

QLH-S01E02: Carnival of Souls

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SPEAKERS

Jessi Chartier, Jen Myers



Jessi Chartier 00:04

Welcome to Quiet Little Horrors. Here we talk about the films that creep under your skin and take up residence in the dark.



Jen Myers 00:16

Let's chat about Carnival of Souls. Before we get started, as a reminder, when we talk about movies, we need to talk about everything in the movie. So there will be spoilers involved. If you haven't seen the movie or want to refresh your memory before you listen, you can stop now and do that before coming back. Hello, this is Jen.



Jessi Chartier 00:38

Hey, Jen, it's Jess.



Jen Myers 00:41

Do you want to talk about carnival souls?



Jessi Chartier 00:44

Heck, yeah, I do. We should do that.



Jen Myers 00:46

That's what we're gonna do right now.

J Jessi Chartier 00:48

I love it. I love it. This is an interesting film, isn't it? It's very

J Jen Myers 00:52

interesting. That's the like the best word I think we can use to talk about it early start out talking about it. Yeah, so I think I suggested this one. And you hadn't ever seen this before? Is that right?

J Jessi Chartier 01:06

That's correct. But it's been a cult classic that's always popped up in like the double features. And so I was excited to watch it.

J Jen Myers 01:13

Yeah, and that's exactly how I discovered it were like, over the past couple years, I've been trying to really watch films that I hadn't seen before. And this film, *Carnival Souls*, it keeps popping up in lists, especially around like other movies that I do enjoy. And so I'm like, well, I should totally see this. And it's in the public domain. So it's pretty easy to get a hold of, even though the quality is not that great a lot of times, but you can see it, you know, it's a, there's a lot of films like that out there, you know, however you can get it is great. And this was one I remember watching and feeling kind of bewildered by on a couple different levels, not just in the narrative, but also like it's kind of an awkward film at times. And I didn't quite know what to think of it. I don't remember having like strong reactions, the first time I saw it, but then after words, it was really like sinking into me. And I remember I was thinking about it a lot. And I kept returning and circling back to it and then kept like, after the fact discovering all these things about it that I thought were really interesting. So it kind of got under my skin and stayed there until it built up more significance. For me.

J Jessi Chartier 02:22

This was one of those films for me that was really, I could see the historical value of it, because it really inspired a lot of subsequent movies like *Night of the Living Dead*. A lot of the storylines now feel very obvious or trite. But it was it was built in 19 not built it was filmed in 1962. So this film really does have a perfect time capsule of what was film or film specifically, like that period of time. And I think that the the craft of it. I mean, there's just so much I want to talk about, right? Yeah,

J Jen Myers 03:04

well, aspects we're gonna start with, we will start like with story production. What do you think?

J Jessi Chartier 03:10

I think we need to start talking about story. Let's start talking about story first. And I know that we gave the spoiler alert at the beginning. But we got to talk about the ending. Because yeah,

J Jen Myers 03:22

this is a pretty big soiler. Like we really mean it on this one. Yeah,

J Jessi Chartier 03:26

exactly, exactly. So the the storyline of three girls get into a car accident. One survives, struggles with crazy things going on in her life past that, and you discover at the very end that she's been dead the whole time. So that storyline of the discovery, the reveal, the reveal was technically from a standpoint. I mean, not very great. It looks like it was so painful for those girls to be in the water. But from a storyline standpoint, from 1962, I don't know how shocking that was, you know, was that something that was very common? Was it something that people kind of saw or predicted? I mean, this is, you know, right after the the height of Alfred Hitchcock or just towards the end of that. And so were people looking for a twist at the end? Were they looking for something that was unusual? You know, or was this considered vanilla at the time?

