

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: GANJA AND HESS

USA, 1972. R. 110 min

Cast: Duane Jones, Marlene Clark, Bill Gunn; Music: Sam Waymon; Cinematographer: James E. Hinton; Producer: Jack Jordan, Quentin Kelly; Director: Bill Gunn

At times, being a cinephile is an exercise in self-imposed heart-break. Many of us have films in our Top Ten that are simply difficult, if not impossible, to procure. The DVD revolution is changing all that; now we can get hard-to-find films with all sorts of added goodies (interviews, outtakes, deleted scenes, etc.). I first saw *GANJA AND HESS* in January 1990 as part of an intercession film program in the Five College area, curated by John Gianvito (the former Curator of the Harvard Film Archive, and the award-winning filmmaker of *THE MAD SONGS OF FERNANDA HUSSEIN*). John was not at the HFA yet, but was living in the Happy Valley and teaching in Boston. The program included a number of wonderful films, most of which I cannot remember, because for me that program was all about the one unforgettable piece of cinema I then spent years trying to track down. When I first saw *GANJA AND HESS* in the Amherst College theatre, I was blown away. A smart, subtle, gorgeously photographed vampire art-flick...but what about those overtones of *Blacula*? Filmmaker Bill Gunn (he wrote, directed and acted) was originally asked to do a blaxploitation flick, as they were popular at the time, but he had a higher vision. Now considered a cornerstone in African-American cinema and an art house favorite, *GANJA AND HESS* tragically has languished in almost total obscurity for years. It flopped at the box office upon its release in 1973, was recut beyond recognition and retitled several times, most notably as *BLOOD COUPLE*, and until recently was unavailable to the general public. Third World Newsreel was the distributor of a full print, and it was from this company that John obtained the print. Gianvito would later add it to a program of Gothic films he helped co-curate with the BCA in 1998 -- I attended that screening, too, desperate to see this film again.

When I tried to find it on video I was unsuccessful; the only copies available were questionable bootlegs and cut-up versions. But earlier this year a newly digitized DVD was released. DVD mavens have commented that there are fuzzy portions but that overall the quality is very fine. What I noticed was that the DVD (and, presumably, this new film print) includes a segment at the beginning that offers a bit more exposition for viewers. The story is somewhat inscrutable, and for those whose love of horror films is tainted by hard-to-follow storylines, this added information might be very welcome.

Hess Green (played with quiet intensity and grace by Duane Jones, who in 1968 wowed horror fans as ghoulish nemesis Ben in Romero's *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*) is a wealthy academic (anthropology



and geology) living in a stately mansion in Croton-on-Hudson. His assistant George Meda (played by Bill Gunn himself) is mentally unstable and troubled by the research they're doing: studying the Myrthian tribe, an ancient African blood-drinking cult. Meda climbs a tree with a glass of scotch and a noose and Hess tries to talk him down. Meda can't quite manage to hang himself, instead turning to a gun, but before he dispatches himself, he stabs Hess three times with an ancient ceremonial knife. This act transfers a tribal curse to Hess, who drinks Meda's blood and is thereafter afflicted with an addictive, vampiric thirst for blood. When Meda's wife Ganja (the marvelous Marlene Clark) shows up at Hess's home, dressed to the nines, cool and snooty (her scenes with Hess' butler Archie, played by Leonard Jackson, are hilarious), she does not hesitate to enter into a steamy affair with him. But when she learns the fate of her husband she is horrified; at least, for a time. Ganja and Hess marry, and she becomes his bride in more

ways than one, experiencing for herself the ancient curse, which causes her to thirst for blood. The parallels with drug addiction are hinted at, as with many modern vampire films, though the film's treatment of urban black populations suggests this parallel is a multi-faceted one.

I have no doubt that this film may have inspired either the novel or film versions of Whitley Strieber's *THE HUNGER*: another lyrically-filmed, sexy vampire film with evocative music and erotic tension around every corner. What makes *GANJA AND HESS* unique is its fascinating complexity, and its often-subversive commentary on African and African-American culture and history. Hess' bloodlust takes him to many places far-removed from his cozy estate, including Harlem tenements and a small-town Baptist church. Composer Sam Waymon appears in the film as a gospel choir leader and preacher. His uncanny use of gospel, modern rock and roll, and, particularly, a repetitive, haunting chant of children's voices makes the soundtrack indeed memorable. In fact, I was reminded years later of its effectiveness when a similarly mesmerizing piece accompanied Mulder's experience in the realm of the dead in "The X-Files."

The dreamlike footage Gunn employs joins with Waymon's score to create what is probably the forerunner of contemporary gothic horror films. The exterior shots are also deliciously reminiscent of the Hammer Horror films, all mist and early morning dew-drenched fields, but which is New York and which is Africa? DP James Hinton has outdone himself. Savvy viewers will notice a sweet cameo with the zaffig TV and Broadway actress Mabel King as The Queen of Myrthia. See this unforgettable "lost" film for yourself, recently restored to its full glory on both film and DVD.

- Written by Peg Alois