



EXPERIMENTA

# Thundercrack!

+ intro by Jane Giles, author of *'Scala Cinema 1978-1993'*

A great many Londoners of a certain age remember Curt McDowell's notorious art/trash/porn crossover with genuine fondness. Made in 1975, it became a monthly staple at the legendary Scala Cinema in King's Cross throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, usually double- or triple-billed with similarly outré fare by Stephen Sayadian (*Café Flesh*, 1982), Doris Wishman (*Let Me Die a Woman*, 1978) or Edward D. Wood Jr (*Glen or Glenda*, 1953), and attending it became something of a rite of passage for more adventurous cinephiles, who were best advised not to look too closely at what fellow audience members might be doing in neighbouring seats.

Scripted by McDowell's sometime mentor and lover George Kuchar, *Thundercrack!* fuses the delirious melodrama of a Douglas Sirk or Tennessee Williams with a creaky old-dark-house setting (only the hairstyles betray its decade; the black-and-white cinematography and blatantly cardboard exteriors could have come from a 1930s cheapie). The house in question, cheerfully named Prairie Blossom, is owned by Gert Hammond (Marion Eaton), who during the course of a long and stormy night ends up offering shelter to a variety of visitors who look as though they might be on their way to a John Waters audition (Waters, unsurprisingly, is a fan). While Gert delivers autobiographical monologues, her guests (including an escaped gorilla) end up having sex with each other for a variety of reasons: desire, recreation or as a bargaining chip. Intriguingly, two characters are named Chandler and Bing, which has led to unconfirmed rumours that Matthew Perry's character in the perennially popular 1990s sitcom *Friends* is a walking *Thundercrack!* reference.

Predictably, from a commercial perspective *Thundercrack!* fell resoundingly between multiple stools – it was too daft for the horror crowd, too overwrought for the drama crowd, and too filthy for just about everyone. The frequent combining of soul-baringly confessional dialogue with the kind of hardcore sex scenes that are normally performed in grunting near-silence seems to have been particularly off-putting, as indeed was McDowell's admirably catholic (if far from Catholic) intermingling of gay, straight and bestial copulation, only the last of which is simulated.

But for those on *Thundercrack!*'s highly individual wavelength, it's an absolute hoot, and this restoration will be a particular revelation to anyone who struggled to make out much of Kuchar's reputedly hilarious dialogue over the Scala's less than state-of-the-art speakers and the film's own poor-quality recording. Eaton has the stage-trained chops to convincingly evoke Blanche DuBois in her study of a woman driven sexually demented through loneliness, but many of her colleagues were clearly cast more for their willingness to rise to somewhat different technical challenges.

Until now, *Thundercrack!* has only been available on video courtesy of VHS and VHS-sourced releases of dubious provenance. A 30th-anniversary DVD was announced in 2004, and five years later Synapse Films promised a high-definition restoration for the 35th. It finally emerged in late 2015, a full 40 years on, but it was well worth the wait. Much of the delay was caused by some

considerable restoration challenges. The original negative and magnetic sound recordings vanished decades ago, only five prints were ever struck and only one of them preserved the film at its full length. Much projected, it was in less than optimum condition, but footage and frames from the other prints (one of which contained unique material, duly spliced back in) and additional digital restoration has produced some remarkable results. *Thundercrack!* will always look like what it is – an extremely low-budget black-and-white 16mm semi-underground film – but unless the negative turns up it's hard to imagine a better presentation.

In life, McDowell rarely settled for less than an outrageously impressive package, and it's good to see the same principle being so firmly applied here.

**Michael Brooke, *Sight & Sound*, March 2016**

### **A contemporary review**

Curt McDowell and George Kuchar's *Thundercrack!* has become a staple trash/underground/gay cult classic – featured every week at the Saturday midnight special at West Los Angeles' notorious Nuart Theatre (a venue which also promoted the films of John Waters and Tobe Hooper). From its inception this was a curious and contradictory enterprise: its makers set out to combine an 'underground' revamp of *The House on Haunted Hill* – i.e., to parody a parody – with an 'underground' porn film of the hard-core variety. To a degree it succeeds in both ambitions; and although the nature and duration of the porn sequences dictated the choice of a cast whose thespian abilities are to say the least minimal, the movie undeniably has the conviction of its own tastelessness.

Its parodies and burlesques have been taken up second-hand from the cheaper schlock and horror films – inversions of traditional sexuality, of traditional middle-American hospitality, and of the whole syntax of suburban interaction – and these are often hilariously handled. (The tone is set early on when Marion Eaton, drinking alone in a nylon slip, hears her doorbell ring and rushes to 'dress' before answering it. She sets a cheap wig on her head, then decides to make herself throw up – lest the unseen guest detect her state of inebriation. In the process, her wig tumbles into the toilet bowl, but she simply slaps it back on her head and staggers to the door, mouthing platitudes of welcome.)

*Thundercrack!*'s particular endeavour – splicing slapstick and hard-core sex scenes into a single viable package – descends directly from the costumed camp repertory of polysexual stage collectives like the Flaming Creatures, the Cockettes, the Cycle Sluts and Les Ballets Trockadero. In *Thundercrack!*, inflatable dolls, French ticklers, suction tubes, salamis, giant vibrators and dildos may conspire to make the viewer feel a relentless voyeur, but what really seals his fate is a pervasive sense that the cast – ripping through their wretched script at a frantic pace – seem to be having a slightly better, more stoned and way-out time than any spectator possibly could.

