

“LORNA THE EXORCIST” (DVD Review)

Written by Scooter McCrae

Wednesday, 11 May 2011 10:14



An erotic fairy tale filled with transgressive sexual imagery that crosses the border into mind-blowing horror territory, Jess Franco's wonderful LORNA THE EXORCIST was finally unleashed on DVD earlier this year, thanks to the unflinching folks at Mondo Macabro and the tireless efforts of archivist Lucas Balbo to unearth the most complete version ever released by tracking down a number of 35mm film elements.

A businessman (Guy Delorme) sells the soul of his yet-to-be-born daughter Linda (Lina Romay) so he can eventually become successful. The broker of this deal is a supernatural presence named Lorna (Pamela Stanford), who, on the girl's 18th birthday, shows up to collect her. But the father denies Lorna possession, with horrifying results for his entire family. The story of a father making a deal with the devil for success—with his daughter as eventual payment—is an old fairy tale that was the narrative backbone of Terry Gilliam's most recent film, THE IMAGINARIUM OF DOCTOR PANASSUS, and the basic story hasn't lost any of its power over the collective imagination. Franco's very frank sexualization of the story seems natural and unforced, considering how the heart of the premise is the separation that occurs between father and daughter at the height of her sexual awakening.



That a film shot in a couple of hotel rooms can display the kind of photographic imagination this one does is a testament to Franco's visual acumen and storytelling skills. Moments like tiny

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crabs discharging from a woman's sex and Linda suckling maniacally at Lorna's breast in nascent lust, after being deflowered with a ceremonial dildo (a legendary scene that had previously only been represented in some on-set promo photos) are brave and surreal images that deserve to be listed among the work of acknowledged cinema masters like Luis Buñuel and Alejandro Jodorowsky for their primitive power. There's also the recurring visual motif of wide-open orifices removed from the joy of sexual expression and punched into the horrific realm of silent screams and gateways to the forbidden zones within, challenging a viewer's notions of where a genre film decides to cross the lines of visual propriety.

While LORNA is not even close to being a “great” film by anyone's normal standards, there is something about the eternal staying power of certain themes and images that will always be disturbing to the well-adjusted human mind, and rare is the artist who can cross into the borderland of nightmares and emerge (hopefully unscathed) to report what they've seen. And LORNA is just that—it is a captured-on-celuloid statement about the fantastical ways the supernatural world can cross over into the most mundane functions of everyday life and transform the ordinary world into a magically cruel extension of a self-made hell. It's a mind-blowing fresco freshly painted onto the walls of our common id, still wet with the materials found lying around on the bathroom floor.

Dario Argento has always maintained (somewhat speciously) that his film TENEBRAE is a science fiction story that takes place in a depopulated future world, but as much as I love that film, I just don't see it at all. On the other hand, there's a valid argument for that description to much better frame LORNA, as futuristic buildings (some mid-construction) rise around the characters amid empty landscapes. Also, Lorna's extensive facial makeup would have made her stand out as a freak even in the cosmetics-sodden era of the 1970s, when this film was made. And the hotel-room decor wouldn't be out of place in another misunderstood science fiction movie masquerading as a horror film: John Boorman's EXORCIST II: THE HERETIC.

Mondo's transfer is mostly excellent, despite some scratches and a few bad splices (most notably in the last 15 minutes or so), but as the source material has been compiled from a couple of existing 35mm prints, it's especially notable how consistent how good the movie looks overall. When one considers that all previous releases look like fifth-generation heat-sensitive photographs that have made the rounds of every on-line bootlegger, the luscious skin tones, the radiant natural-light shooting and the sharpness and detail of every last...um...visible hair is really quite startling. As a film suffused with writhing naked flesh that helps tell its sad and sordid story, the bracing visual immediacy gives the movie an emotional and sensual presence necessary to engage all of a viewer's senses. The sonic quality of the English and French (with English subtitles) audio tracks is good enough to let the hypnotically agile music score shine through, carrying a good many scenes (especially the opening 10 minutes) into the realm of a very perverse kind of poetry.

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Supplements include “Fear and Desire,” a 17-minute Franco overview in the form of monologue by Steven Thrower, and a 12-minute examination of LORNA, also by Thrower, that is informative and entertaining, as he not only has a great grasp of the director’s work but also is obviously a very articulate fan. Then there’s a 14-minute interview with Gerard Kikoine, who discusses working with Franco and his producer Robert de Nesle; his energetic delivery and excitement as he talks about his work during this fascinating period of Eurocinema makes for a great featurette (and, along with “Fear and Desire,” has been ported over from Mondo’s previous disc release of Franco’s SINNER). The deleted and extended scenes promised on the back cover are nowhere to be found on the disc, but as this is the longest and most complete version of LORNA ever released, I have no complaints about that, as all the footage that would have appeared in this section is back in the film itself, where—as far as I’m concerned—it rightfully belongs.

The always beautiful and alluring Romay is at the height of her powers here, as a physical presence and as an actress—and the final lingering shot of her wide-eyed and squirming in bed, unleashing one of cinema’s most unbridled and disturbing screams since Renfield’s cackling in Tod Browning’s DRACULA, is one that will leave you simultaneously aroused and disturbed. There are very few films that have ever achieved what this one does, and probably fewer still that had the *huevos* to even attempt what it successfully achieves. It’s a Franco classic ripe for rediscovery, and this release should be celebrated and supported by all Francophiles.

MOVIE: 🍷🍷🍷🍷

DVD PACKAGE: 🍷🍷🍷🍷

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