



SCALA: SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK AND ROLL CINEMA

Thundercrack!

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*)
Moir 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
158 mins + interval
Digital

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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

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Basket Case

Mon 1 Jan 15:20; Thu 25 Jan 20:40

Pink Flamingos

Mon 1 Jan 18:20; Fri 19 Jan 18:20; Fri 26 Jan 20:50
(+ intro by Mark Moore and Tasty Tim)

Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!

Tue 2 Jan 18:20; Thu 18 Jan 21:00 (+ intro by film scholar and writer Virginie Selavy)

Taxi zum Klo

Wed 3 Jan 20:50; Mon 8 Jan 20:40 (+ intro by Vic Roberts, Scala usher)

The Warriors

Sat 6 Jan 18:15; Sun 14 Jan 12:00; Wed 17 Jan 20:55 (+ intro by SCALA!!! co-director Ali Catterall)

Thundercrack!

Sat 6 Jan 20:00; Sun 14 Jan 14:10

The Evil Dead

Fri 5 Jan 20:45 (+ intro by Graham Humphreys, freelance illustrator and designer of the original UK marketing for The Evil Dead); Tue 30 Jan 18:10

Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom

Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma
Tue 9 Jan 20:35 (+ intro by season curator Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Tue 23 Jan 18:10

Sight and Sound Presents:

Scala Spirit 1993-2023

Thu 11 Jan 18:20

Shivers

Thu 11 Jan 21:00; Sun 21 Jan 15:20

Pee-wee's Big Adventure

Fri 12 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ben Roberts, BFI CEO);
Wed 31 Jan 18:20

Pink Narcissus + Un chant d'amour

Fri 12 Jan 20:40; Thu 25 Jan 18:20

The Saint: Teresa + intro by Dick Fiddy, Archive TV
Programmer + **The Avengers: A Touch of Brimstone**

Sat 13 Jan 14:30

Looking for Mr Goodbar + Dick

Sat 13 Jan 17:45 (+ intro by season curator Jane Giles); Mon 22 Jan 20:10

The Thing

Sat 13 Jan 20:40; Mon 29 Jan 20:45

The Beast La Bête

Tue 16 Jan 20:45; Tue 23 Jan 20:50

Surprise Film + intro by season curator Jane Giles
Sat 20 Jan 17:10

A Clockwork Orange

Sun 21 Jan 18:00; Wed 31 Jan 20:25

Shock, Horror! The Scala All-nighter:

An American Werewolf in London; The Creature from the Black Lagoon – 3D; Videodrome; The Incredible Shrinking Man; A Nightmare on Elm Street

Sat 27 Jan 22:30 BFI IMAX

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 and 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