

Strait-Jacket

1963 | USA | 89 min.

Credits

Director	William Castle
Screenplay	Robert Bloch
Photography	Arthur E. Arling
Music	Van Alexander

Cast

Lucy Harbin	Joan Crawford
Carol Harbin	Diane Baker
Bill Cutler	Leif Erickson
Raymond Fields	Howard St. John

In Brief

A jealous woman carries out her revenge on her unfaithful husband and his mistress by chopping them up with a handy axe. She is sent to an asylum for 20 years. Upon her release, more brutal axe murders occur. Are these events purely coincidental, is the woman still crazy or is someone else trying to frame her?

Advised by his backers to eliminate the gimmicks, Castle initially relied upon the presence of Joan Crawford, fresh from the Grand Dame Guignol of *What Happened to Baby Jane?*, to bring in the audiences. But old habits died hard and Castle was soon having cardboard axes handed out to patrons!

For some seven years in the late 1950's and early 1960's, William Castle was as much a carnival barker as he was a filmmaker. Sure, people went to see his movies because they liked his style as a director, but inseparable from that style was Castle's wild sense of showmanship and fondness for intricate, overbearing ballyhoo. Inseparable, that is, until 1964. Part of what drove Castle out of the gimmick business was simply the easing off of the pressures that had driven him into it in the first place. In the final assessment, *Emergo* and *Percepto* had been merely more eccentric and extreme manifestations of the thinking behind 3-D, Cinemascope, and color cinematography— just one more attempt to find something a movie theater could do that TV could not. By the 1960's, though, the competition between television and the movies was settling into a state of equilibrium, and people in the film industry were no longer panicking over the prospect of a future in which their customers would desert them en masse in favor of the boob tube. Without the impetus of that looming anxiety, it no longer made financial sense— either for Columbia Pictures (Castle's usual distributor) or for the theater owners— to devote scarce resources to rigging theater seats with electric buzzers or building Coward's Corners at the backs of auditoriums. Castle's gimmicks necessarily became cheaper and simpler after 1961, and inevitably started to look sort of lame in comparison to what had come before. The Punishment Poll cards for Mr. Sardonicus cost next to nothing, but the audience-participation angle they brought to the movie provided considerable zing nonetheless. The plastic coins handed out along with the tickets to *Zotz!*, however, seemed like a major letdown, and the international beauty pageant that accompanied *13 Frightened Girls* was an even bigger miscalculation. Since it didn't include the audience in any way, it missed the boat completely on what had traditionally made Castle's hucksterism special; any Hollywood cigar-chomper could dream up a publicity stunt like that! So when Castle returned to Columbia after the indifferent reception that greeted *The Old Dark House* (the product of his brief and rather uncharacteristic alliance with Hammer Film Productions), it should have come as little surprise to anyone that the suits essentially asked him if this time, he could just make a damn movie for once like any normal producer/director. The answer, officially, was yes. But as John Waters astutely observed in his essay on Castle in *Crackpot*, *Strait-Jacket* ended up having, in a sense, the old showman's biggest gimmick yet, for *Strait-Jacket* featured something that no William Castle production had ever had before. It had a no-two-ways-about-it, capital-S Star.

Twenty years ago, Lucy Harbin (Joan Crawford, from *Berserk* and *I Saw What You Did*) chopped two people to pieces with an axe. One was her tomcatting second husband; the other was the ex-girlfriend of his with whom Lucy caught him in bed. Her little daughter, Carol, witnessed the ghastly double murder, and she was adopted by her Uncle Bill (Leif Erickson, of *Invaders from Mars* and *Night Monster*) and Aunt Emily (Rochelle Hudson, from *The Night Walker* and *Dr. Terror's Gallery of Horrors*) when Lucy was declared insane and packed off to an asylum. Bill and Emily Cutler then moved out west to escape from the nimbus of scandal surrounding the family, buying a small farm out in the countryside somewhere. Carol grew up (to be played as an adult by Diane Baker, of *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *The Silence of the Lambs*), and began dating Michael Fields (John Anthony Hayes), the son of a prosperous dairy farmer. It's been a simple and peaceful life for her, but now things are about to get complicated again. Lucy's caretakers have decided that she's well enough at this point to make a go of living outside the asylum, and now the fabled sometime axe-murderess is coming to stay at the Cutler farm.

