

QLH-S3E3M: Nightmare Alley (1947)

Sat, 3/26 12:54PM 21:45

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

film, stan, con artistry, lilith, carnival, people, feel, bleak, movie, film noir, portents, tarot, fortune telling, stories, remake, mentalism, manipulated, hollywood film, talk, dark

SPEAKERS

Jessi Chartier, Jen Myers

J 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.

J Jen Myers 00:17

We talk about movies. So we're going to talk about parts of movies that may be spoilers. If that doesn't bother you, you can keep on listening. Or you can hit the pause button and go watch the films that we're talking about before you continue here. Consider yourself warned.

J Jessi Chartier 00:34

Let's talk about 1947's Nightmare Alley. Stan a drifter finds himself attracted to the con artistry of a few carnivals sideshow acts. After learning the secrets to successfully swindling people. Stan and his new wife Molly hustle the elite of Chicago with a wildly successful nightclub act of mentalism. However, Stan finds himself hatching a new con with a local psychologist, which unravels his whole life. I love a good old film, gents.

J Jen Myers 01:10

I'm excited to talk about these.

J Jessi Chartier 01:12

I am too. I'm too. So I saw this film, I have a Criterion subscription. And this one popped up. And I had recently watched Freaks, and was like, Ooh, another carnival movie. I'm definitely gonna watch this one. And it was weird and unusual. And that is like the name of the game in this

episode. And these these particular month, so yeah, I loved it. I thought it was. Here's what I liked about it. I liked that. The I'm so used to see 1947 movies not take on like weird stuff. And this one took on weird stuff. I appreciated that about

J Jen Myers 01:53

Yeah, yeah, I saw this, I first saw this thing has been at least a few years ago, if not longer, I have long loved film noir. It's like, from when I first started getting into the capital-F film, it was one area that I was really drawn to. So I actually might have seen this a long time ago, because just working through lists of those type of movies from this time period. But yeah, it definitely stuck out to me, because I also really love like carnival imagery, and anything that deals with that sort of culture and setting. And yeah, you're right. This is though, unusual for the genre and time period in the sense that it's a much darker film, figuratively and literally, I think, in some ways, but mostly figuratively. And it is it's a lot weirder than a lot of films that you would expect from coming out of a studio in the late 40s. It's got a lot of strange things going on with it.

J Jessi Chartier 02:44

Yeah, it's well, let's talk a little bit about the film noir and how this kind of fits into it. So you heard this synopsis. You know, there's this guy who stumbles into the carnival scene discovers that he's actually pretty good at it. Like he's got the con artistry down pat, you don't really know what his history is in the 1947 version. And he ends up using that and taking it into like living room parlor ax to make a killing. And then things go awry. But like how do you see this film as film new art? Let's talk about what that looks like.

J Jen Myers 03:16

Well, I think that the sense I mean, there's, I feel like there's like a lot you go down a laundry list of what makes a film noir? Not. For me, I think the essential thing is this idea of how people human beings interact with darkness, whether it's inside of them or outside of them, or there's an intersection of the two. And I think that this the the original nightmare alley film, and I say that because we're going to talk about the remake next episodes, just as a heads up there. But this one has like a lot of the trappings of film noir, but I think it's go so much further even I think, and I think this is and this is what we'll probably talk about a lot more next time. But I think that's where it edges up into psychological horror. Because this film, for me, I feel like it's really centered on this one man's journey and oh, it's pretty much the darkness inside of him. And it gets super super bleak. So I feel like that's where the film noir kind of nature of this film is centered but it goes even further than that. I think it's it's new territory that at the time I don't think anybody was quite ready to deal with honestly.

J Jessi Chartier 04:27

Yeah, that makes a whole lot of sense. It aligns with my thoughts as well as that it's just a marginal it feels like it's on the marginal side of things like it's a weird film. It is based on a book so let's remember that and I think there is it is very black and white. There is no in

between like people are there but it also humanizes them like you could see yourself as any one of them.

J Jen Myers 04:48

Yeah, I my theory is the fact that this is taken from a book so it's from a novel by William Lindsay Gresham, which is also very good. It's been a minute since I read it but it's very good. But it's also based on his own experiences in carnival life like he did this. So I think that maybe that even when you get to the point where you have this late 40s Hollywood film, I feel like there's a thread that goes back to some grounding and reality. And yeah, I think it's in kind of these people. That it's funny they are, I think the people might be good or bad, but I think they live in a gray area. I think all of them do. And I think maybe they fluctuate back and forth sometimes. So they're bouncing back and forth on these extremes. I think Stan actually does that himself. I feel like ricocheting like a pinball all of this. But they all live in this weird gray area, like on the edges in the margins. And I think that it's about like how difficult it is for human beings to navigate that and do it in a way where you come out on the other side hole.

