
I WAS A TEENAGE SURFER ZOMBIE FROM MARS

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CULT CINEMA

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Week 8: Sing Something Strange

Richard O'Brien

- Born, 25th March 1942, in Gloucestershire, England
- When he was a child, his family moved to New Zealand
- Later, he worked as a barber at a shop near the Embassy Theatre
- It was there that he saw many late-night cult/science fiction/horror pictures – these would later inspire him when writing *Rocky*
- To improve his skills, he attended a method acting class
- He wound up in a touring production of *Hair* and he eventually moved to London
- In 1972, he met Jim Sharman, who cast him in a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*
- He also later cast him as Willie the alien in a production of Sam Shepherd's *The Unseen Hand*, at the Royal Court Theatre (Upstairs)
- Meanwhile, O'Brien had begun to put together his own cult/fantasy/schlock horror musical, originally titled *They Came from Denton High*
- Sharman helped O'Brien to stage a production at the Royal Court Theater Upstairs, suggesting a name change to *The Rocky Horror Show*

The Rocky Horror Show

- It rapidly became a hit, and quickly moved to the 200 seater Chelsea Classic Cinema, then the 500 seater Kings Road Theatre
- There soon followed productions in L.A, Sydney, Madrid, Copenhagen and Broadway
- The show encompassed rock 'n' roll songs, B-movie imagery and references, transvestites from outer space and Frank N Furter – a sort of camp Frankenstein

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975)

- Directed by Jim Sharman
- Screenplay by Richard O'Brien and Jim Sharman
- Based on *The Rocky Horror Show* by Richard O'Brien
- Produced by Lou Adler and Michael White
- Cinematography by Peter Suschitzky
- Edited by Graeme Clifford
- Songs by Richard O'Brien
- Music by Richard Hartley

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) CONT...

- There's no doubt that Richard O'Brien's subversively camp midnight musical about transvestites from outer space, certainly does deserve its place in the pantheon of outsider cinema.
- In many ways, alongside productions like *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960) and De Palma's *Phantom of Paradise* (1974), it has become a sort of fishnet-clad shorthand for what a cult movie *is*.
- *Rocky*, for all its cross-dressing, horror, and sexual tolerance, was able, largely due to its iconic musical numbers and transferable appeal, to transcend the 'minority interest' trap, so many other counter culture wonders fall into.

The Sequel

- The idea began, at least at script stage, as a straight-up sequel, *Rocky Horror Shows His Heels* sought to bring Frank 'N' Furter and Rocky back from the grave in a convoluted plot involving a pregnant Janet and a gay Dr Scott. When that idea was rejected it was reworked into *The Brad and Janet Show*, which eventually became *Shock Treatment*.

Shock Treatment (1981)

- To save money, the production was shifted to England and director Jim Sharman and O'Brien were faced with a tighter than tight schedule and the project quickly developed into a full-blown satire on the media, utilising the closed studio set-up, no-location option they were faced with.
- Consumer culture and the burgeoning early eighties me, me, me society, are fearlessly attacked, and regardless of its humour and jazz-hands sparkle its vicious swipe at prime-time telly and late-twentieth-century America, in a sense feels closer akin to Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) than other contemporary musicals
- The story surreally takes place within the confines of a game show set come mental health unit, and the LA style obsession with therapy and self-help is lampooned mercilessly.
- Doctors and nurses morph effortlessly into celebs in an on-point and devastatingly prescient summation of the reality star generation, and although there's no way that O'Brien and co could have predicted the mess of a Trump presidency, it certainly seems to warn against placing power in the hands of the vacuous TV star
- Its brilliantly colourful art design merges the padded cell and straight jacket aesthetic with star-spangled costumes and larger than life grotesques, who all form dizzying components of the mentalist showbiz on offer.
- The flashing lights and rapturous audience applause segue into the creator's custom brand of rock 'n' roll doo-wop perversions, providing us with a killer soundtrack, cutting, complex and boldly exotic.
- The stand out number is the brilliant 'Bitchin' in the Kitchen', a super-smart look at rampant consumerism, tracing its effects back to the joyless bedrooms of white middle-class suburbia
- But for all its excellent musicianship, lyrical smarts and obvious connection to *Rocky* in the form of Patricia Quinn, Charles Gray and Little Nell, what impresses most about *Shock Treatment* is just how cinematic it feels.

