

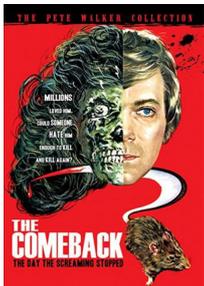
Fango Flashback: “THE COMEBACK”

Written by James Gracey

Sunday, 26 September 2010 11:09



Provocative, grim, shocking and extremely anti-establishment in their outlook, British director Pete Walker’s “terror” films were always controversial—perhaps due to their frequent representation of an unsavory, seedy underbelly of a British society governed by convention and hypocrisy. With his previous movies, notably *HOUSE OF WHIPCORD*, *FRIGHTMARE* and *HOUSE OF MORTAL SIN* (a.k.a. *THE CONFESSIONAL*), Walker had actively worked to subvert typically British institutions (such as class, family and the legal system) and outrage as many people as he possibly could by presenting cannibalistic pensioners, murderous priests and private prisons controlled by sadistic wardens.



1978’s *THE COMEBACK* (a.k.a. *THE DAY THE SCREAMING STOPPED*), however, unfolds as a somewhat more conventional offering, and was seen as a deliberate move to reach a more mainstream audience. The casting of crooner Jack Jones and the specific locations used, particularly the London landmarks seen in various shots, confirm Walker’s attempts to internationalize his brand of horror.

Written by UK TV scribe Murray Smith, who also penned Walker’s *DIE SCREAMING MARIANNE* and *SCHIZO*, *THE COMEBACK* is the deranged tale of faded pop singer Nick Cooper (Jones), who has returned to London from the States after a messy divorce to attempt a resurrection of his flagging career. Holing up in an isolated country manor to record a new album, Nick is seemingly terrorized by the specter of his murdered ex-wife—whose body is decomposing in the trendy docklands penthouse they once shared. Are his nightmares real, or could it be that someone doesn’t want him to relaunch his career and is doing his or her utmost to drive him insane...?

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In comparison to Walker's earlier, grimmer offerings, *THE COMEBACK* has an altogether "lighter" touch—though that isn't saying much. It is also perhaps more technically accomplished than his earlier movies, boasting assured direction, tight editing and flashes of fluid camerawork. Swirling together elements of old dark house melodramas with conventions of the gothic psychological thriller, *THE COMEBACK* is also notable for its stylish gore and murder setpieces, predating the onset of the slasher-movie cycle by a year or so. A couple of expertly staged slayings carry echoes of Dario Argento as well, particularly *DEEP RED*, and the twisted revelations, deranged psychology, abundance of red herrings and complex revenge plot also cement the influence of the giallo on *THE COMEBACK*.



Among a few bizarre casting choices, there's a fiendishly good performance by Walker regular Sheila Keith as a sinister housekeeper with a dark secret. Keith's performance hums with a macabre humor that sits well amongst the movie's more histrionically tinged aspects, including a killer transvestite and various sly pastiches of Hammer horror. The film's denouement is grounded in a morbid criticism of conservative British attitudes toward the perceived immorality of younger generations. While the unforgettable and frenzied confrontation in which Nick finally comes face to face with his tormentors is as demented as anything Walker has ever come up with, the plot's *raison d'être* seems contrived, if only because it is hard to imagine Jack Jones as a purveyor of "foul contortions and lewd suggestive songs; with music that drives innocent children to behave like beasts in the farmyard."

While not as vital as some of Walker's other aforementioned titles, *THE COMEBACK* (available on DVD from Media Blasters on the Shriek Show label) still exhibits the grindhouse charm of the director at his macabre best.

{comments on}