

The Tingler

1959 | US | 81 min.

Credits

Director	William Castle
Screenplay	Robb White
Photography	Wilfred M. Cline
Music	Von Dexter

Cast

Dr. Warren Chapin	Vincent Price
Martha Ryerson Higgins	Judith Evelyn
David Morris	Darryl Hickman
Isabel Stevens Chapin	Patricia Cutts

In Brief

Dr. Warren Chapin is a pathologist who regularly conducts autopsies on executed prisoners at the State prison. He has a theory that fear is the result of a creature that inhabits all of us. His theory is that the creature is suppressed by our ability to scream when fear strikes us. He gets a chance to test his theories when he meets Ollie and Martha Higgins, who own and operate a second-run movie theater. Martha is deaf and mute and if she is unable to scream, extreme fear should make the creature, which Chapin has called the Tingler, come to life and grow. Using LSD to induce nightmares, he begins his experiment.

Possibly William Castle's most famous and well-regarded film, at least from amongst the fruits of the heyday of his faux-Hitchcockian huckstering, it's rather more confidently essayed than Castle's immediate predecessor and companion piece, *House on Haunted Hill*. Both films sport star Vincent Price, then fast entrenching himself as the great American ghoul-movie star, subplots involving marital monstrosity, and gaudily tacky fairground fright effects. It's also more polished and poised, if far less sly and uniquely neo-realist, than Roger Corman's near-simultaneous excursions into low-budget, high-concept fare, such as *Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), just before Price found a home with Corman for his epochal series of Poe adaptations. Castle's earnest, and yet somehow hilarious, appearance at the outset promises a thoroughly good time, but *The Tingler* is chiefly sustained by a smart script with some wonderful animating ideas, courtesy of Robb White.



The notion that a monster grows in centipede-like form up the length of one's spine, feeding on fear like a parasite, is an irresistible starting point for a genre work from a man entirely dedicated to finding the soft spots of his audience. Not that anyone was every likely to die of terror at a Castle film, in spite of his Lloyd's insurance policy, but few works even in the symbol-laden horror genre have ever quite embraced such a keen figurative idea as the *Tingler* itself. Research pathologist Dr. Warren Chapin (Price) develops his theory based on signs of spinal damage he detects in executed prisoners, and explores the notion with the aid of his talented research assistant David Morris (Darryl Hickman). He also shares his ideas with a chance acquaintance, Ollie Higgins (Philip Coolidge), a mousy man married to a deaf-mute, Martha (Judith Evelyn), who owns a silent film revival theatre. She presents a perfect vehicle for experimenting with the *Tingler*, which can only be robbed of strength by the psychic release valve of screaming, but having no vocal chords she cannot make any sound at all.

Both men have an epiphany that leads to diverse, and yet linked, responses. Warren, tired of his obnoxious, unfaithful, rich wife Isabel (Patricia Cutts) disrespecting him and trying to bully her younger sister, Lucy (Pamela Lincoln) into ceasing to date David, scares her into fainting with a faked shooting that enables him to take an x-ray of a *Tingler*. Ollie, on the other hand, hungry for his wife's money and fed up with living in a sickly, combative environment, begins providing gruesome apparitions to provoke the *Tingler's* growth until it kills her. His plan works, and he brings her to Warren to confirm she's dead, but she continues to move in spite of being stone cold: Warren realises the full-grown *Tingler* is still alive inside her and cuts out the ugly creature for study. But the *Tingler* proves a troublesome little critter, all too capable of existing outside the body when fully formed, and a handy tool in Isabel's revenge on her husband, before going on a little walk to the chagrin of some movie theatre patrons.



The interweaving of family conflict and bizarre psychosomatic manifestation makes for a fascinating mixture, anticipating, in a cheerfully unpretentious fashion, the likes of Jerzy Skolimowski's *The Shout* (1979) and Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980), in exploring psychological concepts, like the primal scream and the collective unconscious, through literalised nightmare figures. The exploitation of then-nascent concepts in therapy like the primal scream as release valve and the use of LSD as exploratory vehicle

William Castle

The Tingler



– as Price does in one sequence – was cutting-edge as story material on the movie screen. The Tingler also repeats the marital-war motif of Haunted Hill and raises the interesting spectre of Castle’s curious misanthropic fascination with husbands and wives trying to murder each other as a driving plot device. The swankiness of Warren’s house, provided by Isabel’s money at a high cost in emotion and self-worth, contrasts the seamy charms of the Higgins’ theatre and apartment: in both marriages, money and hate are inseparable even at diverse ends of the fiscal spectrum. The Tingler itself then becomes a rampant animus, the grotesque offspring of perverted human lives.

