

“THE ART OF HAMMER” (Book Review)

Written by Chris Alexander

Friday, 26 November 2010 09:57



When it comes to marketing horror movies, the world has changed for the worse. Today, a film sinks or swims based on its on-line presence or how “viral” it becomes. Shame that—because studios, and in turn filmmakers and audiences, seems to be oblivious about just how effective and powerful a damn good movie poster can be. Today it seems all people want—or at least all people get—is nameless, faceless, generic, namby-pamby Photoshop shrugs and designer dropout fodder.



But trust us, there was a time when crafting a movie poster or a lobby card was an art form unto itself—the major tool used to hook an audience into parting with their coins and putting their asses into seats and their eyes before a screen. Nowhere was this art more profound than in horror, as many of the come-ons simply evolved from the lurid, garish painted posters from the depths of the darkest carnivals.

Case in point: Hammer horror. The celebrated UK studio that reigned supreme through the genre’s golden age from the late ’50s through the mid-’70s—spitting out a cavalcade of dead things, sexuality and blood, blood, blood—never dicked around when it came to shucking their wares, and neither did any of the international distributors who placed their bold pictures in theaters. Now, thanks to Hammer scholar Marcus Hearn (author of *THE HAMMER STORY* and co-author of *HAMMER GLAMOUR*), we have Titan Books’ mind-blowing coffee-table tome *THE ART OF HAMMER*, a jumbo-sized collection of some—if not all—of the studio’s finest marketing art, each painted image suitable for framing.

Going decade by decade, we start with the early days in the 1950’s with noir titles like *THE DARK LIGHT* and *FOUR SIDED TRIANGLE* (“She lived two amazing lives under his evil spell!”) and *BLACKOUT* (“Lost...in a sinister network of evil!”) through the landmark pictures *THE CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN* (“No one who saw it lived to describe it!”), *ENEMY FROM*

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SPACE (“...strikes terror across the earth!”) and, of course, HORROR OF DRACULA (“The terrifying lover who died...yet lived!”).



As the studio found success by mixing sex and death to lucrative effect, and as the '60s evolved into a much more permissive decade, we got even more eye-filling posters, stuff like NIGHT CREATURES (“Their Oath was TERROR! Their cry, BLOOD! Their goal, DEATH!”), mini-Hitchcocks like PARANOIAC (“When it comes to love or murder there is no one as dangerous as the Paranoiac!”) and THE EVIL OF FRANKENSTEIN (“Like you’ve never been SHOCKED, SHOCKED, SHOCKED before!”). Of course, by the time Hammer reached the '70s and was competing for screen space with hardcore pornography, the posters themselves almost had to have censor ratings, as witness HANDS OF THE RIPPER (“a new terror filled X film!”), TWINS OF EVIL (“A new era of VAMPIRES! Unrestricted Terror!”) and VAMPIRE CIRCUS (“The Greatest Blood Show on Earth!”). Sigh...the list goes on and on and it’s almost too much to take, in a very, very good way.

Hearn has done a bloody remarkable job assembling these sumptuous posters from domestic and international sources, his own library and many private collections. What’s fascinating is to see the radically different ways many of the titles were sold depending on which country they were exhibited in, with the German posters bearing a more rigid, abstract look, the U.S. one-sheets being very earthy and PT Barnum-ish and the original UK art absolutely delirious explosions of sexuality and id-stimulating awesomeness.

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Reading, holding, admiring this massive tome is indeed—for lovers of this sort of thing—a genuinely emotional experience that increases your heartbeat and almost damn well elicits tears. This is beautiful, rapturous stuff, and it should serve not only as a history lesson, it as a reminder to today’s crop of marketing stiffs that creativity and human hands (as virtually all of these posters were rendered as paintings or drawings) bring in the crowds more than any machine-made nonsense ever could. And they last longer too...



{comments on}