

Bedlam

USA | 1946 | 79 minutes

Credits

| | |
|--------------------|------------------------|
| Director | Mark Robson |
| Screenplay | Val Lewton/Mark Robson |
| Photography | Nicholas Musuraca |
| Music | Roy Webb |

Cast

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| Master George Sims | Boris Karloff |
| Nell Bowen | Anna Lee |
| Lord Mortimer | Billy House |
| William Hannay | Richard Fraser |

In Brief

Bedlam is one of the costlier psychological-horror efforts from Val Lewton. Boris Karloff stars as the supervisor of the notorious 18th century British insane asylum St. Mary's of Bethlehem, better known as "Bedlam." Anna Lee, who co-stars as the feisty mistress of a fatuous government official, is appalled by the miserable treatment afforded the Bedlam inmates and insists that reforms be initiated. The crafty, politically connected Karloff responds by having Lee herself incarcerated in the institution: she is a "willful woman", and therefore must be insane.

Bedlam is as historically accurate as possible, right down to the archaic dialogue passages. For the most part, the film is an indictment against political corruption, with Karloff (in a terrific, multi-faceted performance) alternately bullying and wheedling to save his own behind. Val Lewton (writing under the pseudonym Carlos Keith) based his film on one of the illustrations in Hogarth's "The Rake's Progress," glimpses of which are seen throughout the film as transitional devices.

- Hal Erickson

Bedlam was the last of producer Val Lewton's RKO horror films, and it's a rather stunning conclusion to the vaunted series of B-movies the producer oversaw at the studio throughout the 40s. As with all of Lewton's work, this film strays far from its ostensible genre, and its horror is strictly human and realistic; it is the horror of cruelty and indifference towards one's fellow beings. Just a year after the end of World War II and the revelation of the horrors of the Holocaust, Lewton made a film about society's continuing tendency to classify people as either human or subhuman, declaring certain specimens to be animals, brutes, mindless, not worthy of respect or dignity or even the ordinary essentials of living. The film is set comfortably in the past, in the 18th Century, and it ends with an optimistic message of progress, but one can't help but think that there are darker, uglier truths at its core.

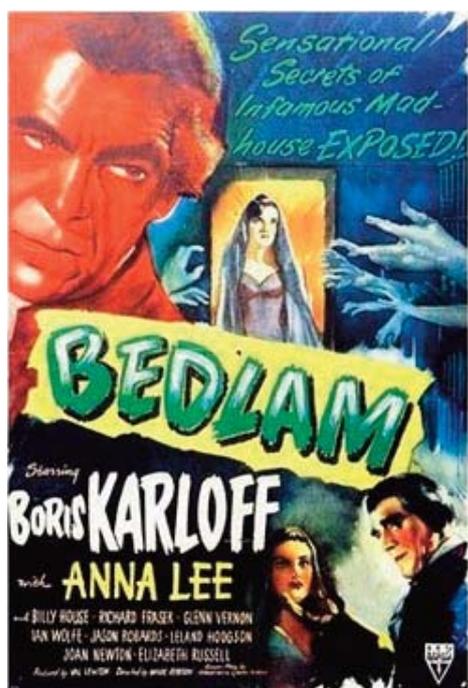


The film concerns itself with the plight of the insane, institutionalized at a famous London asylum derisively called "Bedlam," where the overseer George Sims charges admission for high society visitors to come and watch the lunatics and be entertained. It is an appalling state of affairs, but no one seems to mind other than Nell Bowen, an entertainer herself and the protege of the wealthy Lord Mortimer. She is a former actress and a cultivated wit, and she is kept as something like a court jester for the corpulent lord. She herself is far from amused by the conditions in Bedlam, but she tries to resist the pangs of her conscience, trying to maintain the air of upper-crust indifference that her friends and companions wear so comfortably. She finds, however, that she cannot stifle her feelings, and the Quaker Hannay encourages her to do something about what she's seen. When Sims parades a troupe of lunatics in theatrical costumes before one of Mortimer's parties — even making a cruel joke out of the death of one of the performers — she is horrified as much by the laughter at the table as by Sims' own actions. She tries to use her influence with Mortimer to change conditions at Bedlam, but the threat of raised taxes proves much more persuasive to the lord than his companion's desires; he tells her to consider his problems rather than those of the poor in the asylum.

