

Lincroft-Holmdel Science Fiction Club
Club Notice - 6/5/87 -- Vol. 5, No. 47

MEETINGS UPCOMING:

Unless otherwise stated, all meetings are on Wednesdays at noon.

LZ meetings are in LZ 3A-206; MT meetings are in MT 4A-235.

_D_A_T_E _T_O_P_I_C

06/17 MT: THIS IMMORTAL by Roger Zelazny
06/24 LZ: MAROONED IN REALTIME by Vernor Vinge (Time Travel)
07/08 MT: FOOTFALL by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
07/15 LZ: TITAN by John Varley (Megalomania) (in 1B-205)
08/05 LZ: The BERSERKER books by Fred Saberhagen (A/I)
08/26 LZ: ?
09/16 LZ: THE UPLIFT WAR by David Brin (Future Histories)

HO Chair: John Jetzt HO 1E-525 834-1563
LZ Chair: Rob Mitchell LZ 1B-306 576-6106
MT Chair: Mark Leeper MT 3E-433 957-5619
HO Librarian: Tim Schroeder HO 3M-420 949-5866
LZ Librarian: Lance Larsen LZ 3L-312 576-2068
MT Librarian: Bruce Szablak MT 4C-418 957-5868
Jill-of-all-trades: Evelyn Leeper MT 1F-329 957-2070
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1. OK, people. Those of you who have been complaining that our books for discussion at Middletown have been too long, we have a short Hugo winner for you this time. Roger Zelazny's THIS IMMORTAL (a.k.a. CALL ME CONRAD). This is one of the more rarely read Hugo winners, mostly because people who saw it under the title CALL ME CONRAD misread the title and thought it said "COMRADE." The obvious assumption was that it was some sort of Communist propaganda. They stayed away from the book in droves. I don't want any misunderstanding because people look to quickly at the title. This is not Communist propaganda! Anything but. So why not read THIS'S IMMORAL and come to the discussion on June 17.

2. We're still busy clearing our backlog of submissions. In this issue we have reviews of four nuclear war films by Dale Skran (who is cited on page 40 of the August issue of ANALOG--go check it out!). We also have an article by the prolific Mark Leeper on the various versions of THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA in general and the new operetta version in particular. [-ecl]

Mark Leeper
MT 3E-433 957-5619
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Four More Nukes
Movie reviews by Dale Skran

O_n_e_N_i_g_h_t_S_t_a_n_d

This recent film set in New Zealand revolves around a limited European war scenario that ascends to large-scale nuclear conflict. The story, such as it is, focuses on a US Navy deserter who hides out in a cultural center, two bimbos who find him, and the cleaning man.

The dialog contains such wonderful lines as "There's a war going on. All we can think of doing is playing strip poker. It's pathetic." And indeed, it is pathetic that the script writer could not envision a more engaging plot than these four colorless half-wits wondering around sound stages listening to rock music and saying "I wonder what it's like to be dead." This plotless meandering distracts the viewer from such mysteries as the perpetually red sky and the ack-ack type explosions that cover it from time to time for dramatic effect.

Eventually, sirens go off, and our four heros, having played out a dull strip poker game and shared many dull flash backs with the viewer,

run down into a tunnel to die. When all appears lost, the two women restore calm to the darkened tunnel by singing a song. Finis.

O_n_e N_i_g_h_t S_t_a_n_d is at its best in one brief scene where one of the women wanders into a room, turns on a TV, and catches a graphically realistic news clip of New York subway tunnels crowded with horribly burned victims. My suspicion is that the director intended to contrast the glitzy atmosphere of the cultural center with the slowly decaying world outside. Unfortunately, so much effort is focused on strip poker and so little on the war that the contrasts are limited to one or two scenes.

Rating: (-1) on a (-4) to (+4) scale.

T_h_e W_a_r G_a_m_e

This British (BBC) film has been an underground classic for years. Originally commissioned by the BBC as a documentary, it was so upsetting that they refused to show it. A certain friend of mine has given this file a tremendous buildup, and as is frequently the case with films much praised by others, I found it somewhat disappointing.

