



Moviedrome: Bringing the Cult TV Series to the Big Screen

Witchfinder General

Witchfinder General

Director: Michael Reeves

©/Production Company:

Tigon British Productions Ltd.

Executive Producer: Tony Tenser

Producer: Arnold Louis Miller

Co-producer: Louis M. Heyward

Associate Producer: Philip Waddilove

Production Manager: Ricky Coward

Assistant Director: Ian Goddard

Continuity: Lorna Selwyn

Screenplay: Michael Reeves, Tom Baker

Additional Scenes: Louis M. Heyward

Based on the novel by: Ronald Bassett

Director of Photography: John Coquillon

Grips: Freddie Williams

Special Effects: Roger Dicken

Editor: Howard Lanning

Art Director: Jim Morahan

Set Decorator: Andrew Low

Wardrobe: Jill Thompson

Make-up: Dore Hamilton

Music Composed and Conducted by: Paul Ferris

Theme Song: Gerry Langley *

Sound: Paul LeMare

Cast:

Vincent Price (*Matthew Hopkins*)

Ian Ogilvy (*Richard Marshall*)

Nicky Henson (*Trooper Swallow*)

Robert Russell (*John Stearne*)

Hilary Dwyer (*Sara*)

Tony Selby (*Salter*)

Michael Beint (*Captain Gordon*)

Bernard Kay (*fisherman*)

John Treneman (*Trooper Harcourt*)

Bill Maxwell (*Trooper Gifford*)

Peter Thomas (*farrier*)

Maggie Kimberley (*Elizabeth Clark*)

Dennis Thorne (*villager*)

Ann Tirard (*second old woman*)

Gillian Aldham (*young woman in cell*)

Hira Talfrey (*first old woman*)

Jack Lynn (*first innkeeper*)

Michael Segal (*villager*)

David Webb (*jailer*)

Sally Douglas (*wench in inn*)

Edward Palmer (*shepherd*)

Lee Peters (*infantry sergeant*)

Peter Haigh (*Lavenham magistrate*)

Godfrey James (*Webb*)

Margaret Nolan (*wench in inn*)

Philip Waddilove

Toby Lennon (*old man*)

Morris Jar (*Paul, young husband*)

David Lyell (*foot soldier*)

Alf Joint (*sentry*)

Martin Terry (*second innkeeper*)

John Kidd (*first magistrate*)

Rupert Davies (*John Lowes*)

Patrick Wymark (*Oliver Cromwell*)

Wilfred Brambell (*Master Loach*)

Paul Dawkins (*farmer*)

Tasma Brereton, Sandy Seager (*wenches in inn*)

Beaufoy Milton (*priest*)

Donna Reading (*wench in inn*)

UK 1968© 86 mins Digital

* Uncredited

Moviedrome transmission date: 27 July 1992

The screening on Fri 11 Jul will be introduced by
Reece Shearsmith

'What is a cult film? A cult film is one which has a passionate following but does not appeal to everybody. Just because a movie is a cult movie does not automatically guarantee quality. Some cult films are very bad. Others are very, very good. Some make an awful lot of money at the box office. Others make no money at all. Some are considered quality films. Others are exploitation.'

From 1988 to 2000 *Moviedrome* was presented by Alex Cox and then Mark Cousins. Across that time, more than 200 features were shown, and generations of movie fans and filmmakers would be informed and inspired by the selection, alongside the wit and wisdom of the introductions that preceded each screening. *Moviedrome* was a portal into the world of weird and wonderful cinema. This two-month season features some of the most notable titles screened and wherever possible they are preceded by the original televised introduction.

Nick Freand Jones, season curator and producer of *Moviedrome*

Alex Cox: Matthew Hopkins was a British Joe McCarthy type who in the 17th century claimed to have the 'Devil's List' of all the witches in England. Just as Tailgunner Joe's list of 160,000 Communists, or homosexuals, or whatever it was, shaped the domestic policy of his nation, so Matthew Hopkins made a thriving living chasing down witches and to a lesser extent warlocks in East Anglia 300 years ago.

Hopkins was paid £23 for a day's work, at a time when the average wage was sixpence a day. He was an industrious witchfinder, and hanged 168 women in Suffolk and 100 in Bury St Edmunds alone. In the fiscal year of 1665-66, Matthew Hopkins made over £1000. *Witchfinder General* tells his story and features an old *Moviedrome* favourite, Vincent Price. There was a considerable outcry over its gratuitous violence when it first came out. Today, inevitably, in the wake of the Freddy saga, *Friday the 13th* and Michael Douglas, it seems relatively tame.

Vincent Price is, as you might imagine, the best thing in it. Untroubled by his American accent, he cuts a swathe through England during the Civil War, behaving for all the world like a misogynist, serial killer and would-be Parliamentary appointee.

Witchfinder General was made by Tigon Pictures. Tigon were at the time the principal rival of Hammer Horror Films and so you can expect the same impenetrable day-for-night shots, the same endless tortured yells, the same attention to period detail and the same proliferation of heaving breasts as a *Carry On* film...