J Jessi Chartier 05:53

Yeah. And I think that you talk about those blurring of the edges. One of the things that I think you and I talked about earlier, that we should go into is kind of like you have the carnival side of stuff, which is like clear con artistry for entertainment. Right. But there's so many comparisons that are used in this film, between the kind of the con artistry of the carnival magic, and that of the psychologist. And I felt that pretty acutely. It was like it was almost like she was just an elevated version of all the like she was portrayed as, yeah, an elevated con artists throughout the entire film, who wasn't that much more different than Stan, other than she was just making a better living at it.

J Jen Myers 06:39

Right? Yeah, I think there's an interesting comparison between the the setting so like in the beginning, when they do these mentalism fortune telling type acts, which are all completely rigged, and it's very clear in the film, how they rigged it, but they're doing those in carnival sideshows with a clearly like working class people in the audience, people who are definitely probably looking for some glimmers of you know, hope or whatever in their lives. And then the second half of the film, Stan and Molly's act is basically the same act. Well, there's, you know, a little bit of difference, but they have slightly more sophisticated techniques, but they're doing this in nightclubs with really rich, fancy people, but they take them for the same suckers. And then Lilith, I feel like is even a step beyond that. Where she is, yeah, she's using tools of psychology and all of that for probably, like, even more elite audience. And so I think it's interesting how the audience changes, but the techniques don't really that much. And also, there's still a clear delineation between the manipulators and the suckers.

J Jessi Chartier 07:41

Yes, yeah, exactly. That's exactly right. It's almost like she's just she does her con artistry in a legitimate field. Almost. Yeah. it's just it's very interesting comparison that changes a little bit

legitimate field. Almost. Yeah, it's just it's very interesting comparison that changes a little bit in the remake, which we'll talk about when we get there because that Lilith's motivations and intents are vastly different in the second one, than they are in the first which you don't realize until of course, the end.

J Jen Myers 08:08

Spoiler alert. That's where we do. But yeah, totally Exactly. Right. I think I just wanted to like, I like what you said earlier about kind of black and white. And as I was saying all that stuff earlier realize I feel like the main black and white, either or kind of line in this film is are you which side are you on in terms of the are you being manipulated? Or are you the one manipulating, and it feels like in this world, that's all that really matters? Is and certainly I think that's all that matters to Stan is like he just doesn't want to be the one who's being manipulated. He wants to be on the other side of the fence. And I think that's really the main kind of black and white division there of Are you the one being manipulated or not?

J Jessi Chartier 08:53

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And I think that one of the I feel like Lilith in that in this movie also feels that way. Like, she doesn't want to be the one that's manipulated. She wants to be the one that is manipulating. It's like a power play. Exactly. Right. Yeah. Which is, I don't know. For me, it makes the ending. almost that much more worse, in the 1947 version. Because it's just ego. It's 100% just ego. And so when Stan ends up, falling as far as he does, and becomes the geek at the end, it just doesn't sit right. It doesn't feel right. Like because I saw I felt like Lilith and Stan's motivation and character arc. Were very similar 1947 movie, but Lilith gets away with it. She does get away with it. And Stan does not. Which made you like there was the sense of like, injustice or unfairness more more true to reality. Yeah. then anything that makes sense, but in we can talk about the ending of the 2000 or the 21. One in a hot minute, but like, I felt a little bit more like, Yeah, he got what was coming. Like, yeah, Stan got what was coming to him. And Lilith wasn't evil. Like, there was a I totally under there was a sense of sympathy for Lilith like, Yes. I understand why she did what she did.

J Jen Myers 10:22

Oh, interesting. I don't know if so,

J Jessi Chartier 10:26

Yeah, I have a lot more forgiveness for Lilith in the next in the more recent one than I do for the one in 47, where it just felt unsettling. And I think that's why I really like I feel like Nightmare Alley fits better into our podcast, the 47. One does. I liked the 2021. One, but I don't feel like it fit as well. Because the the ending was too satisfying.