Such motifs were possibly trying to channel some of the emotional brutality and intensity of his models, Hitchcock and H.G. Clouzot, whose *Les Diaboliques* (1956) seems to have particularly influenced his rather cheesier gimmicks involving fake bodies in bath-tubs, and his three-card monte plots. That Castle definitely wasn’t Hitchcock or Clouzot is self-evident; in truth he was perhaps not even on a par with other journeymen dabbling in fantastic cinema at the time,

such as Arthur Crabtree and Gene Fowler Jr: his camera set-ups are generally merely dutiful and the action set-bound, even though his careful framing of actors betrays an eye trained by the exigencies of the old studio style. Stunt effects, like isolated colour as Martha is frightened by visions of vivid red blood, and half-hearted lens distortions to reproduce Warren’s LSD trip, are crude, and yet have a kind of pop-art delight to them.

The limited camerawork and the cheap settings reflect more the cramped budgets of Castle’s independent work than any lack of technical chops on his part (the photography, by Wilfred M. Cline, and the lighting, are quality work in their way). But his showmanship, beloved in popular memory thanks to its innately tacky humour value and notion of chiller cinema as a kind of audience-participation game that looked forward to the Rocky Horror Show, actually often hurt the integrity of his films, sacrificing a complete and logical feel to contingency, as the significant subplot of Warren’s increasingly deadly conflict with Isabel goes nowhere and leaves story issues dangling, and the finale is perforated by silly time-outs and a “shock” finish that’s merely irritating and disappointing. Like Haunted Hill, *The Tingler* stops rather than finishes, and to this extent Castle represents a cheapened vision of the horror genre.

But Castle’s approach is an indicator, just as much as the more inflated paraphernalia such as Cinerama, of an American film industry searching for new ways to galvanise its waning patronage, and represents a bracing by-product of the loosening bonds of that industry: Castle perhaps helped prove that an independent director could make his own films successful with a strong sense of his intended audience. Castle probably in this way helped pave the way for rather more volatile, boundary-pushing talents such as Herschel Gordon Lewis and George Romero to wow midnight matinee audiences with their sick visions, even if Castle’s own talent was far more clean-cut and retrograde. *The Tingler* itself, once seen, though clumsily animated, is fascinatingly designed, with a look that made have influenced future generations of body-invading organisms in horror and sci-fi films, immediately putting into my mind the brain slugs of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*.

Price, playing a more sympathetic character than usual, in spite of Warren’s willingness to indulge a little play-act murder, is slick and remarkably free of any hint of ham or tongue-in-cheek; Cutts, as his laughingly self-satisfied, icicle-hearted spouse, is both memorably nasty and sexy; and Evelyn memorable in her soundless anxiety and final desperation. The music, by Von Dexter, consciously apes Bernard Herrmann’s score for *Vertigo*. Most delightful, although a little fudged in the pay-off, is the great touch of having the Tingler escape into the theatre, tickling the shins of viewers engrossed in the 1921 Henry King film *Tol’able David*, a scene that plays as meta without any self-consciousness, much like the similar sequence in *The Blob* (1958), but with an added dimension of delighted movie buff indulgence of a kind that was still relatively rare in cinema at the time. Even the choice of silent movies accords neatly with Evelyn’s disability and denies the handy pleasure that *The Tingler* indulges: the healing power of good noisy scream.

- Roderick Heath

edinBURGH
FILM
GUILD

William Castle

Thirteen Ghosts

1960 | US | 84 min.