J Jen Myers 04:28

You know, as far as I know, and I'm not like an incredible expert on this. But I think that nobody really paid attention to the film at all. So I don't think that there was much of a reaction one way or the other, because I just think that this never really got in front of enough people to have that. But I think that maybe the people who did see it, you know, I don't know or even just that guess I'm not talking about that. I don't know that but just from my own perspective. It is a I don't know it's a little bit of a silly Story mechanism. But I also feel like throughout the film, I don't know if it's really building up to that I feel like the film still is so much the substance of it is just this weird kind of psychological journey, that when you get there, you're like, Okay, that was the underpinning of it. But it never felt to me that the film was like building up to that, really, if that. Does that make sense?

J Jessi Chartier 05:24

It does. And I think that we can talk about, you know, in all the films that we look at, we talked about how there's usually some kind of slow burn horror underneath it. All right, pneumatically, something is going on. That's creeping us out. And I think that for this particular film, it wasn't that reveal it was, from a thematic standpoint, I think it was her sense of feeling disconnected from the people around her. And that sense of alienation. Loneliness, or, as they like to call it the lack of soul, right? There are several times throughout the movie, where a soul is mentioned, you know, the organ owner, organ factory owner says it takes more than intellect, you have to put your soul into it. And there's so many other pieces to like, when she meets with the doctors, or the doctor. She says things like, I have no place in the world. It was as if for a

time I didn't exist. And then he says, well, don't you want to feel like you can experience things with other people? And she says, I don't think I can. So there's, I think that that's what we're meant to feel as the slow burn horror. But because it was 1962, it comes across as very different. You know, it doesn't feel as slow burn as if it feels more like the men are attacking her, or 100 nuts. Not meeting a certain standard of femininity. Yeah,

J Jen Myers 06:49

ultimately, this film for me, you know, after I was thinking about it, I, II, okay, so here's the thing that we love our last episode, we talked about the witch, how it could be working on several different levels at once. Like, it could be your the reality of witchcraft. And it could also be these inner psychological things going on and stuff like this. And I feel like this is a little bit different, because the film is very literally saying, look, here's the deal, this chick is dead, and she just doesn't like know it yet. And then, you know, she's literally taken back by the demons at the end. Like, that's literally the narrative of the film. But when you watch it, to me, it feels like it's such a clear metaphor for what it's like to just live as a woman in the world, that you're a little bit out of sync with the people around you, and what they expect of you, and what you want to do, and just how you want to live your life. Maybe, you know, like, like I said, I have said before to this film makes me think about what the experiences are just living as a woman with any sort of anxiety at all, whether it's like a more clinical sense, or if it's just kind of this general sense of, I'm out of sync with what the world wants in me. And I don't know how to reconcile that.

J Jessi Chartier 08:00

Let's talk about that. Because there's so much of that out of sickness and the expectations of women of this particular woman, and we don't necessarily have to generalize, but of this particular woman in the society in which she is, is very clearly out of sync from what she wants or experiences. My there are two points that kind of highlight to me. The very, you talked about the male gaze, this is a great film to teach male gaze, because there are times where the men will say to her things like, don't you want to connect especially Linden, you know, other roommate who's like, Don't you like, guys? You know, you were so nice to we had such a great report this morning. Now, you're also cold, you got to thaw out baby. Like there's just so much and then he the the scene in the in the bar where his language is so manipulative, right? Where he talks about, you just might not want to hang out with me anymore. Maybe I should just leave like all of that language. I'm interested to hear kind of your thoughts on that, too. Oh, man,

J Jen Myers 09:15

there's so much there. And that character in particular is, like just the creepiest, sleaziest just like this, he Yeah, every every interaction she has with him. He's manipulative. But it's also very clearly in this way that this is the script that he knows to follow, like, as a man talking to a woman. And I don't say that in a way to excuse him at all. I'm just saying that, like, that's just how he thinks you interact with women. That's just how he thinks that goes. And so when she and he also interprets all of her reactions, you know, following that script to one way or another, like when she you know, was just like refusing him. He's like, Oh, well, you're cold and

