

# "A LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE SUPERNATURAL" CURTIS HARRINGTON'S *RUBY* TURNS 40

## ARTICLE BY NATHANIEL BELL

In the middle of the night, on a fogbound road, the twin headlights of a vintage automobile appear in the distance. A title reads: "Florida 1935." Languorous theme music washes over the soundtrack, and a tuxedoed man (Sal Vecchio) emerges from the vehicle, followed by a woman (Piper Laurie) in a fur coat. After pouring champagne, he begins to untie a docked boat at the edge of a lake. The corners of the screen are blurred, throwing a dreamy sheen over the proceedings. But the handheld camerawork creates an unstable, disorienting effect that suggests looming danger. Before the scene is 90 seconds old, another car pulls up to the embankment. Several well-dressed men get out, and, in the style of a classic gangland rubout, blow the first man away. The woman drops to the ground, clutching her pregnant belly. A voice on the soundtrack begins: "That was the night Ruby's baby was born . . ."

And so begins *Ruby*, a bizarre 1977 horror psychodrama, at once derivative and original, ludicrous and compelling. Independently produced, it proved to be the most lucrative film for its director, the late Curtis Harrington—an ironic twist, given that Harrington considered it something of a *film maudit*. He even went so far as to remove his name from the picture when it was recut for network television. Later, he dubbed the production "the most nightmarish experience of my entire career." In a three-decade industry stint full of creative tussles, this is an extravagant insult. To fully understand what happened, one must start at the beginning—indeed, *before* the beginning, when the teenage Harrington first picked up the camera.

Curtis Harrington began his career making poetic films after the fashion of Jean Cocteau and Maya Deren. In 1947, at the age of twenty, he shot *Fragment of Seeking*, one of the key contributions to the emerging West Coast avant-garde. His friend and one-time business partner, Kenneth Anger, responded the same year with *Fireworks*, which was subsequently paired with Harrington's at several private screenings and retrospectives. Unlike Anger, however, Harrington had set his sights on a career in Hollywood, and eventually abandoned the underground circuit to work as an assistant to prolific producer Jerry Wald (*Sons and Lovers*, *Peyton Place*). He took a short sabbatical to shoot his privately funded debut feature, *Night Tide*, which has garnered a sizable cult following since its premiere at the Venice Film Festival in 1961.

By the time *Ruby* went into production, Harrington had accumulated several notable credits, including *Queen of Blood*, *Games* (for Universal), *What's the Matter with Helen?* (United Artists), *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (AIP), and *The Killing Kind*—each one a stylish exercise in psychological suspense. Unbeknownst to him at the time, his professional career had already peaked, and *Ruby* would prove to be his second-to-last theatrical feature. Coming on the heels of *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Abby* (1974), the film borrows fashionably from those exercises in supernatural possession while taking a more stylistically subdued approach to the story's more sensational aspects.

The project was initially developed as *Blood Ruby*. Harrington's longtime creative partner, George Edwards, brought him the script (which Edwards co-wrote with Barry Schneider) on behalf of Steve

thrillers. He even proposed a possible tag line: "First . . . *The Exorcist*. Then . . . *The Omen*. Now . . . *The Apparition*." His suggestion was ignored. It was no surprise, then, that Krantz's memos to Harrington and Edwards fell on unsympathetic ears. One such letter reads:

Some of the night material is dark and unreadable . . . There is an absence of close-ups that bothers me, to punch up the action . . . It's my feeling that the only way the drama works for us and the horror works for us as well, is that the horror has to be punched up with build up of POV shots, close-ups of faces, etc. Please bear this in mind with the material you're doing in the mansion.

The creative tug-of-war continued. During a *New York Times* interview, Laurie referred to the project, still in production, as *The Apparition*. Krantz guessed Harrington had planted the idea. He wrote a letter to Harrington chiding him: "You have no right to do this. It is wasteful and totally out of keeping with your role on the picture."

