

other houses, "Ring your doorbell if you love Jesus"? No, of course not. At least Christmas wreaths people really do hang in the doors of their homes as well as on the front grill of their cars. But of how many of your friends can you say that when you go in their bathroom and look at their mirrors they have a pair of baby shoes

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or foam dice hanging from the mirror? But you see it all the time in cars. (Actually, come to that, I am still not totally happy we have to have mirrors in bathrooms. That is generally the room I am least anxious to look at myself in.)

The history of American car decoration is truly silly and demented. It would have to include atrocities such as skits to give VW bugs grilles like Rolls Royces. Then there is the giant ersatz wind-up key, also for VW bugs. VW owners just aren't normal. There is something about driving a bug that drives you buggy. I think that their current ad campaign is based on the idea that VW fans are really turned on by giant German words that sound like barf-fig-newton.

If you are a longtime reader of this notice I don't have to tell you about the silliness of diamond signs and stuffed animals stuck to car windows. This is because if you are a longtime reader you may not have brain cells enough to process the information.

Well, what's chewing my parsnips this week are those silly "How am I driving?" stickers. You know which ones I mean. Some manufacturer or something had all their trucks put on stickers that asked, "How am I driving?" and gave a phone number to call and tattle. Americans love to live by the principle, "If you can't say something nice, at least it feels good to say it anyway." Now everyone knows the pronoun is all wrong. the truck driver isn't going to be at the other end of that line. He's going to be in a restaurant arm-wrestling and being served pie by a waitress named Trixie. If you c_o_u_l_d get him on the phone to complain, you'd hear some new words. These guys talk more aggressively than they drive. It has become a new sport amongst truck drivers to obscure that sign with precision mud splattering. It takes a light touch driving through mud just the right way.

Then there are the ones who save you the trouble of calling and right up front they say, "Don't like my driving? Call 1-800-EAT SHIT." I wonder how many people call that each year.

How was this article, by the way? If you didn't think it was funny, let me know. I have installed a special phone line; call 1-800-TUF-LUCK.

Mark Leeper
MT 3D-441 957-5619
...mtgzy!leeper

Amongst all things, knowledge is truly the best thing:
from its not being liable ever to be stolen, from its
not being purchasable, and from its being imperishable.
-- The Hitopadesa

DEAD AGAIN

A film review by Mark R. Leeper
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Capsule review: Two murder mysteries tied together by reincarnation. A great deal of tension is created, but the solution of the mystery is not too surprising and an action sequence toward the end is just not up to the style of the rest of the film. There is a great product placement, however. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4).

When a little-known filmmaker has a film that makes it really big, it is interesting to see what he or she does with that success. What is the next film like? When suddenly a filmmaker is respected and has a little more freedom, what does s/he do for an encore? A little-known George Lucas had a big hit with A_m_e_r_i_c_a_n_G_r_a_f_f_i_t_i; his next project was to bring comic-book space opera in a way that did not suffer in the transition. That was a success. Spike Lee's first post-success project was the disappointing S_c_h_o_o_l_D_a_z_e. Kenneth Branagh, the director and star of the very successful H_e_n_r_y_V, has returned with a very stylish

mystery and supernatural thriller with a dream cast. Branagh stars with his somewhat less well known wife, Emma Thompson. But also on hand in smaller roles are Derek Jacobi, Andy Garcia, Robin Williams, and European actress Hanna Schygulla (of T_h_e_M_a_r_r_i_a_g_e_o_f_M_a_r_i_a_B_r_a_u_n and B_e_r_l_i_n_A_l_e_x_a_n_d_e_r_p_l_a_t_z). This is an oddly matched collected of actors and the screenplay hardly gives them all a chance to make contributions commensurate with their talents.

