



DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS

Opera

Opera

Director: Dario Argento
Production Companies: Associazione Direttori Cineproduzioni, Cecchi Gori Group Tiger Cinematografica
Production Company: Dacfilm *
Produced in collaboration with: RAI
Executive Producers: Ferdinando Caputo
Producer: Dario Argento
Unit Managers: Olivier Gérard, Fabrizio Diaz
Production Supervisors: Alessandro Calosci, Verena Baldeo
Screenplay: Dario Argento, Franco Ferrini
Based on an original idea by: Dario Argento
Director of Photography: Ronnie Taylor
Camera Operator: Antonio Scaramuzza
Special Effects: Renato Agostini
Animatronics: Sergio Stivaletti
Editor: Franco Fraticelli
Production Designer: Davide Bassan
Art Director (Regio Theatre, Parma): Gian Maurizio Fercioni
Set Dresser: Valeria Paoloni
Costume Designer: Francesca Lia Morandini
Chief Make-up Artist: Rosario Prestopino
Make-up Artist: Franco Casagni
Hairdresser: Ferdinando Merolla
Music: Brian Eno, Roger Eno, Claudio Simonetti, Bill Wyman, Terry Taylor, Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini
Sound Effects: Luciano Anzellotti
ADR Director: Robert Rietti
Recorded by: International Recording Studios (Rome)
Recorded by [English Language Version]: Gambit International
Dubbing Mixer: Romano Pampaloni
Cast:
Cristina Marsillach (*Betty*)
Ian Charleson (*Marco/Mark*)
Urbano Barberini (*Inspector Alan Santini*)
Antonella Vitale (*Marion*)
Daria Nicolodi (*Myra*)
William McNamara (*Stefan Obrini*)
Coralina Cataldi Tassoni (*Giulia/Julia*)
Barbara Cupisti (*Signora Albertini*)
Antonio Juorio (*Baddini*)
Carola Stagnaro (*Alma's mother*)
Francesca Cassola (*Alma*)
Maurizio Garrone (*Maurizio*)
Cristina Giachino (*Maria*)
Gyorivanyi Gyorgy (*Miro*)
Bjorn Hammer (*1st cop*)
Peter Pitsch (*Diva's assistant*)
Sebastiano Somma (*2nd cop*)
Michele Soavi (*Inspector Daniele Soavi*) *
Italy 1987
107 mins

* Uncredited

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

+ intro by Michael Blyth, season curator (Monday 8 May only)

Opera is, arguably, Dario Argento's last truly great film – it all gets a bit patchy after this and although there were some memorable moments still to come, no other film would be as wholly satisfying as *Opera*. It marks the end of a remarkable run of films that began in 1970 with *The Bird With the Crystal Plummage* (1970), a culmination in many ways of the themes and obsessions that had informed Argento's career from the off.

Opera understudy Betty (Cristina Marsillach) gets her big break when the arrogant star Mara Cecova (not seen on screen, but Argento had wanted Vanessa Redgrave to play the part) is injured in a car accident. So Betty is thrust in the spotlight, taking over the role of Lady Macbeth in a revisionist adaptation of Verdi's opera at the Parma opera House by British director Marco (Ian Charleson, in his last film role before his untimely death from complications caused by AIDS in 1990). But Betty has attracted the attention of sadistic killer who ties her up, attaching needles to her face to prevent her from closing her eyes while he first kills her boyfriend Stefano (William McNamara) and later her dresser Giulia (Coralina Cataldi-Tassoni). The killer, who she barely sees, triggers memories of the murder of her mother when she was a child. Inspector Alan Santini (Urbano Barberini) is on the case but is unable to prevent the murder of Betty's agent Mira (Daria Nicolodi) and Marco becomes convinced that the ravens being used in the production may have witnessed Giulia's death and the killing of several of their number. Argento had form in using wildlife as witnesses to murder (see the insects in *Phenomena* (1985)) and in one of those delirious turns that we've come to expect and love, on opening night, he has Marco unleash the surviving ravens on the audience who descend on the killer...

As ever the plot really isn't up to much – it's the usual standard issue *giallo* psycho-thriller with all the head-scratching eccentricity Argento is famed for – but the set pieces are magnificent and for once, it's an Argento film that's actually about something – about several things in fact. It's a film about watching, seeing and voyeurism, about the relationship between art and violence and particularly about the relationship between cinemas and more 'reputable' forms or art. It's arguably Argento's most self-reflexive film, as much about him, his career and the standing of his films in the eyes of the critical establishment as it is about a mad serial killer. The film's most iconic image, of a terrified Betty being forced to watch the horrors inflicted on her friends by a row of pins on her cheek, preventing her from closing them came, Argento claimed, from a jokey reference he would make to being annoyed that audiences kept looking away from his horror highlights. Argento also based the story on his own experiences trying to stage a production of Giuseppe Verdi's *Macbeth*, Ian Charleson being the most obvious stand-in for the director in any of his films.

