

t_h_e_S_l_a_u_g_h_t_e_r_P_e_n. Of course, you and I know that there never was a Marx Brothers film as vulgar and depressing as A_D_a_y_a_t_t_h_e_S_l_a_u_g_h_t_e_r_P_e_n. That brand of humor did not come along until the Three Stooges.

THE MT VOID

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Now let me tell you what I saw this time on Route 35 in Cheesequake. (You think I am making these names up? No, Cheesequake is not a Madison Avenue invention: "New Nachitos have so much cheddar cheese flavor and so much crunch, eating them is like a Giant Cheese Quake!" Boy opens bag. Bites a Nachito. Under his feet the ground rumbles and cracks open. Out of the fissure bubbles molten Velveeta. Boy enjoys his Nachito as molten cheese covers his Nikes. No, there really is a Cheesequake, New Jersey.) And what I saw on the road was an advertisement for Italian-style dog food. No, not dog food like Italian dog food; I am sure in Italy those dogs who are fed get standard cylinders of horsemeat. And bad horsemeat at that. "Is there good horsemeat?" you ask. Okay, I'll digress again. People in this country get a little green around the gills when they think about eating horsemeat. Of course horsemeat i_s disgusting in the United States. That's because we serve it only to dogs and don't make it any more appetizing than it would take to get a dog to eat it. Beef dog food is pretty disgusting also. That doesn't mean that prime rib is really a stomach-turner. If you are into red meat, which I am not any more, horsemeat is superior to beef. Horses tend to have better muscles than cows do. A horse runs around. A cow just stands around most of the day and thinks bucolically. I got brave once and tried a horse steak in Brussels. It was indistinguishable from just a very good cut of beef. Of course, only dogs eat horsemeat in the United States, so it is prepared no better than it would take to tempt a dog. That's not so tempting, I think. Dogs are not real gourmets. But that brings me back to what I saw in Cheesequake. I passed a billboard so strange I did a U-turn to see it again. So this billboard was for Italian-style dog food, but what they meant was Italian-style food for dogs. They had both Beef Bolognaise and Chicken Cacciatore for dogs belonging to the rich. And I suppose if times get hard it might be more tempting than canned horsemeat.

2. The last issue, with the description of C_h_i_n_a_M_o_u_n_t_a_i_n_Z_h_a_n_g, should have been Volume 11, Number 51. It also should have been 6/18/93 instead of 6/11/93. (Someday I will find what problem is causing the number not to increment!) [-ecl]

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...mtgzfs3!leeper

America is still a government of the naive, by the naive, and for the naive. He who does not know this, or relish it, has no inkling of the nature of this country.

-- Christopher Morley

FRANKENSTEIN
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: This version of Mary Shelley's classic novel takes some chances, including actually roughly following the plot of the novel, while giving a new interpretation of the relationship between Frankenstein and his monster. That would have been a real virtue if the rest of the production was not so bland. As it is, this is a disappointingly uninvolved version of the story. Rating: 0 (-4 to +4).

Last autumn we saw Francis Ford Coppola's allegedly accurate adaptation of Bram Stoker's D_r_a_c_u_l_a. It turned out to be more faithful than some of the better version, particularly in some superficial ways, yet it transformed the story into one of Dracula trying to regain his lost love, a rather fundamental departure from the original novel. While the old monsters are popular, Ted

Turner's organization has financed their version of F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n, also claiming to be close to the novel. Sure enough, the basic plot and many of its twists are faithful to Mary Shelley, but producer/director/writer David Wicks has decided--like most people making film versions of F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n--to make some fundamental changes to the story. Incidentally, there is one almost totally faithful film adaptation. It is a 1975 Swedish-Irish co-production called V_i_k_t_o_r_F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n, or on television, T_e_r_r_o_r_o_f_F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n. Leon Vitali plays the doctor and Per Oscarsson is the monster. Except for one scene with a seance, it is a literal adaptation from the novel--faithful, but ponderous and dull. Wicks' F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n is a little less faithful, but also only a little less dull.