A nameless, voiceless woman (played by Thompson) shows up at a church school. She has been given sanctuary for a few days, but when she starts having screaming nightmares, the school asks a detective who is a former student (played by Branagh) to help find out who the woman really is. The search is heading nowhere when Franklyn Madson shows up. (Madson played by Jacobi) is a furniture dealer with a talent for hypnotism. He offers his services to put the mystery woman in a trance and help her to remember her previous life. And what she remembers is indeed a previous life, a life in which she was someone else. It was a life that concluded in a famous murder case of 1949. What is more, there are indications that her detective friend may be a reincarnation who was also involved in the same murder. In the past lives a composer and his wife (also played by Branagh and Thompson) have marriage problems that end in the wife murdered and the husband executed. At this point, the uncertainties start to pile up. The reincarnation may or may not be authentic. Roman Strauss, the composer, may or may not have been the murderer. And, most disturbing, the events may or may not be fated to happen again, or perhaps the murder will go in the other direction as a sort of karmic revenge. The film has a complex plot and leaves unanswered the biggest question: does the film really make sense or not? Does the ending really explain all we have seen? Like J_a_c_o_b'_s

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L_a_d_d_e_r, most of what you can get out of this film you get thinking about it afterwards.

The photography is stylishly done, particularly in the scenes set in 1949. They are done in monochrome, but the blacks and whites are just slightly tinted. At least that is the style element easy to identify. And the credits intercut with newspaper clippings about the murder opens the film with a feel almost like that of M_u_r_d_e_r_o_n_t_h_e O_r_i_e_n_t_E_x_p_r_e_s_s.

Oh, one more thing. The best touch in this film is the product placement. This film _d_o_e_s have a product placement. And as it happens it is the best product placement you will see in a film this year. It kind of makes up for all the bad product placements we have had this summer.

Overall the production values and the acting talent are better than the story. And the story is better than it seems at the end of the film. I would still give _D_e_a_d_A_g_a_i_n only a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale. With this cast it should have been better.

DOC HOLLYWOOD

A film review by Mark R. Leeper

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Capsule review: A good director turns out his most commercial but least interesting film. Michael Caton-Jones, the director of S_c_a_n_d_a_l and M_e_m_p_h_i_s_B_e_l_l_e, tells the story of a big city doctor stranded in a small town in South Carolina who finds himself bewitched by the locals. Pleasant but predictable. Rating: 1 (-4 to +4).

This whole film is something of a riddle and the riddle is what is Michael Caton-Jones doing directing a film like this? First, Caton-Jones is British and D_o_c_H_o_l_l_y_w_o_o_d is about small-town life in South Carolina. That cannot be a subject about which Caton-Jones is particularly expert. Probably the closest Caton-Jones has ever been to the American South is watching reruns of "The Andy Griffith Show." That television show's Mayberry has more than a passing resemblance to Grady, South Carolina. But Caton-Jones worked on A_b_s_o_l_u_t_e_B_e_g_i_n_n_e_r_s in a minor but formative capacity. He went on to direct S_c_a_n_d_a_l and M_e_m_p_h_i_s_B_e_l_l_e. Each of these films was set a generation or so back. Each had notable actors but no big stars. Each of these films took something of a risk presenting what could have been an unpopular viewpoint. (An interesting piece of trivia: Mandy Rice-Davies played in A_b_s_o_l_u_t_e_B_e_g_i_n_n_e_r_s, Bridget Fonda played in D_o_c_H_o_l_l_y_w_o_o_d, and in S_c_a_n_d_a_l Bridget Fonda played Mandy Rice-Davies.)