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- *Shock Treatment* though, was developed *for* the screen, without having the necessity of shoehorning in pre-existing set pieces or ideas. In short, though not as immediately accessible as *Rocky*, it is undoubtedly a better ‘film’, in that it understands more fully, and wholly embraces the medium which it sits in
 - Ironically, this works because of the production’s deliberate staginess, however, unlike *Rocky*, which, despite its more ridiculous qualities, exudes a cheap, decaying, dank feel, the theatricality of *Treatment* is heightened to the point, where it can *only* work successfully on celluloid. While the temptation to reverse engineer this into to a stage show ala *Rocky*, has been too much for some to resist, it feels hard to imagine this in any other format.
 - The sharp editing, and the show within a show idea, which incorporates lighting within lighting and camera work within camera work, gives the production an ahead of the game meta feel.
 - As well as this, it is truly odd in a way that *Rocky*, even with all its counter-culture referencing, never will be.
 - The casting, aside from O’Brien’s usual gang of freaks, lends the film some quirky and dark flourishes. The alternative comedy wave offered the likes of motor mouth Ruby Wax and of course Rik Mayall.
 - At the time, he was best known as Kevin Turvey, a TV sketch show character from *A Kick up the Eighties*, and of course his odd cameo in *An American Werewolf in London*
 - Inevitably, *Shock Treatment* does sail slightly closer to its predecessor in some scenes more than others. Its ensemble cast led by an outsider nutter, does feel like the basic *Rocky* set up has been transposed, and ‘Farley’s Song’, in particular, re-treads the old formula with its long dining table shot and group lyrical exchanges.
 - Swap out Tim Curry for a talking TV and basically, it’s an ‘Eddie’s Teddy’ reprise.
 - But overwhelmingly, this is not the film many people wanted it to be including a seventeen-year-old me, who was at first reviled by its non-*Rocky*-ness.
 - But I and they were wrong.
 - This is a better thing than perhaps we deserved and it is better, because it doesn’t quite know what it’s doing.
 - The cobbled-together nature of its existence, coupled with enforced geographical changes and unfamiliar filming practices, enhance rather than debilitate.

Shock Treatment CONT...

- Despite its inclusion of Brad and Janet and the other obvious connections, it's a mistake to see this picture as anything other than a unique collaboration between O'Brien, Sharman and their spot-on players.
- And while this will inevitably be seen by most as something lesser, forever destined to be the support film at Rocky Horror Conventions, essentially it has less to do with that all-consuming franchise and more in common with mid-career John Waters films like Hairspray.

Brian De Palma

- Split screen techniques
- Unusual camera angles
- Long takes
- 360-degree camera pans
- Slow motion
- Often accused of being very 'gimmicky'
- Has been accused of being 'perverse misogynist'

The Phantom of the Paradise (1974)

- Directed by Brian De Palma
- Written by Brian De Palma
- Produced by Edward Pressman
- Cinematography by Larry Pizer
- Edited by Paul Hirsch
- Music by Paul Williams

Plot

- A naïve composer is tricked into giving away his music, framed and sent to prison
- He is later mutilated in a record press
- After a nervous breakdown, he takes on a new persona and exacts his revenge

Paul Williams

- Williams began his musical career writing for Biff Rose
- He would collaborate with many people and even contributed to films like *The Muppet Movie*
- He was also an actor, starring in a host of films from 1965 onwards

The Phantom of the Paradise (1974)

- A satisfying, cosmic blend of rock n roll, rock opera, Frankenstein, Faust, The Phantom of the Opera and 70s kitsch

"Though you may anticipate a plot turn, it's impossible to guess what the next scene will look like or what its rhythm will be. De Palma's timing is sometimes wantonly unpredictable and dampening, but mostly it has a lift to it. You practically get a kinetic charge from the breakneck wit he put into 'Phantom;' it isn't just that the picture has vitality but that one can feel the tremendous kick the director got out of making it."

Pauline Kael

