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The American Comedy

Abbott & Costello Meet Frankenstein
Universal-International Pictures
Directed by Charles T. Barton
1948; 82 min.

Cast

Chick	Bud Abbott
Wilbur	Lou Costello
Lawrence Talbot	Lon Chaney, Jr.
Dracula	Bela Lugosi
Monster	Glenn Strange
Sandra Mornay	Lenore Aubert
Joan Raymond	Jane Randolph
Mr. McDougal	Frank Ferguson
Dr. Stevens	Charles Bradstreet
Waiter	Bobby Barber
Man at Party	Joe Kirk

Credits

Producer	Robert Arthur
Director	Charles T. Barton
Original Screenplay	Robert Lees, Frederic I. Rinaldo, John Grant
Photography	Charles Van Enger
Music	Frank Skinner
Art Direction	Bernard Herzbrun, Hilyard Brown

Notes

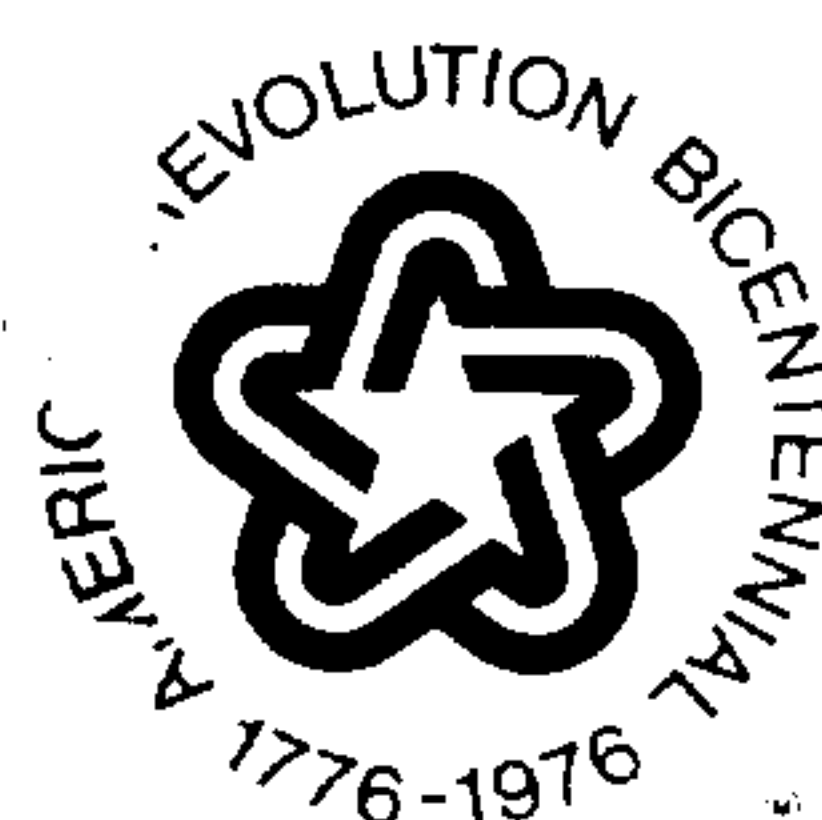
With everything that it has going for it, Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein is quite possibly the best of the comedy team's films; unquestionably, it is among their top five. Compact and consistently entertaining, it spares us the romantic sub-plots, arbitrary musical numbers and infantile humor which marred so many of their features. Much of the film's strength derives from the evolution in the Abbott and Costello characters, and their relationship to one another. To begin with, their individual personalities are much more well-defined than in most of their earlier films, where they come across all too often as standup comics who have wandered into an already existing movie. With Abbott as a too slick straight man, and Costello as a too gullible booby, they would go through routines like the cute but strained "Who's On First?" with all the subtlety of carnival barkers pitching to the outer reaches of a crowd of mildly distracted rubes.

Here, however, thanks to a strong script and the sure hand of director Charles Barton, the comedians have a genuine place in the framework of the story, and there is a much more realistic balance between them. For once, the two of them seem possessed of equal intelligence, and it is quite refreshing to see Costello emerge victorious from so many of his verbal exchanges with Abbott. An additional dimension of "maturity" is provided through Costello's pronounced interest in romance - and with two girls yet - a far cry from those pudgy innocent days when he spent his time fleeing from the likes of Martha Raye. Overall, the Abbott and Costello characters here are conceptually closer to the characters they would play in their television shows of the early 'fifties - namely, themselves, as perennially out-of-work sharpies - than to the irritating burlesque comics of their early films.

Of course, a great deal of Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein's appeal also stems from those ingredients familiar to all connoisseurs of the great Universal horror films: the marvelously impractical brain transplants; the doctor with a history of professional indiscretions; eerily atmospheric sets; meticulous special effects work; a full blooded musical score; and, finally, the legendary creatures themselves. There is the incomparable Lugosi, playing Dracula for the first time since he had immortalized the role back in 1931. Rewarded with a number of fine close-ups, and capitalizing on the staying power of his piercing eyes, he seems almost like the Lugosi of old, and contributes a performance which stands as a creditable swan song to his checkered career. In the case of the Monster, Glenn Strange was never as adept at the part as Boris Karloff, but he does turn in an acceptable performance, and the humor at the Monster's expense never violates the basic integrity of the character.

Lastly, there is the Wolf Man, who always seemed the most innately absurd, and consequently the least interesting member of Universal's horror pantheon. Scampering incongruously about the countryside in his dark shirt and tweed slacks, the curse of his lycanthropy supposedly made him a very sympathetic character, which, in itself, may account for his lack of appeal. Then too, Chaney was always overplaying it, with his constant whining about a cure and worrying about what he would do to his hapless victims once the moon rose (an event which the more intriguing Dracula always looked forward to with relish!). As a result, it seems fitting that he is made the butt of most of the comedy, a point which is driven home quite literally in a hilarious sequence wherein he finds himself on the receiving end of a well-deserved kick in the pants.

Notes by Gary Collins



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