

“THE WICKER TREE” (Fantasia Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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The first and most important thing to keep in mind when sitting down to watch Robin Hardy’s THE WICKER TREE is that it’s not a direct sequel to Hardy’s horror masterpiece THE WICKER MAN—not in story and certainly not in spirit. Better to think of TREE as the EVIL DEAD II to MAN’s EVIL DEAD—a sort of semi-remake that explicitly brings out the comedic elements that lay beneath the original’s surface.

As dramatic, tragic and horrific as THE WICKER MAN is, there’s also a latent sense of amusement as the devout Sergeant Howie is confronted with the hedonism of the pagans of Summerisle. Adapting his own novel COWBOYS FOR CHRIST (a much more appropriate and less misleading title), Hardy amps up the humorous contrast by establishing as his heroine Beth Boothby (Britannia Nicol), a golden-blond young singer who started out as a Britney Spears-esque pop tart (her big hit, for which we see a piece of the video, was “Trailer Trash Slut”), became a wholesome country crooner and, as the film opens, has decided to devote two years of her life to spreading God’s word and love. The improbable first stop for Beth and her fiancé Steve (Henry Garrett), a walking Texan cliché in a cowboy hat, is the village of Tressock on the Scottish-English border, where they’ve been told the locals are in serious need of conversion.



Anyone familiar enough with THE WICKER MAN to want to see this movie will immediately know that Beth and Steve’s spirituality will be no match for the local pagan practices, and part of the fun of THE WICKER TREE lies in the way Hardy plays on those expectations and teases us about what’s to come. Once again, this village is undergoing a blight requiring a corrective ritual, though this time it’s not the crops that are failing but the fertility of the local women. This could very well have something to do with the fact that Tressock is located near a nuclear power plant—which, like the town itself, is run by Sir Lachlan Morrison (Graham McTavish)—but Morrison has specific plans unconnected with the station to remedy the situation, in which Beth and Steve are fated to be unwilling participants.

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Hardy establishes a playful tone from the start of *THE WICKER TREE*, one that encompasses everything from the funny use of subtitles during a sex scene to a stray *SIMPSONS* joke based on Morrison’s day job. The characters are broad, but the performances are in tune with the farcical nature of the material, led by Nicol, who’s so earnest in expressing Beth’s wide-eyed purity that one could almost suspect she thinks she’s in a serious horror-thriller (which, if such were the case, would just play into the joke). That guilelessness is nicely counterpointed by the droll sense of superiority with which McTavish plays Morrison, who sometimes barely conceals his disdain for his pious new visitors. (When he tells Steve a whopper and Steve says, “You’re kidding!”, Morrison’s reply is, “I probably am, but don’t take offense.”)

There’s corrupted innocence, bare boobs and ominous foreshadowing (like the presence of a raven, through whose eyes a few scenes are viewed) throughout *THE WICKER TREE*, though the overall tone is more benign than suspenseful. The result is that although there’s a fun sense of giggly-nervous anticipation as Beth and Steve are drawn closer to their fates, *THE WICKER TREE*’s pleasures lie largely on the surface. Hardy has points to make about how religion is practiced and viewed in both American and Britain, yet he never takes the leap into full-blown satire, preferring to foreground the more obvious culture clash between his pair of proselytizers and the heathen community they’ve stumbled onto. That becomes most problematic as the story reaches its inevitable climax, for which we’ve been prepared with a number of horrible suggestions but which fizzles out in the execution.

There are moments—including key ones—in *THE WICKER TREE* that play as if Hardy restrained himself from paying off on the sinister implications he has set up, for fear of upsetting the lighthearted tone of the overall film. The result is that, even as a black comedy, *WICKER TREE* can’t match the impact of its predecessor. Still, for those fans of *WICKER MAN* who can open their minds to viewing, as Monty Python used to put it, something completely different, the new movie can be appreciated as an entertaining variation on its themes.