The film starts accurately enough with Victor having chased the monster to the Arctic and being rescued by a ship, then telling his story as a flashback. Frankenstein, it turns out, is a great medical scholar, an exaggeration of Shelley's simple student. He uses a strange process something like an early matter duplicator to create a man. Of course, most film versions say that the monster was constructed from dead bodies, but that is a cinematic invention. Shelley is intentionally vague about how the monster is created. This creation, while unconventional, is in no way inconsistent with the novel. From there the plot followed is a rough approximation of the novel, except for the addition of a strange plot device that is really a fairly fundamental change to the story. The monster, being a sort of matter duplication of Victor, has a physical and psychic link with his creator. If the monster is wounded, Victor also gets the same wound. This

transforms the story from its usual allegory of the relationship of God and Man to one of the two sides of a single person's personality, more like Jekyll and Hyde.

The film is generally a fairly lackluster adaptation. The only character with real empathy value is the monster himself, played by Randy Quaid. His makeup is a real departure from standard interpretations of the monster. With his stocky structure and his moustache-less beard, he resembles something between a troglodyte and a Scottish Highlander--with burns on his face. Again Shelley

gives us little idea of what the man-made man looks like, except that he is eight feet tall--which even the large Randy Quaid cannot appear. The remainder of the cast, led by Patrick Bergin in the title role, conveys little emotion and helps to make this version bland.

John Cameron's score rarely creates much of a mood either, though its use of choral voices is somewhat unusual and lend the score much of the interest value it has. After a few good Turner productions, including a very satisfying version of T_r_e_a_s_u_r_e_I_s_l_a_n_d, this F_r_a_n_k_e_n_s_t_e_i_n is a disappointing and unmemorable production. (This version can be seen several times this month on TNT.) I rate it a 0 on the -4 to +4 scale.

Arthur Kopit's Two Phantoms
An article by Mark R. Leeper
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It is unclear if we should consider the two Arthur Kopit versions of T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a as if they are really two versions or if they are instead just two incarnations of the same play. Kopit's statement is that he wrote his stage play without knowing that Andrew Lloyd Webber was also working on a version. He had the American rights to the story, purchased by Geoffrey Holder, but the same novel was in public domain in Britain where Webber adapted it. When the Webber was a smash hit, he shelved the idea of doing a stage play, but he still adapted his play into the 1990 Charles Dance made-for-television movie. Later he decided that his approach was so different from Webber's that he would still do his play. In opera, certainly, it is not uncommon for two different operas based on the same story to be playing at same time. (There is a famous cartoon in opera history, first published at a time when Gluck's O_r_f_e_o_e_d_E_u_r_y_d_i_c_e and Offenbach's O_r_p_h_e_e_a_u_x_E_n_f_e_r_s were playing at the same time in the same city. A well-dressed man tells the cab driver "Take me to the opera about Orpheus." The cab driver replies "Which one? The funny one or the dull one?") Kopit eventually did have his stage play mounted in 1993. Because his two versions are so similar, even sharing much of the same dialog, they should almost be considered a single play.

1990 Charles Dance

The day that Tony Richardson's made-for-television version of T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a was due to be shown, my local newspaper did a feature on it quoting the writer Arthur Kopit as saying, "[After having read the novel] what struck me was that this story ... wasn't very good. Still it captured the imagination of people. Why? What bothered me about [the previous dramatic] versions, what I thought they essentially missed, was that you never knew why the Phantom was in love with Christine."

I had very high hopes for this version. There were four announced film adaptations in the wake of the success of the Broadway play. One starred Richard Englund, whose most famous role was the razor-gloved Freddy Krueger; one was simply a film version of the musical; one was set in Nazi Germany. Of the four versions, the only one that sounded like a genuine new adaptation of the novel was the announced four-hour television version. Then I read Kopit's quote.

