Vincent Price stars in a Shakespearean horror film

By Oliver Spivey

An exploration of Shakespeare-influenced kitch can lead one into some wonderfully souped-up orchestrations, but mention downright noxious, regions of the B-movie universe.

Now, if it is true that all of these movies are lying in the gutter, it is also true that some of them are looking at the stars. The stars, of course, are too distant to lend them much in the way of cosmic illumination, but a few of these movies might’ve distracted even Shakespeare himself for an hour or so.

One movie in the gutter that is not only looking but also winking at the stars—at and the audience—is The Theater of Blood (1972). This Grand Guignol piece is decidedly lowbrow, but it’s also positively high camp.

Those purists fearing the desecration of Shakespeare’s plays will not be dismayed by their lease conquest upon viewing several minutes of the movie. Here are, indeed old-fashioned film buff(s) (those Pagans who adore cinematic esoterica), as well as casual viewers seeking out the guilty pleasure of a hammy Vincent Price per- forming, will likely not be disappointed.

Price plays Edward Lionheart, a Shakespearean performer of the London stage who apparently commits suicide by jumping into the Thames after an un-slaughter of adverse critical reviews. The only person who doesn’t know, however, is that Lionheart has survived his deathbed plunge, and, after being rescued by a curious band of granting and groveling derelicts, he has begun to plot an inspired series of revenge murders.

Famously bloody scenes from Shakespeare’s plays will soon be staged by Lionheart in order to dispose of his former critics in high style. The first critic murdered is knifed to death, inspired by Julius Caesar; the next is drowned in a wine vat à la Richard III, and so forth. After this ghastly ritual is established, we pretty much see where the rest of the show is leading. The movie moves mechanically from one nasty setup and payoff to the next, doing nothing more than deliver more shocking thrills.

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