you know, you need to loosen up and then When she warms up to him, it's immediate. It's not in a sense of like, oh, maybe she just wanted, you know, a friendly chat with somebody, it's like, okay, no, this is the beginning for me, it of me getting what I want. And so then later on when he still doesn't get what he wants, and he goes back to them, and I feel elation, but it's kind of like he doesn't ever deviate from this one single track of this is how I interact with a woman is, and it's all just a path of getting him what he wants. And she is, and you know, yeah, not to generalize here. But I definitely understand what it's like to be on the other side of that, where you might want a friendly interaction. But you also know that if you encourage or accepts that even you just even you don't have to encourage it. You know, if you just accept a bit of a friendly interaction, you are going to feel committed to delivering something else down the road that you might not want. Exactly. And she doesn't bury in this movie, like doesn't have any wiggle room there and tries to assert some some more space for herself, and just cannot get an inch from this dude.

J Jessi Chartier 11:05

No, I Yes. And he was, to me, he was the scariest character in this whole film. Definitely Lyndon because the threat of him, just taking what he wants was very, very present.

J Jen Myers 11:21

And there's that line sorry, not just to like, illuminate that there's that line later on, where he says, like, what I'm just done a doorway, or across the hall, something like that. And I think he says that in a sense of like, well, you might as well, but like, that's an absolutely terrifying line to hear from the opposite perspective.

J Jessi Chartier 11:40

Yes, yes. And on the flip side of that, it's not, you know, to talk about, on the flip side of that, to talk about how it's not always just the the sexual nature of it, but the doctor is another form of that, you know, the first encounter with the doctor, she's running away, because she's afraid and he grabs her, and starts to like, shake her and hold her. And if you look at how tightly he's holding her, she cannot get away, right. And his desire There is to be the Savior, like you are acting out in a way that is unexpected of a female. And I am going to make sure that you are taken care of so that you can return to what my idea of normality is?

J Jen Myers 12:25

Absolutely. Like, he literally just comes in off the street, and is like, you are not behaving right, let's do what we need to do to make you behave Right.

J Jessi Chartier 12:33

Exactly. And then proceeds to tell her what her feelings and thoughts are. When he says things like, perhaps this is a manifestation of your guilt. Just like what, yeah. No,

J Jen Myers 12:51

it's wild. And then like continuing this theme, so then later run the minister at the church where she's working at when he comes upon her and she's playing something unsuitable for church, I guess, although this is one of those things where it is part of the sequence where her mind seems to be kind of like, you know, dancing at the bill villian with all those demons and things of that nature. So it's definitely a bit of a creepy song. But his reaction is, like he came across across are like dancing naked or something where he just like, how could you do something so improper, and just like is basically yelling at her and then telling her she needs to resign. And it's such a weird reaction, and so unbelievably over the top judgmental, that it's just kind of like, you know, it continues the theme that all of these men and then you've got the man which is the the coolest guy that's following her, but he does not really seem as scary as these other men that we've just described.

J Jessi Chartier 13:51

Agreed. I mean, you look at the doctor is concerned about her mental, the mental state, she's not conforming there. Linden is concerned about the expectations of women to sleep with men and to be there for the men. So that's the sexual piece of it. And then you have the the pastor who's concerned about the spiritual nature of her, those three areas, she is not conforming, she doesn't demonstrate the expected interactions, behaviors, aptitudes, etc. And so because of that, they all turn against her. Like it is much more terrified is much more terrifying than anything the ghouls will do. I can see why she is attracted to the ghouls because at least they're they don't want anything from her. They just want her

J Jen Myers 14:42

right. And there's a certain I mean, especially when you know the whole sense of the story. There's a certain fitness or rightness and then reclaiming her because she she doesn't, she's not having a good time in the world. Like it's not fun for her You know, and I guess that there's an interesting thing here where she's still trying to cling to the bits of her alive life. But it's not she's not enjoying it. But she would rather do that than go to wherever she's going. And you know, we don't know, I guess the the implication is that she's going someplace worse. But we don't really know that. It could just be that this is the method of getting her to move on. And it has to come to this. This because she just isn't letting go that sort of thing. But yeah, there's there's a certain kind of beauty and elegance of all the ghouls and, and it's almost Yeah, when they finally come to it seems like this is an inevitable thing, but also may just may be a thing that has to that fits.

