

Document Citation

Title	The bat whispers
Author(s)	William K. Everson
Source	<i>Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society</i>
Date	1965 Sept 21
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The Bat whispers, West, Roland, 1930

"THE BAT WHISPERS" (United Artists, 1930; rel: 1931) Written, produced and directed by Roland West; based on the stage play by Mary Roberts Rinehart and Avery Hopwood as produced by Wagnalls and Kemper; photographed by Ray Jans; photographs of wide-screen version; settings designed and executed by Paul Zoe Crawley; production assistants, Roger H. Heman, Ned Mann, Charles H. Smith, Helen Hallett; edited by James Smith; in charge of sound, J.T. Reed; sound technician, O.E. Lagerstrom. 8 reels.

The Cast (in order of appearance): Police Lieut. (Chance Ward); Mr. Ball (Richard Tucker); Butler (Wilson Benge); Police Captain (DeWitt Jennings); Sergeant (Sidney D'Albrock); Man in the Black Mask (S.E. Jennings); Cornelia van Gorder (Grayce Hampton); Lizzie Allen (Maude Eburne); The Caretaker (Spencer Charteris); Dale Van Gorder (Una Kerkel); Brook (William Bakewell); Doctor Vanees (Gustav von Seyffertitz); Detective Anderson (Chester Morris); Richard Fleming (Hugh Huntley); Detective Jones (Charles Don Clark);

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Sept. 21, 1965

It has been over eight years since our first showing of "The Bat Whispers" at this society. In the interim it hasn't seen the light of day at all; Mary Pickford now owns the film, and several prints repose in her vault, including some 65mm copies, since it was made as part of the short-lived wide-screen cycle in the early days of sound. Since a very anemic remake with Vincent Price was made by Allied Artists a few years ago, it now seems unlikely that this original will ever be revived for theatres or tv. In order to protect this print and keep showings of it to a minimum, we haven't re-screened it, and the notes that follow are based largely on our notes of May 1957. I have updated them in terms of additional information, but reappraisal of the picture will have to await tonight's show. However, there seems no reason to assume that our initial enthusiasm will have lessened any. At that time, we were quite overwhelmed by it. Expecting good, stylish "The Cat and the Canary" type fare, we were absolutely bowled over by the marvellous stuff it contains.

Robert West's first version of "The Bat", made as a silent, was a huge success. It starred Jack Pickford, Sojin and one of the loveliest of the Griffith girls, Jewel Carmen - who, incidentally, was Mrs West. This talkie remake however was somewhat of a flop commercially. In an era when movies were expected to talk and do little else, and when transplanted stage plays were all the vogue, especially at UA and RKO, this stage adaptation broke all the rules. It remained determinedly a movie rather than a talkie. Its stage origins are apparent in some of the rather irksome comedy - which isn't helped by occasionally sub-standard sound on the print - but otherwise it tells its story entirely visually, in the best tradition of the silent greats. As such, in 1931, it probably seemed quite old-fashioned and even a retrogression; today, like so many ignored films of that period, it seems wonderfully fresh and invigorating. Oh, for some of its style and imagination in today's films!

As an old-school "old house" thriller, it has some plot familiarities of course, and more than casual resemblances to "The Gorilla", "The Cat and the Canary", "The 13th Guest" (which copied one whole sequence from it) and "The Old dark House". But even the cliches seem fresh here, and West deliberately kids (without ridiculing) those elements of the plot which seemed a little corny to him. And recognising that it is basically a "fun" film, he doesn't concern himself too much with logic. If he likes a pictorial effect, he uses it, and he blazes with trying to explain or justify it. Throughout there are tremendous, stylistic visuals: great moving camera shots, ingenious miniatures, strikingly dramatic lighting and compositions, fantastic and effective angles. A remarkable bank-robbery scene is done almost in an impressionistic manner, shot at a distorted high angle, and reminiscent of Fritz Lang in his best days. A black gloved hand snuffing out a candle is a happy borrowing from Lang's "Metropolis" too. In fact, pictorially the film often reminds one of Lang and Maurice Tourneur, but it is never lazily imitative. Some of the pictorial effects - the great bat shadow melting into nothing for example - are among the most striking images that the film thriller has ever created.

Robert West was obviously a dynamic and individual film-maker, who was lucky enough to be independently wealthy and something of a dilettante about film. He made only nine films in 14 years, and he made them just as he wanted. An actor and playwright too, he liked to use players from the stage as much as from film, and too if he thought a man had flair and talent, he'd use it, regardless of lack of experience. His art director on "The Bat Whispers" for example was formerly a UA studio draughtsman. His films were all one-man-shows, and always cost more than they should have done because of his habit of building the maximum number of sets to ensure camera mobility and variety, and because he almost always shot at night, starting in the early evening and knocking off just before dawn. He made a completely successful transfer from silent movies to sound, although dialogue did make his pictures even tougher to follow than heretofore. His plots always seemed to abound in unexplained motives and characters, and like Rabst, he never seemed too concerned about his audience as long as he knew what he wanted. His three talkies were all fine melodramas starring Chester Morris - "Alibi" (unfortunately not available), "The Bat Whispers", and his last, "The Monster" (also unfortunately unavailable). One of his last films was a horror spoof "The Monster" in Robert Youngson's upcoming compilation of silent MGM thrill material. West's movie career came to a sudden end in the mid-30's when he was implicated in, and suspected of, the murder of Thelma Todd (She was his leading lady in "Corsair", and also apparently his mistress). Though never proven, doubts remained, and his movie career was at an end. He spent the rest of his days in Hollywood as both a curiosity and an enigma - and, quite incidentally, a prosperous restaurateur. "The Bat" is still an old reliable for Summer stock theatres, and until her death, Joan Pitts toured with it in the comedy-maid role. Ray Jane's camerawork is so stunning that one would love to see the effects in the wide-screen version. The editing, by the way, is by Walter Smith - D.W. Griffith's old editor. The film is in excellent condition.