Finally, in a move that resulted in arbitration, Krantz hired Stephanie Rothman (*The Velvet Vampire*) to reshoot the last scene. When Harrington found out, he considered it a breach of contract and complained to the Directors Guild of America. The DGA sent Krantz a letter explaining how Harrington had the right under contract to screen and discuss the latest version of his film as well as oversee the dubbing, sound, and music selections. Krantz seemed hurt by what he felt was a premature reaction. Harrington, for his part, felt he had been treated disrespectfully and dishonestly. He sent a mailgram asserting that he would continue in a professional manner even if Krantz did not, "to save the looping and dubbing from a fate less ignoble than the editing."

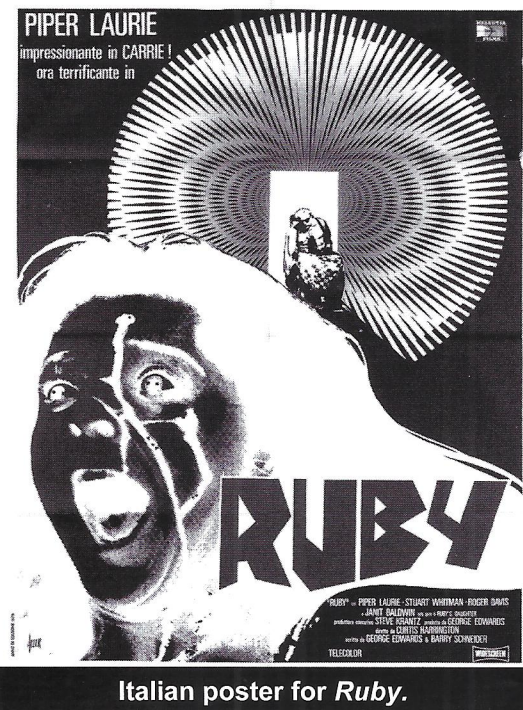
Shortly after production wrapped, Harrington sent another dispatch explaining how he was unhappy about the visual quality of the new ending shot without his participation, and claiming that Laurie was disturbed at the use of a double for the sequence. He threatened legal action. Krantz responded to Harrington, accusing him of adopting a "hurt and conciliatory attitude as a tactic to cover a multitude of unprofessional and unethical pursuits." And so the eternal dance between art and commerce—between the creatives and the moneymen—continued until *Ruby* opened on screens across the U.S. in the summer of 1977.

Dimension was happy to exploit Laurie's success with *Carrie* with the following tag line: "She was frightening in *Carrie*. She is terrifying as *Ruby*. Piper Laurie is . . . RUBY." They rolled it out to several dozen theaters and drive-ins in L.A., pairing it with *The Redeemer* on double bills. It went on to gross over \$16 million. In addition to his modest \$15,000 salary, Harrington received a small percentage of the gross, a deal that served him well when the film eventually reached foreign markets throughout Europe, the Far East, and South Africa.

If all of the fussing between Krantz and Harrington seems like so much handwringing for what is essentially a cheap horror knockoff, it proves that its director undertook each assignment with the seriousness and dedication of an artist. Never comfortable with hack work, even when it paid the mortgage on his Hollywood home, the underappreciated Harrington continually strove for effects that would have pleased his former mentor and spiritual predecessor, Josef von Sternberg.

Indeed, if one looks closely at *Ruby*, there are traces of a far more interesting picture—one more daring and dreamlike—struggling to emerge. After the pre-credits sequence, the film jumps forward 16 years, situating us in 1951. The locale is now a backwoods drive-in movie theater run by Ruby Claire, the murdered gangster's former moll, and operated by members of the old gang. The theater is advertising *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*, a full seven years ahead of its actual release date.

An evil presence begins to manifest itself around the place. The projectionist (Edward Donno) is strangled by a reel of film. Could Nicky, the slaughtered mobster, be responsible? Back in her decaying pile of a house adjacent to the theater, Ruby, wearing the first of many red gowns, discusses the incident with Vince (Stuart Whitman), her right-hand man. Right away, we notice the faded opulence of her quarters; the rooms have some of the perfumed density of a 1930s melodrama. She, like all of Harrington's fragile female protagonists, is a woman trapped by her past, an aging Baby Jane ensnared in a web of her own delusions. We are introduced to the cabana-like space that she, an ex-crooner and would-be movie star, keeps as a shrine to herself. For these scenes, Harrington filmed in the old Hollywood Studio Club, a former women's dormitory that once housed a long list of emerging industry talent: Marilyn Monroe, Kim Novak, Maureen O'Sullivan, and even Ayn Rand.