J Jessi Chartier 15:47

Can we talk for a hot second about the owner of the boarding house? She's the only other female character? Yeah, in this entire movie. And she conforms. She fits all the conformity. And there's a there's a scene where Mary is concerned about the ghoulish man in the hallway, right. And she's talking to the boarding woman who had brought her sandwiches and coffee. And she

has this great little bit where she's trying to convince the boarding woman that no, there is someone out there, and the boarding woman starts to buy into it. And you can see her fear, right? And then in a few scenes later, the boring woman says she can't stay here. She's got to leave. Right? And it's I there's just this interesting commentary on this woman is not acting how normal women behave. But I can see myself acting this way. Ergo, she needs to leave before she drags me in with her.

J Jen Myers 16:51

Yeah, no, that's really I hadn't really fixed on that before and thought about it that clearly. But I think you're absolutely right. There's definitely a sense of I know, this fear, which I think is something Yeah, the idea of a strange man being in your own home is I mean, it would it would scare anybody, but I think a lot of women have this experience of, you know, watching out for being followed or just being like, hyper aware of those sorts of things. And so there's an interesting thing here where this other woman is presented with that, and she immediately backs away instead of reaching out to help. And she's like, No, I, I'm just gonna shut myself off from that. And if I do that, and if I eliminate anything that's threatening that then I will be safe. Yes, yes.

J Jessi Chartier 17:39

The scariest part of the whole film, for me, came at the end, the very end, where Mary has disappeared. And the police officers, the doctor and the priest are all there talking about, she just disappeared. And there's a shot where the priest and the doctor are in frame, right? I know exactly what you're talking about. And the doctor is looking straight at the camera. I was terrified. I was like, Oh my God, this doctor is gonna come after me. Like, that was the scariest thing out of the whole movie.

J Jen Myers 18:17

Like we took care of her. We can take care of you too.

J Jessi Chartier 18:20

Exactly. Exactly. And it's not probably totally unintentional. Right filmmakers part?

J Jen Myers 18:26

Yeah. Which is an interesting thing to say. And all those because I don't think any of this was intentional on there's a lot of things that I think are unintentional as far as the director goes. And that's not to say that I think that, you know, he was he did a bad job necessarily, or he was ignorant of things. But it's, I mean, it's also we haven't talked about this, but we might as well get into a little bit of like the production stuff.

J Jessi Chartier 18:52

Yep. You know, talk about the production stuff. Yeah, it was like Well, I reckon

J Jen Myers 18:55

I really do genuinely like this film a lot. And I definitely recommend it to people. I don't recommend it in the sense of like, this is a complete masterpiece, especially Technically, there are some things that just are not right in the very beginning. I think it's been pointed out by many people, there's like syncing issues with audio like you see mouths moving and there's no voice coming out. And then yeah, we have touched a little bit on the acting is uneven at best. The some of the performances are really great. Some of them are not so great. Some of the compositions are really wouldn't which is weird, because there are other compositions that I think are stunningly beautiful all over the I feel like the production is very uneven. Having said all that, I feel that the things that are uneven, inadvertently contribute to the kind of like strange feel of this film, the feeling that something is just off. I don't think the director intended that. But I think that even like when you have one of the poor actors doing a you know, something where you feel as patently not quite authentic. But it, what it ends up doing is making you just kind of feel uneasy, which does benefit the film as a whole. So it's an interesting case where I think there's a lot of things happening in this film that the director may be just kind of like, accidentally tapped into, or did as a matter of necessity. That actually ended up adding two more the sum of its parts.

