

The Beast Must Die

Year | Country of Origin | Running Time

Credits

Director	Paul Annett
Screenplay	Michael Winder James Blish (story)
Photography	Jack Hildyard
Music	Douglas Gamley
Cast	
Tom Newcliffe	Calvin Lockhart
Dr. Christopher Lundgren	Peter Cushing Marlene Clark
Caroline Newcliffe	Caroline Newcliffe
Arthur Bennington	Charles Gray

In Brief

This delightful Amicus horror / mystery crossover stars Calvin Lockhart as the white polo neck wearing great black hunter who summons six guests to his huge country estate which he has rigged up with video cameras and a high-tech security system. He informs them and his surprised wife that they are all to stay over a weekend and that all of them will be kept on the estate during that weekend. For each guest, dead bodies have followed in their wake and the way that the dead have been murdered means that one of the guest is a werewolf and Tom has summoned his guests here to discover who it is and to hunt it down... But who is the wolf: Peter Cushing? Anton Duffring? Charles Gray? Michael Gambon? Some other slumming thesp? Pit your detective skills against Lockhart's in the notorious "werewolf break".

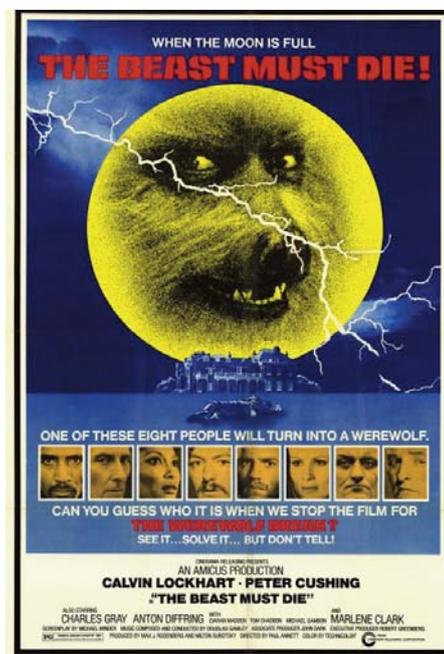
Since humankind crawled out from the liquidly shores of the sea, the social gathering has been a staple of the household mores of the bourgeoisie. The wail of invitation, the echo of RSVP, the congregation of like-minded people intent on passing an evening in the pursuit of small talk and trivial toasts, all enclosed within the most ornamented of cages. What could go wrong? Well plenty, if cinema's anything to go by.

Renoir suffered a quandary or two when surveying the Rules of the Game, with cordiality rapidly evaporating in the midst of a plethora of misunderstanding. Festen's family reunion wasted little time turning sour as truths were unveiled and vexation became sutured to the grimace of just about everyone. The Exterminating Angel's dinner party descended into savagery when hosts and guests alike became mysteriously incarcerated in the dining room. Hell, look what happened when the good-natured Han invited folks around his pad in Enter the Dragon – some little sprite from Hong Kong wrecked the furniture, broke the toilet and ended up killing the host!

In *The Beast Must Die*, a wealthy hunting-enthusiastic by the name of Tom Newcliffe invites six individuals to his grand country mansion. Expecting a relaxing couple of days gazing at the finest green pastures the British landscape has to offer, and maybe taking the time to peruse that Chekhov that's been gathering dust for a while, the sextet are alarmed to learn that Newcliffe has other motives in amassing their bodies in his abode. His moustache quivering, he announces that he reckons one of them to be a werewolf – and not only that, for he has arranged this shindig with the express purpose of kindling a transformation in order that he may exercise his skills in the hunting arts. With an estate overflowing with CCTV, sound transmitters and motion sensors, and a full moon hovering into position above, he's primed to gun-down one of nature's most elusive shaggy-haired canines.

And thus begins a crazy game of Guess the Werewolf – a game not simply played out in the film world. *The Beast Must Die* opens with a call directly to the audience to participate in this sport of elimination. Against a murky black, a croaking voice spits out a challenge to eager would-be detectives to test out all those supposedly-dormant abilities, talents hitherto suppressed by 9 to 5 and income tax. But now, go ahead, be Sherlock, be Kojak, be Marlowe, be Burt Reynolds in *Cop and a Half*, all your dreams can now be realised, and minus the risk of having your throat jettisoned to the opposite side of the room. The narrative even ceases for a moment towards the denouement so that a reminder can be issued from the off-screen voice, a teasing slice of "have you worked it out yet", followed by a thirty-second countdown in which each possibility is flashed into the frame for a few seconds. Sure, it's slightly naff, but you have to admire the filmmakers for shaking it up a tad and having fun.

