

"NIGHTBREED" and "LORD OF ILLUSIONS" might deserve a re-think

Written by Michael Mitchell

Wednesday, 13 June 2012 12:29



HELLRAISER. Not many need to be told that Clive Barker's directorial debut was an instant sensation when it burst onto the cinematic landscape in 1987, spawning a character that would become an icon, eight sequels, and a capital-C career. Like HALLOWEEN, A NIGHTMARE ON ELM ST and other classics in the horror pantheon, the title alone conveys it all. But this doesn't seem to be the case with his follow-up, 1990's NIGHTBREED, nor 1995's LORD OF ILLUSIONS. For while Barker's seen varying degrees of filmic success post-HELLRAISER as a producer (GODS AND MONSTERS, most notably), these two later works, which he also both wrote and directed, never seemed to fully capitalize on the great promise shown in his auspicious arrival.

This failure, of sorts, to have reached a wider audience when it was first released has been attributed to many factors. However, with a petition circulating to have the director's cut of NIGHTBREED (currently screening) make its way to DVD, and along with it the hopes of a possible rejuvenation of the movie's fortunes, I figured this might be a good time to take a look at an angle that I've yet to see explored: Which is, that the movies "failed" simply because they're probably not really movies, per se. If anything, they're probably more akin to filmed stage plays. And that is what accounts for the lack of an audience more than anything.

Owing to his prodigious and prolific output, it's easy to forget that Clive Barker started out as an astonishingly adept—when he was still only 28 years old The Kensington Post hailed him as “a master of his craft”—and relatively successful playwright. One work, THE HISTORY OF THE DEVIL (1980), which still gets remounted even today, was performed well over 200 times around the U.K. and Europe when it was first written.

Taken as filmed stage plays, NIGHTBREED and LORD OF ILLUSIONS are in fact, practically note perfect. Taken as movies however, there may have been a few minor miscues in the dialogue and directing that led to their suffering such lukewarm reviews, as well as failing to reach a wider audience. So they might not speak to a film-going audience as much as they do

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to a theatre-going audience attending a film, but that's solely because it looks like Barker may have carried a bit of a playwright's, and lot of a stage director's, sensibilities with him into these tales—and I might not be alone in my supposition. Douglas E. Winter, in his biography of Barker (THE DARK FANTASTIC), writes:

“The world of LORD OF ILLUSIONS is, indeed, the world of the stage: its three male leads inhabit stylized, mythic landscapes that are mirrors of their inner selves.”

Take the opening of NIGHTBREED, where a panoply of the beast-human nightbreed cavort through long grass in the moonlight. It's vivid, it's dramatic, it's well filmed, but it's just a little... off.

What it is, in effect, is probably a shade too theatrical for a modern moviegoer's taste. What are they doing? Why are they doing it? Where's the smoke coming from? The scene might generate far, far too many questions in a movie.

Now, imagine it happening with live actors on stage in front of you á la Broadway's Lion King. It infuses the scene with a whole new resonance. You can almost picture the painted backdrop, the dry ice creating smoke, etc. Not only does it now work, it soars. Everything about the opening works so long as it's happening on a stage. But on film, it might not quite hit the mark, as, again, the overall tone could be off for a movie.

It's exactly the same case with the opening scene of LORD OF ILLUSIONS, where the protagonist (Swann) is racing across the desert to the villain's (Nix) encampment. On stage, a group of people in a “car” that's shaking and rocking and uncoiling all this energy tells us where they've been and what they've gone through to get there. It gives us all the back-story we require. Whereas in a movie, we might not really need it, as tension comes from restraint as much as anything. In a play, frenzy is all we have to wind us up. But why would they announce their arrival so readily? How can they sneak up on anyone thundering and yelling like that? And since we're never really told why they have to race there anyway (Did they leave late? Get caught in traffic?), a moviegoer, I believe, can be forgiven for only thinking, “Why didn't they just show up last night, under the cover of darkness?”

Another example in LORD OF ILLUSIONS is when the resurrected Nix buries his acolytes in

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the desert soil via a torrential downpour. It's loud, it's engrossing, it's Sturm und Drang, but is it wholly effective in a movie? It'll definitely work on stage. To see people sinking into the sand and screaming their lungs out for their very lives? Egads, it'd suck us right into the scene with them. But is it too loud for film? That is, is it the overall tone, especially when the guy flips Nix the bird and screeches? Perfect on a stage, but perhaps a movie calls for a close up of the hand protruding from the ground with a rigor mortis-like quiet stiffening of it into something akin to the gesture?