The story of D_o_c_H_o_l_l_y_w_o_o_d is far from original: big-city boy meets and falls in love with a small-town of interesting and eccentric characters. I have seen that plot attributed to Frank Capra, though I myself cannot think of a single Capra film with a plot that seems to me all that similar to D_o_c_H_o_l_l_y_w_o_o_d. I will, however, point out that this film has a strong similarity to Bill Forsythe's L_o_c_a_l_H_e_r_o. I would claim that L_o_c_a_l_H_e_r_o is by far the better film, but if I were from Scotland I might well prefer a film to show me exotic South Carolina. The title is a nickname for Dr. Benjamin Stone (played by Michael J. Fox), who is headed for a lucrative cosmetic surgery practice in Beverly Hills when an accident and the damage it causes forces him to spend some time in Grady, South Carolina. You can probably figure the plot from there. Boy meets town. Boy hates town. Audience loves town. Boy meets girl. Girl hates boy. Audience loves girl. Boy loves girl. Girl starts to like boy. Boy starts to like town. Boy, girl, and town live happily ever after. Together. Audience leaves happy.

I can be as silly as the next guy and I liked the town and laughed at the jokes. The town is likable. The town is lovable. What's not to love about a town where blacks and whites, men and women, city folk and rednecks all sashay together in perfect harmony, where never is heard a bigoted word and nobody looks twice at gays. This Southern town is the

Ku Klux Klan's worst nightmare come to life. And the plot doesn't bear much thought either. One of the characters pays a minor podiatry bill with a pig whose value is probably ten times the size of his debt. He could easily have sold the pig, paid his bill, and had a big piece of change in his pocket.

Then there is the incredible stretching Michael J. Fox. He has a lot of scenes together with female lead Julie Warner. Somehow when you see full-length shots of the two of them she is perhaps an inch taller than he is. In every close-up she has to reach up to a Michael J. Fox who has a good two or three inches on her. This film is willing to find endearing all sorts of eccentricities which Grady, South Carolina, accepts without batting an eye, but would rather create a distraction than break the taboo that the boy has got to be taller than the girl. The film has people joke about how short Dr. Stone is, but of course he finds a soulmate who is even shorter.

_ D_ o_ c_ H_ o_ l_ l_ y_ w_ o_ o_ d is entertaining and pleasant but the audience gets none of the value of seeing itself through someone else's eyes that they would get from a Louis Malle film such as _ A_ t_ l_ a_ n_ t_ i_ c_ C_ i_ t_ y. I rate it a flat +1 on to -4 to +4 scale.

PHANTOM by Susan Kay
Delacorte Press, April 1991, ISBN 0-385-30296-7, \$19.95.
A book review by Mark R. Leeper
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It seems peculiar to say that the writing of a particular work of fiction was inevitable. But P_h_a_n_t_o_m is a novel I really had expected would be written sooner or later, and while my fiction writing is probably not up to it, I had wistfully thought on occasion of writing the story myself. I had even gone so far as to compose, in my mind, several scenes that might appear in the novel. If Susan Kay and I both thought of writing the same novel, then very likely there were others. So what's the novel?

When Gaston Leroux wrote the book T_h_e_P_h_a_n_t_o_m_o_f_t_h_e
O_p_e_r_a, he had in mind several details of a life history of the mysterious Erik. The story requires Erik to be nothing short of a genius, with many diverse talents that it seems unlikely that a single person could possess. So when the main action of the novel is over, Leroux gives the reader (in an epilogue) a very short account of Erik's life. These five paragraphs are, effectively, a ready-made outline for a separate novel telling the story of the life of Erik, the Phantom. It must have occurred to many an aspiring author to flesh out this outline. That is particularly true now that this novel--once hard to find--is in print from several different publishers. And, of course, there is a ready market for a

novel that tells us a little more about Erik, due to the popularity of the stage play and the numbers of people fascinated with the figure of Erik (as I have been since many years before Andrew Lloyd Webber thought of doing his play).

