

# 50s horror film is one of the best of its era

By Oliver Spivey  
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If you're thinking of getting your scares down at the local multiplex this Halloween, I urge you to reconsider. No horror flick they have showing will give you the diabolical atmosphere and nostalgic thrills that Jacques Tourneur's cult classic *Night of the Demon* (1957) provides.

Okay, the fire demon that we see at the beginning and end of the film may seem down right cheesy to today's viewers who are used to getting their senses violated by the clangorous special effects we find in the *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*.

But the enjoyment of a great horror movie doesn't depend on what the filmmakers rub in our faces—it depends instead on suggestion, story and mood. These are things that far too many filmmakers have abandoned in the current blockbuster gold rush.

There was no one more suitable to bring *Night of the Demon* to life than French-born director Tourneur, who made a name for himself in the early 1940s directing eerie mood pieces like *Cat People* (1942) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), for producer Val Lewton. Tourneur also gave us one of our greatest film noirs, *Out of the Past* (1947).

Filmed in England in 1957, *Night of the Demon* was made when

Tourneur's career was beginning to wane. Dismissed as genre dreck by critics of the day, the film's reputation has grown over time. For years it was seen only in the shortened American version, *Curse of the Demon*.

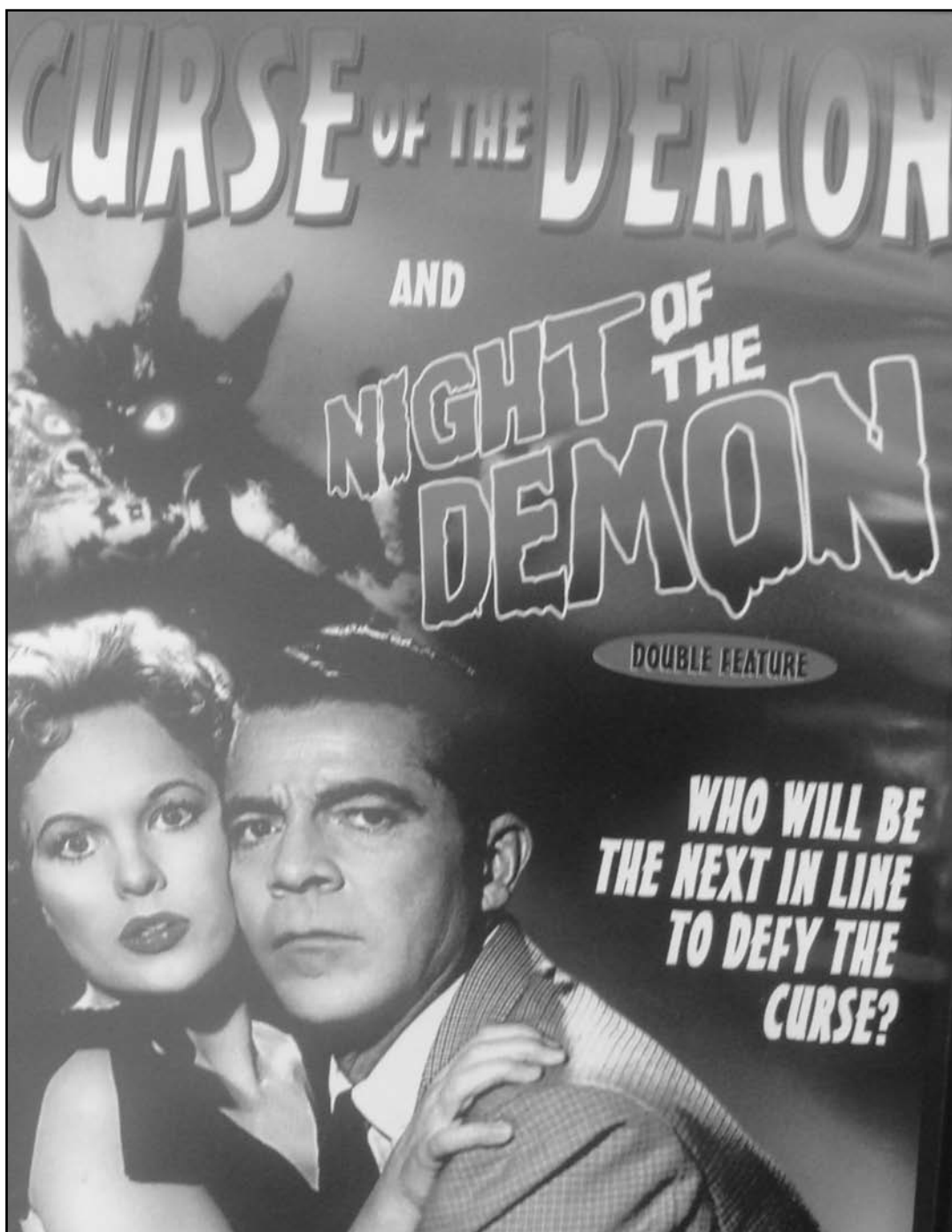
Based on a story by Montague R. James, "Casting the Runes," the film follows psychologist John Holden (Dana Andrews) to England where he intends to join colleague Henry Harrington (Maurice Denham) at a convention exposing the reportedly fraudulent practices of Satanist cult leader, Julian Karswell (Niall MacGinnis).