J Jen Myers 10:49

That's really interesting. I think that I have a lot more sense in the 1947 version of it still being

centered on stands in our darkness. And like not to disagree. I don't like outright disagree with anything you're saying. But yeah, I feel like I had a little bit, I was a little bit more involved with that. And I don't know, maybe that helps coming to it with more of like the nor framework because even in the 47 version, and this happens, and the other version, too, but I think stands like big sin that you see in this version is the mixing of the alcohol earlier in the carnival days that leads to I forget his name, Zeena's partner, the old magicians who has already he has descended into alcoholism himself. But Stan get actually accidentally gives him the wood alcohol, the wood alcohol, yeah, and kills him. But everybody assumes that because this man was a drunk, he drank the wrong bottle. And nobody realizes that it was Stan that actually made that mistake. But Stan was it was Stan that made that mistake. And I think that's the big thing that he carries around in this one. And I don't know, I still feel like that is what leads to under he's always reaching too far and but covering up things at the same time. And you get I feel like you still get the sense that this is his character flaws of doing that he ever reaches. And he doesn't take seriously or doesn't take responsibility for the way it affects other people.

J Jessi Chartier 12:27

Yeah, yeah, you're right. Like he doesn't take responsibility, or when he does, it's off. I think that I have to go back and watch the movie one more time. Because I mean, I just watched it, and I can't remember now. I think in the original 1947 film, Stan thinks he gave him the wrong bottle.

J Jen Myers 12:49

Oh, but he actually didn't.

J Jessi Chartier 12:51

Actually might discovers that at the end?

J Jen Myers 12:55

Right. That's it. Okay. Yeah. So he's carrying around guilt, but honestly, but I think and the reason why I think I thought it was otherwise, because I don't think that is in their original story. I feel like that was a Hollywood change to make the hero a little bit more likable. Because it's not like that in the remake. And I think that the remake takes that directly from the original novel. So I don't know, I guess I'm just more like, I think I'm more fully even in the 1947 version. I think I'm more fully bought into this story as an inevitable descent of this man who may be well intentioned in some areas, but in other areas just has not been doing the right things. And they come the the bill comes due at some point. And I think that it's funny, though, that they would have changed something like that. Because I think even with little changes like this, the Tyrone Power who plays Stan in this film, like this character is so dark. And even in this Hollywood film, The ending is so bleak. Like I think I read that this was not a hit. And it was a like Tyrone Power was not known for doing dark roles like this. And it really turned people off. And I think people were upset by it. And I get that. But I also think that it's It's brave to be the as committed to this bleak character study as they are because even for this time period, even

for this type of film, it is incredibly bleak. It's a bleak character and a bleak story. And I don't know I guess maybe I kind of dig that. So I'm like more fully bought into that. I'm like, Yes, this is great. Let's make it even more bleak, that sort of thing. But it is like very bleak compared to other films of the time.

J Jessi Chartier 14:36

It is very bleak. And I also realize too, that like the ending, and the ending of the new one, Stan is totally alone. But in the ending of the 47 the cycle of Xena and is it PETE Yeah seen as Pete the cycle of Zeena and Pete are recreated with Molly and Stan, because Molly is there. And although he takes the gig of the geek you get the impression that she's going to pull him out of that, but that it's never going to be any better than what it was in.

J Jen Myers 15:07

I haven't thought about that specifically, but I can totally see that. It gives a little bit of a kind of a glimmer at the end. So that's still really dark.

J Jessi Chartier 15:16

Yeah, but it's even there. It's like, it's not, because that just if it's going to perpetuate that means that at some point in time, Stan is going to just end up killing himself.

J Jen Myers 15:24

Yeah, it's yeah, I hope nobody was hoping for a happy ending here. Because that's not happening. And it's not gonna get better in the remake.

J Jessi Chartier 15:33

Nope, it's not going to get better in the remake. But speaking of which, before we jump into the remake, which we will do in our next episode, let's talk about tarot cards for just a second

J Jen Myers 15:45

I requested some time to talk about this. So like a big thing in Nightmare Alley is so Zeena the original fortune teller reads tarot cards which is I feel like things has definitely shown up in movies I think movies love the type of like fortune telling or those things are drawn as like symbols and portents and all that fun stuff. And so there's a lot in this movie that focuses on the card the Hanged Man and I have to say it really irritates me as somebody who studies tarot and is really interested in kind of the the folklore and the mythology surrounding these cards and their interpretations and that's not really what that card means. Like there's a lot of room for interpretation in tarot don't get me wrong, like I'm not saying it means this and nothing else. But they interpret the Hanged Man card in this film as directly meaning like, like

somebody is gonna hang by a noose like it's death. And that's not at all what the the card really means. It's nothing what the card depicts. And most of the the usual depictions of it, and certainly the ones that is used in the film like it's a man who is hanging upside down from one foot with his arms crossed pretty serene, actually. And that's usually what it points to. It usually points to more of like a passive sitting back and gathering wisdom from the universe, letting things work on their own. It doesn't mean death, and they keep pulling it into this movie to like, portent to Stan's death and it just annoys me and I just wanted to say that