The following will tell something of the plot of P _ h _ a _ n _ t _ o _ m, but no more than the reader will already know if he or she has already read the original P _ h _ a _ n _ t _ o _ m _ o _ f _ t _ h _ e _ O _ p _ e _ r _ a. And it is my strong recommendation that

the reader not start this book without having read the original novel by Leroux. Leroux creates the magic; Kay explains it. Reading the novels in the wrong order damages the enjoyment of each. Kay's approach is to break Erik's life into seven periods, each seen from the point of view of a character of the story. This is a little disappointing in that the story of Erik's earliest days is told by Erik's vain and selfish mother. It is one period when we really want to get inside Erik's head and find out what he is thinking. But Kay denies us that pleasure. We do see the development of the boy-Erik and he is recognizably the Erik of the Opera. We also learn of his cruel treatment due to his disfigurement and the seeds of a perfectly natural misanthropy. If anything, Kay makes Erik unrealistically too much like the adult we know from Leroux. Many of his childish angry pranks from this period foreshadow similar actions in the Leroux.

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We next see Erik through his own eyes, on the road and held in captivity by gypsies who exhibit him first for his horrendous ugliness, then for his talents as a singer. After that a great Italian architect tells us the tragedy of his three years working with a brilliant adolescent who wore a mask and already had the intellect of a superlative genius.

A longer section is narrated by Nadir the Persian, who was dispatched to bring Erik to the court of the Shah-in-Shah of Persia. The two become close friends and Nadir tells us of the court intrigues that first entangle Erik and which then he masters. Erik is finally able to give his anger at humanity full freedom to express itself.

Erik then tells the reader of his return to France where, like the

Count of Monte Cristo, he exercises his new wealth and power, manipulating events to allow him secretly to be the true designer of the Paris Opera House. And he designs it not just to be a superior opera house, but also as the intricate and deceptive home of which only he can be the master, a house in which he can move unseen under the floors and in the walls. As a climax, we get to the main body of the story Leroux, here retold alternately by Erik and Christine. Finally Raoul completes the story with what is a disappointing cliched ending.

The very first thing that impressed me about Phantom is Kay's writing style. Her prose is clear, clean, and unaffected. If that sounds like a faint piece of praise, it most certainly is not. I find very few writers have a prose style so clear that when I get to the bottom of a page I know exactly what happened on that page. Clear writing is no small feat and Kay's prose is refreshingly clear.

To my taste, however, her style is a little too soft-focused, a little overly romanticized. We know that Erik has become hard and cruel. In Persia he turns his genius to creative means of torture of prisoners of the Shah-in-Shah. We know that this is happening, but Kay shows us very little of Erik's amoral cruelty. We are spared all but tiny glimpses of this important facet of Erik's personality. Kay is taking a safe route, not wishing to alienate more sensitive readers and following a somewhat lighter interpretation, much as Andrew Lloyd Webber did. Presumably most of her readers will know the Webber version and perhaps one or two of the many film versions. The Kay depiction of Christine Daae is a bit more sympathetic than the Leroux Christine. The original tells us just enough to assume that Christine is, to put it bluntly, not very intelligent. She seems much too easily duped into believing literally that an angel of music has come from Heaven to tutor her. Somehow because she can present more of her point of view in Kay's novel, she comes off as a bit more intelligent. Curiously, Kay uses a touch to bring out Erik's character that I would have also used had I written the novel. Erik recognizes that spiders are beneficial creatures that happen to be repulsive to humans by nature. He is angered when Christine shows indifference to the killing of spiders. Erik sees his condition and the spiders' condition as related. Both are

hated out of prejudice against their unaesthetic appearance.

I have claimed in a previous article that Leroux intended Erik to have a universal intellect like Goethe's hidden behind the horrible face. A friend who also liked the book thought that interpretation was not really in Leroux's novel. I still contend that it is, and in the same five paragraphs on which Kay based her novel. But Kay goes much further than I did, making Erik not just a good architect, not just a good singer, but the best in all Europe and while he is still no more than fifteen. Her fervent adulation of Erik is reminiscent of Franz Liebkin in T_h_e_P_r_o_d_u_c_e_r_s waxing enthusiastic about what a great house-painter Hitler was. Kay does not want us to think that there was any talent that Erik was merely good at without being brilliant.

