

The Phantom of the Paradox:

The Enduring Appeal of Brian DePalma's *Phantom of the Paradise*.

~Spoilers~

Two films, alike in dignity. Both rock musicals released by Twentieth-Century Fox in the mid 1970's, both riffs upon classic monster movies, both box-office failures upon initial release. One, booked onto the midnight circuit by a savvy marketing exec, explodes into a worldwide phenomenon with instant name recognition, the other slides into obscurity, and is forgotten.

Except. Like the Ring of Sauron, Brian De Palma's 1974 *Phantom of the Paradise* could never be truly lost. Why has it a 95% fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes? Why are Guillermo del Toro, Gerard Way and Daft Punk fans? Why did Tegan and Sara pick a *PotP* theme for their *I Hear Noises* music video? Why do Canadian grocery shoppers pump their fists in the meat department, chanting "Beef! Beef! Beef! Beef!?" What *is* it about this cinematic oddball that has kept audiences coming back and sharing their love for going on five decades?

Oh, it's an artifact of the 70's, make no mistake about that, and many venal sins now deemed deadly may be laid at its feet. The casual sexism. The homophobic and racial slurs. The randomly applied and potentially offensive Puerto Rican accent. The *polyester*. The avocado shag carpeting. The blue eye-shadow on the Swanage stairs alone makes one weep. But catchy, singable songs? Got 'em. Withering satire? Got that too. Comedy so black it's in the ultra-violet? Got it. Fantastic performances by an amazingly talented cast and crew? Check, check, check, check.

(For the uninitiated: the plot, briefly, is thus: Aspiring and criminally naive composer Winslow Leach (William Finley) has his opus magnus stolen by famous music producer Swan (Paul Williams) who goes out of his way to injure and humiliate him. Leach attempts retribution, which ends with his falling into New York's East River with open wounds, which may or may not influence his decision to haunt Swan's new concert hall, the Paradise, in a stolen bird costume whilst simultaneously attempting to further the career of singer Phoenix (Jessica Harper), with whom he is in love because she is pretty, and talked to him that one time on the stairs. Leach kills Beef (a flamboyant star turn by Gerrit Graham) Swan's prima donna, onstage at the Paradise, leading Swan to conclude that killing people onstage is a nifty crowd-pleaser, and orders the televised assassination of Phoenix for the next night. The liner notes on the soundtrack reference 'music and mayhem,' and that ensues, leading to a climax worthy of Shakespeare: Act Four, Everybody Dies, and a fantastic 'curtain call' end credits sequence. Since the film's release, the world has lost both William Finley and George Memmoli, who played Swan's henchman Philbin, Gerrit Graham is still acting, with hundreds of credits to his name, Jessica Harper is a recording artist and married the head of Sony Pictures (she's fine) and Paul Williams, in what I can only assume to be an ongoing act of atonement, heads ASCAP.)

So you see, it has a lot going for it in a tight 92 minutes, and if you ask a hundred fans why they love it, you might get 100 different answers. But what I think accounts for its enduring appeal is not so much what is in it as what is *not*, or at least, not on the surface. A great mystery lies at the heart of *Phantom*, to wit: *Why would a character with as much to lose as Swan risk everything just to fuck over Winslow Leach?*

"Good to see you again, Winslow," Swan says when they finally meet face-to-mangled-face. "Been looking for you everywhere." Here's the thing: *He's not lying.*

What's so special about Winslow? You want his music? Buy it. You're a wealthy producer, he's an unemployed songwriter in 1973, he made what, \$3,000 last year? Offer him \$5,000. Okay \$7,500, but that's your last offer. What's that? Only Phoenix can sing it? Let's see how you feel after this blonde goes on her knees. *What's so special about Winslow?* That he *is* special is painted on the screen: all the prisoners get to put the tiddlywink pieces in the tiddlywink games, after all, but only *Winslow* gets to wear the special little *hat*. Why do everything in your power to ensure that this guy, whom you know to have an explosive temper from act one, is going to come after you? *Why would a character with as much to lose as Swan risk everything just to fuck over Winslow Leach?*

We know Swan is a narcissist. The dude has a mirrored bathtub, for crying out loud, and has lines like "You know how I abhor perfection in anyone but myself." But when a role so written is taken by an actor standing 5'2" tall and carrying extra weight and newly capped teeth, it becomes something else: Swan is not *just* a narcissist. He is a *delusional* narcissist, and it is in Winslow, a fellow narcissist so deluded he thinks an audience gathered to hear (essentially) Sha-Na-Na wants to hear his 400+ page cantata on the life of Faust, that Swan, who surrounds himself with mirrors and loves selfies, finds his perfect mirror, the reflection in which he, like the Narcissus of legend, will ultimately drown, dying onstage, clutching his tinfoil namesake. And it is this hidden myth, I think, that has kept audiences enthralled for going on fifty years, just as surely as audiences returned to *The Matrix* just to re-live the eight minutes of cinematic exposition that explained its cosmology.

