Written by Clay McLeod Chapman
Wednesday, 08 September 2010 15:22

In the course of a single year, Werner Herzog has unleashed a pair of peculiar potboilers in quick succession: BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL—NEW ORLEANS and MY SON, MY SON, WHAT HAVE YE DONE—two films that announce to their audience of devotees that we are now a far cry from the preferred rough country of FITZCARRALDO. Though the Urubamba River makes a guest plotline appearance in MY SON (on DVD September 14 from First Look), Herr Werner has traded in his Amazonian stamping grounds for the vastly bland urban wasteland of southern California, leading one to speculate that Herzog himself has now suddenly become the fish out of water for once, rather than the parade of hubristic protagonists from his films past.

Miss McCullum (Grace Zabriskie) is dead, slashed at the hands of her son Brad (Michael Shannon). The weapon of choice? An antique sword that would have served as a prop in a production of the Greek tragedy ORESTES—where, during rehearsal, Brad presciently states to his director, “Some people act a role, others play a part.”

Herzog’s plot (scripted with Herbert Golder) is rooted within the true story of UCSD student Mark Yavorksy, who murdered his own mother with a similar saber, paralleling his part in a play he was set to perform back in 1979. True to his character’s testament, Shannon enters into the pantheon of oddball actors who have worked under Herzog’s demanding eye—an esteemed club of eccentrics including favorite fiend Klaus Kinski and, more recently, Nicolas Cage. And yet, where Kinski and Cage externalized their own patented brands of madness, mincing about like orangutans force-fed copious amounts of acid, Shannon, himself appearing akin to a shaved Yeti, heads in a different direction altogether. His particular insanity seems to seethe out from behind his lazy eye, barely bottled beyond its boiling point and just about to blow. Listening to a crackly recording of “I Am Born to Preach the Gospel,” Brad mistakes Washington Phillips’ warbling blues tune for the voice of God. The very visage of his holy master manifests itself in the logo of a “Puritan Oats” container—a rather unsubtle substitute for the Quaker Oats bloke.

“I’m going to stunt my inner growth,” Brad utters. “I think I shall become a Muslim. Call me Faruk.”

While the film is presented as a *why*dunit rather than a *who*dunit, the mystery behind Brad’s actions never seems all that mysterious. What does remain a question, however, is what exactly happened behind the camera. With David Lynch serving as one of the executive producers, MY SON is something of a cinephile’s wet dream. One can’t help but imagine what alchemy such a collaboration of cinematic masters could wring. But beyond the cosmetic casting crossovers of Brad Dourif as a racist ostrich rancher, Willem Dafoe as a police detective and Zabriskie’s smothering mother, it is unclear where one’s contribution ends and the other’s begins. Aside from choice moments of oddball dialogue reminiscent of TWIN PEAKS, including Brad’s coffee-mug banter (“Razzle dazzle, razzle dazzle”), it is Herzog’s aesthetic that ultimately shines through. Those raw moments of improvised awkwardness make for the most exciting scenes in MY SON, a Herzog specialty—and a contrarian ingredient to the antiseptic precision of Lynch’s own aesthetics. At one point an ostrich gulps down Udo Keir’s glasses, only for a ranch-hand to manually cause the bird to regurgitate them back up…and it all looks painfully real. This happy accident caught on camera shows Herzog at his best, making way for those moments in his storyline that present man and nature clashing in the most unexpected ways.

While it’s safe to say that this is not one of Herzog’s—or Lynch’s—best, MY SON does have much to offer fans of the maverick director. As often occurs, however, Lynch’s imprint is sorely missing from the special features, which include a CliffsNotes commentary by Herzog, along with Golder and producer Eric Bassett. Hearing the director delve into his film’s deeper meanings is something of a safari into the psyche, and one might wish Herzog was actually sitting next to them for couchside observations to further enhance the viewing experience of MY SON, much like the epic narrations of his documentaries. This makes the inclusion of Ramin Bahrani’s short “Plastic Bag” an odd aperitif to Herzog’s own feature. Originally produced as part of the Independent Television Service’s FUTURESTATES series for public television, this 20-minute curio is narrated by none other than the shoe-eating director himself, starring as—wait for it—a plastic bag. It doesn’t get more Lynchian than that.

MOVIE: 💀💀💀☠

DVD PACKAGE: 💀💀💀☠

{jcomments on}