

Brainwashed - "The Phantom Carriage: KTL Edition"

Written by John Kealy

Saturday, 23 February 2008 17:00 -



This is one of two editions released at the same time of Victor Sjöström's silent masterpiece from 1921. In lieu of the usual silent movie soundtrack (an example of which is on the other edition), Stephen O'Malley and Peter Rehberg score a violent and unsettling accompaniment to the proceedings. The film is worth watching in any case but the powerful atmospheres conjured up by this pair makes for an uncomfortable and rewarding night in.

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Sjöström's movie is the tale of a man named David Holm (played by Sjöström himself) who is forced to look back at his wicked life or to spend a year in the service of death, driving the carriage that transports the souls of the dead to their ultimate home. There is a strong whiff of *A Christmas Carol*

to this movie but the wickedness on display is uglier than Scrooge's, even by today's standards. Holm's drunken venom towards all around him is chilling; the power is increased by the lack of natural sound or dialogue. The acting is realistic, even with the overacting necessary for the silent film. The torment and despair on show are tangible, no doubt helped by Sjöström's early version of method acting (supposedly he lived rough for a number of weeks prior to shooting in order to get a feel for being down and out in Sweden).

KTL's soundtrack follows the mood of the film closely, having to do the work that most films leave to the actors. The clanging percussion that opens each act is a signal that this will not be an easy ride or a pleasant experience. It is hard not to be on edge for the duration of the film. The howling blizzard of O'Malley's tremolo-plucked guitar and Rehberg's electronic gurgles are exponentially more evocative than the pair's albums. I can only assume that hearing their albums in their original context (as soundtracks to a theatre piece) enhances their effect but as it stands they got a far more potent reaction from me here than on CD.

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I was hoping before I watched the DVD that the soundtrack would get a separate release but after seeing this version of *The Phantom Carriage*, I feel that KTL's score would be ruined if divorced from its original context. The film stands up on its own (obviously, as it has been in existence for over 80 years without a KTL soundtrack!) but unsurprisingly having the DVD running to just listen to the music did not live up to the original experience. Still, in its proper context, this is the best of all the KTL releases,

The Phantom Carriage

is a worthy companion to their work.