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BOOK REVIEWS

JAMES WHALE by James Curtis

Scarecrow Press; 267 pages, \$16.50

A book on director James Whale is long overdue. For years publishers were uninterested, not least because so few of his films were available that not even a limited cult following had sprung up, and marketability possibilities seemed slim. Then when, finally, all of his films were available for study (a simplification, since four of them can still be seen only if one has the right contacts, and not all of the remaining 18 titles are easily accessible) writers and historians must have realised that Whale was an "auteur" in the truest and strongest sense of that much misused word, and that tracking down his beginnings, his World War One experiences, and his early stage work, was a "must". Since Whale died in 1957, and not too many of his colleagues were around, the research work needed was staggering.

Author Curtis's homework in this area has been thoroughly over and beyond the call of duty. He has unearthed biographical data of great importance, and interviewed a large percentage of the still-surviving players and technicians who worked with Whale. He was never a very warm or communicative person, and some of the most detailed and revealing comments come not from his film co-workers, but from actors who worked with him on the stage (Alan Napier in particular) where contacts were closer.

In one area, Curtis is perhaps ill-advised in his tact and diplomacy. Whale's homosexuality is referred to in passing a couple of times, but no more is made of it. I don't suggest for a moment that Curtis should have tried to dig up commercially useful scandal. In any case, Whale was

very much of a gentleman and handled his private life with discretion. But homosexuality was not considered socially acceptable in Hollywood in the 1930's, and once Whale was past the period of his peak creativity and autonomy (a date one can fix as everything after 1936's *Show Boat*, when Universal underwent a total change of policy and management that virtually crippled Whale), this aspect of his life was undoubtedly used as a wedge to keep him away from the top projects that he then needed more than ever.

Moreover, while Whale couldn't be accused of even once injecting a homosexual "strain" into his films (and he had the power to reshape and re-write, and frequently did) there are repeated if subliminal statements and themes in his films which certainly reflect his personal life style: his treatment of the Frankenstein monster as an "outsider" deserving understanding and pity; his somewhat cynical view of marriage (though with most of the sympathy going to the wife); his depiction of strong, dedicated friendships between men, often surprisingly touching (as in the relationship between Morgan and Saul in *The Old Dark House*, or the Monster and the Hermit in *The Bride of Frankenstein*) and without the "macho" image of the much-touted male friendships in the Howard Hawks films.

In fact the basic problem with the Whale book is its unwillingness to delve, or to regard the 22 films as a body of work deserving study. Individual films are given their due, the merits of the outstanding ones duly recorded, and an astonishing array of background information provided. Budgets, shooting problems, and studio politics and wheelings and dealings are gone into with praiseworthy detail, and

one of the most interesting — and saddest — aspects of all this are the Whale projects that nearly came to fruition and collapsed. (These included *Goodbye Mr. Chips* and *Time Out Of Mind*, the latter a full decade before it was finally filmed by Siodmak). Whale's methods, and his theatrical use of film grammar were unique, and show remarkable progress from year to year, and picture to picture, up until *Show Boat* and probably even *The Road Back* before it was mutilated by the new owners of Universal. But apart from recognition of unique bits of cutting or camera angles, there is virtually no discussion of Whale's style. Again, I don't mean the arrant structuralist nonsense that passes for analysis today, but a study based purely on the evidence of the films themselves. Since Whale was pretty much of a loner, he seems not to have discussed his methods or his ambitions with either his co-workers or his friends. It's significant that Ted Kent, one of Whale's most frequently used editors, stumbled across one of the secrets of those methods, but because it was so unorthodox, saw it as a flaw and says as much to Curtis in an interview. Presumably Curtis agreed, since if ever there was an opening for a footnote — or a logical opportunity to discuss Whale's style — that was it. Maybe the problem is that author Curtis is apparently not a particularly film-oriented writer, and approached his subject primarily from a biographic point of view seeing all the films, but not necessarily in the right order or in a short enough period of time to recognise the unique and evolving style that was Whale's.

Whale seems to have had certain unlikeable traits, and some rather curious personality quirks — including an innate modesty and a refusal to "push" himself when he was on top, and (because he was always comfortably fixed financially) a belated assumption of that power and a certain arrogance in the years (some 17 of

them) of his virtual retirement. He also seems to have been, and no disrespect to him, a rather dull person. All that was exciting and vital about him went into his work, which makes it all the sadder that the appraisal of that work doesn't half do it justice. Curtis obviously loves certain films and respects others, but does seem rather blasé about the body of work as a whole. For example, he dismisses *The Impatient Maiden* (1932, and Whale's first film after *Frankenstein*) because it was commercially unimportant and its content was trivial. But it contains some of Whale's most dazzling stylistics, and really shows what Whale's direction was all about.

Despite my somewhat negative comments about certain aspects of the book, we should all be tremendously grateful to James Curtis for having written it. It is obviously a labor of love, reliable, very readable, and full of information we didn't have before — including the details of Whale's tragic suicide, and the explanatory letter that he left. (For years, the idea was nurtured that Whale's death was actually an unsolved murder). There are many unfamiliar production stills, and extremely rare photographs from the last years of his life. If the price seems a little steep for the relatively unglossy production of the book, it's undoubtedly because the publishers didn't envision a wide sale. At three times its price it would still be a bargain. Probably there will be other books on Whale including, I hope, one devoted primarily to the films themselves. But if one should come along to be the glossy equivalent of Whale's own *The Bride of Frankenstein*, then this initial book must be considered the parallel to Whale's original *Frankenstein*: flawed, rough-hewn, but still the basic work from which others must derive.

WILLIAM K. EVERSON

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