Aside from these extradiegetic sequences, much playful frolicking is done in the film as Newcliffe runs around causing his guests a mixture of irritation and unease. His favourite games for the dinner-table revolve around having his unassuming company clench a silver candlestick in their hands, then producing a large wolfsbane plant, making sure its spores thoroughly infest the air (apparently this herb induces a panoply of subconscious urges in the psyche of a werewolf), and finally forcing his visitors to place a silver bullet in their mouths (this is as a consequence of vicious hearsay that in the previous silver-related test possible hand-protection could have slyly been applied destroying any validity the test would otherwise have had – somewhere a biomedical scientist intoxicated on the double blind test is crying). If you were expecting an ounce of the wondrous tension generated by the blood-test in *The Thing*, then you'd be in for a smack of disappointment across the jowls. Clearly the silver motif is overused. Surely something less trite could have replaced one



The Werewolf

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of those tests, perhaps a group screening of *Underworld* and *Van Helsing* – the first to explode in a cataclysmic rage of teeth and snarls, drool and ferocity, will be the...ah no, actually, on second thoughts they might not be the best products of cinematic lycanthropy to try and expose potential wolf-men or -women.

Anyway, what about those potential werewolves? Who are the residents of this affluent gunslinger's elaborate hunt?

Frankly, a bunch of anons and Peter Cushing. Well alright, that's unfair. There is Michael Gambon, who in recent years has been spotted in various films of varying success, and Charles Gray. But it is Cushing's charisma that obscures all else. He plays an anthropologist called Dr Lundgren – who as well as being an expert in werewolves, is a wizard on the chess board. His helpful tidbits of knowledge are always forthcoming; he's what Claude Levi-Strauss could have been had the Frenchman redirected his analyses to the savage minds of werewolves and other assorted anthropo-hairballs. The way in which Dr Lundgren explicates the biological processes that occur when the change from human to werewolf commences is one of the highlights of this film, his charming oration both soothing and educating, his careful pronunciation of each syllable in the word "Transmogrification" the typification of preciseness. His inquisitive glances and gentle demeanour are perfectly homologous to his namesake's own tender manoeuvres in *Universal Soldier* – only the latter had more ears slung around his neck.

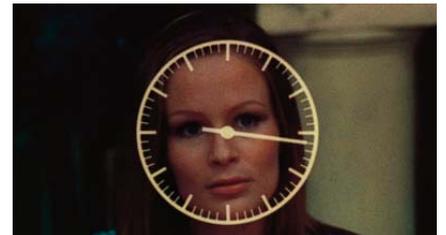
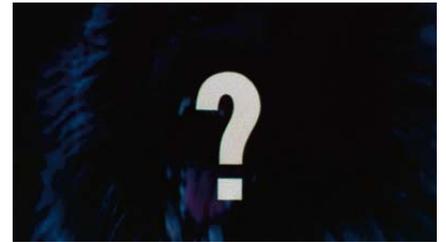
However, a few words of praise need to be siphoned off in the direction of Calvin Lockhart, whose hyperbolic performance as Newcliffe is on a level of light-hearted jollity similar to that of the film as a whole. He jogs through the film like a quasi-Shaft, paranoid and athirst for some rifle action. Lockhart would later go on to play King Willie in *Predator 2*, that dreadlocked Rasta who donates his head to the predator's skull collection. He didn't get much action in that film – probably still shattered after all the running he did in *The Beast Must Die*. Soon as news came that someone wasn't in their room, or a sensor in the grounds picked up some activity, he'd burst out the patio and hit the woods for some exploration in the shadows, some slithering over and under branches in the unadulterated black of night. It's possible that had he received help from the inept crew feasting on his hospitality, or even had a few lights shone on the scene, he might have been able to mount some sort of defence against Danny Glover's foe.

A number of tropes thrust the film away from its natural home of horror. It's not only Lockhart's afro and badass attitude that hint at blaxploitation, but the electro-jazz-funk soundtrack also makes one envision snappy, multicoloured suits, slick lines of dialogue and more reams of cool than could possibly be signified by a mere four-letter word. Shots from a helicopter as it zooms over the rural scenery underlie the opening credits, whilst a thundering spasm of wah-wah bumps and jerks its way into our auditory fields, like some sort of angified *Starsky and Hutch*. It's the type of rhythmic shuffle that would nowadays have cheques brandishing several zeroes dedicated to their recreation.

The Beast Must Die might not be up to the quality of Amicus' portmanteau flicks (*Dr Terror's House of Horrors* being a case in point), but it is nevertheless enjoyable, and does continue on the lineage of that fine production house. The contemporary setting, the self-aware daftness, the campy absurdity, all factors that distinguished Amicus from its more straight-faced rival Hammer. The interstitial turmoil is given a splendid sheen of car chases and exaggerated mannerisms, never allowing the narrative to travel over to the foreign territory of seriousness – and all the better for it, last thing we want to see is a mid-70s British horror going all solemn and falling into laments of sincerity.

Since then, director Paul Annett has gone on to direct a number of episodes of BBC's number one soap, *Eastenders*. Surely it's only a matter of time before Phil Mitchell sprouts hair on the back of his knuckles and goes on a carnivorous rampage down at *The Arches*. What a joyous plot twist that would be!

Aaron Fleming



EDINBURGH
FILM
GUILD

The Werewolf