As you'd expect, *Opera* is full of the bravura camera balletics that we've come to expect from Argento, his cameras obsessively picking out tiny details here and there, his restless Steadicam barely standing still for a second. The set pieces are as breath-taking as you'd expect. Daria Nicolodi's relationship with

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DARIO ARGENTO: DOORS INTO DARKNESS

The Cat o' Nine Tails (Il gatto a nove code)

Mon 1 May 18:20; Sat 13 May 11:20; Thu 16 May 20:45

The Bird with the Crystal Plumage (L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo)

Tue 2 May 18:10; Sat 13 May 20:45; Tue 16 May 21:00

The Five Days (Le cinque giornate)

Tue 2 May 20:35; Fri 19 May 18:15

Four Flies on Grey Velvet (4 mosche di velluto grigio)

Wed 3 May 20:30; Sat 6 May 17:40

Two Evil Eyes (segment: The Black Cat) (Due occhi diabolici: Il gatto nero)

Wed 4 May 21:00; Mon 22 May 20:55

The Stendhal Syndrome (La sindrome di Stendhal)

Fri 5 May 18:05; Sun 7 May 18:20

Deep Red (Profondo rosso)

Fri 5 May 20:35; Sat 13 May 15:00 (+ Q&A with Dario Argento); Tue 23 May 18:10

Do You Like Hitchcock? (Ti piace Hitchcock?)

Sat 6 May 20:40; Tue 30 May 20:40

Trauma

Mon 8 May 15:50; Sun 28 May 15:40

Opera

Mon 8 May 18:30 (+ intro by Michael Blyth, season curator); Sat 27 May 20:45

Dark Glasses (Occhiali neri)

Wed 10 May 21:00; Wed 31 May 20:40

Suspiria

Fri 12 May 20:40 (+ intro by Dario Argento); Sat 20 May 18:10

Tenebrae (Tenebre)

Sat 13 May 18:20 (+ intro by Dario Argento); Wed 17 May 20:45; Tue 23 May 20:50

Inferno

Mon 15 May 20:45; Sat 20 May 20:45

Phenomena

Fri 19 May 20:45; Mon 29 May 15:50

The Phantom of the Opera (Il fantasma dell'opera)

Sat 20 May 15:50; Fri 26 May 20:40

Sleepless (Non ho sonno)

Sun 21 May 18:10; Sat 27 May 17:45

Mother of Tears – The Third Mother (La terza madre)

Wed 24 May 20:40; Mon 29 May 18:40

The Card Player (Il cartaio)

Thu 25 May 20:30; Sun 28 May 18:20

Strange Phenomena: Argento Season

Introduction

This video will be available to watch for free on BFI YouTube from 19.30 on Mon 17 Apr

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Argento had just come to an end and she was reluctant to accept her role in the film until she read the extraordinary way that she would meet her demise. Elsewhere the not-terribly-convincing fake ravens make a spectacular circuit around the opera house, finally revealing the identity of the killer and there's a memorably grim moment when the killer tries to retrieve an incriminating bracelet that a victim has just swallowed (you have to be there really...)

Inevitably, Argento references Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* (a book he himself would adapt as *Il fantasma dell'opera/The Phantom of the Opera* (1998)), with its falling stage light replacing the famous chandelier and the killer's obsession with a singer. It's a more effective take on a story that Argento first encountered as a child via the 1943 film version directed by Arthur Lubin ('I was very young, and I was on vacation with my family, and there was a retrospective of old films, and one of them was *The Phantom of the Opera* with Claude Rains that was in colour. It was something very important for my career because I began to follow these stories that were morbid') than his underwhelming revisionist take on the tale.

Argento tries to shoehorn in some insight into the killer's inner workings via a poorly made throbbing brain – which is a bit unnecessary and frankly not a great effect – and the film really doesn't need such niceties. It's a film that playfully dances backwards and forwards between the rarefied world of 'high art' and the scurrilous world of the horror film. The bursts of heavy metal music – an annoying tic that Argento had picked up making his previous film, *Phenomena* – might at first seem as at odds with the lavishly opera as the cruel violence is with the sumptuous settings – but the version of *Macbeth* that Marco is trying to stage looks like a heavy metal, *Mad Max* (1979) version, set in some post-apocalyptic setting with set design that wouldn't have been out of place in the most outrageous of 80s metal promo videos.

Curiously, Argento seems to borrow his ending from Thomas Harris' novel *Red Dragon* (filmed in 1986 by Michael Man as *Manhunter* and again by Brett Ratner as *Red Dragon* in 2002). In Harris' book, the killer, Francis Dollarhyde, is thought to have perished in a fire only to unexpectedly pop up again some time later to attack the FBI agent pursuing him. Virtually the same thing happens here, agent Will Graham replaced by Betty, but otherwise it plays out pretty much the same. What Harris doesn't have is the peculiar coda – cut from early English language versions retitled *Terror at the Opera* by distributors who probably couldn't believe what they were seeing – in which a traumatised Betty wanders through the grass, finds a lizard and waxes lyrical about the power of nature.

Beautifully photographed by British cinematographer Ronnie Taylor and directed with Argento's trademark precision and eye for gorgeous detail, *Opera* hasn't always had the love it deserves, coming after the oddball but enjoyable *Phenomena* and at standing the peak of the director's filmography, just before his long and dispiriting decline. It's certainly far better than anything that would follow, a last hurrah before something started to go horribly wrong and he would struggle to find anything like his old form. *Opera* may not stand alongside the real gems like *Deep Red* (1975), *Suspiria* (1977), *Inferno* (1980) or *Tenebre* (1982) but it's still a minor masterpiece in its own right.

Kevin Lyons, eofftreview.wordpress.com, 27 November 2020