J Jessi Chartier 17:15

Yeah, I think that the the use of a lot of different things is often like tarot or like you say those fortune telling, areas of portents? Yeah, it's which is totally understandable in the 1920s. When is that's when the book was written?

J Jen Myers 17:29

I think so yes.

J Jessi Chartier 17:31

Yeah, 20s was like the Ouijia boards were big and fortune telling was big. And I think it's also important in case people didn't know this. And maybe we should actually talk about this. And the next one is like the 1920s were a very hot time for fortune telling, and especially cultists, and seances to be happening, because a lot of people needed to learn how to deal with grief from death in the war, World War I. And so a lot of people were turning to the supernatural to find that. So the idea that Stan should not be doing the spook show as they call it was a very real thing. Like don't do the spook show, it's gonna get you into trouble, because that was a real thing. It was the elite of the world, using mediums to reach their dead loved ones was a very commonplace thing. It was also very dangerous, because if you didn't tell them what they wanted to hear, they were powerful people.

J Jen Myers 18:23

Oh, and just for the record, I looked at our real quick, the novel did come out in the 40s. But I think everything you're saying like that it was all happening in that first part of the century. And it certainly didn't lessen like after the Depression and World War Two and all that fun stuff. So. So yeah, it was later than I thought, but it still is all there. And I think also, just to say, like, I love using these type of things in stories, because I think, a lot of tarot and things related to it, I think that they really do have underlying connections to human psychology, I don't tend to like look at this stuff in terms of actually like reading the future or anything like that. That's not really what I look at it for I look at it for more of it reveals what people are thinking and feeling in ways that maybe they aren't willing to accept or able to do any other way. And I think that's why they're so useful in stories, because that's what stories also do. I think that stories are a way of like getting at these things in humans that we can't maybe describe or deal with, in a straightforward way. So we tell stories about things and we explore like why people are the way they are and why they do this or that or feel this way or fear that or hope for this. And so things


like tarot can be really useful. And like constructing stories like that, but yeah, but it doesn't really work if you get it completely wrong. So I don't know I'm I blame Hollywood for this. Because I feel well, like you said maybe though that this is something that at that particular time, they had much more straightforward. This is what it means and it doesn't mean anything else and they didn't have kind of the nuance ways of looking at it that maybe we do now. So maybe that is something that was baked into the novel. I can't remember specifically, but yeah, definitely in the movie, it gets flattened out into a thing. That doesn't really mean although I will say I recently ordered the new Criterion Blu-ray of this movie. And it comes with little designed tarot cards that are very cool. So I like that. Not like a whole deck, but like a few. And it's cool. So yeah.

 Jessi Chartier 20:27

Well, Hollywood's got to get it right one of these times.

 Jen Myers 20:28

One of these days, when I make a movie, and it has tarot in it, you can trust that the tarot is going to be correctly interpreted and expressed. That's my pledge.

 Jessi Chartier 20:41

Awesome. And we are going to be talking a little bit about how taro plays into things in the next episode where we get to look at the more recent version of Nightmare Alley. I'm excited about that because I got some thoughts.

 Jen Myers 20:53

Yeah, no, I think it'll be really good to talk about it. And I think we'll be able to expand on a lot of the stuff we started here.

 Jessi Chartier 20:58

Agreed agreed. So stay tuned for our next episode should be coming out in a couple of weeks. If people want to find us Jen, where do they find us?

 Jen Myers 21:05

We have a website at quietlittlehorror.com where we have links to different podcast services and also everything is streaming there on the website. You can also find us on Twitter at [quiethorror](https://twitter.com/quiethorror) and on Instagram at [quietlittlehorror](https://www.instagram.com/quietlittlehorror) and if you want to email us you can do so at [hello](mailto:hello@quietlittlehorror.com) at quietlittlehorror.com



Jessi Chartier 21:22

Thanks everybody for joining us and we will see you the next one. Bye