Holden is a lifelong cynic skeptical of ghosts, witchcraft and demons. But a lot of eerie things start happening that slowly breaks down his disbelief in the supernatural.

First, Harrington mysteriously dies before the convention causing his superstitious niece, Joanna (Peggy Cummins), to believe Karswell has killed her uncle by casting an evil curse on him in order to protect his (quite lucrative) leadership position.

Soon Holden and Joanna begin doing some of their own investigating of Karswell and his estate. Karswell warns Holden that he will die in three days due to a demonic hex if he does not drop his investigation.

Holden scoffs at his talk of sorcery, finding it a joke in comparison to his



smug rationality. Holden gets some great non-believer lines in the film like, "if the world is a dark place ruled by devils and demons, we might as well give up right now."

Most of the characters are given well defined personalities, particularly in the extended English version. Tourneur stays true to his *Cat People* roots by keeping the demon shrouded in ambi-

guity.

The two times he appears on screen supposedly killing his victim, we can't help but wonder if the demon is a literal creature or some kind of psychological metaphor, since no one else can apparently see him and since the demon's slayings take place concurrently with possible rational explanations for the deaths (fallen power

lines, a moving train).

Tourneur knows how to get Lewton-esque chills translated to the screen with ease. Look out for the film's creepiest sequence, with Holden being followed through the woods by Karswell's conjured demon. Ted Scaife's nightmarish cinematography captures the ominously lit forest perfectly, while we shudder at the sight of the invisible

demon's smoking footprints catching up to the frightened Holden.

If the film has a flaw, it may be the appearance of the fire demon coming to get Henry in the first few minutes of the movie. It seems jammed in by producers wanting to give the monster more screen time to lure audiences and not the artistic choice of a subtle director like Tourneur.

The swirling, sinister cloud that signifies the appearance of the demon seems to have inspired later filmmakers to use a similar device. I'm thinking of the moving mist containing the booming voice of God in Terry Gilliam's fantasy film, *Time Bandits* (1981) and the netherworld vortex in Fred Dekker's cult favorite *The Monster Squad* (1987).

If you saw last spring's effective comedy/horror film *Drag Me to Hell*, from director Sam Raimi, you'll also find striking similarities between it and *Night of the Demon*—complete with a token that will pass on a curse and a twist ending at a railway station.

I'm glad that at least some directors have the good taste to incorporate ideas from these terrific old horror films into their work, while still having the courage to be innovative. If they didn't, horror movie fans would be left with nothing but assembly line sequels, unnecessary remakes and gratuitous carnage. What a truly horrifying thought.