Credits

Director	William Castle
Screenplay	Robb White
Photography	Joseph F. Biroc
Music	Von Dexter

Cast

Buck Zorba	Charles Herbert
Medea Zorba	Jo Morrow
Benjamin Rush	Martin Milner
Hilda Zorba	Rosemary DeCamp

In Brief

Cyrus Zorba, inherits a big old house from his strange, rich, recently deceased uncle, Dr. Plato Zorba. As most of their furniture has just been repossessed, Cyrus and his family are keen to move into their new abode, which even comes complete with a creepy house keeper. Unfortunately the house is haunted by various vengeful ghosts and it is not long before they start appearing to Cyrus and his family — but are the ghosts actually real?

Through the wonders of Illusion-O, the brave amongst you can don your red lenses and see the ghosts while the not so brave can put on the blue lenses and have them removed!

William Castle was renowned for showman gimmicks to which he gave cheesy names, such as "Percept-O," "Fright Break," and "Emerg-O." Although some of these effects were pretty silly, some were fairly complicated—and most of them relied upon the communal nature of a theatre audience for effect.

But there is one exception. The gimmick for Castle's 13 GHOSTS was "Illusion-O," which required the audience to use color filters (available here) similar to 3-D glasses to see the ghosts in the film. Like most Castle films, the story is very basic. A financially strapped family inherits a house, and unless they actually agree to reside in it the property goes to the state. But the house is also residence to 11 ghosts "collected" by the previous owner, and his death raised the number to 12. Now all of them are out to add another to their number. Who will the victim be? The script, the design, the cinematography, and the story are just as hokey as they can be, but the cast—which includes Margaret "Wicked Witch of the West" Hamilton -- plays it very straight and even without the Illusion-O process the film is a cult favorite.

But Illusion-O puts the icing on top. Periodically, a caption flashes on the screen instructing you to look through the viewer. Look through the red filter, and Poof! There are ghosts galore. Look through the blue filter, and Poof! Ghosts be Gone! Now, strictly speaking, you don't actually have to look through anything to see the ghosts—they are fairly visible without squinting through that little red lense—but it does add a tremendous amount of fun to the whole thing. This may be your only chance to see a William Castle film as it was intended to be seen—well, if you are a Castle fan you'll probably want to go to the trouble. Whatever the case, it's all silly, campy fun. -- Gary F. Taylor



13 Ghosts: A Celebration

In the hot summer of 1960, one of the few places that had air conditioning in the small town where I lived was the local movie theater. That summer we went to the movies a lot. I can't remember if it was during THE BELLBOY or THE ALAMO, but there was a preview for William Castle's 13 GHOSTS and I was hooked. I had to see it.

By 1960 producer-director William Castle was at the height of his career. He had already unleashed such "shockers" as MACABRE, THE HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL, and THE TINGLER. Castle was a showman first and movie-maker second. I like to think of him as the smiling carny who stood outside the tent and promised things he couldn't possibly deliver. However, when you are seven years old, you believe him when he promises that the amazing new process of Illusion O will allow you to see 13 ghosts on screen. More importantly, if your nerve deserted you, the process would allow you to make the ghosts disappear.

After endless weeks of anticipation, the opening day for 13 GHOSTS finally arrived. Every kid in town had lined up for the Saturday matinee, hoping for one of the coveted seats in the balcony of the Geneva Theatre (please note, I am Canadian and we spell it theatre, instead of theater). Everyone got their own ghost viewer when they entered the theatre, handed out by bored ushers who instructed us that we would need them to see the ghosts.

All the kids who crowded into the theater were wired up on a giant sugar rush powered by soda and chocolate. The air was filled with flying popcorn boxes and anticipation as the lights dropped. The curtain rose and William Castle himself gave us a pseudo-scientific

Thirteen Ghosts



lecture on how to use our ghost viewers. To see the ghosts we needed to look through the red lens, if we were chicken we could make them disappear by looking through the blue lens (as if).

13 GHOSTS is really old fashioned, with bad dialogue, lame acting and cheesy special effects. However, it captivated a group of small town seven-year-olds and even shut up the rowdies in the balcony.

13 Ghosts (1960) 13 GHOSTS follows the adventures of the Zorba family, who always seem to be on the verge of bankruptcy even though Mr. Zorba appears to have a good (albeit somewhat undefined) job at the local museum. The family, who seem like great candidates for a subprime loan, have just had all their furniture repossessed by the finance company, when a telegram arrives (producing one of the few genuine shocks in the film) to inform them that a distant uncle has passed away and left them his house and, as we later find out, his collection of ghosts from around the world.

