
KITCHEN SINK CREEPS

WEEK 3.

Never Take Sweets from a Stranger (1960)

Directed by Cyril Frankel
Screenplay by John Hunter
Based on the play *The Pony Trap* by Roger Garis
Produced by Anthony Hinds
Cinematography by Freddie Francis
Edited by Alfred Cox and James Needs
Music by Elizabeth Lutyens

It's curious that in 1960 that same company at the height of its powers would choose to make a film, which eschewed the velvet cloak flapping vampire, stalking zombie or werewolf howling at the moon, for an altogether more disturbing kind of monster – that of the child sex abuser.

In light of recent high profile court cases like Jeffery Epstein and the controversies which still seem to hound HRH Prince Andrew, it seems fitting to re-examine Hammer's most taboo of films, with its themes of power, corruption, and paedophilia.

Based on a nineteen fifty-four play *The Pony Trap* by Roger Garis, *Never Take Sweets from a Stranger* (1960) wouldn't have exactly seemed like a good fit for Hammer.

Though the studio wasn't exclusively producing horror films, they released a superb selection of thrillers and war films for instance, it wasn't known for its risk-taking capacity.

They worked mainly on already established successful formulas - repeated elements which they knew had worked before, and often posters or promotion would be considered long before a single frame of film was even shot. Though now, thankfully the sexual abuse of children, is a more open subject of discussion and prosecutions of perpetrators more likely, back in the sixties, it was still a deeply un-talked of topic.

The word paedophile was seldom used except in the world of behavioural science or psychiatry, and the notion of the sexual predator was often reduced to the all-encompassing and non-committal 'dirty old man'. Garis's play for instance was apparently based on an encounter his daughter and friend had had with one such 'rain coat wearing pervert'.

So, it's difficult to see what Hammer head honcho James 'I'm not an artist, I'm a businessman' Carreras was thinking when he agreed to greenlight this 'message picture' about such distinctly 'sordid' and 'distasteful' subject matter

The film begins with a pre-credit sequence. Two young girls Jean Carter (Janina Faye) and her playmate Lucille (Francis Green) are accosted and coaxed with candy into the house of an eerily silent older man. As we shift into the credits the camera focusses on an empty child's swing which moves solemnly in the breeze, the old man's house just visible in the background, towers above the lush greenery, like a fairy-tale ogre's castle.

Never Take Sweets from a Stranger (1960) CONT...

Elizabeth Lutyens score is both innocent and ominous giving us a foreboding hint of the darkly complex tale which is about to unfold.

As the action starts proper, the first thing we see is a bronze bust of the aforementioned old man, prominent in the foyer of a theatre as the audience files out.

Given the modern knee-jerk anger aimed at any hint of impropriety concerning children now, one of the most shocking aspects of *Never* is how it reminds us how much the problem of child abuse has become a societal issue only recently.

The exposure of celebrity predators like disgraced pop star Gary Glitter AKA Paul Gadd or the late DJ and charity fundraiser Jimmy Saville or the allegations aimed at Michael Jackson in recent times have done much to broaden the issue into a national or even international debate, yet for many years, the problem, at least in the hands of the mainstream press was seldom taken seriously.

Take for instance ex-Rolling Stone Bill Wyman publicly ‘courting’ 13-year-old Mandy Smith when he was 47. This was as recent as 1984. The story made headline news, yet for many, it was treated more as a beery pub joke than a case of possible indecent assault.

For a 1960 film to be tackling this subject – one of the most forbidden - in an era where much cinema was still struggling to acknowledge the physical existence of toilets, let alone the sexual abuse of children, underlines the arguable bravery of such a project.

Director Cyril Frankel better remembered for bawdy British comedies like *School for Scoundrels* (1960), military knockabout caper *On the Fiddle* (1961), and batty supernatural effort *The Witches* (1966), treats his subject matter seriously and shows a considerable amount of sensitivity.

There are of course sensationalist elements, the title screams exploitation and this is a Hammer film after all, but largely this brooding and disturbing take on this difficult business is handled with level-headedness, honesty, and subtlety.

The movie’s final moments though afford us the most suspense. Spurred on by yet another ‘victory’ in the courts, and emboldened by his seeming immunity from prosecution, the creepily voiceless Olderberry, redoubles his abusive efforts and pursues Jean and Lucille once again. In an excruciatingly close approximation of the silent slasher killers to come, the old man stalks his prey slowly but relentlessly, detestably oozing his now barley contained unhealthy urges.

Momentarily, the girls think they’ve gotten away in an abandoned boat, but terrifyingly, their escape is cut short when it is revealed that the dingy is still moored to the embankment.

The look on Olderberry’s face as he reels his helpless victims back to the shore is oppressively and disquietingly horrific.

The film ends on a more positive note but not without its fair share of tragedy.

