

Fango Flashback: "TWO ON A GUILLOTINE" (1965)

Written by Clay McLeod Chapman
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You can't keep a psychotic magician down, even in death. In William Conrad's 1965 *TWO ON A GUILLOTINE*, the recently departed Great Duke Duquesne (Cesar Romero), "The World's Greatest Illusionist," is about to perform an encore direct from the afterlife. In his will, he has left his estranged daughter Cassie (Connie Stevens) his entire fortune—on one condition: Stay for seven straight nights in his palatial, possibly haunted, mansion... alone.

It's been twenty years since the Duquesne family was last together, abruptly torn apart onstage with the decapitation of Cassie's mother (Stevens, once again) during the Duke's brand new "Marie Antoinette trick." Daddy Duquesne is bent on having his cake and eating it too, however. His malevolent spirit has a few tricks up his sleeve. Phantasmal rabbits hop about the house. Even mom's said head goes a-tumbling down the mansion steps, tussled blond locks and all, rendering our poor Cassie an unraveled, nervous wreck.

Has The Great Duquesne come back from the dead for his grand finale? Or are the money-grubbing vultures circling around Cassie, such as *THE LOVE BUG*'s very own Dean Jones, toying with her sanity for a stake in her pending fortune?

The William Castle playbook is dusted off and put to good work here, particularly his gimmick-ridden tingler *HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL* (1959) and its hovering rubber skeletons. *GUILLOTINE* even takes a page from Robert Wise's classic *THE HAUNTING*, released two years prior, effectively using the creaks and groans of an old mansion to fray Cassie's—and the viewer's—nerves.



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Several simple images continue to resonate. When we first lay eyes on darling infant Cassie, she's covered in blood. Stage blood, we eventually learn—but the stark image of a little girl's face, clearly an innocent non-actress, dripping red (or black, as the case may be), still lingers in this reviewer's mind. By then, the viewer is already lost in a world of illusions. What is real and what is mere sleight of hand won't fully come to light until GUILLOTINE's chilling climax. Rest assured, heads will roll.

GUILLOTINE has its own echoes in such future films as WIZARD OF GORE (1970) and LORD OF ILLUSIONS (1995), reserving its justly-deserved position as a cinematic ancestor to mad magicians everywhere. A tip of the top hat goes to Romero, who gives it his all as the maddened Duquesne. How his eyes didn't pop out from their sockets during production is the real mystery here. Most haunting of all, however, may be watching Connie Stevens wandering through the empty corridors of the family mansion as her own pre-recorded voice echoes throughout its halls. Much like THE HAUNTING that came before it, it is when GUILLOTINE leans on its superb sound design that this film really cuts deep.

TWO ON A GUILLOTINE is now available from the Warner Archive