Italian poster for *Ruby*.

Krantz, who cooked up the original story and served as executive producer. Krantz, the man chiefly responsible for introducing *Fritz the Cat* (1972) to the moviegoing public, had just scored a hit with the nostalgic high school comedy *Cooley High* (1975). The film's biggest asset was Piper Laurie, who'd signed on to the project moments before Brian De Palma's *Carrie* put her back in the spotlight after a long absence from the screen. Dimension Pictures (*Kingdom of the Spiders*) agreed to distribute, and the production launched in the fall of 1976.

Harrington's collaboration with Krantz was contentious from the very first day. Saddled with a cameraman he didn't like, the frustrated auteur felt continually rebuffed by a producer who, in his view, overreached on artistic decisions. From Krantz's perspective, Harrington persistently sought to surpass his role as director. For instance, Harrington had lobbied to name the film as *The Apparition*, in the style of other very recent diabolical



While Ruby gets sloshed, another member of the gang (Paul Kent) is knocked around by an invisible force after a sexual encounter with the town floozy (Crystin Sinclair). A strong gust of wind impales him on a tree. A game of supernatural "Ten Little Indians" begins to develop. Two more important characters enter the frame: Ruby's blind, wheelchair bound husband Jake (Fred Kohler) and Leslie (Janit Baldwin), her mute, doe-eyed daughter, whose birth was induced by Nicky's violent shooting death. When it came to casting, Harrington could be very particular. For the role of Jake, Harrington had envisioned Jack La Rue, the actor responsible for bringing to life William Faulkner's impotent gangster from the pre-code classic *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933). This wish never came to pass.

Dreaming of the fateful night that rerouted the course of her life, Ruby has a vision of her long-dead lover, his bullet-ridden face dripping blood, floating toward her bed. Vince hypothesizes that he might be coming back to claim Leslie. Ruby responds: "It's me, damn you! He wants me!"

Enter Dr. Keller (Roger Davis), a parapsychologist who helped parole Vince. Keller immediately senses the bad vibrations swirling around the premises, and launches an unofficial investigation. Meanwhile, another ex-gangster (Len Lesser) is found dead, stuffed into the soda fountain. This sets up the film's corniest joke: a plump theater patron withdrawing what she thinks is a cherry cola and getting a swig of blood instead.

Slowly descending into a booze-fueled foofaraw, Ruby stumbles into the abandoned theater parking lot for one of the film's niftiest set pieces. Crying out to her dead lover for absolution, she hears Nicky's voice calling her name through the drive-in speakers. The sound gets louder and louder, filling the stadium. A car approaches in the distance, and Ruby discerns Nicky's pale, bloodied corpse in the driver's seat. It suddenly disappears. An agonized scream diverts her attention. It's another of the gang (Jack Perkins), impaled like a butterfly in the middle of the silver screen.

The following night, Ruby hears a voice emanating from the attic. She ascends the stairs to find Leslie, now possessed by Nicky's spirit. Her lascivious gaze and lewd speech ("Baby, how I want you") delivered in Nicky's voice add up to the film's biggest shock, to which Harrington adds a dash of thunder and lightning. Nicky, through Leslie, accuses Ruby of double-crossing him, and pounces on her. A conveniently placed mallet temporarily incapacitates the devil. Keller, now acting as amateur exorcist, attempts to purge the spirit from the catatonic Leslie's body. In a moment crystallized in the film's poster art, the traumatized teen lets loose a scream and her face is momentarily transfigured, in a sort of secular stigmata, into that of her father's bullet-marred face.