Eventually, Nell's insistence on stirring up trouble and trying to improve conditions at Bedlam gets her committed herself, with Sims manipulating a sanity hearing against her and getting her under his care. Sims is a true villain, and Karloff delivers one of his best, creepiest performances as the sadistic asylum-keeper. He is a toady to the upper class, cherishing his stable position, in which he is at least tolerated in society by virtue of his usefulness, but he is never really accepted. All he wants is this acceptance, and he tries to present himself as a poet, an educated man of letters, though as the introduction makes clear, he can only really attain this status by imprisoning and murdering his more sensitive and intelligent rivals. He is a monster masquerading as a sophisticate, and his ingratiating smiles fade over time into sinister leers. He looks uncomfortable, too, in the neat dark wig that covers up his shock of white, ragged hair, another society pretense, a thin veneer barely covering up his evil nature.

This is one of Lewton's most pointed and forceful social commentaries. One of the film's greatest scenes is the climactic moment when, after Nell has finally engineered her escape from Bedlam, the inmates take Sims as their prisoner while one of them, a former judge (Ian Wolfe), decides to put the prison supervisor on trial. The inmates hold a trial in which Sims stutters out his excuses and justifications, saying that he didn't want to hurt anyone, that he was merely following the dictates of society, trying to fit in with those around him — a defense that essentially amounts to, "I was just following orders." It rings as false here as it did at the contemporaneous Nuremberg Trials, but the inmates nevertheless declare Sims to be "sane" and therefore release him. It's a fascinating moment, not least because the inmates' verdict of sanity can also be understood as an acknowledgment of his culpability for his actions. The inmates act as though Sims' sanity frees him, but in actuality it confirms that he knew exactly what he was doing, that his cruelty and viciousness were conscious.

Bedlam



Lewton and director Mark Robson sculpt this film's images with their usual care and delicacy. The images from the early part of the film, in Mortimer's lavishly appointed home, are bright and pristine, seeming to glow with light. The brightness and good cheer of Mortimer's parties and the laughter constantly echoing throughout his house create a powerful contrast against the squalor of Bedlam. The film purposefully delays the moment when the inmates' quarters, hidden behind a heavy wooden door, are finally revealed. When Nell goes to visit the asylum for the first time, as she steps through the doors the camera remains on her face, in a closeup as her eyes go wide and her mouth opens slightly, unable to suppress a gasp of horror. Lewton and Robson hold the moment, taking in Sims' self-satisfied smirk behind her, convinced that he has another satisfied customer. And then the camera slowly tracks backward into the room, revealing the filth and misery and darkness in which Bedlam's inhabitants must live. They are sprawled out all over the floor, most of them dressed in rags and covered in dirt, sleeping on straw, living like animals. As Sims leads Nell around the room, he even describes what kinds of animals certain inmates are: some are pigs, wallowing in their own filth, while others are dogs and need to be kicked every so often. He's a cartoonish villain, but his villainy feels all too real anyway.

The same can't always be said of the other characters. Despite the film's many virtues, it often suffers from mannered, stilted dialogue — it's the kind of writing that tries to approximate older forms of speech by eliminating contractions and making the conversational rhythms stiff and slow. Karloff's sheer intensity gets across even the clunkiest of the dialogue, but some of the other actors occasionally stumble. This is especially a problem for Fraser, whose stubborn Quaker comes across as self-righteous and

sermonizing. Lee, however, is a worthy foil for Karloff's scenery-chewing evil. She's free-spirited and quick-witted, even if the rather staid dialogue never really establishes her as quite as funny as she's supposed to be. But as usual with Lewton's productions, the emphasis is on the film's atmosphere, particularly the eerie, darkly lit interior of the asylum, with its shadowy back corridor where grasping hands reach out from between the bars of cages. This is a horror story about the inhumanity with which people treat one another, and the societal structures that prop up and encourage this inhumanity.

- Ed Howard

History of Bethlem

Bethlem has been a part of London since 1247, first as a priory for the sisters and brethren of the Order of the Star of Bethlehem, from where the building took its name. Its first site was in Bishopsgate (where Liverpool Street station now stands). In 1337 it became a hospital, and it admitted some mentally ill patients from 1357, but did not become a dedicated psychiatric hospital until later. Early sixteenth century maps show Bedlam, next to Bishopsgate, as a courtyard with a few stone buildings, a church and a garden. Conditions were consistently dreadful, and the care amounted to little more than restraint. There were 31 patients and the noise was "so hideous, so great; that they are more able to drive a man that hath his wits rather out of them." Violent or dangerous patients were manacled and chained to the floor or wall. Some were allowed to leave, and licensed to beg. It was a Royal hospital, but controlled by the City of London after 1557, and managed by the Governors of Bridewell. Day to day management was in the hands of a Keeper, who received payment for each patient from their parish, livery company, or relatives. In 1598 an inspection showed neglect; the "Great Vault" (cesspit) badly needed emptying, and the kitchen drains needed replacing. There were 20 patients there, one of whom had been there over 25 years. In 1620, patients of Bethlem banded together and sent a "Petition of the Poor Distracted People in the House of Bedlam (concerned with conditions for inmates)" to the House of Lords.