T_h_e W_a_r G_a_m_e is a straight documentary, with no characters or storyline per se. Events begin with the Chinese invading Viet Nam, the Americans use nuclear weapons, and the British government responds with one of the more flawed plans in history--women and girl children leave their husbands and sons to hide out in remote districts. The police

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compel locals to accept the boarders, by force if need be. Rationing is soon imposed. "War Game" shows vividly that any large scale evacuation could be as devastating as a normal war all by itself.

A humorous segment has reporters asking typical citizens questions about radioactivity. They are unable to explain fallout, bone-seekers, strontium 90, or almost anything about nuclear war. Finally, fighting breaks out in Berlin, and the war spreads to Europe as the Americans use battlefield nuclear weapons.

An official appears describing a booklet that tells how a simple shelter could be built. The official mentions that the booklet was put on sale by the government some time ago, but "it didn't sell well." A closer examination of the shelter reveals that most poor Brits couldn't afford to build it, and we focus briefly on a more wealthy soul with a gun who intends to defend his shelter.

To the credit of the film, it points out clearly that NATO depends totally on nuclear weapons to defend Europe, and is now reaping the consequences. Firestorms come, with 100 mile an hour winds. Fortunately or unfortunately, the copy of the film I viewed was so poor that the oft described scenes of the burned and wounded had only minimal impact since I had great difficulty even figuring out what I was looking at much of the time.

Another interview segment focused on Bishops and their defense of "the just war." Given the currently strong anti-nuke tack of most Churchmen today, this sequence dates the film. Yet another interview segment shows the response of middle aged women asked if Britain should retaliate. All say yes.

Next we are shown police executing the mortally wounded as part of a triage program. The thousands of "shell-shocked" are also dramatized, as is the mass burning of bodies to prevent the spread of disease. Much of this material, including the bucket of wedding rings kept so people may have some hope of finding out who died, was taken from accounts of the Dresden bombings in World War II.

As things get worse, thousands drift into a state of profound apathy while others battle the police for food. Firing squads of bobbies are shown polishing off food rioters. Finally we are left with the warning that with nuclear proliferation war may come as early as 1980.

Although clearly a breakthrough effort, T_h_e _W_a_r_G_a_m_e is not as good as a later British effort, T_h_r_e_a_d_s. T_h_e _W_a_r_G_a_m_e relies overly much on World War II experience. The viewer is left with the impression that nuclear war will be like a big Dresden everywhere. Like many other films, T_h_e _W_a_r_G_a_m_e shys away from the implications of widespread fallout or what might constitute enough shelter to survive. Overall, I felt liked I'd watched the C_i_t_i_z_e_n_K_a_n_e of nuclear war films--an early,

innovative film that doesn't have as powerful an effect on modern audiences familiar with its ideas from later films that copied it.

Rating: (+2) on a (-4) to (+4) scale.

L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n

L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n is a propaganda film, but so are most nuclear war films. Of course, this is a Soviet propaganda film, and even though it sets the story in an un-named Western European country, it is really set in the Soviet Union. Where else, after all, would the entire plot center on people waiting to enter a "central bunker" to be sealed in for "30 or 40" years? It is difficult to imagine any Western country constructing a central bunker anywhere, let alone being organized enough after an attack to collect survivors for a long term life underground.

L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n, which begins with a nuclear war triggered by a computer accident, is brought to us by the "Better World Society." With this opening statement, you may be surprised to hear that L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n is one of the better, and possibly the most artistic, of the nuclear war films I have seen. L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n is told from the viewpoint of a scientist who apparently had some involvement in weapons development, both through both his daily struggle to survive in the basement of a museum, and a series of flashbacks. A supporting cast of catatonic children, a dying wife, a lost son, a harsh central bunker doctor, various road-warrior type lowlifes, and grungy fellow survivors flesh out the story.

It is difficult to describe L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n as anything but excellent. The hall of burnt children and the drowned library are hauntingly effective, as is the scientist's final solution of a difficult mathematical problem he has worked on for many years. At one point he says to no one in particular, "It may not mean much to you, but my institute worked on it for 30 years."