In a denouement that echoes the real-life Saville case, the community and the authorities acknowledge their culpability way too late and though Olderberry is finally brought to justice, the townsfolk have a dead child on their hands.

Though it bombed at the box office, making it one of the studios least successful ventures, partly due to the BBFC's enforced X certificate, and the public's discomfort with such material, it remains a powerful bit of storytelling, a brave critique of the corrupt rich and their insidious habits, whose wealth places them above the law.

Never Take Sweets from a Stranger is quaint and possibly naïve in some respects, in many ways it belongs where it is, in the fuzzy changing landscape between a buttoned-down corseted fifties and a free love, mini-skirted yet to be experienced future which was only a few years away but completely unimaginable.

The performances are serviceable, more than adequate, but never outstanding and the method of delivery is absolutely of its time, with nary a hint of the kind of the more progressive European stylings that were piquing with the likes of Clouzot, Hitchcock, and Bava, etc.

But, it is a beautifully presented piece, a clean and sharp visually pleasing monochrome snapshot filtered through the ever-keen-eyed lens of cinematographer Freddie Francis.

It is also bleak and uncommonly candid about a deeply serious issue, we are made to think about every parent's most unthinkable nightmare yet we are never manipulated or exploited. Instead, we are drawn into a family tempest that batters through courtroom drama, satire, and a nerve-jangling thriller.

And while it may never occupy the same space in my heart as the vivid horror dreamscapes of *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961), *The Reptile* (1966) or a host of other more recognisable Hammer favourites, it remains a daring, slightly icky, but no less important piece of work, an oddity at odds with the studios own run of features and the public's refusal to face up to an all too real problem, which unfortunately probably isn't going to go away.

Séance on a Wet Afternoon (1964)

Directed by Brian Forbes
Written by Brian Forbes
Based on the novel of the same name by Mark McShane
Produced by Richard Attenborough and Brian Forbes
Cinematography by Gerry Turpin
Edited by Derek York
Music by John Barry

Richard Attenborough

"...Gandhi (1982), a lavish biopic of an ascetic life, which encouraged its audience to boo a chorus of Edwardian pantomime villains and congratulate themselves for their own liberalism..."

Shepperton Babylon
Matthew Sweet

"Attenborough was born for sleaze and terror. Observe him as Pinky in Brighton Rock (1947), elucidating his contempt for Carol Marsh into the microphone of a make-your-own-record booth, thriller by the cleverness of his act of deferred cruelty."

Shepperton Babylon
Matthew Sweet

- It presents a very British kind of misery
- Dark, dank and oppressive
- Part of its appeal is its use of subtext
- The relationship between the two main protagonists is arguably the most disturbing aspect of the film

Séance on a Wet Afternoon (1964)

“Study his mock-heroic abduction of a little girl in Séance on a Wet Afternoon; the mildewed tenderness he employs in an attempt to assure her that she will come to no harm.”

Shepperton Babylon
Matthew Sweet

- Was a commercial failure
- Alongside the earlier *Life for Ruth* (1962), *Séance* led to the collapse of the Allied Film Company

Bette Davis (1908 –1989)

- Born Ruth Elizabeth Davis
- She began a stage career at an early age
- She made her Broadway debut in 1929
- She moved to Hollywood and gained a contract with Universal Studios
- However, Carl Laemmle didn't really know what to do with her and considered firing her - *"about as much sex appeal as Slim Summerville"*
- After more than 20 film roles Davis finally won critical acclaim in *Of Human Bondage* (1934)

I think Bette Davis would probably have been burned as a witch if she had lived two or three hundred years ago. She gives the curious feeling of being charged with power which can find no ordinary outlet"

E. Arnot Robertson

- During the war, she sold war bonds
- She was also the only white actor to perform to black regiments
- She set up and helped run the Hollywood Canteen – ensuring that big names would make appearances to entertain the troops
- She became a committed Democrat
- She refused the title role in *Mildred Pierce* (1945), a role for which Joan Crawford won an Academy Award
- By 1961 her career was in decline, she had appeared in a Broadway version of *Night of the Iguana*, but after many mediocre reviews she left the production early
- She accepted the role of Jane Hudson in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), believing it could potentially tap into the same audiences that had flocked to *Psycho* (1960)
- She negotiated a contract which allowed her 10% of the world-wide profits of the gross profits as well as her original fee

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane (1962)

Robert Aldrich

- Apparently, Crawford suggested Davis for the role
- The two stars maintained publicly that there was no feud between them
- However, Robert Aldrich (possibly fueling publicity) reported that *"It's proper to say that they really detested each other, but they behaved absolutely perfectly."*

The Nanny (1965)**The Plot**

- A young boy returns from a special school for disturbed children
- He has been blamed for the accidental death of his younger sister
- His parents are informed that he has a hatred of older women
- He particularly mistrusts The Nanny (Bette Davis)
- He becomes convinced she is trying to kill him but is not believed by his parents