



MARTIN SCORSESE SELECTS HIDDEN GEMS OF BRITISH CINEMA

Uncle Silas

Uncle Silas

Director: Charles Frank
Production Company: Two Cities Films
Producers: Josef Somlo, Laurence Irving
Associate Producer: Jack Hicks
Production Manager: John Gossage
Assistant Director: Peter Bolton
Screenplay: Ben Travers
Based on the novel by: Sheridan Le Fanu
Photography: Robert Krasker
Camera Operator: Bob Huke
Special Effects: Henry Harris, George Blackwell
Editor: Ralph Kemplen
Production Designer: Laurence Irving
Art Director: Ralph Brinton
Script Illustrator: Maurice Laban
Costume Designer: Elizabeth Haffenden
Music: Alan Rawsthorne
Music Played by: The London Symphony Orchestra
Conducted by: Muir Mathieson
Sound Recording: John Cook, Desmond Dew
Sound Editor: Kenneth Heeley Ray
Studio: Denham Studios

uncredited

Production Executive: Herbert Smith
Assistant Production Manager: Peter Berg
2nd Assistant Production Manager: Andrew Allan
Location Managers: Victor Wark, Len Lee
2nd Assistant Director: Anthony Hearne
3rd Assistant Director: Stanley Hosgood
Continuity: Joan Barry
Assistant Continuity: Olga Brook
Casting: Irene Howard
Crowd Casting: Gerry Dereham
Special Effects Photographers: Henry Harris, Stanley Grant
Models: Percy Ralphs
Assistant Editor: Patricia Murray
2nd Assistant Editors: Peter Taylor, Roy Fry
Assistant Art Director: Kenneth McCallum Tait
Set Dresser: Colleen Browning
Draughtsmen: Edward Marshall, Marcel Diserens, Eric Blakemore, Anthony Haley, Syd Cain
Draughtsman to Mr Irving: Peter Phillips
Buyer: Sid Siddall
Assistant Costume Designer: Doris Lee
Wardrobe Master: Fred Pridmore
Supervising Make-up: Tony Storzini
Floor Make-up: H. Hutchinson
Supervising Hairdresser: Vivienne Walker
Dance Director: Andrée Howard
Sound Recordist: Alfred Miller
Sound Mixer: F. Minter
Sound Maintenance Engineers: Wally Day, D. Taylor
Boom Operators: Fred Ryan, Ken Ritchie
Boom Assistant: John Streeter
Dubbing Crew: Desmond Dew, L.E. Overton, George Willows, D. Taylor, Anthony J. Kay
2nd Assistant Dubbing Mixer: Peter T. Davies
Publicity: Pegeen Mair

Cast:

Jean Simmons (*Caroline Ruthyn*)
Katina Paxinou (*Madame de la Rougierre*)
Derrick de Marney (*Uncle Silas*)
Derek Bond (*Lord Richard Ilbury*)
Sophie Stewart (*Lady Monica Waring*)
Esmond Knight (*Dr Bryerly*)
Reginald Tate (*Austin Ruthyn*)
Manning Whiley (*Dudley Ruthyn*)
Marjorie Rhodes (*Mrs Rusk*)
John Laurie (*Giles*)
Frederick Burtwell (*Branston*)
George Curzon (*Sleigh*)

Uncle Silas and Maud Ruthyn first appeared in 1864 as a serial in the *Dublin University Magazine*, before being published in three volumes as *Uncle Silas: A Tale of Bartram-Haugh*. The author, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, is best remembered for perfecting the 'psychological' ghost story (*Green Tea, Carmilla*, etc.), but in *Uncle Silas* he wrote a *Jane Eyre*-flavoured 'sensation' novel dubbed by David Punter 'the first properly Gothic masterpiece in England since *Melmoth the Wanderer*.'

In 1947, Le Fanu's novel was filmed twice. Carlos Schlieper's *El misterioso tío Sylas*, starring Elisa Galvé, opened in Argentina in May. Its British counterpart was the brainchild of producer/designer Laurence Irving. As the grandson of Henry Irving he was perhaps predisposed to melodrama of the gas lit Lyceum variety. Charles Frank, best known for his innovative dubbing of foreign films, made his début as director and Ben Travers was hired to write the dialogue, despite having sent up the 'old dark house' genre in his 1927 stage hit *Thark*. 'One can believe,' sneered the *Observer*, 'that Mr Travers, who is known and loved as a rollicking farceur, shied violently at having to adapt a lurid, melodramatic novel by this Anglo-Irish Goth of a boy.'

Production got underway at Denham at Christmas 1946. Jean Simmons, whose character underwent a name-change from Maud to Caroline, turned 18 during filming, on 31 January. She also had her voice lowered an octave or two by Molly Terraine, head of the recently formed Rank Company of Youth (the so-called 'Charm School'). On the film's release in October, Simmons was made the focal point of its publicity drive ('Make your patrons JEAN CONSCIOUS – she's a great young actress,' urged the pressbook) and, indeed, garnered most of the best notices. By comparison to Simmons' 'charming, simple performance,' observed Elspeth Grant, 'It would be difficult to think of anything funnier than Mr Derrick de Marney's study of a Wicked Uncle – unless, perhaps, it were Mme Katina Paxinou's portrait of a Fiend in Human Form.'

