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Crucible of the vampire

Now available in the UK on screenbound, *Crucible Of The Vampire* is director/writer/editor Iain Ross-McNamee's second full-length feature. He cleverly uses the topography of Shropshire's bucolic landscape, as well as the history of the estate, which is used as the film's main filming location to beautifully evoke a golden era of British horror. But the film is a transparently low budget affair, so brilliantly steeped in a mixture of early 70s folk horror tropes Tigon British and racial lesbian vampire action, that writer Tudor Gates made the cornerstone of Carnstein's Hammer Films trilogy -- *Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Lust for the Vampire* (1971), *The Twins of Evil* (1972) - in the same period that it's really a mystery why Ross-McNamee also allows proceedings to deteriorate, to the end, in a quagmire of cheap CGI digital effects and choreographed Such tactics quickly destroy the genteel air of old-school charm that defines the diffuse kind of British exploitation presumably intended to mimic the tone in earlier parts of the picture, only to replace it with a rough low budget aesthetic that is a dime-a-dozen everywhere you look in indie horror circles. Yet before we reach this final act, when it comes off the rails a little bit, there's plenty more to the aficionado of the 1970s Brit horror to acknowledge and undoubtedly appreciate. The story itself will seem instantly familiar, being entirely constructed from the tropes and narrative strands that appear countless times throughout the genre and are central to many of David McGillivray's scripts for British horror film directors such as Pete Walker and Norman J. Bratton. Ross-McNamee and his two collaborators, Darren Lake and John Walskel, do a particularly compelling job in the first half of the film about how they're interested in the 70s hammer vampire and the Big Three, associated with the subgenre of folk horror, into what essentially becomes the repeated work of the slave Satan Warren, since 1976 - with witchcraft, necromancy, a dysfunctional family with a evasive history and an attractive innocent who is unsuspectingly pre-prepared by a trap set by diabolical powers. This is combined with awareness of the methods of building supernatural fairy tales by the likes of M.R. James and Arthur Maken, who are often obscure historical pallimpests who reveal their hidden layers through explorations of architectural and landscape history. The film begins in traditional fashion for this genre, in this case with a 1649 black and white prologue in which John Sterne, chief associate of the real Civil War witch Matthew Hopkins, hangs an old peasant called Ezekiel Fletcher (played by Brian Croucher of Blake's 7 fame) from an oak tree in the Shropshire forest for crime His next act is to break into two parts a cauldron suspected of using Ezekil for his witchcraft. Ezekil's dead daughter was seen roaming Jacob Wood at night, which is more than enough reason to find the old boy guilty on the spot without further consideration of the matter. Three hundred and fifty years later, however, and half of what later became known as Stearne Cauldron is now in the University Museum of a young assistant curator called Isabel (Katie Goldfinch). Aware that owners may be trying to scam the university to pay for repairs, its supervisor sends it to a Shropshire manor house reconstructed by a family claiming to have uncovered the other half of the cauldron in their basement in preparation to lay a new gas pipe. It is Isabelle's job to examine the artifact and decide whether the claim is genuine. Karl (Larry Reu), the owner of the house, tells Isabel about the history of the building, which was originally built by secret Catholics during the reign of Jacob I, then adapted and expanded into the Victorian era. When he recalls how the non-Jacobian bunch used to be a girls' school, it sounds like a famous line included in the script with the intention of picking it up to the audience as an obvious reference to Hammer's *lust for vampire* from 1971. In fact, a small study of light in estates in the Shropshire area unearthed the filming location to be one Acton Reynald Hall: a Victorian mansion that includes parts of a building dating back to the early and mid-17th century. The building has been the home of the Corbett family for generations; but they first moved there in 1644, after their former home became a royal garrison during the English Civil War and was destroyed by a Cromwell soldier. It was expanded in the early 19th century by Shropshire architect J.H. Simpson. Haycocom, when the entire village of Acton Reynard, along with several farms, were demolished to make way for the surrounding park. In 1919, however, the building was actually converted into a girls' school, and remained one until 1995! One of the nice things about the Iain Ross-McNamee film is how he manages to incorporate a bit of local area history into his plot of the film B about witchcraft, witches and vampirism. At one point, Isabelle finds a diary written by a former Victorian-era house owner that prompts an M.R. James-style flashback where we learn how half of the Stearne cauldron, now buried in the basement, was discovered. Jeremiah Cain (Charles O'Neill) describes being led by an unearthly melody floating in the wind in the woods to the place of hanging by Ezekil Fletcher, spotted in a 1649 prologue. It also leads him to the cauldron, which he then takes back to the manor house, only to uncover the ghostly in the form of a pale, ghostly woman in a black dress that comes to be known as the Dark Lady. Up to this point, Isabelle is also