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Directed and produced by Robert Aldrich. Screenplay by Lukas Heller from the novel by Henry Farrell. Director of photography, Ernest Haller. Editor, Michael Luciano. Art director, William Glasgow. Music, Frank DeVol. A Seven Arts production distributed by Warner-Pathe. Cert. X. 133 mins.

Jane Hudson, BETTE DAVIS; Blanche Hudson, JOAN CRAWFORD; Edwin Flagg, VICTOR BUONO; Mrs Bates, ANNA LEE; Elvira Stitt, MAIDIE NORMAN; Mrs Flagg, MARJORIE BENNETT; Ray Hudson, DAVE WILLOCK; Cora Hudson, ANN BARTON; Baby Jane, JULIE ALLRED; and Young Blanche, GINA GILLESPIE.

'Behind the drawn blinds and barred windows of a bizarre and crumbling Hollywood mansion someone—or something—stirs. Death and decay pirouette in every faded room. Madness and corruption are reflected in the tarnished mirrors.' So the synopsis begins. Psychiatrists tell us that the fears we so earnestly repress that we may eventually go mad, or murder our nearest and dearest, or be persistently haunted by the spirits of the dead we have wronged, can be at least temporarily alleviated by watching such situations externalised for us on the screen in fantasies about other people who go mad, murder their loved ones or run screaming down corridors pursued by ghosts. Robert Aldrich's new film with its disarming title is just such a fantasy to relieve your worst repressions and leave you absolutely certain that it is most unlikely you will ever go mad in quite the same way as Baby Jane. You are far more likely to wonder what led a producer-director of Aldrich's skill to choose a subject so foreign to his particular talents.

The titles and credits, which hardly seem to arrive until well into the second reel, are preceded first of all by a lengthy sequence showing Baby Jane Hudson performing her precocious and be-ribboned child act way back at the turn of the century while her dark and dour sister Blanche glowers jealously from the wings. Then comes a second sequence that reveals how, twenty years after, it is Blanche who has become the great and passionate film star of the 'thirties while Baby Jane, faced with failure in her adult career, has declined into a useless alcoholic in whose talent only her sister still believes. The titles finally arrive only after Blanche has been involved in a car accident which seems to have been deliberately contrived by Baby Jane and results in Blanche being crippled for life.

By the artificial bonds which always prevail in this kind of psychological horror story, the two sisters are shown to have lived ever since the accident in virtual isolation, bound to each other by ties which can only excite mutual hatred and fear. Baby Jane, hideously raddled beneath her ringlets, tries to maintain a macabre memory of her childhood through the mask of her painted face, while Blanche is slowly dying in her bedroom upstairs as the result of her sister's neglect and cruelty.

The advance reputation of this film rests on the fact that two distinguished actresses, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, play the two weird sisters, and that Robert Aldrich, a director who loves strong meat on the screen, produces and directs the picture. This kind of horror film, if it is to succeed in the modern cinema, needs a quite different form of treatment from that given by Aldrich, a director with an outstanding talent for the more realistic kinds of story.

In *Psycho*, for instance, Hitchcock succeeded in his own particular way in creating the kind of insidiously developing atmosphere that is needed in *What ever happened to Baby Jane?* So did Clouzot in *Les Diaboliques*, creating his horrors with what can only be regarded as imaginative virtuosity. I can only report that I found *What ever happened to Baby Jane?* a heavy handed and drawn-out piece of Grand Guignol lasting two and a quarter hours, unconvincing alike in story and situation and unpleasantly over-acted. Joan Crawford conceals her strong screen personality with some difficulty in the utterly negative and recessive character of Blanche, while Bette Davis, who is after all one of the screen's greatest and most experienced character actresses, gives, in my view, a completely outmoded and garish performance as Baby Jane, though in fairness it is only right to point out that it is a garish and outmoded kind of character to have to play. The only two supporting characters who matter greatly in the story are Victor Buono's Englishman, the most credible and thoughtful piece of acting in the film, and Maidie Norman's coloured maid, Elvira, who all but commits suicide by carefully putting down a hammer for Baby Jane to use at the very moment when any person with the least instinct for self-preservation would have hung on to it.

If *Psycho* and *Les Diaboliques* are successful, it is because of the subtle technical discipline with which the horror is developed. Robert Aldrich does not reveal in this film a discipline of this kind; he attacks both character and situation with too violent and obvious a hand, pressing home the points of horror with strident music and leaving many loose ends in the action.