

## BSB in FANTASIA: Falling at the feet of "THE DEVILS"

Written by Chris Alexander  
Tuesday, 20 July 2010 15:56

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For me, this year at FANTASIA is really about one thing: meeting Ken Russell and seeing THE DEVILS on the big screen. Do you know THE DEVILS? Are you familiar with it? I'd normally say if you're not, that you must be semi-soft in the skull, but really, I do not blame you. Because THE DEVILS is a tough one to dig up these days.

Released in 1971 in North America through a then-daring Warner Bros. (they also released A CLOCKWORK ORANGE that same year), Russell's fevered, completely insane, out-of-control masterpiece of beauty, blasphemy, sex, religion and hypocrisy has been difficult to track down in any version. For years the only well-circulated video version was the WB VHS, the U.S. cut of the print which eliminated the jaw-dropping "Rape of Christ" sequence in which a convent of fake mad nuns sexually assault a plaster of Paris statue of Jesus and a scene where co-star Vanessa Redgrave gets friendly with the charred femur bone of freshly executed Father Grandier (Oliver Reed, who has never, ever been better). But then it went out of circulation and became an eBay expense that would set you back a pretty penny. WB is always announcing a special edition DVD release, but every time they do, the title vanishes from their schedule.

In the UK, the BBC dug up and aired an almost 100% cut free version of the film for a one-off, the likes of which was horrendously bootlegged and distributed through some nickel-and-dime outfit called Angel, which I have and, even though it looks like hard-boiled ass, is still watchable. Print-wise, when I worked at Warner Bros. Canada in my youth, we had a 35mm print on ice that I rented and watched in the screening room. It was splicey, cut but still spectacular. Earlier this year for my FILM SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL series, I booked that print only to be told that it had been sent back to LA and then junked in error, whatever that means. I had to cancel my screening and cried for days.

I love this film. It is my favorite film. It has no peer though it does have many imitators and its notoriety was chiefly responsible for the wave of "nunsplotation" films that followed. But as rude, daring and damning as THE DEVILS is, there is no disputing its sense of punk rock, enfant terrible attitude and gleeful sense of abstract humor. And its poetry. See, this is ALL Russell. That's what he does, taking human sexuality, politics and religion and happily lampooning them, celebrating their insanity and idiocy while bombarding his audience with as much horny, lyrical, frightening, disturbing and joyously surreal imagery as possible.

I worship this film. I worship this man.

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And I love Montreal, so coming here, to this wonderful festival last night to see THE DEVILS in all its splendor on the big screen, with a packed house and Mr. Russell himself in attendance, was a gift from the gods. Mitch Davis, mastermind of FANTASIA, busted his ass just as I did to get the uncut print of THE DEVILS (which is at the mercy of locked doors and private collections), settled for the U.S. print, found out he couldn't get it and instead dropped a mint getting Warners to strike a digibeta video master of the U.S. print to screen.

Who cares if it was video? Who cares if it was cut? Even without the extra frissons, THE DEVILS is offensive and an assault of good taste that is just as epic, bloody, erotic and mad, mad, mad as it always was. But again, its humor, its arch performances, its jarring shifts in tone from meditative quiet to violent rage to pathos to orgiastic depravity keep it firmly on the side of the art house.

I pray for you—as does the ghost of Father Grandier—that you get to see THE DEVILS as I did. If you don't I'll be happy to tell you about my wonderful night at FANTASIA again and again and again and ...

You get it.

Back to the fest grind. Blog soon...

{jcomments on}