**Cynthia Rose, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1980**

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## THUNDERCRACK!

*Director:* Curt McDowell  
*Production Company:* Thomas Bros. Film Studio  
*Producers:* John Thomas, Charles Thomas  
*Assistant Director:* Margo O'Connor  
*Script:* George Kuchar  
*Original story:* Mark Ellinger, Curt McDowell  
*Photography:* Curt McDowell  
*Lighting:* George Kuchar  
*Gaffer/Production Photographer:* Gail Lawrence  
*Miniatures/Special Effects:* Curt McDowell, George Kuchar  
*Editor:* Curt McDowell  
*Coiffure/Make-up for Ms Eaton:* Mr Dominic  
*Title Design:* Holly Hood  
*Optical Printing:* Chuck Hood  
*Music Composed/Performed by:* Mark Ellinger  
*Sound Recording:* Roy Ramsing  
*Music Recording:* Steve Malcolm  
*Special Sound Effects:* Mark Ellinger

## Cast

Marion Eaton (*Mrs Gert Hammond*)  
George Kuchar (*Bing*)  
Melinda McDowell (*Sash*)  
Mookie Blodgett (*Chandler*)  
Maira Benson (*Roo*)  
Rick Johnson (*Toydy*)  
Ken Scudder (*Bond*)  
Maggie Pyle (*Willene*)  
Bernie Boyle (*Señor Tostada*)  
Mark Ellinger (*Charlie Hammond*)  
Virginia Giritlian (*Sarah Lou Phillips*)  
Michelle Gross (*hula hoop girl*)  
Laurie Hendricks (*Simon Cassidy's mother*)  
Billy Paradise (*Mrs Harlan*)  
John Thomas (*Simon Cassidy*)  
Pamela Primate (*'Medusa'*)  
Margo O'Connor, Gael Sikula, Bernie Boyle, Billy Paradise (*guests at cocktail and wedding parties*)

USA 1975  
159 mins

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## REGULAR PROGRAMME

### Relaxed Screening: Stand Clear of the Closing Doors

Tue 24 Aug 18:00

### Woman with a Movie Camera: Preview: Souad + pre-recorded Q&A with director Ayten Amin

Tue 24 Aug 18:00

### Terror Vision: Dr Terror's House of Horrors

Thu 26 Aug 20:40

### Woman with a Movie Camera: UK Premiere: Copilot (Die Frau des Piloten) + Q&A with director Anne Zohra Berrached

Mon 6 Sep 20:25

### African Odysseys: No Place Like Home (Redux) + Q&A with Justine Henzell

Sat 11 Sep 14:00

### Seniors' Free Matinee: The Fallen Idol + intro and Q&A

Mon 13 Sep 14:00

### Gallivant + intro by Eden and Andrew Kötting

Sat 18 Sep 14:30

### Short Films by Eden and Andrew Kötting + Andrew Kötting in Conversation with film curator Gareth Evans

Sat 18 Sep 18:00

### Projecting the Archive: Flesh and Blood + intro by Jason Morell, actor and son of Joan Greenwood

Tue 21 Sep 18:10

### Art in the Making: Cinema Architecture and Atmosphere + discussion

Thu 23 Sep 18:10

### Member Picks: Moonstruck

Fri 24 Sep 18:05

### Silent Cinema: Nasty Women: A Comic Tribute + intro by curator Bryony Dixon

Sun 26 Sep 12:40

### Relaxed Screening: Seeing The Unseen (Að sjá hið ósýnilega)

Tue 28 Sep 18:00

### Terror Vision: Altered States

Thu 30 Sep 21:00

## IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

### UK Premiere: I've Been Trying to Tell You

+ Q&A with Alasdair McLellan and Bob Stanley

Fri 3 Sep 18:30, 21:00

### Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 6 Sep 18:00

### Black to Front + Q&A with special guests TBA

Tue 7 Sep 18:00

### Doctor Who: The Evil of the Daleks (animated)

Sun 12 Sep 12:00

### Preview: Sweetheart + Q&A with director Marley Morrison

Mon 13 Sep 17:50

### Prime Suspect: 30th Anniversary (First Series Complete Screening)

Sun 19 Sep 14:00

### Lynda La Plante in Conversation

Sun 19 Sep 18:45

### 60th Anniversary: Whistle Down the Wind

+ actor Hayley Mills in Conversation

Sun 3 Oct 12:00

## THE FILMS OF SAINT ETIENNE

### This Is Tomorrow + intro by Bob Stanley and Paul Kelly

Fri 3 Sep 14:30

### Asunder + intro by Esther Johnson and Bob Stanley

Sat 4 Sep 12:00

### Finisterre + Q&A with Bob Stanley and Pete Wiggs

Sat 4 Sep 15:00

### How We Used to Live + Q&A with Pete Wiggs and Travis Elborough

Sat 4 Sep 17:20

### Saint Etienne: Shorts Programme + intro by

Paul Kelly and Pete Wiggs

Sun 5 Sep 13:00

### Lawrence of Belgravia + Q&A with Paul Kelly and Lawrence

Sun 5 Sep 15:30

### What Have You Done Today Mervyn Day? + Q&A with

Pete Wiggs and Paul Kelly

Sun 5 Sep 18:30

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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