# English horror film is a rarely seen gem

By Oliver Spivey  
Staff Writer

There are only a handful of classic actors who I love watching in any type of movie, no matter how cornball or bogus the material: Gregory Peck, Jimmy Stewart and James Cagney to name a few.

And then there's Peter Cushing. He was a classically trained British actor who brought a whole lot of gravitas to almost every role he played. Whether he was chasing vampires or resurrecting the dead, you always knew Cushing was the expert and those other characters had better heed his words.

From the late '50s to the mid-'80s, Cushing—along with his favorite costar Christopher Lee and scary movie legend Vincent Price—was one of camp horror's most recognizable faces. His work with England's finest horror filmmakers at Hammer Studios in the 1950s gave us some classic titles.

Cushing was at his best when playing a steadfast rationalist immersed in the mysteries of the supernatural: an adventuring botanist in *The Abominable Snowman* (1957), the mad Dr. Frankenstein in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), the vampire hunter Dr. Van Helsing in *The Horror of Dracula* (1958) and the brilliant Victorian

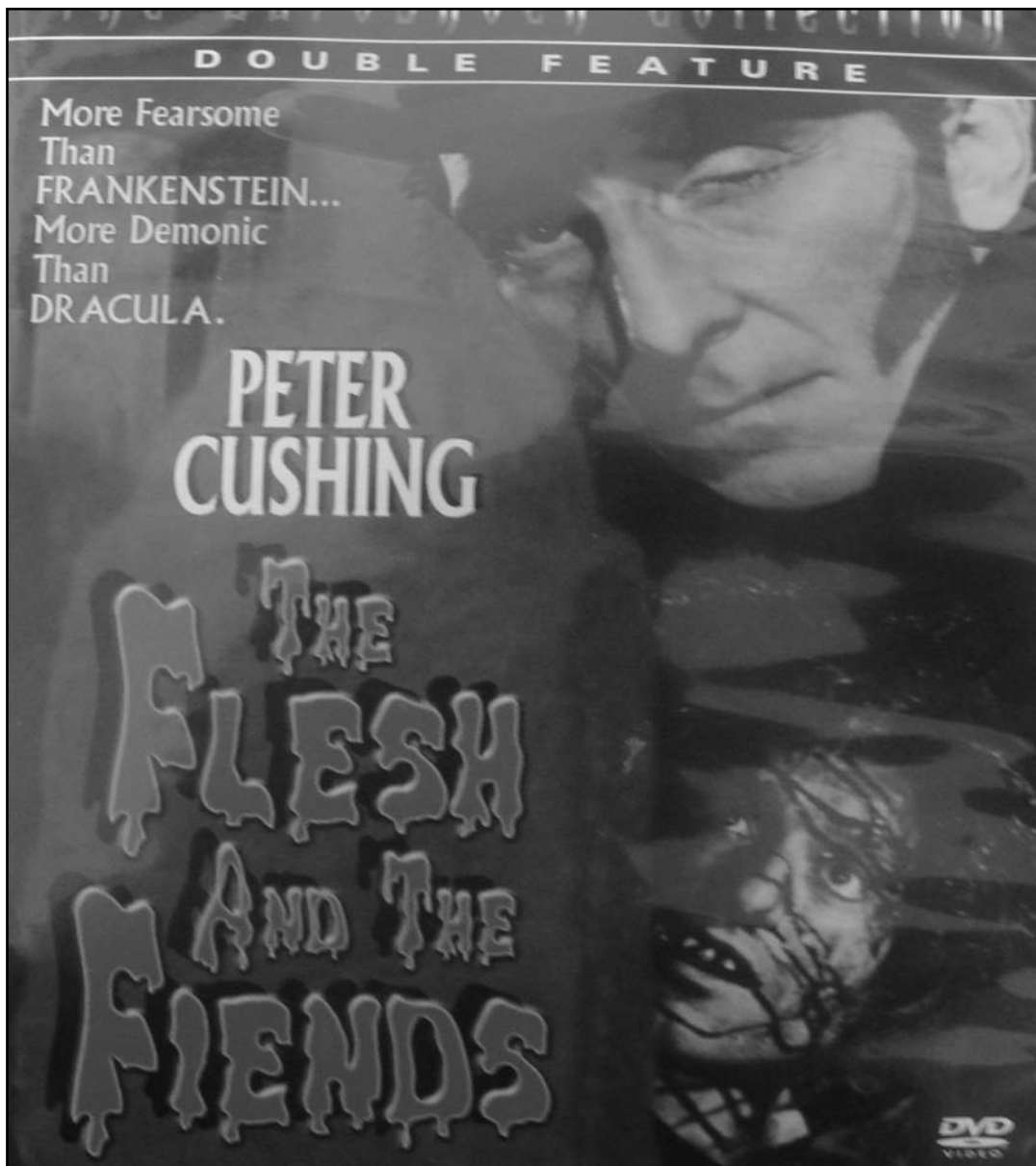
detective Sherlock Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1959).