"Well enough" isn't quite the same thing as "well," however, as Lucy's behavior following her homecoming amply demonstrates. She's nervous, awkward, withdrawn, and apt to be overcome with emotion in response to even seemingly minor stimuli. She's also





so petrified at the prospect of having to deal with strangers that she flees the house in a panic when Michael comes over for dinner on her first evening at the family homestead. Of course, all of those things could be dismissed as the inevitable side-effects of having to adjust to so drastic a change in lifestyle after twenty years in a mental hospital. Similarly, one might regard the aversion with which Lucy greets the confinement of the livestock on the Cutler farm—to say nothing of the dread that suffuses her in response to any talk of slaughtering or butchering—as only to be expected given both the length of her own confinement and the circumstances that led to it. Nevertheless, such things do raise the question of whether the farm is precisely the right environment for Lucy in making her final recovery. More worrisome still are the nightmares, like the vivid dream Lucy has in which she seems to awaken in the middle of the night to find the severed heads of her old victims sharing the bed with her. Perversely enough, however, the biggest threat to Lucy's precarious mental balance may be Carol herself, who seems so caught up in her own fantasies of picking up where she and Mom left off as to be oblivious to the strains her expectations place upon Lucy. For example, maybe celebrating her mother's release by presenting her with a twenty-year-old photo album and her favorite bracelets from way back when—the very same bracelets she had been wearing when she hacked up her husband—isn't such a good idea.

It's when Carol takes Lucy out shopping that the trouble really starts, though. You see, the girl's avowed aim for the excursion is to give her mother the means to turn back the clock and present herself as if the last two decades had never happened at all. By the time Carol gets through with her, Lucy looks just like the trailer-trash vamp her daughter remembers from back in the day, with a stylish dress, gaudy jewelry, sexy shoes, and a wig to cover up her heavily graying hair. Carol is rather surprised, however, when her mother starts acting the part of the trailer-trash vamp, too, making a disgraceful, drunken attempt to seduce Michael when Carol invites him over for afternoon

cocktails. Sure, it's great that Lucy finally seems to be regaining some of her erstwhile self-confidence, but that really is a bit much. The lurid scene is arrested only when something even more unnerving happens—Dr. Anderson (Mitchell Cox), Lucy's psychiatrist, calls on the phone to announce that he's in town and means to stop by for a visit, launching Lucy off on a spiraling paranoid freak-out. She starts accusing everyone of wanting to send her back to the asylum, and takes much persuasion before she'll believe that her relatives know no more about Dr. Anderson's intentions than she does.

It turns out that Anderson is mixing business with pleasure. He's on his way to meet some colleagues for a fishing retreat, but while he's in the area, he wants to check in on his patient and see how she's adjusting. Anderson didn't fully agree with the hospital directorship's decision to release Lucy (he thought she needed just a little more time for the therapy driving her big breakthrough to stick), and he has convinced his superiors to treat the present situation as probationary. If Lucy is getting on well at the Cutler farm, then so much the better; if not, Anderson is prepared to have her re-committed. The doctor's impression of Lucy's stability is not favorable, and he immediately recognizes Carol's efforts to ignore the past as a dangerous influence. But before Anderson has a chance to begin the process of sending Lucy back to the asylum, or even to tell the Cutlers that he intends to do so, somebody—obviously a woman, although we see only her shadow—lures him into the chicken coop and kills him with an axe. This is only the first of a string of axe-murders to be committed on or around the farm in the days to come, and even if we make the natural assumption that Lucy is behind them all, the subsequent behavior of Carol, hired hand Leo Kraus (George Kennedy, from *Death Ship* and *Creepshow 2*), and even Michael's parents (Howard St. John and Edith Atwater, of *Die, Sister, Die* and *The Body Snatcher*) is such that genuinely clear consciences are surely going to be in short supply by the time the obligatory post-*Psycho* twist ending comes.

