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VV 1-23-97
P 62

FILM

The Unknown

Directed by Tod Browning
At Walter Reade Theater
January 24 through 26

At its release in 1927, Tod Browning's silent circus of pain, *The Unknown*, was called "an offense ... to every normal-minded moviegoer." The evaluation holds true today. The acceptable ceiling for big-screen depiction of viscera has since been raised, but this tale of a gypsy circus girl afraid of men's hands (paws, she calls them) and the armless knife thrower who lovingly stalks her still provides its fair share of chills.

Browning's identification with carnies has a biographical angle (he ran away and joined the circus), but, as in his more frequently seen *Freaks*, *The Unknown's* disquiet (and eagerness) about bodily deformity is vouchsafed by putting the genuine article onscreen. Here that's Lon Chaney (playing Alonzo the Armless) who, silent-star lore has it, spent off-camera hours on the set in a circulation-restricting truss that produced the illusion of limblessness, to better understand his character's "pain." Tall tales about Chaney abound; onscreen his blankly cracked face and single-minded pursuit of the phobic Nanon (an 18-year-old Joan Crawford) give off creepy vibes of mad love and deep masochism, undeniably compelling even when they tilt toward melodrama. Similarly, the images of Alonzo in an easy chair chain-smoking with his feet are vintage Browning: sick, funny, and clinical.

The Unknown runs with *Plane Crazy*, the first Mickey and Minnie silent ever produced (albeit released after *Steamboat Willie*), animated in its entirety by a single artist (Ub Iwerks). Both works have been rescored by the Alloy Orchestra, who've been providing live new music for old silents from *Nosferatu* to *Man With a Movie Camera*. *The Unknown* would be interesting onscreen even without Alloy's contribution, but the live accompaniment definitely separates the fun and fascinating from the merely curious.

—GARY DAUPHIN

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