The scientist decides to stay with some catatonic children rather than be sealed in the central bunker, and finally dies, after having restored the children's sanity through love. Unfortunately, the world has no place for the children, and they march bravely to their deaths in a fierce nuclear winter blizzard, driven by the scientist's final words, "Go. While man remains on this planet, there is hope for him yet."

While L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n is yet another nuclear war film that deals with fallout mainly by ignoring it, or at least not discussing it, it is extremely effective, although a bit slow. The contrast between the scientist's optimism, even to his death bed, and the depressing surroundings provide L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n with dramatic tension most nuclear war films lack. Even the final message of has a ring of truth that extends beyond the issue of nuclear war. In the end we shall all die, with or without the aid of nuclear fire, fallout, or winter, and

all our works will pass away, just as the scientist's did in L_e_t_t_e_r_s
_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n. We are all mad to hope, to love, to believe,...to live,
even as the scientist is mad. But it is a fine madness, a human thing.
Finally, L_e_t_t_e_r_s_f_r_o_m_a_D_e_a_d_m_a_n is much too realistic to be effective
propaganda. People do survive, or at least hope to survive, in this
central bunker, and the scientist shows that the only death we need fear
is the death of the human spirit.

Rating: (+3) on a (-4) to (+4) scale.

_C_o_n_t_r_o_l

This post-SDI nuke-war film begins with a foundation selecting a
cross section of humanity to test a new type of fallout shelter they
intend to construct across Europe. They have hired a famous American
rocket scientist, who looks almost exactly like the real-life main
mission controller at Cape Kennedy, to manage the experiment.

The shelter contains room for fifteen, a radio, intercom TV, M-16s
or similar automatic weapons, body bags, generators, radiation suits,
and so on. No fires are allowed to cut down on oxygen consumption. The
food seemed to resemble mush more than anything else. The contention is
made that individual shelters are not cost effective, which seems
reasonable, but surely fifteen people is not enough for effective long-
term survival as a group.

The volunteers are assured a payment of \$5,000 if they stay in for
twenty days, and include a tough reporter, a peace demonstrator, her
kid, a rich shelter builder, his girl friend, a model looking to break
into acting, an "artist," a retired woman, etc. Unlike the odd groups
that appear in shelters in some films, these people at least have
reasonable motives for being there, and there is a clear explanation why
a cross section of the population is selected rather than fifteen
identical military personnel.

Soon a compressor failure in the air conditioning almost leads to
everyone being overcome with heat, and makes it clear that, not only are
fifteen people too few to deal with all likely problems, but that the

smaller a shelter is, the less complex its equipment should be.

We are treated to some short debates on nuclear war, including one in which it is passed off as a fact that the Russians are not building shelters, which, to the best of my knowledge, is simply not true.

Soon radio reports begin to appear that indicate a MIRV has been fired at Europe. A dramatic, but totally bogus news report has each target of the MIRV identified by name, which seems unlikely in the extreme. One of the people decides to leave the shelter for his family, and the reporter follows him out the street, suspicious of something.

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Here they are greeted by screaming mobs and roaring police cars, so he retreats to the shelter. Soon a mob is pounding at the door, prompting an intense debate on whether to let anyone in. A vote is taken to allow the outsiders in, but the losers cannot accept that, and take over the shelter with the M-16s.

At this point, the model goes in the back room to commit suicide, and we are introduced to the idea that everything so far has been staged by the scientist managing the shelter as a "test to destruction" without the knowledge of the foundation to prove what a bad idea shelters really are. When they see the model start to kill herself, they rush to the shelter and begin to break in with jack-hammers. This throws the people in the shelter into total panic, and the survivalists come out shooting with the M-16s, only to discover that the guns are loaded with blanks.

As the shelter inhabitants file out, the reporter opines that "There is no shelter from the bomb, even in a shelter." This is only the last and most heavy of a long series of cliched pro and anti nuclear statements made throughout the movie by various characters.