J Jessi Chartier 20:23

I agree. And I'll highlight one particular part where that stands out to me is in the park where she's getting water, and she drinking some water, she looks up, she sees the ghoulish man. And she turns a runs, and we pan back. And now there's just a standard man there. And his delivery of the line of I didn't mean to scare you, or I just came up for some water is so deadpan and so flat, right that it made me wonder, is this actually the ghoulish guy just in human form?

J Jen Myers 20:53

Right? Yeah, it's, it makes you feel really weird. And you know, honestly, I think the honest answer to that is No, I think he's just not a very good actor. But exactly the effect in the film, like you're really works.

J Jessi Chartier 21:07

Mm hmm. Well, I mean, we let's talk a little bit about the director and writers kind of history around that, because I think that that colors the context a little bit, too, so her carvery, and Joe Clifford, the director, and writer, respectively, were, all of this was filmed in Kansas, and they worked in the industrial film industry in Kansas, so they were making training videos, that education videos, and you can kind of see that come through. And a lot of things like some of the composition, the lighting, for sure, everything is very brightly lit, there's not a ton of use of

shadows, they, you did a beautiful job of the car scene, but that seems very orchestrated, and some other scenes just don't. So it's very, very interesting that they were, and they just raised money, like they just decided to raise money to build this particular video. And I think that that kind of adds to the joy of the film.

J Jen Myers 22:06

I think so too. And, and I do also feel that there are some some shots, some moments that I actually feel are really gorgeous, and really beautiful. And in a way again, that's another one of these things, they stand out that much more, because it's not the consistent, I was thinking when I rewatched this recently, there's a scene towards the very end, I think it's right before maybe the the kind of the, the ghouls, the demons, whatever we're calling them at the Pavilion come after her. But there's this wide shot, all in silhouette of looking out from the pavilion, and she's walking out and it's all just the silhouette of her, but it's really, really well done. And there's some great shots in the beginning and the organ factory, I feel like, which is a really interesting location. And it could just be that the location itself is interesting, which is probably the case for some of the other shots in the pavilion that I think are particularly stunning, where he just seemed to have a really good eye for finding those places that came with their own inherent interest or grandeur or, but But yeah, it's, it's there are moments where I feel like wow, this just really nails, the visuals and the feeling and all everything all together. But it doesn't it almost seems like an accident or something that kind of happened is that an offshoot of the rest of it?

J Jessi Chartier 23:28

Absolutely. Let's talk about the Saltaire pavilion, which is in Utah, which is the only place that was not filmed in Kansas as they went and did everything shot there. The Psalter pavilion is an has an interesting history to and from what I was looking at prior to our conversation here is that the director drove past this on one of his trips, and just was so inspired by it that that was the impetus for the entire film. Like he stopped into pictures of it and came back and went to Joe Clifford, the writer and said, We got to make a movie to incorporate this. This is just such a beautiful space. And I feel like in some sense, they undersold it like it's theirs. I think with the production value. It could have been amazing. It could have been haunting. It could have been doing all these other things. And there were moments where it was very good. Don't get me wrong. But yeah, it did feel kind of that forced. But I mean, when I heard that story, I was like, okay, yeah, that explains everything. Like, it doesn't feel natural, like they did, I would have expected that they would have written something to the effect of oh, that old pavilion out there. There was an accident and hundreds of people died out there. You know, some, but if that's not the story that they tell, they just say it was oh, it used to be a place of splendor and grander and now it has decayed where it does make We think like, okay, is that a metaphor for Mary? Like, was she of splendor? And now she's just soulless and like rotting on the inside? Because she's not meeting the standard expectations?