Reviews were dismissive almost across the board: 'one of the most nonsensical films I have seen for years' (*Daily Express*); 'the sort of British film that makes me long, if you can imagine it, for Leslie Arliss and his wicked ladies,' (*News Chronicle*); 'the film jostles *Jassy* for first place as the most preposterous piece of melodrama screened this year' (*Daily Graphic*). William Whitebait took a more tolerant view in the *New Statesman*, noting that 'the trouble with *Uncle Silas* is that a corpulent Gothic-domestic tale has been squeezed of nearly all save its melodramatic backbone ... But the resulting shocker isn't a quarter as silly as most of the reviewers have exclaimed.' *Variety*, however, made the dire prediction that 'this laboured hokum can add little to British prestige. It's not for export.' Indeed, over three years would elapse before the film's US release in February 1951; retitled *The Inheritance*, it was described by *The New York Times* as containing 'some of the most atrociously archaic melodrama in recent memory.'

Perhaps the animosity which greeted the film can be ascribed to the fact that, prior to Hammer's explosive arrival in the late 1950s, the words 'British' and 'horror' seemed mutually exclusive. The distinguished example of *Dead of Night* had failed to establish a consistent post-war trend towards films in a

O.B. Clarence (*Vicar Clay*)
Frederick Ranalow (*Rigg*)
Patricia Glyn (*Mary Quince*)
Guy Rolfe (*Sepulchre Hawkes*)
Robin Netscher (*Tom Hawkes*)
John Salew (*Grimstone*)
Patricia Dainton *
UK 1947
103 mins
35mm

A BFI National Archive print

* Uncredited

MARTIN SCORSESE SELECTS HIDDEN GEMS OF BRITISH CINEMA

Uncle Silas Sat 14 Sep 18:20; Mon 30 Sep 20:45

Hue and Cry

Sat 14 Sep 20:30; Mon 30 Sep 18:15 (+ intro by Josephine Botting, Curator, BFI National Archive)

Terence Fisher Double Bill:

To the Public Danger + Stolen Face

Sun 15 Sep 18:10; Tue 1 Oct 20:30

Mandy Mon 16 Sep 18:35; Sat 28 Sep 12:20

The Man in Grey Tue 17 Sep 20:40

Yield to the Night

Fri 20 Sep 18:00; Sat 28 Sep 15:10

The Flesh and the Fiends

Sat 21 Sep 14:50; Wed 2 Oct 20:40

The Damned Sat 21 Sep 20:40; Fri 4 Oct 18:30

Station Six Sahara

Sun 22 Sep 12:30; Sat 5 Oct 16:00

The Mind Benders

Sun 22 Sep 18:00; Wed 2 Oct 18:20

Went the Day Well? + intro by James Bell,

Senior Curator, BFI National Archive

Mon 23 Sep 18:20

This Happy Breed Tue 24 Sep 18:00

The Seventh Veil Wed 25 Sep 20:40

Green for Danger Thu 26 Sep 20:55

The Pumpkin Eater

Fri 27 Sep 18:00; Sun 6 Oct 15:00

It Always Rains on Sunday Fri 27 Sep 20:50

Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde

Sat 28 Sep 18:10; Thu 3 Oct 18:15 + intro by

Sam Clemens, son of Brian Clemens

The Legend of Hell House

Sat 28 Sep 20:40; Mon 7 Oct 18:20

Guns at Batasi Sun 29 Sep 18:20; Sat 5 Oct 18:20

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similar vein. With horror going underground once more, plumbing the murky depths of threadbare second features like *Castle Sinister* and *The Ghost of Rashmon Hall*, the big-budget *Uncle Silas* must have seemed like a freakish caprice.

Seen now, however, the film has much to recommend it. Boiling down Le Fanu's sprawling saga to its bare bones, Travers' script makes it crystal clear that Bram Stoker's *Dracula* owes a considerable debt to Le Fanu's narrative structure, with a female Jonathan Harker imprisoned in a gloomy old house by a white-haired old man who intends to kill her. The film also gives the celebrated Greek actress Katina Paxinou a classic 'face at the window' entrance and features much arresting montage work from Frank together with stunning sets, alternately baronial and dilapidated, from Irving. Robert Krasker's cinematography brilliantly contrasts the airy shafts of sunlight in Caroline's ancestral home with the hellish stripes of firelight characterising Silas', and the film's only real drawbacks are its unwieldy length and underwhelming title character.

'Mr de Marney looks exactly what he is – a youngish actor dressed up as an old man,' said the *Daily Herald* of the 40-year-old matinée idol, who at no point suggests what Le Fanu called Silas' 'baleful effulgence.' As white-haired Gothic recluses go, Silas, with his 'face like marble ... [and] fearful monumental look,' is clearly the missing link between Poe's ethereal Roderick Usher and Stoker's carnal Count Dracula, but you wouldn't know it from the wasp-waisted comic-opera villain provided by de Marney.

Le Fanu's story has since resurfaced at 20-year intervals. Thames TV's rendition for the long-running *Mystery and Imagination* series, with Robert Eddison, Patience Collier and Lucy Fleming, appeared in November 1968, while the BBC's *The Dark Angel* was shown in three parts (replicating the original's three volumes) in January 1989 and starred Peter O'Toole, Jane Lapotaire and Beatie Edney. Hammer veteran Barbara Shelley was Cousin Monica and Guy Rolfe – Sepulchre Hawkes in 1947 – appeared this time as Dr Bryerly.

Jonathan Rigby