's attempted abduction of Esmeralda, the gypsy dancer he had previously denounced as a witch. Captured by Phoebus' guards and abandoned by his protector, the hunchback is flogged and humiliated in front of a jeering crowd that ignores his simple plea for water. When the gypsy girl whom he had formerly accosted shows him compassion, Quasimodo's soul is flooded with a new awareness of both his ugliness and his humanity. After she is later framed by Frollo for the attempted murder of Phoebus during an aborted rendezvous, Quasimodo saves her from hanging, whisking her away to the Cathedral and invoking the sacred law of sanctuary to shield her from the law. His triumph is short-lived, however, as the novel draws to a devastating conclusion marked by numerous betrayals.

Unlike its numerous cinematic adaptations, *Notre-Dame* is a relentlessly bleak epic featuring characters who are either scoundrels or naïve innocents operating in a world where inhuman cruelty is most often fueled by laziness or indifference rather than outright malice. Quasimodo, introduced as the one-eyed "King of Fools," forms the moral epicenter of a plotline in which most of the action is driven by myopia and stupidity. Characters constantly misunderstand one another, allies unintentionally work at cross-purposes, enemies unwittingly collaborate, and tragedy stems from misplaced devotion. The nobles and the peasants, the religious and the secular, the learned and the ignorant, are all base creatures, pathetically groping through the miasma of Paris beneath the soaring Gothic architecture meant to evoke the ideals to which humanity occasionally aspires, but rarely sustains. Within this tragic milieu, even appeals to God are less than worthless, revealing Him to be nothing more than a callous trickster, cruelly offering a glimpse of salvation before snatching it away. It is a mistake, however, to believe that the novel's catalogue of atrocities are intended to form a case for nihilistic despair. Rather, they are designed to shatter the illusion held by the comfortable and privileged that the suffering of the wretched has somehow been earned, and is thus reflective of a Divinely-ordered universe that fairly dispenses both reward and punishment. Esmeralda and Quasimodo are true innocents, and their misfortune is dictated not by Divine justice, but by the caprice of that most impersonal and unyielding of forces—blind fate.

It is not surprising that the first cinematic adaptation of the novel, the celebrated Universal silent *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) starring Lon Chaney as Quasimodo, drastically softens the tone of Hugo's novel. In the first place, Claude Frollo is here introduced as "saintly," while the villain of the film is revealed to be his brother Jehan, who in the novel is simply a dissolute student who cajoles his brother for money to spend on whores and wine. Jehan's motives are noticeably less complex than his counterpart in the novel, as the screenplay portrays him as acting purely from sexual lust. Far more perverse is the recasting of Phoebus as a dashing hero and devoted lover, a revision on par with an adaptation of *Lolita* depicting Clare Quilty as a valiant genius who triumphantly rescues his beloved from the clutches of the Satanic Humbert Humbert. Perley Poore Sheehan's screenplay borrows heavily from Hugo's magnum opus *Les Misérables*, reenvisioning the narrative in terms of a class struggle between the abusive aristocracy and the impoverished commoners who slowly begin to bridle under their oppressive rein. Esmeralda—here a confident voice for social justice—and Phoebus ultimately bridge their social divide through a *Romeo and Juliet*-style romance, and Quasimodo is granted a hero's death.

RKO's brilliant 1939 *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, with Charles Laughton essaying the title role, is partially an adaptation of Hugo's novel, and partially a remake of the 1923 adaptation. In a marked departure from both Hugo's novel and the Chaney film, Sonya Levian's screenplay is an unabashedly earnest celebration of culture, progress, and modernity in opposition to the evils of superstition, ignorance, and bigotry. The film is a veritable catalogue of modern progressive political ideals, tacking such still-current issues as immigration reform, the benefits of education, the virtues of a free press, and the triumph of intellect over brute force. Unlike either the detached bean counter of Hugo's novel or the cruel despot of the great Chaney adaptation, King Luis XI (Harry Davenport) is here depicted as an advocate of