experiencing similar visions of a terrified ghostly woman at night. And there are also countless other strange episodes to deal with involving, frankly, strange residents who are isabel's hosts in the mansion: Scarlet (Florence Cady), the rebellious daughter of Carl and his foreign wife Evelyn (Babette Barat), steals Isabel's phone and even some of her underwear. And Evelyn insists on providing Isabel with mysterious drinks before bed and then hanging out to make sure she's depleting the glass before leaving. These mysterious tonics seem to prompt erotic dreams (or do they dream?) involving white horses and a ghostly pale woman. Even a trip to a local pub leads to a meeting of Isabel the gardener who works on the estate (played by Neil Morrissey), who then tells her about the terrible fate of his predecessor. A former gardener's seemingly hostile son follows her back to the mansion along a lunar track after she leaves the pub that night (providing an opportunity for some very hammer-like day-to-night photos) issuing inconsistent warnings about what might happen to her if she stays in the mansion anymore. Karl himself is also becoming more suspect, refusing to allow Isabel to remove the cauldron from his present location in the basement of the estate and demanding that she agree that half of the museum's artefact be brought instead to Shropshire to find out if they fit together. When Isabelle reveals to a barmeside in a local pub that she had just split up with her boyfriend because he couldn't accept her religiously derived belief that there shouldn't be sex before marriage, it didn't take the viewer's genius to find out that isabel's pristine state may have also had some ulterior Wicker Man-style role to play in her chosen one to go out into the estate in the first place. The latter thought is made rather more explicit by the extraordinarily forward behaviour exhibited by Scarlet, who, not content with confronting Isabelle with the knowledge that she is trying to seduce her while wearing her own peeled isabel underwear, ends up exploiting Isabelle's particularly disturbing encounter with the Dark Lady to successfully initiate her into the pleasure of sapphic love! The plot elements and sometimes theatrically antique performance styles of some members of the cast make it pretty clear that a trio of Hammer films that were very loosely based on Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novel Carmill are the main models for storytelling, and for the film's slightly eroticized style. The problem with any attempt to recreate this past era nowadays is that the actors are the personality and stature of Peter and Ingrid Pitt is no longer around to do what they have so often been able to do for Hammer Films: bring a degree of prestige to the productions they worked on that raised these films at their face value. For example, the role of Carl's head of household is played perfectly convincingly by the performer of the task with the job here, but you can't help but say that his role is exactly the one that at one time would have been played by someone like John Carson if it had been a real Hammer movie - and once you see that, it immediately draws your attention to the fact that an actor taking his place can never be an adequate replacement. That being said, Florence Cady makes a seductive antagonist can-be-a-lesbian/maybe-vampire antagonist; and newcomer (and Brie Larson-like) Kate Goldfinch is an appropriately attractive leader, though she inevitably struggles with the character mismatch that is required of her script when she walks away from naivety, beyond her depth is an academic who falls for the same drug drink trick twice in close succession, to a supenwoman's buttock kicking, slashing her throat and crushing her heads, seemingly seamlessly, who manages to take out a coven full of shabby cult members about having to drain her from the blood of their virgin so they can fully restore their vampire-ty Neil Morrissey gets top billing on the cover of the DVD, but actually turns out to be just a few scenes, mostly related to the delivery of the exposition. He is also given a scene at the film's climax to make it worth his turning presumably - although his role in the events depicted is, frankly, fairly minimal. In his roles as director and editor, Iain Ross-McNamee makes evolutionary use of Acton Raynard Hall's exterior and interiors to deliver many atmospheric moments in the build-up to easily predictable climactic detection; and a dream-like sequence that takes place in complete silence and in slow motion is directed (probably unintentionally) as an ethereal Jesus Franco fever dream - although there is nothing in the film that is anywhere as quickly as what ol' Jess would have presented to us, I'm sure. But if you can ignore the awful digital FX, one or two weak performances and resolution that seems aimed at charged ambiguity but just ends up feeling a little unsatisfactory, instead, there's still a general old-school feel about *Crucible of the Vampire* that is undoubtedly appealing, and will please many fans of the 1970s British horror classics. This, after all, draws many strands of influence together in a way that feels perfectly natural and compelling. It's just a shame to pay off it seems pretty rote, and plays by the rules of a more modern breed of horror rather than having the courage to adhere to the original low-key style he started with. Entertainment has just released a film on the dual Blu-ray/DVD format and on digital platforms after it has received many festival plaids and awards, so this is a film that will certainly be of interest to many despite its flaws.

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