



## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

# The Old Dark House

### The Old Dark House

Directed by: James Whale  
©: Universal Pictures Corporation  
A Universal picture  
Produced by: Carl Laemmle Jr  
Screen Play: Benn W. Levy  
From a novel by: J.B. Priestley  
Sound System: Western Electric Sound System Noiseless Recording  
uncredited  
Associate Producer: E.M. Asher  
Assistant Director: Joseph A. McDonough  
Additional Dialogue: R.C. Sherriff  
Director of Photography: Arthur Edeson  
Camera Operator: King Gray  
Assistant Cameraman: Jack Eagan  
Stills: Roman Freulich  
Special Effects: John P. Fulton  
Editorial Supervisor: Maurice Pivar  
Editor: Clarence Kolster  
Art Director: Charles D. Hall  
Set Decorator: Russell A. Gausman  
Make-up: Jack P. Pierce, Otto Lederer  
Music: Heinz Roemheld  
Recording Supervisor: C. Roy Hunter  
Sound Technician: William Hedgcock  
Cast:  
Boris Karloff (*Morgan*)  
Melvyn Douglas (*Roger Penderel*)  
Charles Laughton (*Sir William Porterhouse*)  
Lillian Bond (*Gladys 'Du Cane' Perkins*)  
Ernest Thesiger (*Horace Femm*)  
Eva Moore (*Rebecca Femm*)  
Raymond Massey (*Philip Waverton*)  
Gloria Stuart (*Margaret Waverton*)  
John Dudgeon [i.e. Elspeth Dudgeon]  
(*Sir Roderick Femm*)  
Brember Wills (*Saul Femm*)  
USA 1932©  
72 mins  
Digital 4K

'We've lost our way, we're somewhere in the Welsh mountains, it's half past nine and I'm very sorry.'

The three characters we encounter at the beginning of James Whale's 1932 film *The Old Dark House* – Philip Waverton (Raymond Massey), Margaret Waverton (Gloria Stuart) and Roger Penderel (Melvyn Douglas) – weren't the first benighted travellers forced to stay the night in weird and inhospitable terrain. Nor, by any means, were they to be the last. But they were almost certainly the wittiest. Despairing of ever reaching Shrewsbury, Philip's acid apology to Penderel is met with a sweetly reasonable response: 'Something might happen here. But nothing ever happens in Shrewsbury.'

Adapting a recent novel by J.B. Priestley, *Benighted*, playwright Benn Levy provided Whale, director of Universal's still-in-circulation *Frankenstein*, with the perfect vehicle for his waspishly grotesque sense of humour. *The Old Dark House* is the most beguiling and idiosyncratic of all the films produced by Universal in the first flood of Hollywood horror, and its considerable riches are now visible in even greater abundance thanks to a really astonishing 4K restoration. When Whale began shooting *The Old Dark House* in April 1932, a number of delicious ironies were at work. The previous December, Priestley had insisted his novel shouldn't be dramatised on the principle that its characters 'are only various forms of post-War pessimism pretending to be people'. He sold the film rights in the first week of January. The expatriate Whale, meanwhile, was basking in the California sunshine ('I'm pouring the gold through my hair and enjoying every minute of it') and simultaneously reproducing a storm-racked night in the old country with scrupulous fidelity. To help do so he shipped over British writers (not just Levy but also, for on-set dialogue tweaks, R.C. Sherriff) and a fleet of West End actors (including the Canadian-born Massey), supplementing them with a couple of Americans (Stuart and Douglas) and the monolithic Boris Karloff – who, in becoming Hollywood's pre-eminent monster, had also become one of its most conspicuous Brits.

There was an added irony regarding Karloff, in that Whale's brief was to provide the breakout star of *Frankenstein* with a showcase – yet he gave him a non-speaking (albeit showy) role in what was unquestionably an ensemble piece. Furthermore, in crafting a grimly funny lampoon of the British at home, Whale turned to, and subverted, an American subgenre whose conventions had been set in stone by such spooky stage hits as *The Bat* (1920), *The Cat and the Canary* (1922) and *The Gorilla* (1925). All these had been filmed as silents and, as recently as 1930, filmed again as talkies; the original *Cat*, directed by Paul Leni in 1927, had made a particular impression on Whale. Yet *The Old Dark House*, despite superficial similarities, is imbued with a peculiarly sophisticated tone like no other film before or since.

'Universal Goes British' was *Kinematograph Weekly's* way of trailing the end product – and here, perhaps, was the ultimate irony. For Priestley's novel was best served, not by Julius Hagen's cash-strapped crew at Twickenham Studios (which had a reputation in 1932 for creepy thrillers like *The Face at the Window* and *Condemned to Death*, and might well have been interested in adding another), but by the deluxe treatment laid on by Universal's Carl Laemmle in California. In a roundabout way, then, *The Old Dark House* might be described as the best British horror film ever made in America. Indeed, Stuart and Douglas can be seen as the kind of token Hollywood names that would turn up in later British horrors to add Stateside appeal, as when Fay Wray was cast in *The Clairvoyant* in 1935 and, 20 years later, Brian Donlevy came over for *The Quatermass Xperiment*. The result, perhaps unsurprisingly, was that *The Old Dark House* performed robustly at British box offices but disappointingly in the US. When Whale's film was in production, the disastrous reception given to Tod Browning's MGM production *Freaks* (1932) was feeding a widespread industry suspicion that the all-new 'horror' genre was too hot to handle. *The Old Dark House* was accordingly advertised in Britain's *To-Day's Cinema* as 'The First of Eerie Hair Raisers – NO MORE HORROR – Hollywood's New Entertainment Vogue – The "Eerie" Picture.' In truth, the waggish 'West End in Hollywood' ambience of the film was as personal to Whale as the sleazy carnival milieu of *Freaks* was unique to Browning, and out-and-out horror was the concern of neither filmmaker.