The late professor Zorba, we learn, had invented a ghost viewer – which was much more elaborate than the cheap cardboard versions we got – that allowed him to see and capture the ghosts and then contain them in his house. All this is explained by a young lawyer who might as well have a flashing sign over his head to indicate his role in all of this. The lawyer was played by Martin Milner, who would go on to television stardom that fall in ROUTE 66.

The Zorba family happily packs up and moves right in. Apart from their dubious financial skills, the Zorbans are also numb-skulls: the father, mother, and daughter are basically throw away characters, while the son Buck stands in for the target demographic, impressionable young boys.

The only lively piece of acting in 13 GHOSTS arrives courtesy of Margaret Hamilton as the mysterious housekeeper. Her performance is enhanced because she doesn't have

much of the clunky dialogue that the script overflows with. Most of her role involves not too subtle references to her classic part as the Wicked Witch of the West in THE WIZARD OF OZ.

Once the ghosts show up the film comes to life. Part supernatural thriller and part old dark house mystery, 13 GHOSTS reaches a more or less satisfying conclusion with the mystery solved, the Zorbans rich and the house ghost free... or is it?

My friends, who hadn't seen nearly as many horror movies as I had, spent the movie sliding down deep into their seats while I spent the entire film mesmerized. When it was over we all agreed that it was "awesome" or whatever the 1960's equivalent to "awesome" was, and we all vowed to go again and again.

We never did.

13 GHOSTS created an indelible memory that I carried down the years, refusing to see the film again because I was afraid that it wouldn't live up to my recollections of it from the summer of 1960. Several months ago, we watched the DVD of Joe Dante's MATINEE, and my teenaged daughter asked who William Castle was. We watched the documentary on the William Castle box set that Sony released last year, and she really wanted to see some of the films including 13 GHOSTS.

Finally relenting, I picked up a copy of the DVD that included the ghost viewer version with the color inserts that revealed the ghosts through the tinted lenses. What would a slightly cynical, hip teenager think of this black and white museum piece? And what would I think after a half a century?

Sure, the story is corny, the acting stilted and the special effects cheesy, but my daughter got caught up in the mystery and the mechanics of her ghost viewer. And, I must confess, for 85 precious minutes, I was sitting amid the flying popcorn boxes, clutching my orange soda and ghost viewer thrilling at flying meat cleavers, headless lion tamers and hidden treasure in a haunted house.

William Castle went on to create '60s cult classics such as MR. SARDONICUS, HOMICIDAL, and STRAIGHTJACKET. Today he is celebrated for the outrageous gimmicks he employed to draw audiences, and if he were making films today it would be interesting to see what kind of gimmicks he would use.

Fifty years ago his ghost viewer opened a whole new doorway into the supernatural for a generation of bored school children. And as part of that audience I hail him and 13 GHOSTS for making the summer of 1960 a chilling one for my friends and me.

- Peter McGarvey



Homicidal

1961 | USA | 87 min.

Credits

Director	William Castle
Screenplay	Robb White
Photography	Burnett Guffey
Music	Hugo Friedhofer

Cast

Karl Anderson	Glenn Corbett
Miriam Webster	Patricia Breslin
Helga Swenson	Eugenie Leontovich
Doctor Jonas	Alan Bunce

In Brief

A blonde woman checks into a hotel offers hotel porter Jim \$2000 if he will marry her the next day; the marriage will immediately be annulled after the ceremony. Jim agrees to the deal, but as soon as the Justice of the Peace has performed the ceremony the woman pulls out a knife, repeatedly stabs him, flees and speeds off in Jim's car. Thus the scene is set for this intriguing, twisty-turny, psycho-thriller which owes more than a little to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

At the climax there is a 45 second "Fright Break", giving those of you who cannot stand the tension at the climax the option of standing in the "Coward's Corner" to be shamed and humiliated by your more courageous peers before receiving a refund on your ticket.

