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For horror fans, news of a quality release of any good silent genre film should be cause for celebration, and there’s been much to celebrate in the last few years, with reconstructed and remastered reissues of NOSFERATU, FAUST, VAMPYR and METROPOLIS gracing retail inventories. Now the Criterion Collection has added yet another silent supernatural treat in the form of Victor Sjöström’s 1921 Swedish classic THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE.

Adapted from Nobel Prize-winning Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf’s novel KÖRKARLEN, the film is the story of David Holm, portrayed by Sjöström himself. An outwardly cruel alcoholic suffering from tuberculosis, David dies in an accident just before midnight on New Year’s Eve. A ghostly carriage arrives, its hooded, scythe-bearing driver obviously the Grim Reaper. Now an incorporeal spirit, David watches in surprise as the Reaper pulls back his hood to reveal that he’s David’s old drinking buddy Georges (Tore Svennberg), who’d died on New Year’s Eve of the previous year. An old legend says that the last person to die on New Year’s Eve is destined to drive Death’s Carriage for the next year, and it looks like unfortunate timing is going to result in David getting the job. But first, Georges takes David to see the people who had been—or *should* have been—important in his life, giving him a tour of the misery and destruction he has caused. Now dead, is he beyond redemption?

THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE is a Dickensian ghost story; like Scrooge, David is visited by a supernatural specter and forced to take an unpleasant trip down memory lane. The film—and the novel before it—also share narrative construction in that both A CHRISTMAS CAROL and PHANTOM CARRIAGE are set in a “present time” that actually represents the final hours of the story, with events leading up to the situation revealed in flashback sequences. The film also shares CAROL’s genre ambiguities in that it isn’t purely a horror film, but more a drama that utilizes supernatural plot devices to relate and, ultimately, resolve its plot.

Still, this is darker than the monumental Dickens work. David *does* have a family, and they still suffer because of his actions. A Salvation Army volunteer devoted to bringing him out of his spiritual abyss lies dying of tuberculosis she contracted from him. David’s supernatural visitor may be showing him the error of his ways, but there’s no threat of ignoble death to motivate David, since he’s not only already deceased but doomed to serve as Death’s Coachman for a year’s service. While Marley’s fate hints of spiritual danger to Scrooge, David’s own plight has become *entirely* spiritual, and plot elements and imagery dealing with redemption in religious terms are abundant in the latter half of the film.

Sjöström’s flawless, captivating performance is the movie’s true anchor, as the character of David Holm is complex and Sjöström portrays him in such a way as to continually have the viewer wondering whether this is a good man who has something rotten growing at his core, or a rotten man with a nugget of good lodged in his heart. The film avoids supplying an easy answer to this query, and David’s interaction with other characters throughout—particularly his estranged, fearful wife Anna (ably played by Hilda Borgström)—keep the viewer teetering between whether they should feel hope or dread at any given moment as to what David might do next.

The film also features groundbreaking, exquisitely realized double-exposure FX work by cinematographer Julius Jaenzon. In one sequence, we see the ever-transparent Phantom Carriage actually ride out onto the sea, the driver submerging through the water to claim the soul of an unfortunate drowning victim. The ambition here was grand, and while in a contemporary context, these techniques may not have the flash and complete seamlessness of what ILM or Weta might turn out, they still remain impressive in their own right.

Presented in its original 1.37:1 aspect ratio, the film looks gorgeous in high-definition. Sure, there are scratches and artifacts along the way, but you can only expect so much of a film turning 90 years old in 2011. English subtitles for the Swedish intertitle cards are turned on by default, but can be shut off via the menu.

Criterion has supplied two score options: First up is revered Swedish composer Matti Bye’s chamber music, commissioned by Svensk Filmindustri to accompany THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE in 1999, presented in DTS-HD 3.0 Master Audio. The second is a composition by the experimental duo KTL, comprised of Editions Mego founder Peter Rehberg and Stephen O’Malley of Sunn O))) fame; it’s an eclectic work of electronic, ambient and guitar elements, presented in LPCM 2.0. Between the two, the KTL music is the more interesting and, for those able to mentally disassociate how old the film is with how old its music should be, will probably be favored. Bye’s score is no slouch, though, and for those with a more traditional ear when it comes to silent film, it will be the obvious score of choice. A commentary track by Danish film historian Casper Tyberg is educational and informative for those wanting to delve more into various aspects of the film, its creation and its reception.

Other bonus features include a booklet featuring an essay on the film by Paul Mayersberg (screenwriter of, among other films, THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH), a five-minute archival video of Rasunda Studios construction footage, a 16-minute video interview with Ingmar Bergman excerpted from the feature documentary VICTOR SJOSTROM: A PORTRAIT, in which the legendary Swedish filmmaker discusses the influence Sjöström and THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE had on him and his work, and a 19-minute video essay entitled “The Bergman Connection,” with film scholar Peter Cowie discussing the relationship Bergman and Sjöström had offscreen in their personal and professional careers, and onscreen in terms of commonalities in theme and visuals between the two filmmakers.

While the supplementary videos are informative and interesting, it’s notable that the real bulk of it is applied through the filter of how it relates to Bergman and his work. One can’t help but find this a disservice to Sjöström, who, before Bergman, was considered a reigning talent of Swedish cinema. A simple biographical video on Sjöström would have been a welcome inclusion, as opposed to completely presenting the filmmaker through the lens of his importance to Bergman. Still, if somewhat myopic in focus, all the video extras are interesting and informative, and presented in HD.

Some genre fans may find THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE’s refusal to be a pure horror experience displeasing, but in terms of the sort of cinematic experience one might hope for from an early-20th-century feature, it’s exemplary. Silent-film enthusiasts owe it to themselves to have this film in their libraries, and Criterion has delivered disc editions that, while perhaps somewhat flawed in their supplementary focus, are technically top-notch.

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