What Kopit is saying is that he has no respect for the material itself, only for its ready-made market. He also thinks that the

dramatic versions missed the point of why the story is popular. I could easily believe his comment if it really were the novel that people remember but, in fact, the book has not been what people have liked. For most of the years the story has been liked, Gaston Leroux's novel has been hard to find. Andrew Lloyd Webber tells an anecdote about how difficult it was to find a copy of the novel when he wanted to read it. The dramatic adaptations that Kopit thinks missed the point of why the story is remembered are really what made the story popular. And here they cannot have missed the point. Actually I would contend that they have all missed what I like in the novel, but not what has made the story popular.

The novel is about a man with a great intellect and a horribly deformed face. All his life he was treated as a freak and just occasionally exploited for his genius. Eventually he finds the opportunity to build for himself an empire in the darkness beneath the Paris Opera House. There he can enjoy the music and can be seen only when he wants. This is Gaston Leroux's Erik but he has never been done satisfactorily in a film or play. I had hoped that in the three and a half hours or so of story there would be time to show Erik's history. In fact, this version did show Erik's history but it bore little relation to anything in the novel.

Kopit missed the point entirely by making his Phantom a petulant young man (played by Charles Dance of T_h_e_J_e_w_e_l_i_n_t_h_e_C_r_o_w_n), who is being shielded by a former manager of the opera house (over-played by Burt Lancaster).

Kopit's screenplay intends this Erik to be likable and steers clear of the question in the novel of whether Erik might be psychotic. This Erik does not kill, at least in the course of the film. Oh, his face may startle and early on this causes a death, but that does not appear to be Erik's fault. This Erik has lost the feel of the sinister and instead controls the fate of the opera house with practical jokes. Even the cutting down of the chandelier is not a murder attempt but an act of angry vandalism intended to vent rage and for which the audience was intentionally given time to get out of the way. Of course, this Erik had less reason for rage than the one in the book. The script claims that Erik's mother at least found his face "flawlessly beautiful." In the book Erik's

mother gave him his first mask because she could not stand to look at his face.

There are a few nice touches to the script. One of them is the issue of how to handle the unmasking. Sort of independently of the quality of the rest of the production there is the question of how to shock audiences when they do see the Phantom's face. The approach here was unusual and not badly done, though it was perhaps dictated by the screenplay's efforts to keep Erik as a romantic Phantom. Less endearing is Erik's unexpected forest beneath the ground. It isn't like the metal forest of the novel but a real

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forest with live trees and unexplained sunlight. It appears that Erik must have built himself a holodeck.

Charles Dance is a little whiny for my tastes, as well as not being sufficiently sinister. Lancaster as the former manager is overripe and Teri Polo as Christine Daae (in the book Daae') is unmemorable. She and her lover Adam Storke as Phillippe, Comte de Chagny, are pretty people but boring actors. (Again, they got the name wrong on the Comte. The character's name was Raoul. Phillippe is the name of Raoul's brother, older by twenty years.)

The whole mediocre revision of the story is directed by Tony Richardson, who directed T_o_m_J_o_n_e_s. I am not a fan of that film but it certainly was better directed than this slow-moving version. If I had never heard of the story before I would have liked this version better, but as it is, I would call it the better than only the Herbert Lom and Richard Englund versions. And perhaps it is a bit better than the stage version of the same play.

Kopit's play P_h_a_n_t_o_m

The story of the play P_h_a_n_t_o_m is almost identical to the NBC T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a, not too surprisingly. Once again Erik is a young man hidden in the opera house because of the horribly deformed face a result of his mother's attempted abortion.

Once again the main interest is the father-son relationship. The story is told much faster than in the television version without losing a lot of depth.