The Hospital became famous and notorious for the brutal ill-treatment meted out to the mentally ill. In 1675 Bedlam moved to new buildings in Moorfields designed by Robert Hooke, outside the City boundary. The playwright Nathaniel Lee was incarcerated there for five years, reporting that: "They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me."

The lunatics were first called "patients" in 1700, and "curable" and "incurable" wards were opened in 1725-34. In the 18th century people used to go to Bedlam to stare at the lunatics. For a penny one could peer into their cells, view the freaks of the "show of Bethlehem" and laugh at their antics. Entry was free on the first Tuesday of the month. In 1814 alone, there were 96,000 such visits.

Eighteenth century Bethlem was most notably portrayed in a scene from William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (1735), the story of a rich merchant's son whose immoral living causes him to end up in a ward at Bethlem. This reflects the view of the time that madness was a result of moral weakness, leading to "moral insanity" being used as a common diagnosis.

In 1815, Bedlam was moved to St George's Fields, Southwark. The inmates were referred to as "unfortunates" and must have had an uncomfortable time in their first



Bedlam

winter there; no glass was initially provided for the windows, because of "the disagreeable effluvia peculiar to all madhouses". This building had a remarkable library as an annex which was well frequented. Although the sexes were separated, in the evenings, those capable of appreciating music could dance together in the great ballroom. In the chapel the sexes were separated by a curtain. Finally, in 1930, the hospital was moved to an outer suburb of London, on the site of Monks Orchard House between Eden Park, Beckenham and Shirley. The old hospital and its grounds were bought by Lord Rothermere and presented to the London County Council for use as a park; the central part of the building was retained and became home to the Imperial War Museum in 1936.

In the early modern period it was widely believed that patients discharged from Bethlem Hospital were licensed to beg, though in 1675 the Governors denied this. They were known as Abraham-men or Tom o' Bedlam. They usually wore a tin plate on their arm as a badge and were also known as Bedlamers, Bedlamites, or Bedlam Beggars. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the Earl of Gloucester's son Edgar takes the role of a Bedlam Beggar in order to remain in England unnoticed after banishment. Whether any were ever licensed is uncertain. There were probably far more who claimed falsely to have been inmates than were ever admitted to the hospital.

In 1997 the Bethlem hospital started planning celebrations of its history on the occasion of its 750th anniversary. The service user perspective was not to be included, however, and members of the Consumer/Survivor/Ex-Patient Movement saw nothing to celebrate in either the original Bedlam or in current mental health care. A campaign called "Reclaim Bedlam" was launched by Pete Shaughnessey, which was supported by hundreds of patients and ex-patients and widely reported in the media. A sit-in was held outside the earlier Bedlam site at the Imperial War Museum. The historian Roy Porter called the Bethlem Hospital "a symbol for man's inhumanity to man, for callousness and cruelty."

Bethlem Royal today



Bethlem Royal Hospital is now part of the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust ("SLaM"), along with the Maudsley Hospital in Camberwell. SLaM is provider of the most extensive portfolio of mental health services in the United Kingdom, and a world leader in research, working in partnership with the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London.

SLaM provides mental health and substance misuse services to people from Croydon, Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham, together with substance misuse services for Bexley, Greenwich and Bromley (main stream mental health services

in the latter three boroughs being provided by the Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust), along with national specialist services, e.g. the National Psychosis Unit. There are a range of services at the Hospital, from substance misuse and eating disorders services to units for children and adolescents.

The hospital also houses an active occupational therapy department, well-known for its vibrant exterior and focus on the arts. The department has its own art gallery displaying work of current patients, and a number of noted artists have been past patients at the hospital over the years. Several examples of their work can be found in the Bethlem museum.

Notable patients of Bethlem hospital

- Lemuel Francis Abbott, portrait painter
- Hannah Chaplin, mother of film actor Charlie Chaplin
- Moll Cutpurse, also known as Mary Frith or "The Roaring Girl", released from Bedlam in 1644 according to Bridewell records
- Richard Dadd, artist
- John Frith, would-be assailant of King George III
- James Hadfield, would-be assassin of King George III
- Daniel M'Naghten, catalyst for the creation of the M'Naghten Rules (criteria for the defence of insanity in the British legal system) after the shooting of Edward Drummond
- Jonathan Martin, the man who set fire to York Minster[9]
- James Tilly Matthews, one time tea merchant and subject of the first book-length psychiatric case study
- Margaret Nicholson, would-be assassin of King George III
- Edward Oxford, tried for high treason after the attempted assassination of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert
- Martha Thompson, Methodist convert
- Louis Wain, artist
- Graham Arland Wainwright, Gothic painter



- Taken from Wikipedia