

Fango Flashback: “THE PASSION OF DARKLY NOON”

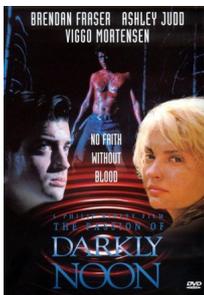
Written by Jason Tannis

Sunday, 15 August 2010 10:41



Cult classics are a peculiar phenomenon. No film means to be a cult classic; it's a status that's earned. It happens like this: Sometimes movies are made that take risks and have wealths of creative energy and heart. They challenge and color outside the lines. When it comes to theatrical release for these pictures, nervous-nelly distributors and media deem them too weird, moody or different to find a wide audience.

But time and word of mouth are kind to such films. Some, like *DONNIE DARKO* and *MAY*, find their audiences and become cult favorites. Others, like *THE PASSION OF DARKLY NOON*, don't, and find themselves wandering like this movie's title character, in a expansive forest of other flicks. I came across it by chance in a VHS delete bin at Toronto's Eyesore Cinema for two clams, and am now here to give it its due.



Released in 1995, *THE PASSION OF DARKLY NOON* was filmed in Germany with an American cast by British writer/director Philip Ridley. Like the legendary Clive Barker, Ridley is one of the last surviving renaissance men. He's a novelist, playwright, painter and children's author. In 1990, his first feature film, *THE REFLECTING SKIN*, was a huge hit at festivals and with critics, and received many awards. *Rolling Stone* anointed him as “a visionary.” *DARKLY NOON* was the follow-up.

The story starts with Darkly Noon (Brendan Fraser) sweating and staggering through the woods before being rescued by a kind delivery man named Jude (Loren Dean). Jude takes Darkly even deeper into the woods to his client, Callie (Ashley Judd), a beautiful recluse who agrees to nurse him back to health. We learn that Darkly (or Lee, as Callie insists on calling him) is the survivor of a strict fundamentalist cult that was slaughtered in a Waco-style shootout. Callie is more of an ethereal free spirit who prefers to be away from the town's prying eyes while she

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awaits the return of her mute handyman boyfriend Clay (Viggo Mortensen). Callie shows Lee kindness and friendship in hopes of introducing joy into his life—but we quickly learn this isn't going to be that kind of movie. Lee is too childlike and deeply damaged by the cult's repression, and the new freedom and carnal desires he feels send him into a tailspin of psychosis. To say things go badly would be an understatement.

The film's visual style and imagery demonstrate Ridley's familiarity with the horror-fantasy elements of children's literature. Nature, the way characters relate to it and how it reflects their inner selves are important facets of the story. Callie, Lee and the others are surrounded by storms, fire, moonlit caves, anthills, snapping branches and oppressive heat that bring out the primal emotions they're all dealing with. There is also that sense of the bizarre from the kiddie genre: Ridley introduces such sights as grinning gunshot ghosts, a boat shaped like a giant silver shoe and birds covered in barbed wire. These images, seen by Lee, evoke both a sense of wonder and abject dread.

The strength of Ridley's debut helped him attract a top-tier cast, and they all perform to the level and tone of the script. David Lynch regular Grace Zabriskie gives good crazy as an old woman who uses Lee as part of her own vengeance against Callie, while Mortensen does his usual fine work here, getting across the depth and intensity of his feelings without the use of speech. As Callie, Judd is well-cast; we see her as Lee sees her—as mysterious, seductive and alluring as nature itself. Judd understands this and plays it perfectly. She gets to let loose, too, just as she did in the underrated *BUG* (2006). When she witnesses Lee's darker side, she flies into hysterics. But the real reason to see this film is the standout performance of Brendan Fraser.



That's right. You heard me. *Brendan Fraser*. This is an actor written off to dumb comedies, kid flicks and the *MUMMY* franchise. Occasionally, he gets a film that allows him to stretch out and show something different (*SCHOOL TIES*, *THE QUIET AMERICAN*, *GODS AND MONSTERS*)—but to quote Al Jolson, baby, you ain't seen nothing yet. This is unlike anything else Fraser has done; surrounded by more acclaimed actors, he nonetheless *dominates*

the screen. He plays Lee not with a slow burn, but as a loudly ticking time bomb. He uses all the actor's tools he has to his advantage to essay Lee's loosening grip on sanity. His physicality and bulk loom over us and promise violence. His eyes tell the stories of confusion, fear, lust and, finally, deeply focused wrath. His deep voice expresses everything from a boyish mumble to delusional babbling confusion to tortured cries to the roar of a demon. When Lee finally falls

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off the deep end, Fraser’s performance and the chaos Lee creates swell to—well, biblical proportions. And it’s something that deserves to be seen.

Though obscure, THE PASSION OF DARKLY NOON did get a DVD release and can be found, with some digging. Meanwhile, Ridley is returning from his 15-year-filmmaking hiatus; his new film HEARTLESS played this year’s Fantasia film festival and is headed to others. This could leave DARKLY NOON as the neglected middle child of his career, and that’s just not right. Seek it out, watch it, revel in its charms and recommend it to others. Give it a better fate—or certainly a kinder one than that which befell poor, confused Mr. Noon.

{comments on}