MetroActive Features

Satan's Cinema

Film Scratches:

One critic's favorite onscreen devils,
from Tim Curry to Buster Keaton

By Richard von Busack

Beautiful manners, menace--and all of the best dialogue; a guarantee of both the audience's complete attention and its constant sympathy. These are just some of the side benefits of playing Satan. The role of Satan attracts tragedians and light comedians alike, from Mickey Rooney in The Private Lives of Adam and Eve to Sammy Davis Jr. in Poor Devil. Satan is most effective when fleetingly glimpsed, like the demon peeping through the smoke in The Exorcist or the scaly back in Rosemary's Baby. More recently, Lucifer has been played big and greasy. Strangely, Robert De Niro's grubby Mephisto, peeling his deviled egg with unclean fingernails, seems to have frightened a lot of movie fans.

Jack Nicholson's horny devil in The Witches of Eastwick topped De Niro with a monstrous transformation scene, turning into a sort of giant, living crookneck squash in the finale. Most recently, a heavy-metal Satan (Viggo Mortensen) turned up in The Prophecy, although he is upstaged by Christopher Walken's Angel of Death.

But enough of these long-haired, unwashed Satans! Give me the urbane tuxedo-wearing devils any day: Laird Cregar in the 1943 Heaven Can Wait, Fred Astaire in a television play called Mr. Lucifer; Ray Milland in Alias Nick Beal, and Vincent Price in The Story of Mankind. But cinematic diabolism has as many styles as the Prince of Darkness has names. My nine favorite screen devils are below:

Tim Curry in Legend (1985). Tom Cruise as Good tries to upstage Tim Curry as Darkness, and has as much luck as good ever does against evil in this wicked world. Ridley (Blade Runner) Scott's dippiest movie, it had unicorns in it, like a schoolgirl's calendar, but what a handsome devil Curry was with that rolling baritone voice, those grand ebony horns and skin the color of chicken tandoori.

Walter Huston in The Devil and Daniel Webster (a.k.a. All That Money Can Buy) (1941). Satan cruises New Hampshire for souls, like a politician preparing for the primary. Walter Huston plays him as a raspy little sinner, with a nasty chuckling voice, an insinuating squint and a goatee. One of the devil's best onscreen moments: a delightful final scene in which a down-but-not-out Scratch sizes up the theater audience for sales prospects.

Peter Cook in Bedazzled (1967). He calls himself Spiggot, a swinging London devil, and he's summoned by the diabolical name of Julie Andrews to help (at the usual price) a Faust who works at a burger stand. In one great scene, Spiggot wordlessly provides his charge (Dudley Moore) with a long wooden spoon when they have lunch--recalling the proverb "If you sup with the devil, use a long spoon."

Rex Ingram in Cabin in the Sky (1943). In a segregated heaven and hell, Rex Ingram presides over colored hell as "Lucifer Jr." Ingram, who starred in Green Pastures, was thus perhaps the only actor besides George Burns to play both God and Satan. Still, Burns never had in his infernal court Louis Armstrong as an imp or Lena Horne as a Marguerite.

Ralph Richardson in Tales From the Crypt (1972). Should the devil be British, with a public-school accent foretelling an eternity of cold showers, compulsory chapel and canings? I was 14 when I saw Tales From the Crypt, and I can remember Richardson, wearing a brown monk's robe and sitting in a stone alcove shushing the questions of a newcomer to hell with a "It ... can ... wait." I had been an ex-Catholic only about a year, and I think I prayed that night.

Benjamin Christensen in Haxan or Witchcraft Throughout the Ages (1922). Scandinavia has changed so essentially little since the Middle Ages that some movies from that corner of the world have a medieval spirit. Deep Lutheran theology provided the agony into Bergman's films, and the Dane Carl Dreyer's films have faces out of Cranach. This expos of the witch trials shows the horrors of the Church militant, while recreating the medieval visions of the bedeviled. Director Christensen was an imposing figure with obscene frilled ears like a salamander's and a tongue almost as long as Gene Simmons of Kiss.

Frank Silva as Bob on Twin Peaks. Silva died in September 1995, so call this a sentimental choice. He was a set dresser whom David Lynch spotted and suspected might be good as the epitome of evil. "Bob smile, everybody run."

Captain de Zita in Glen or Glenda (1953). A booking agent for strippers, "he did everything from running the girls down to their dates, to picking them up at two or three of the morning, and shaving them," said producer George Weiss, remembering this extremely unsavory-looking character. De Zita, whose first name is lost to us, plays the devil in Ed Wood's Glen or Glenda, as ratty, as squalid, a monster as Max Schreck's Nosferatu.

Buster Keaton in Go West (1925). Buster Keaton appears in a devil suit with rubbery horns and a tail that stretches like an elastic band. Keaton was more often the subject of diabolical forces than anyone in the history of movies. Unfortunately, he doesn't get a close-up wearing the devil suit. More's the pity, because it would have been a profound theological lesson to see Keaton's face as the devil, standing forlorn, exposed like a folk tale under a microscope.

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