William Castle's efforts to establish himself as Alfred Hitchcock's rival in cinema thrills and public notoriety sees him kick off this film with a brief but amusing little cameo in which he offers to the audience's eye the product of his own embroidery talents, displaying the film's title, adopting a playfully sing-song voice in trying to capture Hitch's familiar brand of schoolboy's black humour. The first twenty minutes of *Homicidal*, an attempt to steal the limelight of Hitchcock's game-changing hit *Psycho* (1960), seems to promise Castle's best film. In one of Ventura County's sleazier precincts, a young woman calling herself Miriam Webster (Jean Arless) checks into a hotel, and, after pointedly requesting the younger, virile-looking bellboy, Jim Nesbitt (Richard Rust) to carry her bags to her room, hits the young man with a strange business offer. She wants him to marry her, and then have the marriage immediately annulled, for the price of \$2,000 dollars.

Nesbitt reluctantly agrees, after swallowing his slightly wounded pride in realising that she doesn't want to marry him for real, and lets her drive him a tedious distance to the house of a JP, Alfred S. Adrims (James Westerfield) and his wife. In a splendidly seedy vignette, the slovenly Adrims, clutching a bottle of booze in his nightgown, takes care to overcharge the couple, Miriam shooting eyes like daggers at Nesbitt when he starts to protest, and then enjoins his wife (Hope Summers) to play the Bridal March ("It'll disturb the neighbours!" "Then play soft!"). When Adrims bends forward with a leer to kiss the bride, Miriam is suddenly gripped by an apparently reactive frenzy and repeatedly knifes the JP in the stomach. She flees as Adrims expires in Nesbitt's arms. It's a scene that displays Castle's gift for blackly comic American gothic as suggested in *The Tingler* (1959), and sports a defiant amount of gore for a 1961 film, Adrims' gut gushing (grey) blood as his assassin stabs him with joyless but relished, prosecutorial fury.

Emily eludes police by stealing Nesbitt's car and then changing to another she's left waiting, and makes it unscathed to a large house outside the small Californian town of Solvang. It soon emerges that this woman is not Miriam Webster at all: she's Emily, nursemaid to Helga (Eugenie Leontovich) the crippled old former nanny to the real Miriam and her half-brother Warren, brought back to America from Denmark, where Warren and Helga spent many years after his parents died in a car crash. Emily's campaign seems, initially, to set up Miriam (Patricia Breslin), who keeps a florist's, as a murderess, but soon her efforts seem less directed, as she trashes Miriam's shop, taking special care to destroy all the wedding paraphernalia, before lurking in wait for Miriam's boyfriend, chemist Karl Anderson (Glenn Corbett), and knocking him unconscious. Karl awakens to Warren's solicitous aid, and Karl and Miriam begin trying to puzzle out the mystery of Emily's place in Warren's life: Miriam eventually seems to learn that they are secretly married. But the truth, which takes until the very climax to emerge, if you're utterly blind, is that Warren is Emily, brought up since birth to take the place of the boy her father had desperately, imperiously demanded. Now she's utilising her ability to shift between genders to create in Emily a murderess scapegoat who can eliminate all who know about his/her secret and whatever impediments remain to inheriting the Webster fortune.

Burnett Guffey's photography apes *Psycho*'s look with its hyper-contrast black and white and minimalist settings. Whilst Castle was undoubtedly an opportunist, his oeuvre is marked out by his recurring decision to couch his stories in themes of familial homicide – the husband-wife duels of *House on Haunted Hill* and *The Tingler* give way here to an even darker, and in some ways brilliantly anticipatory, theme of childhood perversion and fatally blurred gender roles. These are encapsulated by the cunning final shot of the doll that was Miriam's favourite toy and the whip that was the tool to toughen up "Warren" lying together in a coldly mocking emblem of the sort of psychosexual signifiers that would have sent Jacques Lacan in to paroxysms of ecstatic deconstruction. Emily is repeatedly drawn into tactile fascination with such signifiers, caressing the short hair cut of a young boy and clutching a doll with dead-eyed, cheated maternal confusion. The notion that Warren/Emily has been driven mad by not only by cruelty in upbringing but by inability to reconcile the rigid codes of masculinity and femininity in a classically patriarchal household, holds a wondrous potential for dark satire and subversive assault on the mainstream ideals of the '50s over and above what *Psycho* achieved, and also looks forward to Dario Argento's rich variation on these themes, *Deep Red* (1975).