After this climactic episode, things appear to return to normal; that is, until Jake comes crashing in, a knife lodged in his chest. His wheelchair, now moving on its own, does a few 360-degree spins before dumping the corpse onto the floor, revealing two eyeless sockets. Upstairs, Leslie is busy doing a few light, Linda Blair-style gymnastics. "Vince is next, Keller!"

At the drive-in, Vince is stalked by an invisible energy, which buffets his car as he attempts to escape. In a moment that may have inspired Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, Nicky's face appears to possess the movie screen itself. But where is Ruby? She's down by the lake in her sexiest red dress, moving toward the scene of the murder as if in a trance. Nicky's ghost materializes out of the fog, beckoning to her. They disappear into the mist, two lovers reunited as in a gothic romance. However, in a final twist, Nicky's skeleton drags Ruby kicking and screaming into the icy water. His vengeance is now complete. Harrington had envisioned a more poetic ending inspired by his literary hero, Edgar Allan Poe, in which the female protagonist goes willingly to her watery grave. Apparently, this wasn't thrilling enough to please Krantz, and so the scene was reshot.

*Ruby* opened to generally negative reviews. *Variety* quipped: "In the cookbook school of filmmaking *Ruby* is strictly leftovers." Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times*, usually supportive of Harrington's work, called it "ludicrous and incoherent." The British journal *Films and Filming* identified a lack of passion in Harrington's direction. *BoxOffice* was more charitable, acknowledging that it was "well made" and favorably cited Harrington's previous credits.

But the *Ruby* saga didn't end with its initial theatrical run. When the film was recut for its network debut, Krantz hired another writer and director (Rothman again, so the legend goes) and shot new scenes without Harrington's participation, adding an entire subplot involving a local sheriff who suspects his wife of cheating. Harrington, freshly outraged, went to the DGA demanding that his name be deleted from the product. Should you ever come across an old *Ruby* VHS from United Home Video, you'll see the moniker Alan Smithee, the standard industry pseudonym for directors who wish to disown a project.

In 1980, Krantz filed suit against Dimension to recover \$125,000 awarded to him in a settlement by the American Arbitration Association involving the release of *Ruby*, which had been sub-distributed to U.S. and Canadian TV. Due to this and other lawsuits, Dimension filed for bankruptcy in February 1981. As a profit participant, Harrington reaped almost twice his initial salary in royalties. It was surely the only comfort he got from the whole experience.



Piper Laurie plays Ruby Claire in director Curtis Harrington's thriller, *Ruby* (1977).

Watching *Ruby* today, one gets the impression that it's a little too tame and tasteful to be a worthy addition to the long list of possession melodramas of the '70s. Unlike *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*—to name two close coordinates—*Ruby* is notable for its complete absence of Christian iconography. Harrington, a confirmed religious skeptic, was clearly more interested in psychology than religion. The evocative meta-filmic resonances, however, are worth noting. One can imagine moviegoers viewing the film in one of the many drive-ins where it played, freaking out at the spectacle of characters trapped in their cars. In this regard, Peter Bogdanovich's *Targets* is a salient comparison. Fascinatingly, Nicky's ghost demonstrates an unusual interest in motion picture exhibition technology as a vehicle for revenge. Kenneth Anger once joked that film itself was evil; Harrington gives that idea flesh. What *Ruby* lacks in coherence, it pays back in mood, atmosphere, and a grim portrait of an aging diva locked in a purgatory of her own making. Scenes of Laurie sitting at her vanity, staring into the mirror, or dancing to her own song on the record player, recall a dreamier chapter of Hollywood history—one that Harrington, spiritually at least, never left.

Now, VCI Entertainment is releasing *Ruby* on Blu-ray in time for its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. David Del Valle and I have contributed an audio commentary track commemorating the film and its frustrated *auteur*. Included among the bonus features are a separate commentary by Harrington and Laurie carried over from VCI's original 2001 release, as well as an hour-long segment in which Del Valle interviews Harrington about his checkered career. But it's the film itself, rendered in high definition, that should attract the most attention.

"Christened in blood. Raised in sin. She's sweet sixteen. Let the party begin!"

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