

## Fantasia Day 3, Part One: "THE REEF" & "THE WICKER MAN"

Written by Ariel Esteban Cayer  
Tuesday, 19 July 2011 13:58

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Fantasia's Day 3 opened with a quiet screening of the Australian shark thriller THE REEF. I had no expectations, but being a fan of aquatic beasties, I made the effort to get out of the house early—read: in festival mode, anything before 3 p.m. is early—and drag my already (!) sleep-deprived ass to the theater.



Marketed as “the scariest shark thriller since JAWS,” THE REEF starts off with a gorgeously photographed snorkeling escapade and quickly turns into an expected open water survivalist thriller, which brings to mind the simplicity of plots found in such films as OPEN WATER and Adam Green’s FROZEN. There are enough underwater moments of pure terror in THE REEF to keep some on the edge of their seats—as I discovered by talking to fellow reviewers and friends who found the film genuinely thrilling and happen to have a fear of open water and sharks—but I couldn’t care less about THE REEF’s half-assed attempts at melodrama and characterization, which is often the key in streamlined survivalist and agoraphobic thrillers such as these.

Following a poorly edited sequence in which the boat tumbles over and our merry five-person crew ends up in the open water, the characters have to decide whether to stay on top of the upturned, sinking vessel and hope to be spotted by a passing boat or plane, or take the risk of swimming a dozen or so miles through possibly shark-infested waters to the small island they just departed from. Four of them decide to take the risk of plunging into the ocean, and unless the situation at hand is unquestionably scary to you, THE REEF will play out as a painfully boring adventure, plagued by over-expository dialogue and asinine characters.

Unlike other man-vs.-nature films like THE DESCENT and FROZEN, THE REEF’s thoroughly unrelatable characters—or straight-up hateful, in the case of Luke (Damian Walshe-Howling)—have you wishing for the damn shark to show up and get it over with. When the Great White finally does appear, the film gets somewhat better, and writer/director Andrew Traucki knows how to orchestrate effective shark attacks and create tension. THE REEF’s realism is quite refreshing (the footage of the Great White is real not CGI, and seamlessly

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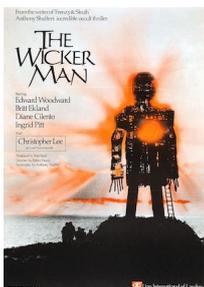
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blended into the film), and the underwater photography, when not chopped to pieces by over-excited editing, is also quite beautiful and scary. That said, it becomes quickly evident that the quote on the poster is downright preposterous.

The A/C in the Hall Theater was pumped to the max—probably unintentionally, but I like to believe there was some William Castle-esque motive behind it all—transforming the screening into an appropriately freezing experience and sending me right into the water with the characters, thus adding a level of involvement to my very limited enjoyment of THE REEF.

Following THE REEF, I decided to skip Takashi Miike's NINJA KIDS!!! (which I honestly cannot wait to see this coming Thursday) and Seung-wan Ryou's THE UNJUST in favor of Robin Hardy's 1973 classic THE WICKER MAN, which—should I be ashamed to say this?—I was about to see for the first time...and on the big screen, no less! Hardy gave a very brief introduction to the film, and Fantasia's co-director of international programming Mitch Davis stated that the filmmaker would take no questions from the audience—saving them instead for the July 19 screening of the "spiritual sequel" THE WICKER TREE, I assume. THE WICKER MAN was initially supposed to play on 16mm, but the festival organizers opted to show the uncut digital version instead, which, while being undeniably underwhelming in image resolution, was done to show the film the way Hardy had envisioned it, as opposed to the Roger Corman-distributed cut version.



What can be said about THE WICKER MAN that hasn't already been said by greater minds and writers? While I left the screening underwhelmed by that actual presentation, THE WICKER MAN was everything I could've expected—from its captivating investigative structure to its masterful mix of genres. Edward Woodward and Christopher Lee are both great as the film's protagonist and antagonist, but most importantly, the greater issues of paganism vs. Christianity, theism vs. atheism and good vs. evil they represent resonated deeply within me. One viewing—and in the sleep-deprived altered state that an early festival day following a

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midnight screening puts you in—wasn't enough, and I cannot wait to revisit the work again. More on the subject as I imminently see THE WICKER TREE.

The pièce de résistance truly came that evening, though, with THE THEATRE BIZARRE, which Fango, through Montreal writer and great friend David Bertrand, has been covering for months, and features the talent of more than half-a-dozen of horror's most interesting auteurs—most of whom I got to talk to at the after-party, which took place at Bertrand and Kier-la Janisse's amazing micro-cinema (and my second home), Blue Sunshine.

Stay tuned! And click [here](#) to read about Ariel Esteban Cayer's Day Two experience at Fantasia.

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