In the non-Hammer production *The Flesh and the Fiends* (1960), Cushing again plays a haughty rationalist as the famous Robert Knox, a surgeon who in 1827 Edinburgh was caught up in a scandal of paying for fresh cadavers—recently murdered—to use for his med classes. He attains the corpses by way of two dirt-poor drunks named Burke and Hare (played colorfully by George Rose and a young Donald Pleasence).

At first, Burke and Hare dig up graves or happen upon dead bodies in the forlorn alleyways of the town; however, they soon find it much easier—and much more profitable—to kill the doctor's lab experiments themselves. Their victims are prostitutes, helpless drunks and drifters whom no one would easily miss.

Knox is only concerned with having fresh bodies for his students to work with—where and how they are acquired doesn't matter much to him. Knox believes he is bettering humanity through his cadaver experiments, hoping they will yield great advancements in understanding surgery and the human body.

But when a cadaver turns out to be the lover of one of Knox's students,



the town starts to take notice. A vengeance seeking mob comes looking for Burke and Hare, while Knox himself is under question from the authorities.

The medical board believes he is unethical and a traitor to the profession. It is not until a touching scene near the film's conclusion, involving a young child Knox meets on the street, that

Knox undergoes a kind of epiphany.

Far from being a mere exploitation film, *The Flesh and the Fiends* is actually a stylish shocker and a solid historical drama. When released in America it went under the title of both *Mania* and *The Fiendish Ghouls* in order to sell it to "audiences of indiscriminating tastes."

The film does have

plenty of creepy atmosphere and macabre violence for stricter horror fans. The opening sequence takes place at night in a fog shrouded graveyard where a body is being exhumed, setting the tone of the film. The scenes with Burke and Hare nonchalantly tossing their victims down at Knox's basement laboratory may even pack a wallop for viewers accus-

tomed to modern horror thrills.

The story had been filmed before in Val Lewton's eerie production *The Body Snatcher* (1945). That film features one of Boris Karloff's finest performances and is itself a gem of classic horror.

*The Flesh and the Fiends* production values are first-rate for a film with such a limited budget and John Gilling's direction is more than capable. Cushing is perfectly cast as the pompous doctor and his performance ranks alongside his best work for Hammer Studios.

For years the film was rarely seen except for chopped up pan-scan versions appearing occasionally. In 2001, Image Entertainment released a fully restored DVD containing both the original British version and the Continental version released for its wider European exhibition. The Continental version adds a little more violence and a couple scenes containing nudity at a tavern—very rare indeed for 1960.

If you're a fan of old horror films, Peter Cushing, or you simply love getting into the spirit of Halloween, then *The Flesh and the Fiends* is exactly the kind of ghoulish late-night delight you've been craving.