

Prey

UK | 1978 | 85 minutes

Credits

Director	Norman J Warren
Screenplay	Max Cuff, Quinn Donoghue
Photography	Derek V. Browne
Music	Ivor Slaney

Cast

Anders	Barry Stokes
Josephine	Sally Faulkner
Jessica	Glory Annen
Sandy	Sandy Chinney

In Brief

Instantly watchable and delightfully cheap British sci-fi finds a male alien missionary on Earth being taken in as a house-guest by an unsuspecting separatist lesbian couple. The true fanged creature is concealed beneath a stolen body, but occasionally emerges during conflicts and feeding frenzies (and looks a bit like the titular terrors of *THE BAT PEOPLE*). The decidedly non-vegetarian visitor becomes caught in the middle of the womyns' peculiar psychodramas and recurring hostilities, and at one point is cross-dressed by them and finds new pleasures in the consumption of champagne....allthewhile drooling over a pet bird they have kept in a hanging cage.

This film, for all its misgivings, remains one of the more "out there" entries in the sci-fi/horror genre...a bad film, to be sure, but one recommendable for its sheer uncommonness. At least they were clearly trying for something altogether different...and they sure did succeed in that task.

- EyeAskance (www.imdb.com)

By far Warren's simplest film, *Prey* is also one of his best. In synopsis, it sounds unbearably silly. But as filmed, it has a simplicity and an intensity which are tremendously effective and it manages to be very nasty without being excessively gratuitous. We're not talking great cinema you understand, but this is a remarkably concentrated film with, if you'll forgive me, guts. Even more astonishingly, it was made on a ten day shooting schedule for about £50,000.

The set-up is remarkably simple. Two women, Josephine (Faulkner) and Jessica (Annan) live together in a isolated house, maintaining an uneasy lesbian relationship which Jessica is not entirely sure she is happy with. One night, Jessica is woken by strange lights in the sky and the next day, they meet a strange man (Stokes) walking in their private woodland. Gradually, he insinuates himself into their home and, much to Josephine's chagrin, Jessica begins to find him attractive. What they don't realise is that their visitor is an alien who has come to earth on a scouting mission to discover an easily available source of protein for a potential invasion.

Prey is a short film and this is a key to its success. Detractors have complained that its slow moving and boring but I think that this is a little unfair. What Warren is doing here is something very unusual in the genre. Concentrating on a very small cast, he manages to create two well defined female characters who have a horribly believable relationship and into this uneasy household he introduces an element of instability which eventually leads to disaster. This is, of course, the old Theorem plot given a SF-horror twist, and the structure works extremely well. Gore lovers are frequently disappointed to find that Warren's customary violence is limited to a few brief shots in the first hour and the incredibly nasty conclusion, but discerning horror fans should find that the minute building of tension is more than enough to keep their attention.



The performances are, of course, vital. Sally Faulkner is a sleaze favourite, having appeared – to her displeasure – in Larraz's brilliant *Vampyres* and a variety of increasingly worse sex comedies. Viewers with long memories may remember her stripping off on a golf course in *Confessions of a Driving Instructor*. But she really is a good, strong actress and she makes Josephine a genuinely unnerving character who is, in her own way, a lot more sinister than the alien. There's little doubt that her dominating presence is gradually destroying Jessica and the intimations that Josephine has already got rid of one of her lover's potential male conquests suggest that the domination doesn't stop in the bedroom. Sally Faulkner doesn't overplay any of this, keeping Josephine one step from the loony bin without going over the top into complete insanity. Barry Stokes is also memorable as the alien, his limited resources as an actor paying dividends in this role where he's meant



to seem gauche, awkward and an outsider. He certainly puts a lot of energy into the part, a role which requires him to half-drown, be made up as a woman and, in the unforgettable climax, eat a lot of offal straight from the fridge. As for the third corner of the triangle, this was Glory Annan's first movie and, despite a very halting style of delivery, she does a pretty good job. It's quite appropriate that she doesn't have the strength of Sally Faulkner and she is just as attractive as she's meant to be. Indeed, Annan has become something of a cult actress, especially for her role as another lesbian in *Felicity*.

Norman Warren's direction is extremely efficient and full of suspense. It takes a good deal of skill to make something as coherent and professional looking as this in the space of ten days and the concentration required seems to have given him valuable focus. There's none of the sense of ideas exploding all over the place that you get in *Satan's Slave* and *Terror* and the camera set-ups are simple but imaginative. Considering that he was limited

to three takes for each shot, the result – although undeniably rather simplistic compared to Warren's other work – has to be counted as a genuine success. The cinematography isn't as imaginative as in the other films mentioned above but the editing by Alan Jones is very skilful. Particularly noteworthy is the script which is low-key and intelligent, creating characters who are believable and heading towards a climax which is, as a second viewing confirms, quite inevitable. Also interesting is the way that it manages to suggest that Jessica and Josephine's relationship is bound to end badly anyway, even if not quite as nastily as the way it does in the film. The special effects, bar the make-up, are very good and the final explosion of brutal violence is rather shocking – one moment in particular, involving Jessica's throat, is rather horrible and hasn't been included in a British version of this film before.

There are some flaws here. It could be argued that the portrayal of lesbianism is laughably clichéd and that's perhaps true but, on the other hand, the sense of a close relationship in crisis is very credible indeed. Another possible defence is that none of the cast or crew apparently knew anything about lesbianism – the lengthy lesbian sex scene was improvised by the actors as they went along. In any case, to see any depiction of a sapphic relationship in a relatively mainstream film back in the 1970s was rare enough so *Prey* could be regarded as something of a milestone in permissiveness. A more serious criticism is the make-up. When he changes into his true form, Barrie Stokes looks less like a dangerous alien being than a badly made-up dog on children's television. His appearance is less frightening than comic and this does result more in hilarity than horror. However, considering the budget and the schedule, *Prey* is quite astonishingly effective and certainly deserves rather more attention. It's also got one of the great final lines of any British horror movie.

I feel honour bound to bore you with another "Doctor Who" connection. Sally Faulkner appeared, flashing her knickers, as Isobel Travers in the splendid 1968 story "The Invasion" which was also notable for launching UNIT and featuring some very cool Cybermen rampaging around London.

Prey is an interesting and unexpectedly intelligent piece of filmmaking which has dated very well and is well worth a look for horror fans. This disc is an excellent addition to the Norman Warren Collection and is highly recommended.

Mike Sutton (<http://film.thedigitalfix.com>)

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