Eric is still somewhat innocent, though in this version he does intentionally kill Joseph Buquet, an act that was apparently an accident in the television version. Still, this is a very light interpretation of Erik, particularly in the first act. Erik sabotages the opera through silly practical jokes. In one scene Erik is distraught because he just killed a man and at the same time because he doesn't like the voice of the new grand diva. This is one play in which just about everything worthwhile is in the second act, when Erik is really angry. One hole is left in the story. It is assumed that Erik became a great operatic singer and one who can also teach others all from singing lessons from his mother when he was very young. It is unlikely, to say the least.

The music and songs by Maury Yeston are uneven. Some of the songs, such as "Home," are hauntingly beautiful, but others seem very amateurish. One has the lyric, "The opera has been invaded by a phantom. The opera has been invaded by a ghost. If you are chasing him, you are chasing a phantom." Another that is a love song between Christine and Phillippe sounds like bad Rogers and Hammerstein, totally out of place with the style with the rest of

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the show.

The staging of the play is often clever, though not as clever as some of the effects done in the Andrew Lloyd Webber version. This one requires several large floats to be moved around the stage. And the best effect of the Webber, the boat in the lagoon, is done better here. The lagoon is made to appear to be three or four times as wide as the stage.

Erik's first appearance is dramatic, as a dark silhouette seen in a white mist, but I still prefer the appearance in the mirror in the Webber version.

"Comparing the Various Versions"

Now that I have had my say about each of the versions individually, it would be a good idea to ladder them from my favorite to my least favorite. It should be fairly obvious from what I said above, but just to make it a matter of record.

1. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 98 8 8 87 7 7 7
M M M Mi i i ic c c ch h h ha a a ae e e el l l l
C C C Cr r r ra a a aw w w wf f f fo o o or r r rd d d d
(((T T T Th h h he e e ea a a at t t tr r r ri i i ic c c ca a a al l l l))))
version--Amazingly

well-staged and well-written. While being surprisingly accurate to the book it is also the most compelling rendition. Best point: Erik really is the tragic genius that Leroux wrote about. Worst point: Erik's makeup is not at all accurate to the book and not really believable.

2. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 94 4 4 43 3 3 3 C C C Cl l l la a a au u u ud d d de e e e
R R R Ra a a ai i i in n n ns s s s version--A more engaging story than even
the Chaney version. We never really sympathize with Chaney's Phantom and with Rains we do. This version probably had more influence than Chaney's version. The story is just a little over-sweet. Best point: For the first time you really sympathized with the Phantom and to some extent found him dashing, even with Claude Rains in the part. Worst point: What happened to the original story?

3. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 92 2 2 25 5 5 5 L L L Lo o o on n n n
C C C Ch h h ha a a an n n ne e e ey y y y version--This remains the classic version
and the most impressive makeup job of any version. I put it just a tad beneath the first remake because of script problems not giving enough plot and having too much comic relief. Best point: Some of the visuals are stunning and even haunting. This is a simply beautiful rendition. Worst point: There is not very much of the novel in this adaptation. The pacing of silent film is just not time-efficient enough to tell much story.

4. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 98 8 8 87 7 7 7
A A A An n n ni i i im m m ma a a at t t te e e ed d d d version--An animated comic
book version, but
it is an adaptation of the original novel; it is not based on any film version. Best point: generally the most faithful

version to the novel. Worst point: dull acting that tells the story but is not at all involving.

5. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 98 8 8 82 2 2 2

M M M Ma a a ax x x xi i i im m m mi i i il l l ll l l li i i ia a a an n n n
S S S Sc c c ch h h he e e el l l ll l l l version--Unexpectedly watchable
television version based on the '43 version, but still Schell makes an impressive phantom. Best point: Dramatic climax with Schell riding the chandelier into the audience. Worst point: The opera is not very convincing. Schell's wife would never have sung on the stage.

6. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 99 9 9 90 0 0 0

C C C Ch h h ha a a ar r r rl l l le e e es s s s
D D D Da a a an n n nc c c ce e e e version--Not based on any other version or on the book, but on Arthur Kopit's play. It does not always make sense. This version could have told the story in the novel but wasted it on an entirely different story. Lancaster forgot how to act years ago and in some scenes is really bad. Best point: This Erik, while not Leroux's, is somewhat interesting on occasion. Sometimes whiny, sometime almost Byronic. Worst point: Totally absurd treatment of opera. There is no respect for opera as an art form. And operatic excellence, in part, is what the story should be all about. The book's Erik is willing to murder for the perfection of the art form.

7. Kopit's musical stage play _ P _ h _ a _ n _ t _ o _ m--It is a shorter and hence

a bit more superficial version of the same story Kopit did for NBC. Even much of the dialog is the same. Some of the staging, while not as simple and elegant as in the Webber version, does manage to create impressive effects. It is hard to think of the story transformed into being about a father-son relationship, but while not Leroux, it is a story worth telling. The set design of the lagoon scene is genuinely impressive set design that out-does the clever stagecraft of the same scene in the Webber. Best point: there are genuinely touching scenes between Erik and his father. Worst point: horribly cliched love song in the first act between Christine and Phillipe in the inappropriate style of American musical.

8. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 96 6 6 62 2 2 2

H H H He e e er r r rb b b be e e er r r rt t t L L L Lo o o om m m version--
Hammer's version does not work, is not Leroux, and at times is overripe. It is hard to generate any sympathy for the Phantom and the musical chords intending to generate it only make the effort seem the more pitiful. The villain is never punished more through oversight

than plan, I think. Best point: The story does generate some suspense in spite of itself. Worst point: The malignant hunchback who does all the dirty work.

9. The 1 1 1 19 9 9 98 8 8 89 9 9 9

R R R Ri i i ic c c ch h h ha a a ar r r rd d d d

E E E En n n ng g g gl l l lu u u un n n nd d d d version--Oh geez, where should I start? It mixes the Faust legend, and time travel and mostly is just an excuse to make an unkillable-killer film. It clearly had two different directors with different styles. Best point: It's short. Worst point: It's not nearly short enough.

CLIFFHANGER

A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Can Rockies rescue ranger Sylvester Stallone recover from a trauma, and get it together enough to clobber nasty super-criminals trying to recover three suitcases of stolen money that fell out of a plane over the Rockies? Hint: Stallone co-authored the screenplay. Lots of action, lots of cliché, a few stunts. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4).

Sylvester Stallone is back in a pure action, non-comedy role.

He had tried breaking out into comic roles in O s c a r and S t o p o r M y M o m W i l l S h o o t. O s c a r I like to spring on unsuspecting people since

it really is about the funniest comedy I have seen in the last ten years, though probably not due to Stallone's efforts. On the other hand, S t o p o r M y M o m W i l l S h o o t is reputedly just awful. So

Stallone is back in a sort of mountain-climbing equivalent of D i e H a r d that might have been called F a l l H a r d. Stallone himself co-authored the screenplay with Michael France, undoubtedly to make sure the story gave audiences exactly what they wanted--breath-taking stunts tied together with brain-numbing cliché.

Stallone plays Gabe Walker, a Rocky Mountain rescue ranger who was once great but lost his nerve after a horrible traumatic experience on a wire high over a valley that should have been called Macho Grande. Gabe is back in the Rockies a year later, testing to see if he can get together with his woman friend Jessie (played by Janice Turner), patch things up with a buddy (played by Michael Rooker), and pull his life together. Just at that moment a plot to steal \$100,000,000 is falling apart overhead. John Lithgow plays Qualen, a British master criminal with an accent that occasionally fades. Qualen heads a team of killers who intended to hijack the cash but ended up accidentally dropping it in three suitcases over the Rockies and who now want the rescue rangers to retrieve the suitcases.

