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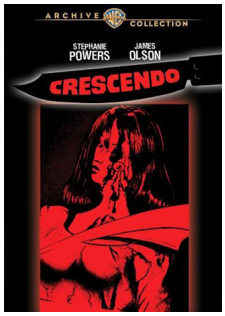
When I was recently presented with a stack of titles for Flashback pieces, I gravitated toward one called CRESCENDO. The front cover features a woman with her eye gouged out. Oh, and it’s a Hammer film! I grabbed this one fast and settled in for a night of Hammer-style mayhem and hyper-bright-red bloody carnage.

I soon discovered that CRESCENDO is not a gory movie. There’s no eyeball-gouging, or even paper cuts for that matter. But it did turn out to be a nice, moody picture that I’m glad I was exposed to. Originally released in 1970, CRESCENDO was rumored to have been slated for Michael Reeves to direct—but after the controversy that ensued from Reeves’ racy WITCHFINDER GENERAL, he was pulled from the project and veteran BBC director Alan Gibson was brought on.



CRESCENDO stars Stefanie Powers (misspelled “Stephanie” on that cover), whom horror fans will recognize from DIE! DIE! MY DARLING!, as Susan, a young graduate student studying music composers. She has come to stay at the isolated manor home of the late composer Henry Ryman, who’s survived by his eclectic wife and depressed, drug-addicted son. Susan begins to discover strange things about the house and an even stranger household staff. Music seems to play from empty rooms. Broken mannequins are stashed around the area. The French maid seems to be into some weird kinky sex with the heroin-addict son. Plus, the son (played by James Olson) keeps pointing out just how much Susan looks like his deceased long-lost love. Somehow, amidst all this surrealism, Susan falls for the son, and they begin a torrid, emotional relationship. But just as the two are getting cozy, bodies start turning up and things keep getting weirder until the plot literally crescendos in the final 15 minutes with a rather surprising twist.

CRESCENDO is by no means scary, but it does have some thrilling moments. Additionally, the son keeps having these heroin-induced dreams which are pretty trippy, and give some great foreshadowing of the final reveal. As in all Hammer flicks, the filmmaking is really quite breathtaking. Vivid colors, landscapes, architecture and faces are all treated with an artist’s care as they are captured on film.

Ultimately, CRESCENDO is a love story with some decent thrills and twists to it. Hammer is mostly known for its Gothic recreations of classic monsters, but it did have a quieter-thrill side with pictures released during the ’60s. These films, like MANIAC, NIGHTMARE, and THE NANNY, were often called “mini-Hitchcocks,” as they were scripted and filmed in the same vein and often in black and white; most of them were written by Jimmy Sangster, who penned CRESCENDO. The film also contains some minimal nudity, but according to a number of Internet chat sites, there was originally quite a bit more that has been cut by various censors over the years.

I was disappointed to find no bonus features on Warner Archives’ DVD, as I was really interested to learn about the filming. A brilliant ride of unbridled fear? No. A nice romantic thriller with some decent twists that is well-filmed? CRESCENDO is your flick! It’s available through the Warner Archive site here .