In Whale's case, the landslide that forces Penderel and the Wavertons to seek shelter with the bizarre Femm family gave him a golden opportunity to anatomise the more obsessive social rituals of his native land, an opportunity made even juicier when two further

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Mon 12 Aug 20:30

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Thu 15 Aug 18:30; Wed 28 Aug 18:20 (+  
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### Charulata

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Fri 30 Aug 20:40

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travellers – the brash Sir William Porterhouse (Charles Laughton) and boisterous Gladys DuCane (Lilian Bond) – presume on the Femms' hospitality. 'You will have to stay here,' sighs the desiccated Horace (Ernest Thesiger). 'The misfortune is yours, not ours.' The five members of the Femm household may be seething with mutual hatred and barely concealed madness, but in between-the-wars Britain does that make them any more abnormal than the five supposedly true-blue Brits who are foisted on them? The smooth, loquacious Penderel, for example – who describes himself as 'war generation: slightly soiled' – is in his own way just as 'damaged' as the mute, scarred hulk that is the Femms' butler, Morgan (Karloff). Whale's delicate balance between humour and horror becomes all the more exhilarating in the new Cohen Media Group restoration, which makes a film that for a long time was thought lost look, on the contrary, as if it was shot last week. The upgrade from the sludge-like murk of previous presentations is impossible to overstate. Murk might be thought appropriate to a macabre gem set almost exclusively at night, yet in practice the improved visibility shows up a host of valuable details provided by Whale's Universal team and, from the actors, a wide range of previously concealed character nuances.

The opening scene, as the first three travellers approach the Femm house in driving rain, is a case in point. The mud roiling away under the Wavertons' wheels has an added immediacy every bit as startling as the raindrops gleaming on their faces; even 'the trickle of ice-cold water' that's siphoned from Philip's hat brim gains a crystalline clarity not seen since, presumably, 1932. The couple's useless road map now looks like a sodden dishcloth marked with runny hieroglyphs, and the landslide effect looks much more impressive than before, making Penderel's nonchalant response – 'There you are: the whole hilltop has probably fallen off' – even funnier. Whale's cinematographer, Arthur Edeson, and production designer, Charles D. Hall, also benefit greatly in this new presentation. The firelight that quivers across the walls of the Femm house now looks even more hellish, while Edeson's fondness for keeping background characters slightly out of focus lends sculptural detail to the face, or faces, in the foreground. (When Philip hovers on the stairs as the candle-bearing Horace hesitates to accompany him on a search of the upper levels, Horace's pencil-thin figure almost seems to be in 3D.) As for Hall, his house interior was so striking (and expensive) it was seen again in 1933 not just in Universal's *Secret of the Blue Room* but also in the independent productions *The Vampire Bat* and *Strange People*. Now we can admire it in greater detail, notably the skull-faced, shield-bearing cat statuettes adorning the ground-floor banisters and the little horned demons that fulfil the same function upstairs.

One of the film's most memorable scenes takes place in the bedroom of Rebecca Femm (Eva Moore), an elderly religious maniac whose face is distorted in the uneven surface of a mirror as she jeers at the severely creped-out Margaret ('You revel in the joys of fleshly love, don't you?'). The previously obscured work of set dresser Russell Gausman adds a new kick to this set piece, notably in the Biblical homilies pinned up either side of Rebecca's mirror: 'Let There Be Light' and 'God is Not Mocked'. Sound, too, is enhanced; the early morning birdsong at the end of the film is impressively detailed, while the woodwind and strings that accompany the opening credits now seem not just to echo the relentless rain, but to anticipate the shrieking shower-stabs of Bernard Herrmann's *Psycho* score.

The acting in *The Old Dark House* is exemplary, benefiting from the fact that most of the company members were well known to each other. (Laughton, Massey and Thesiger, and indeed Whale himself, had all acted in Benn Levy plays, for example.) Though coming from outside this charmed circle, Stuart and Douglas are impressive too, and Karloff is monumentally sinister as the brooding and unpredictable Morgan. Thesiger's Horace and Moore's Rebecca remain the film's most indelible presences, yet there are also memorable cameos from Elspeth Dudgeon (mischievously cast as the Femms' 102-year-old patriarch, Sir Roderick) and Brember Wills as the impish pyromaniac Saul, who is eventually freed from the attic and provides the film with a rousing, and disturbing, climax. Dudgeon's scene, incidentally, allows a close examination of Jack Pierce's ageing make-up, which anticipates his work on Karloff in a later 1932 production, *The Mummy*. The 32-year-old Laughton, however, is too fresh-faced to play a knighted, self-made entrepreneur who reminisces about his youth, and also a bit too overstated in his remembered bitterness – but when Charles Laughton is an ensemble's weak link, you know for certain that it's on the highest level possible.

Jonathan Rigby, *Sight and Sound*, May 2018