{youtube}k8a1wofBOX4{/youtube}

And this is the case for both movies, scene after scene after scene. Yelling where we might respond to quiet, light where we might respond to dark. As a master of the craft of writing, Barker knows that the language of a play is a bit different from that in a film (as theatre is about behaviour, while cinema is about action). Since everything in a story cannot be brought onto a stage, a lot of information needs to be given through dialogue, so the word is paramount. Dialogue, or the absence of it, is what drives a play. Not so with a movie. In movies, image is everything.

For instance, in the modern masterpiece WAITING FOR GODOT we get:

ESTRAGON: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

VLADIMIR: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.

VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear.

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VLADIMIR: *We have our reasons.*

ESTRAGON: *All the dead voices.*

VLADIMIR: *They make a noise like wings.*

ESTRAGON: *Like leaves*

VLADIMIR: *Like sand.*

ESTRAGON: *Like leaves.*

(Silence.)

VLADIMIR: *They all speak at once.*

ESTRAGON: *Each one to itself.*

(Silence.)

VLADIMIR: *Rather they whisper.*

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ESTRAGON: They rustle.

VLADIMIR: They murmur.

ESTRAGON: They rustle.

A movie, much less a genre movie, could never get away with dialogue like that. Notice, as well, the two silences, which are very important. They're as important as the dialogue. On stage, silence says something. Now take this exchange from LORD OF ILLUSIONS where the two main characters are driving in L.A. The direction is cinematic in this scene, but the dialogue/action is pure theatre:

SWANN: I like playing with people's heads.

HARRY: Is that the best you can do?

SWANN: It's important to distract them from their banality for a few minutes. Doesn't mean much in the end, they're all going to die.

(He takes a swig from a bottle of wine.)

HARRY: But you're not?

SWANN: Well, I was going to discover the secrets of the universe. That's why I liked Nix, he promised me all these explanations.

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HARRY: But he didn't have them . . .

SWANN: He had something. Showed me how to bend the rules. A little levitation, a few fireworks.

HARRY: Is that all?

SWANN: No. At the end, when we had him cornered, he got into my head, showed me what we really look like when the veneer's gone: jelly. Shit.

HARRY: And you believed him?

SWANN: I saw it with my own fucking eyes. See, that's his best trick. No illusions, just the truth. Are you ready for that?

(Harry grabs the bottle, takes a swig, hands it back to Swann.)

SWANN: Thought not.

The scene is about Nix's power and Harry's duty to, once again, rectify another supernatural snafu, but does it fully resonate on film? Harry takes the swig, but between the scenery going by (Is that Downtown L.A.?), and the drinking while driving, and all the other things cramming for our attention, the moment gets lost. In fact, the bottle might even be just a hair too distracting on film. Yet the bottle is the crux of the scene.

Conversely, the scene, as written, will work perfectly on stage because on stage everything would be static aside from Harry's grabbing of the bottle. Like the two calls for "silence" in the Godot excerpt, it now obviously carries all the weight.

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And while some scenes in the two movies sound like a play and others act like a play, some are somewhere in between. In NIGHTBREED when Boone releases the Berserkers, it's a big scene. The entire compound the Nightbreed calls home is being attacked by the local police force, an evil psychiatrist is hacking away at people, it's massive in scope. Watching it, imagining what it would look like on a stage, you realize that finances and logistics would prevent you from showing almost any of the action. It'd be referred to, alluded to. It'd most likely happen offstage. For the actual release of the Berserkers from their holding pen, you could probably only put a spotlight on Boone and show him reacting to them (and play the sounds of their actions).

On film, the scene works well enough until Boone screams "Go get 'em, boys!" It's a phrase that seems deliberate. On the surface, it harkens back to 1950s Americana. It evokes patriotism, apple pie, the good ole American Way. What I think Barker's doing is using it, inverting it, to underscore the full insanity of what's happening: that the craziest of the crazies need to be pulled out to defend against the supposed order of law. On stage, the line would have the resonance and relevance it deserves, but on screen it appears to miss the mark. Far better, maybe, to just pan the camera over the motto "To Serve and Protect" on a police car door? A line on stage has tremendous cultural baggage to it. It has a connection, an awareness to all that's going on around it. It's recited live by a person commenting today right in front of you. It's about now. A line on film only carries film culture baggage because film, by nature, is a medium frozen in time. It can only refer to other films. It can only be about what has already happened. The line gets lost because all Boone is doing, is screaming it into a veritable vacuum.

Tone. That's all it comes down to.

So I entreat you to watch both movies again, but with the mindset that you're watching a play. Not only will it add another level to the viewing, but maybe, you'll end up seeing NIGHTBREED and LORD OF ILLUSIONS as two of the best stage plays you've ever seen in your life.