Even more pointed is the ironic theme involving the ease with which familial roles can be filled or emptied according to economic consequences, adds urgency to Warren/Emily's campaign of schismatic role-annihilation: Emily's initial buying of a husband gives way to her final efforts to murder her sister, all to assure Warren's inheritance, which, it has been dictated, must go to the younger male inheritor, but only as long as he is male – Warren/Emily's efforts then simply extend and invert the mean-spirited enforcement of a patriarchal ideal, that subjects the theoretical bonds of family to mere capitalism. The very finish, after Warren/Emily is rather casually dispatched with a bullet in the back by Miriam, is a jokier play on the deliberately cheesy explanation of Psycho, but lacks the sting of Hitchcock's punchline, as Karl's comic last line, replying to Miriam's question as to whether her new-found wealth will change things between them ("Yes it will Miriam... I think I'm going to love you more!"), deliberately deflates the tension between love and money that is central to the story.

And yet Warren/Emily is constantly driven to fury by being confronted with the signifiers of romantic love and marriage, something s/he has a cruel outsider's perspective on, and her game involves a pretend marriage between the different aspects of herself. Emily hires a man to sharpen her favourite weapon of murder, a surgical knife, the weapon with which she determinedly attempts to cut apart her own fatally concatenated life by cutting apart the people in it, the act of the sharpening lingered over in almost erotic pleasure. Much of the film's overt suspense and most compelling scenes comes from the constant toying Emily engages in with Helga, who, wheelchair-bound and mute after a stroke, attempts to constantly tap out messages pleading for aid but has Emily purposefully mistranslate them. Helga's part in establishing nursery room authority and rewriting the "natural" codes of gender has been completely, viciously inverted, for all of Helga's most despairing efforts to communicate with the outside world, including the local physician, Doctor Jonas (Alan Bunce), fail, before Emily finally, gleefully cleaves her head off. Emily's delight in controlling her crippled muse of violence clearly looks forward to the sisterly sadomasochism of Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? (1963). Castle's overt gimmick, that Arless plays Emily and Warren, albeit with a man dubbing over Arless' lines when inhabiting Warren, largely explains why he's otherwise quite restrained, except for a "fright break" towards the end, sporting a clock dial on the screen, giving audience members too freaked out a chance to retreat to the "Coward's Corner".

Castle's reputation as a trashy, entertaining showman obscures, to a large extent, his essentially conservative solidity as a filmmaker, in spite of his overt acts of canny barker hype and delight in trying to tease and nauseate his audience, and both the longevity of his efforts and their frustrating lack of truly cinematic punch can both be laid down to this solidity. His stalwart technique always kept his chosen narratives from approaching the outer limits of hysteria they promised. Castle does spice his style up here with flash cuts to close-ups of Emily's eyes during her wild moments, but is otherwise largely content to stick with his usual variation on master shots from one side of his sets, to which the action is largely bound, as per old studio practise, and dully rhythmic exposition. Then again, the concision with which Castle offers up some patently weird images and frames his action, demands respect: even if Castle's inspiration is only present in flashes, at least the flashes, when they come, are fascinating. But the screenplay, by Castle's usual collaborator in his later fright-fests, Robb White, is again full of good ideas but only functional, flat characters and dialogue.

The middle act, after the strong start and before the off-the-wall last ten minutes, is a slow plod, depending on the hilariously unconvincing masquerade of Arless as a man to sustain mystery and tension, and giving far too much screen time to the bland-as-beige Miriam and Karl. The clever dark humour and intriguing suggestions in the early scenes giving way to a main story that's impossible to take seriously as it's played out, and Castle's imagination is finally too literal to take it stranger places. Admittedly, the central ruse needed either uncommonly brilliant mimicry or outright surrealist campiness to be pulled off effectively, or, preferably, keeping Warren off screen. Although Arless does a good job in imitating a young man's body language, her appearance, with a dental plate that keeps her from closing her mouth properly much of the time, makes her look more a demented butch chipmunk, and it effectively ruins what chance the film has of sustaining real tension. Still, Arless gives it the old school try, and her performance is a lot of fun.