P_h_a_n_t_o_m is certainly a novel I wanted to see written, but in some ways it is not such a good idea. As I said before, there is magic missing from the more recent book. The Leroux story has the element of surprise, for example, when Erik turns out to have command of the Punjab lasso. In the Kay book the reader always knows fairly well what Erik's talents are at each point in time and where Erik got each of these talents. The mystery is gone from the character and the events of the Leroux novel are just a humdrum extension of what has gone before. When Erik kills with the lasso, it comes as no surprise. While there is some excitement seeing the pieces of the famous story fall into place, when Kay gets around to telling that story the Paris Opera House events come as just one more chapter from Erik's life.

Incidentally, Kay pulls all the right elements in place so that the Leroux story can proceed exactly as he wrote it, and then she modifies the original story. For reasons beyond my understanding, she changes events around. Her version is only moderately faithful to the original version. She eliminates retelling part of the story and that is fine, considering how it is being told, but then she moves the chandelier sequence to just before Raoul and the Persian go together to the cellars. I did not compare side by side, but I think the death of Joseph Buquet and the scene of La Carlotta croaking like a frog were also not at the proper places in the story. Major events of the story occur out of sequence. With the dramatic versions on film and on the stage you are grateful if all these events are present anywhere, but Kay should have better control. These may seem small matters to most, but as a longtime fan of Leroux's novel I see any divergence from complete consistency with the original as Kay's breaking faith with her stated purpose.

This one problem, together with turning Erik into a super-genius of incredible magnitude, is the biggest weakness of Kay's book. Its strength is to flesh out the character and give him a life that extends beyond the pages of Leroux's book. That is a feat that has been attempted in films before and never with very good results. Kay does manage it in the book at the same time she is giving us a fairly good read.

CHEKHOV'S JOURNEY by Ian Watson
Carroll & Graf, 1991 (1983c), ISBN 0-88185-675-9, \$3.95.
A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper
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Ian Watson is not a well-known author on this side of the Atlantic, though he is well-respected in Britain. Maybe it's that his work is more subtle than the American public wants. (Cynics will claim it's because his work lacks both torrid sex scenes and extensive descriptions of hardware, the former being necessary for the mainstream audience and the latter for technogeeks.) But his subject matter is likely to turn off the American reader before style even enters into it.

Consider C h e k h o v' s J o u r n e y. Now admittedly Watson may achieve some accidental sales among those who mistake this for the latest "Star Trek" novel, but it won't take long for them to figure out that the Chekhov is Anton, not Pavel, the last name is Chekhov, not Chekov, and the journey is across Siberia, not interstellar space (though one gets the feeling the temperature and population density are not all that different). But the American public is not likely to go for a book about a Russian playwright.

It turns out there i s a spaceship in C h e k h o v' s J o u r n e y, launched in 2090. There is also a centenary documentary being made in 1990 of Chekhov's 1890 journey across Siberia. These three strands braid together along with the Tunguska meteor which, like many of the main characters, becomes "unstuck in time." Watson not only turns cause-and-effect on its head here: he sticks it on a merry-go-round.

I will admit my knowledge of Chekhov's life and work to be less than perfect, which meant I occasionally had difficulty determining where Watson was making changes. And his characterizations of the 1990 and 2090 participants suffers from his failure to predict glasnost, perestroika, and the general collapse of the Communist bloc. It is perhaps unfair to have expected him to do so in 1983, but reading about all the staunch Communists (as well as the rebellious non-conformists) in a staunch Communist system no longer rings true. Well, think of it as an alternate universe. The rest of the plot is surreal enough that this won't be too much additional strain.

I enjoyed Chekhov'sJourney, yet I hesitate to recommend it. It doesn't have a lot of what people seem to want in science fiction. But if you enjoy a well-crafted story, or an interesting travelogue, or a different perspective on a famous author, or just something different, try Chekhov'sJourney.