It wasn't until I saw *Strait-Jacket* that I realized the extent to which *Psycho* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* had been variant faces of the same cinematic trend. Both the *Psycho*-inspired proto-slashers and the *Baby Jane*-style sagas of menopausal mayhem moved their horrors away from the genre's traditional settings to situate the furthest extremes of human viciousness in surroundings that a 1960's audience would have regarded with perhaps discomfiting familiarity. (It is, however, worth observing in this context that *Psycho* itself has a vestigial spooky old house serving as the cinematic equivalent of a vermiform appendix.) On both sides, their villains are human maniacs with authentically squalid motives, and both forms display a special affinity for twisted family relationships. Parents poison the minds of their children, siblings resent each other's successes and blame each other for their failures, and spouses turn to murder to vent their suspicions and jealousies. And in both cases, black and white cinematography is used not only to control costs (an independent production with Joan Crawford in the lead is going to have to economize on something, after all), but also to create a very specific sort of atmosphere. Remember that Eastmancolor and Pathecolor had been available as cheap alternatives to Technicolor for a good five years by the time these movies started appearing; color could be had even on an Allied Artists budget if a

Strait-Jacket

filmmaker were willing to cut corners somewhere else. In practice, however, color film was for spectacles, while movies that worked on a more intimate scale generally stuck to monochrome stock. Because intimacy inevitably becomes oppressive in the company of a lunatic, the psychological horror films of the 60's were able to exploit that implicit dichotomy to maximize the impact of a story in which small numbers of relatively isolated people find themselves at the mercy of a deranged killer—coziness turns to claustrophobia as soon as the knives come out.

Strait-Jacket makes for an especially effective illustration of the essential kinship between the two dominant modes of 60's psycho-horror, because it places the unbalanced, aging woman of the Baby Jane school at the center of a story that could, with minor tinkering, have been used as a sequel to Psycho. (Robert Bloch, who wrote both Strait-Jacket and the Psycho source novel, must have noticed that possibility, too. The screenplay he devised for Psycho II eighteen years later follows a strikingly similar plot.) Some of its similarities to the Hitchcock film I could do without, such as the "Voice of Wisdom explains it all" wrap-up scene and the pronounced deflation the movie suffers during the climax. Strait-Jacket at least has a respectable final face-off between killer and heroine, but the "just 'cause Psycho had one" twist that accompanies it undermines the best features of the story up to that point in much the same way (if, thankfully, not to the same degree) as the similar climactic upset in House on the Edge of the Park. Some appealingly ambivalent characters have all of the complexity excised from them by the events of the final few scenes, and Strait-Jacket would be substantially the poorer for it even if the operation hadn't been performed so clumsily. But for the most part, Strait-Jacket is among the more successful examples of its breed, and it got William Castle's post-ballyhoo career off to a very respectable start. In particular, Castle, Bloch, and the two lead actresses collectively nail the fraught relationship between Lucy and Carol, which is really the core of the film. The sequence that begins when Carol notices Dr. Anderson's car parked in front of the house despite her mother's claims that he left hours ago, and ends when Carol and Leo Kraus confront each other over the significance of said vehicle's continued presence, is a minor masterpiece of suspense cinema, revealing considerable insight into the power of family loyalty to lead people cataclysmically astray. And Crawford, despite the hokiness of much of her performance, gets in a few moments that demonstrate irrefutably that she still had it. My favorite is the showdown between Lucy and Mrs. Fields that ensues when the latter corners the former into admitting where she's been for the last twenty years. Lucy, already on the defensive because of her opponent's wealth and privilege, is finally reduced to blubbing abjection by her badgering cross-examination, but when Mrs. Fields blurts out that she'll never let Carol marry her son now, Lucy suddenly rallies with a fierceness and resolve that she hasn't shown since the night she killed her husband. An emotional 180 like that isn't something I'm accustomed to seeing done right, but Crawford sure as hell does it right here. Along with his long-established laurels as king of the hucksters, we may also credit Castle for exhibiting exceptionally discerning taste in has-beens.

- Scott Ashlin, 1000 Misspent Hours and Counting



edinBURGH
FILM
GUILD

William Castle