Homicidal does kick upwards again as it builds towards Emily's final murder of Helga. Helga's dumb-show appeals to Jonas, and the doctor's delightfully idiotic response to the urgent terror on the woman's face (he does come back in the nick of time later to save Miriam, but all too late to help Helga, because he was "concerned"), Castle pushing in for an indelible close-up of Helga trying to communicate, and then Emily's girlish, taunting glee in letting Helga try and escape her on the elevator that takes her wheelchair up and down the stairs, before delivering the coup-de-grace, is all compellingly bizarre. The (suggested) gruesome pay-off, that Emily leaves Helga's severed head balanced in place, ready to plunge down the stairs at the slightest disturbance, as a welcome-home gift to Miriam, is a memorably funny touch and also anticipates the later compulsory scene in slasher films like Halloween (1978) in which caches of victims are discovered like the killer's idea of practical jokes. Nobody over the age of six years was in any need of retreating to the Coward's Corner, at any rate.

This Island Rod [Roderick Heath]



Mr Sardonicus

1961 | USA | 89 MIN.

Credits

Director	William Castle
Screenplay	Ray Russell
Photography	Burnett Guffey
Music	Von Dexter

Cast

Sir Robert Cargrave	Ronald Lewis
Baroness Sardonicus	Audrey Dalton
Baron Sardonicus	Guy Rolfe
Krull	Oskar Homolka

In Brief

This fiendishly twisted tale involves an eminent London doctor called Sir Robert Cargrave who receives a letter from his old flame, Maude, and travels to Central Europe to visit her. Maude is now married to the mysterious Baron Sardonicus, a candidate for the unluckiest ever lottery winner ever, who has an ulterior motive for inviting Sir Robert...

Here, Castle invites you to participate in the "Punishment Poll": By holding up your card thumbs-up or thumbs-down you can collectively decide what happens to Mr Sardonicus!

Mr. Sardonicus. "Mr. Sneeringly Derisive." What a great name. And given my personality and Señora El Santo's curious affection for Latinizing nicknames, one that will surely be applied to me if ever she learns that this movie exists. I tell you, William Castle was a strange, strange man, and this, his follow-up to *Homicidal* (made later the same year), is a strange, strange movie. It's very much a film in the antique style: lots of dialogue, not much action, a villain who mostly just talks about all the evil things he's going to do instead of just doing them, one curiously effective if clumsily executed shock visual that it uses again and again whenever it seems like the audience is likely to be getting bored. But it also has an off-kilter craziness to it that does much to make up for its shortcomings.



As I said, there isn't much action, so the story is a bit difficult to synopsis, but here goes. One day in 1880, a famous doctor named Sir Robert Cargrave (Ronald Lewis, from *Scream of Fear*) receives a letter from a strange-looking man with one eye (Oskar Homolka). The letter was written by a woman named Maude (Audrey Dalton of *The Monster that Challenged the World*), who was Sir Robert's girlfriend in his youth, and for whom he still carries the torch. Maude was prevented from marrying Sir Robert (who in those days had no "Sir" attached to his name) by her father, who believed that the boy would never amount to anything. Instead, she was married off to a central European nobleman called Baron Sardonicus (Guy Rolfe, from *And Now the Screaming Starts!*), who had apparently already amounted to much. Now this Baron Sardonicus greatly desires to see Sir Robert, and according to her letter, "it is vitally urgent to [Maude's] well-being" that he does. Sir Robert is understandably shaken by the tone of the letter, and immediately arranges to travel to Sardonicus's home in Gorslava (wherever that is-- somewhere between Transylvania and Visaria is my guess...).

Upon his arrival in Gorslava, Sir Robert immediately begins to see signs that Sardonicus is Bad News. His castle is so far out in the wilderness that there are scarcely any roads leading in its direction, and no public coach service at all. Not only that, it is quite clear that the locals are all desperately afraid of the man; the luggage porter at the train station practically shits his pants in panic when Sir Robert says he is in town to visit the baron, and when asked why, mumbles something about Sir Robert being unable to understand because he is young and has no daughters. Uh-oh. So it is hardly a shock when the private coachman who comes to pick Sir Robert up at the station turns out to be Krall, the one-eyed courier from the previous scene.