Of course, the real stars of the film are the three S's: Stallone, scenery, and stunts. While some of the scenery really is the Rockies, some is the Italian Alps near Cortina D'Ampezzo, and some is sets. The stunts, which I will not describe so as not to spoil them, are impressive, though not really too different from those you would probably think of if you were scripting a similar story. Trevor Jones's score bears a marked resemblance to his score for T_h_e_L_a_s_t_o_f_t_h_e_M_o_h_i_c_a_n_s.

This is about what you would expect Sylvester Stallone would be releasing in the summertime. It is nearly two hours of action and familiar plot against a less familiar setting. I give it a low +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

SLEEPLESS IN SEATTLE
A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Nora Ephron tells the story of Fate bringing together a man and a woman "made for each other." The story is occasionally touching, but feather-light. Rating: +1 (-4 to +4).

Not long ago A_S_t_r_a_n_g_e_r_A_m_o_n_g_U_s introduced audiences to the word "bashert." It is the concept that a man and a woman are fated to meet and fall in love, a pairing made in heaven. People in

_ S_ l_ e_ e_ p_ l_ e_ s_ s_ i_ n_ S_ e_ a_ t_ t_ l_ e discuss whether there is anything to
this
concept and are inclusive, but it is clear that screenwriter Nora
Ephron wants us to believe it is true. _ S_ l_ e_ e_ p_ l_ e_ s_ s_ i_ n_ S_ e_ a_ t_ t_ l_ e
has the
strangest case of bashert since _ S_ o_ m_ e_ w_ h_ e_ r_ e_ i_ n_ T_ i_ m_ e. Ephron, who
previously wrote _ W_ h_ e_ n_ H_ a_ r_ r_ y_ M_ e_ t_ S_ a_ l_ l_ y..., has written and
this time
directs this story about when Sam met Annie.

Sam is Sam Baldwin (played by Tom Hanks). Sam lost his wife Maggie and decides to leave Chicago and its memories and to move to Seattle. There, eighteen months later, he is still a wreck and an insomniac to boot. He lives in a houseboat with his son Jonah (talk about tempting fate!). Jonah (played by Ross Malinger) calls a radio psychologist to ask what his dad should do. When Sam is called to the phone, he opens up to the psychologist and shows such sensitivity that hundreds of women listeners across the country are moved, including the absolutely right woman for Sam. She is Annie Reed (played by Meg Ryan). Unfortunately, she lives a continent away in Baltimore and is already engaged to be married. But Fate is not to be cheated, and we follow two story lines--the lives of Sam and Annie--knowing full well that they will eventually come together.

Ephron's plotting is not really her strong point. The film is extremely sentimental from the opening credits on. Under the credits we hear Jimmy Durante singing "As Time Goes By" and are shown a map of the United States on a section of a globe. As each actor's name is credited, a star is added in the sky over the map. Then in the film as a running gag everybody has seen the sad film _ A_ n_ _ A_ f_ f_ a_ i_ r_ t_ o_ R_ e_ m_ e_ m_ b_ e_ r. All the women love it; none of the men care for it. Eventually that film will be pivotal in bringing Sam and Annie together.

While the plot is sentimental and a little sticky, the dialogue is a lot of fun and often very witty and insightful. Annie's confidante is her friend Becky (played by Rosie O'Donnell) who, like Annie, is unmarried and is clearly getting frustrated. Her cynical comments are some of the best lines in the film. On the other hand,

Sam's conversations with his friend Jay (played by Rob Reiner) are totally unlikely and inane. As before, Ephron's female characters are better written than her male characters. Still, it is unusual these days to see an unabashedly--not to say overly--romantic film.

_ S _ l _ e _ e _ p _ l _ e _ s _ s _ i _ n _ S _ e _ a _ t _ t _ l _ e is diverting and even nostalgic with its resurrection of old songs that act as commentary on the story. Nothing great, but a solid +1 on the -4 to +4 scale.