Something else *Witchfinder General* has in common with the British comic cinema is the presence of Wilfred Brambell, alias old man Steptoe, as Master Loach. Also look out for a cameo by Patrick Wymark as Oliver Cromwell.

All in all this film is a fairly routine Price horror movie with none of the genius of the Roger Corman/Edgar Allan Poe films. (In the United States it was known as *The Conqueror Worm*, from a line by Poe – presumably to cash in on the success of those films) Nevertheless, it has a certain cultish fame, and is a pretty persuasive warning against over-associating with black cats or stoats.

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Welcome to the Moviedrome

Fri 4 Jul 18:30

The Wicker Man (Final Cut)

Fri 4 Jul 20:45 (+ intro by Alex Cox and Nick Freand Jones) Fri 18 Jul 18:00; Mon 28 Jul 21:00

Walker

Sat 5 Jul 15:10 (+ intro by filmmaker and Moviedrome presenter Alex Cox); Tue 29 Jul 20:40

The Fly (1958)

Sat 5 Jul 18:30 (+ intro by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones); Sun 13 Jul 15:20

The Fly (1986)

Sat 5 Jul 20:55; Sun 13 Jul 18:20

The Great Silence II grande silenzio

Sun 6 Jul 12:10 (+ intro by filmmaker and Moviedrome presenter Alex Cox); Tue 15 Jul 20:40

Sweet Smell of Success

Sun 6 Jul 18:00 (+ intro by filmmaker and Moviedrome presenter Alex Cox); Mon 21 Jul 21:00

An American Werewolf in London

Mon 7 Jul 18:30; Sat 26 Jul 21:00

Get Carter

Mon 7 Jul 20:45; Thu 17 Jul 20:30; Tue 22 Jul 18:10

Les Diaboliques

Tue 8 Jul 20:35 (+ intro by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones); Sat 12 Jul 11:35

Two-Lane Blacktop

Wed 9 Jul 20:45 (+ intro by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones); Sat 19 Jul 18:20

Witchfinder General

Fri 11 Jul 18:20 (+ intro by Reece Shearsmith); Mon 14 Jul 20:50

California Dolls (aka All the Marbles)

Sat 12 Jul 15:10; Wed 23 Jul 20:40 (+ intro by season curator and Moviedrome's producer Nick Freand Jones)

Shaft

Sat 12 Jul 18:20; Sat 19 Jul 20:50

Scarface

Sat 12 Jul 19:50; Sun 27 Jul 14:10

Exotica

Mon 21 Jul 18:10; Wed 30 Jul 20:45 (+ pre-recorded intro by filmmaker Atom Egoyan)

La Haine

Fri 25 Jul 21:00; Thu 31 Jul 18:00

Clockers

Sat 26 Jul 18:00; Thu 31 Jul 20:20

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Witchfinder General was directed in 1968 by Michael Reeves, who was seen as one of the great white hopes of the British film industry but sadly committed suicide just after this film at the age of 25. It was shot like TV by one Johnny Coquillon who shot *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and several other movies for Sam Peckinpah.

Alex Cox's original introduction for *Moviedrome*. Also published in *Moviedrome: The Guide 2* (BBC, 1993). With thanks to moviedromer.tumblr.com

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

A contemporary review

Not since *Peeping Tom* has a film aroused such an outcry about nastiness and gratuitous violence as this one. Difficult to see why, really, as there are in effect only two scenes of lingering violence: the opening, in which the pastoral quiet is suddenly shattered as a screaming woman is dragged up a hill and hanged in full view from a gibbet erected on the skyline; and the end, where the hero hacks the witchfinder ruthlessly and systematically to pieces with an axe until one of his horrified friends intervenes. In between these two extremes, the tone of the film is oddly muted, with torture and death in plenty, but viewed matter-of-factly and without stress.

The point, one would have thought, is fairly self-evident. Matthew Hopkins introduces a new and bloody terror to England, which soon becomes an accepted part of daily living; and when one man sets out to rid the country of this evil, he has himself become so tainted by it that he uses its own methods. Visually, the theme is beautifully supported by Reeves' subtle use of colour, in which the delicate patchwork greens of the English countryside (the whole film is splendidly shot on locations in Suffolk by Johnny Coquillon) are shot through by the colours of death and decay as Matthew Hopkins prowls through it robed in black, pursued by the avenger in the scarlet soldier's tunic.

Probably wisely, the film sidesteps the novel's attempt to psychoanalyse Hopkins' character by delving into his almost pathological fear of women, and instead presents him as an unequivocal figure of menace to whom Vincent Price, playing completely without tongue-in-cheek, brings his own peculiar note of ambiguous sympathy. Equally wisely, it avoids a head-on clash with the Battle of Naseby on a small budget, so that the Civil War, never actually seen, hangs over the whole film as an ominous reminder of the troubled times in which Hopkins was allowed to rampage unchecked.

Throughout the whole film there is a vivid sense of a time out of joint, which comes as much from the stray groups of soldiers who skirmish against unseen attackers in the woods or hang wearily about by the wayside waiting for battle to commence, as from the bloody crimes committed in the name of religion by Matthew Hopkins.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, July 1968