Sardonicus's house is just as creepy as his reputation (or his name, for that matter). There are no mirrors anywhere (though it is clear that there used to be). Neither are there any paintings on the walls-- just empty frames. (Krall explains that such frames would normally hold portraits of one's ancestors, and that by hanging the frames empty, Sardonicus "has disowned his forefathers with one magnificent gesture.") Worse still, the first thing Sir Robert sees when he enters the place is a pretty young girl, tied to a chair, her face covered in leeches. When he asks Krall what is going on, the man explains to Sir Robert that the application of leeches is a local folk remedy for certain afflictions. So what is the girl's affliction? She has none; as Krall asks, "Do you not, in your country, make use of what are called 'guinea pigs?'" And just wait 'til you see the baron himself. He is a tall, slender, well-dressed man, whose face is at all times covered by the most alarming wax mask. It's not that the mask depicts anything horrible-- just an expressionless, but basically handsome male face-- it's simply the fact that Sardonicus would wear it at all. You just know he's got to have a hardcore case of Phantom of the Opera disease to do something like that.

And that is absolutely the case. Sardonicus, as a matter of fact, has hired Sir Robert to help him do something about his face, which has been permanently frozen in the most hideous parody of a smile ever since his late first wife put him up to the grisly task of digging



up his dead father to get at the winning lottery ticket in the pocket of the vest he was buried in (don't ask). The makeup effect for Sardonicus's face is really amazing-- I don't think I've ever seen anything so fake-looking that was simultaneously so creepy. The baron chose Sir Robert, you see, because the doctor is a sort of proto-physical therapist, specializing in restoring mobility to paralyzed and atrophied muscles. He is also supposed to be the best in the world, and Sardonicus has high hopes for him and his treatments. The baron also has his own unique way of spurring Sir Robert on to success. If he fails, Sardonicus will have Krall disfigure Maude's face so that she looks just like her husband. (I'll let Krall speak for himself: "I am a man of all works. When my master says 'Krall, do this thing for me,' I do the thing-- whatever it may be.") The rest of the movie concerns Sir Robert's search for the cure, juxtaposed against Sardonicus's diminishing patience.

But we really don't care about the story, here, do we? Of course not-- this is a William Castle film. What we care about is the gimmick! Mr. Sardonicus's gimmick may not have the inventiveness of *Percepto*, the slapdash audacity of *Emergo*, or the show-stopping lunacy of the *Fright Break*, but it's still a damn lot of fun. When the movie played in theaters, each member of the audience was handed a large, white card, emblazoned with a drawing of a fisted hand with the thumb extended. As Castle himself explains when he appears onscreen after the movie seems to end, these cards are ballots, which the audience shall cast to determine the final resolution of the movie. If the audience would have mercy on Baron Sardonicus, it should hold up its cards with the thumb pointing up. If it would rather see the baron suffer more profoundly for his misdeeds, it should hold them up in the opposite orientation. Castle then pretends to count the cards and tally the audience's verdict (presumably we're meant to believe that there was also somebody

standing just out of view at the front of the theater making a real count). Depending on the outcome of this vote, the projectionist would then play one of two different ending reels, one merciful, one vindictive. Or such, at any rate, was the "official" story. It now appears that in actual fact, there was but one ending-- and do you even need to be told which one it was? I mean, come on! We're talking, for the most part, about crowds of unruly pre-teen boys here. The audiences would almost never have voted for mercy, so what point would there have been in spending the money on a second ending? Even if the voting hadn't been rigged, there's every chance that after the first few showings, the projectionists wouldn't even have bothered to unpack the mercy ending from its canister. Columbia's marketing department did an extremely thorough job of concealing Castle's subterfuge, however, and even as recently as 2000, it was frequently reported that the mercy ending had indeed existed, but was now lost. Now there's an outfit that could teach a few present-day national intelligence services a thing or two about keeping a secret!

Scott Ashlin, 1000 Misspent Hours and Counting