I liked C o n t r o l more than I expected to, perhaps because I'd been told it wasn't very good, but also because it was a solid consistent story with a reasonable plot--up to a point. Unfortunately, the filmmakers clearly believe in their message, i.e. people would go nuts in shelters, or be reduced to animals clawing for survival. I find it hard to believe that a majority would have voted to open the door to a screaming mob, an action that in the context of the film is best equated to agreeing to death by an unknown horrible means.

Finally, the film-makers are right, there is no shelter from the bomb in shelters, but neither is there shelter in the confused notions of the nuclear freeze movement. We have lived with the bomb now for over 40 years, and we shall have to continue to live with it until we die--by whatever means. The bomb is not a demon we can exorcise by the correct political ritual, it is a tool we shall simply have to deal with, unpleasant though that prospect might be.

Rating: (+1) on a (-4) to (+4) scale.

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THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
A music review and commentary by Mark R. Leeper
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What do you think of when you hear the term "operetta"? If you are like most people you probably think first of Gilbert and Sullivan. You think of something light and whimsical, maybe H. M. S. P. i. n. a. f. o. r. e or T. h. e. P. i. r. a. t. e. s. o. f. P. e. n. z. a. n. c. e. It is difficult to think of anyone but Gilbert and Sullivan who ever wrote one. Some might remember Offenbach's O. r. p. h. e. u. s. i. n. t. h. e. U. n. d. e. r. w. o. r. l. d., another piece of whimsy. But most people cannot think of a single operetta written since World War I.

In actual fact the art form of the operetta is still very much with us though the name is rarely used these days. Operettas play on Broadway relatively often but somehow they seem to escape the label of the art form. If a work has a grim tone, nobody thinks to put it in the same category as a Gilbert and Sullivan. Obvious examples are Peter Weiss's M. a. r. a. t./ S. a. d. e and Stephan Sondheim's S. w. e. e. n. e. y. T. o. d. d.

But by far the most successful practitioner of the art form is Andrew Lloyd Webber. Webber began his long partnership with Tim Rice when they wrote religious school pageants together. The first version of J. o. s. e. p. h. a. n. d. t. h. e. A. m. a. z. i. n. g. T. e. c. h. n. i. c. o. l. o. r. D. r. e. a. m. c. o. a. t was written when they were in school. Later they wrote J. e. s. u. s. C. h. r. i. s. t. S. u. p. e. r. s. t. a. r. J. e. s. u. s. C. h. r. i. s. t. S. u. p. e. r. s. t. a. r began a sort of mini-Golden Age of operettas in the late 60s and early 70s, as large numbers of operettas were written and called "rock operas." Webber and Rice responded with a new production of J. o. s. e. p. h. a. n. d. t. h. e. A. m. a. z. i. n. g. T. e. c. h. n. i. c. o. l. o. r. D. r. e. a. m. c. o. a. t and with E. v. i. t. a.

Now, nearly a decade later, Webber has a new operetta, this time written with Charles Hart. The new work is T. h. e. P. h. a. n. t. o. m. o. f. t. h. e. O. p. e. r. a., based on the novel by Gaston Leroux.

Leroux wrote the novel in 1911, basing it in part on what he claimed were actual legends of the Paris Opera House. Leroux embellished the legends to say that a man referred to only as "Erik" was the so-called "opera ghost." Erik was born healthy but with a face so ugly that his own mother could not bring herself to look on it. Erik was in turns a carnival freak, a singer, a ventriloquist and conjurer, an executioner for the Shah of Persia, and an architect of torture chambers, but eventually he retreated from a cruel world to live in the passageways and catacombs below the Paris Opera House, reputedly so immense they contain an entire underground lake. Beneath and inside the walls of the mammoth opera house he found himself an unchallenged king, albeit of an empty kingdom of rats and darkness (perhaps there is a parallel here to "Paradise Lost"). The actual story of the book begins years later as the fabled and rarely seen "opera ghost" has decided to make an aspiring young singer, Christine Daae, the star of the opera using any means necessary.