J Jen Myers 25:11

I haven't actually even thought about it that way. Yeah, you know, it's interesting. This is another one of those things where I feel like it's a little bit of a double edged sword, depending on how you look at it. And I think that the, the kind of the bright side of having a location like

this, that maybe is a little bit more vague, or maybe almost under utilized, is that it creates more potential for your own imaginings, or your own impressions of it. And I'm like, someone who I totally understand. And I'm really Charmed, by the way they describe the like, the seed of this movie, because I would do the same thing. You know, I love and I also love that you get so many shots of the Solitaire, like from the car driving by like you get that perspective. So when you hear like, if you watch the movie, and then you hear like, Oh, this is why he wanted to do this, you're like, Oh, I feel like I've seen exactly what he saw. And so you get this sense of, I don't know, there's something that's tantalizing, but never fully explained. And like I said, it depends on how you look on it, it could either be a failing that they didn't really push that farther. Or it could be that it's one of those things where leaving it more in mystery allows you to project more of your own thoughts and feelings onto it.

J Jessi Chartier 26:29

Yeah, that's a really, yes. That's a really interesting point. I think that there, whether that was intentional or not, there's a lot of that there. It's it takes it to nth degree and your imagination takes it to a different degree, especially now that we're watching it very retro actively, you know, we're in 2020, watching this film that was over 40 years ago, you know. So it's almost six years ago at this point. So it's very, very interesting to kind of see the perception of the world and what was considered scary what was considered horrific at that time.

J Jen Myers 27:03

That's a good point, too. Yeah, I think that there is a bit of a modern perspective where we would expect more from that, and then maybe, yeah, at that time, it just wasn't something that people wanted. But like I said, that I feel like this is another one of those things that maybe is a bit of a feeling that also kind of works out because I do think that it does add something the fact that this is just kind of this, this thing out there doesn't have a specific backstory, which like you mentioned, I read up a little bit about this, too. Like it does have a backstory, that thing was around for decades, and it burned down like two or three times even before the the film was filmed even before the 60s. So like, it has a very odd, almost sinister history that they never get into at all. And so it's sometimes feels a little weird that they don't do that. But yeah, I don't know. I think I almost kind of like that. It's just This dark blob out there. That you don't really No, it just kind of this also kind of like, cuz then what was the what's the explanation for the fact that these ghouls just hang out there or she's inexplicably drawn there? Like that's, that's the part that is never really explained. And I kind of like that. Like, why did the ghouls need to draw her there? What difference does that make? Like they show up at other places, the man follows her all over the place. There's that time when they try to lure her onto the bus. And they're all in the bus there with her. So it's not like they are bound to that place. So what is it about that place that that she has to go there? Like that's never explained at all? And I don't know, I think in a way I kind of like that. It's just this big, almost black hole.

J Jessi Chartier 28:42

Yeah, that's exactly right. I'd love the sinister pneus that is there. I would love to have seen that dialed up of it. I mean, something as simple as it was built on the waters of Salt Lake City, but then the Salt Lake receded right now, you know, for reasons that you know, humans cause

we've diverted water. But you could also say that it receded because it was so dark. Like even the water wouldn't go near it. Right. Yeah, he's like, a little more poetic there. Yeah, totally. You could get much more much more poetic for sure. We were talking a little bit about the technicality of the film. And one of the things I really loved about this film, from a technical perspective, was the use of the organ music throughout. Yeah. You know, this is a film that did not have a huge production budget, and instead of hiring huge orchestras and huge conductors, they hired an organ, an organist, to create the music to this film. And I think that that was such a brilliant choice from a production standpoint was to include the organ as part of the story tropes, and then also, to use it as the musical instrument to create the background music. It was just I found that really, really clever.

J Jen Myers 29:58

No, I agree. And in fact, It was so clever that it was something that didn't even really register with me until I did start to research his film. And I hadn't even when I've seen it a couple times. And it had not really sunk in that the only music in the film is organ music, whether Mary's playing or whether it's like soundtrack music. But after I thought about I learned that and thought about it, I was like, oh, yeah, that makes perfect sense. And it really brings the film together. And again, one of those things where I think that it provides a bit of a coherent experience for you, when the narrative is kind of going back and forth in between reality and out of reality. But the organ music is always there, and maybe kind of a threatening way. But it still is cohesive.