Phantom of the Paradise is a fable. It is a musical both book and digetic at the same time; it is a scathing satire of the media even as it *is* the media, it is a deeply tragic love story about a boy and a girl who met one day on the stairs and it is undoubtedly a horror movie, in that it saves its worst treatment for its most sympathetic character, who was just trying to get home to see his mother in Cincinnati. It is a work of genius, made by a group of talented young filmmakers at the dawn of their careers. See it, see it, see it. Watch as DePalma shoots around all those mirrors. Marvel at the split-screen ballet of *Upholstery*, and note that the bomb ticks in time to the music. Pay attention to the shot that *looks* like split-screen but isn't. I hear that a re-mastered edit, removing the clumsy optical prints necessitated by decades-old lawsuits, is hoped for; and that DePalma wants to revive it as a Broadway Musical. Should either of those happen, I'll be here as I was when I was a 13-year-old Cult of One, cheering from the sidelines. And to anyone new to the party: welcome. You'll have a great time.

Trust me.

Except. Like the Ring of Sauron, *Phantom of the Paradise* could not be lost forever. Popular upon release in New York, Paris, and Winnipeg, its soundtrack went double gold in El Salvador. It counts Guillermo del Toro, Daft Punk, and Tegan and Sara amongst its fans. It has a 95% fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes. A fan-created website www.swanarchives.com led directly to a 2014 Blu-Ray release, resulting, in turn, in fifteen-and-counting You Tube videos. Fan convention Phantom-palooza. A 2019 documentary, *Phantom of Winnipeg*. You, reading this now. A whole new generation discovering and adoring this oddball one-off flick. Why?

(Much, also, is made of *POTP*'s resemblance to that *other* rock/horror musical released by Twentieth-Century Fox in the mid-1970's, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and indeed, the two films spent a few years touring the revival house circuit together before *RHPS* blew up into the worldwide institution it is today. In the early days of the Rocky cult there was an adage, *scratch a Rocky fan, they'll bleed Phantom*, and it is no accident that Jessica Harper was cast in *RHPS*'s 1981 quasi-sequel *Shock Treatment* when Susan Sarandon was unavailable. Both films trade in classic monster-movie iconography and themes; both films are musicals; both, ask me, owe their existence to 1973's *Cabaret* and its 11 Academy Awards. But there the similarity ends, and further attempts to convert *POTP* into *RHPS* are fruitless. There is a vast difference, after all, between "Don't dream it, be it," and "We're all born to die alone and that's the Hell of it." DePalma's vision is far more cynical (and hilarious), and while *RHPS* is an undeniably good time, it's playing checkers while *POTP* is playing three-dimensional chess.)

By all rights, the movie should not exist. It should have died early on when a disagreement between DePalma and a co-writer led her to decamp, taking her half of the screenplay with her. Usually, losing one-half of one's body weight is a fatal blow, but DePalma stitched his movie back together best he could, and from all accounts it was an ongoing collaboration all the way through production. The killing of Beef onstage, for example, was an on-set, on-the-fly decision that influenced the overall tone of the project. At one point DePalma wanted Williams to play Leach/The Phantom, with Graham taking on the role of Swan and Finley relegated to Beef. An early script has Phoenix dancing off into the sunset, drunk on herself. The film was hit with four separate copyright suits, and producer Edward Pressman, to his eternal chagrin, made a neophyte's mistake of failing to sign

his errors and omissions insurance application, resulting in the evaporation of the independent production's then-record-breaking acquisition money. It failed upon release.

And yet. It *did* get made, it *did* get released, and it did find its audience, again and again and again. Winnipeg. Paris. New York. El Salvador, where the soundtrack went double gold. The worldwide cadre. Swanarchives.com. Fan convention Phantompalooza, going on its 6th year. Fifteen YouTube videos and counting. The 2019 documentary *Phantom of Winnipeg*. You, reading this now. A whole new generation discovering and adoring this oddball one-off flick. Why?