The book's first film adaptation, and the only accurate one, was in 1925 with Lon Chaney, Sr., in the title role. With Chaney's superb portrayal of Erik with both power and pathos, T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a became one of the most memorable films of the silent era. It was one of the first films--and one of the few silent films--to contain a sequence in the (then) new process of Technicolor.

The first of three remakes was produced in 1943 with Claude Rains as Eriqre Claudin. The Rains version made one major change in the myths that all the later versions adopted. As one additional cruelty at the hands of humanity, Eriqre was not deformed from birth but instead, through tragic circumstances, has his face burned with strong acid.

There were two more direct remakes, one in 1962 with Herbert Lom and one in 1983 with Maximillian Schell as the Phantom. Each version has an unmasking, a falling chandelier, and a dramatic death for the Phantom. (The Herbert Lom version was an odd variation in which toward the end of the script none of these elements were present yet. In the climax scene, s_o_m_e_o_n_e_e_l_s_e cuts down the chandelier and Lom rips off his own mask and dives under the chandelier to save Christine, thus showing all three elements in the space of a few seconds.)

There have been a number of major variations on the theme, of course, including the 1975 P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_H_o_l_l_y_w_o_o_d and the 1974 P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_P_a_r_a_d_i_s_e, which also mixed in the Faust legend.

All of this leads us to this latest incarnation, an operetta based on T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e_O_p_e_r_a with music by Webber and lyrics by Charles Hart. As yet it is available in this country only in an abridged form on record.

My first observation is that Webber, Hart, or both read the book. Does that sound like faint praise? It might have been in Lon Chaney's day. It is clear that his version is reasonably close to the book, but

each later version diverges further from the source material. The new version has returned to arm's length from the novel. Various changes were made to fit it into the confines of the stage and into a reasonable performance time, the most serious of which is the omission of a very important character referred to as "the Persian." In addition, from the illustrations on the record, the Phantom looks nothing like Leroux described him. Leroux's Phantom is "extraordinarily thin and his dress coat hangs on a skeleton frame." The record's illustrations show a man much more substantial, if not actually heavy-set. Further, in the new version the Phantom's mask cuts across his face diagonally, covering most of the forehead but not the left eye and continuing diagonally to leave his mouth entirely uncovered (probably a necessity to allow the actor to sing). But his face hardly fits the description:

"His eyes are so deep that you can hardly see the fixed pupils. You just see two black holes, as in a dead man's skull. His skin, which is stretched across his bones

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like a drumhead, is not white, but a nasty yellow. His nose is so little worth talking about that you can't see it side-face; and the absence of that nose is a horrible thing to look at. All the hair he has is three or four long dark locks on his forehead and behind his ears."

The actor in the play seems to have normal skin and nose and a healthy head of hair. Admittedly even Chaney could not achieve the effect of the nose, but this Phantom looks like a businessman in a brief mask.

The music seems at first listening to be a cut below that of E_v_i_t_a just as the music of E_v_i_t_a seemed a cut below J_e_s_u_s_C_h_r_i_s_t S_u_p_e_r_s_t_a_r.

After two or three listenings that impression goes away entirely and both for the subject matter and the music, this has quickly become my favorite of Webber's works. Some of the melodies are discordant and downright ugly. The same was true of E_v_i_t_a, however; once some of the nicer melodies are heard two or three times they make the music all worthwhile. The sticker on the album boasts what it calls "hit songs": "All I Ask of You," "Phantom of the Opera," and "Music of the Night." Where exactly these songs are hits, I have no idea. They are, however, appealing melodies though no more than others like "Masquerade," "Think of Me," or "Angel of Music."

Unfortunately, not enough can be told about the actual play from the record. While the album contains the full text of the play in the libretto, it is abridged on the records. In fact, the whole fate of the phantom, whether he will live or die, is lost in an ambiguous stage direction--is he disappearing from the room or only disappearing into his cloak? If the former, he will survive as he does in the book; if the latter, he will be captured by the mob as he was in the first film version. I suspect he escapes, but it is unclear. I look forward to seeing a live performance and in the meantime I will dust off my copy of the book.

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