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Review of The Furies

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The Furies
(Criterion, 6.24.2008)

Anthony Mann's career was unusual because it developed in stages. He began with low-budget B movies in 1942, moved on to films noir such as *Raw Deal*, and then in 1950 to westerns, often with noir elements. *The Furies*, one of his three 1950 westerns, is interesting as an odd blend of genres: western, noir, gothic romance, and melodrama.

In the 1870s T. C. Jeffords (Walter Huston) lords over an immense New Mexico ranch. Rather than leave his legacy to his weak-willed son (John Bromfield), he considers his feisty daughter Vance (Barbara Stanwyck) his natural heir. Problems arise when Vance is drawn to gambler Rip Darrow (Wendell Corey), whose land was stolen by T. C., and when T. C. tries to run off Mexican squatters, including Vance's childhood friend and sometime soulmate Juan Herrera (Gilbert Roland). There are more troubles with the arrival of widow Flo Burnett (Judith Anderson) as a threat to Vance's supremacy.

In his commentary western authority Jim Kitses points out that Mann's westerns are usually about tensions between or within families, with *The Furies* an excellent example. Vance sees herself as a replacement for her late mother in her father's affections, which border on incestuous. One wonders what 1950 audiences thought when Vance enticingly puts her feet up on her desk while T. C. gazes longingly. (Huston's son John does more than gaze, of course, in *Chinatown*.) Phallic symbols abound, as with the tall cacti, Juan's hilltop home, and the mother's scissors, which Vance fondles lovingly. The arrivals of Rip and Flo create more sexual confusion and jealousy. *The Furies* would make a nifty double bill with *Written on the Wind*, for we're in deepest, darkest Douglas Sirk territory here. Based on a novel by Niven Busch, it is almost as lurid as my favorite over-the-top western, *Duel in the Sun*, also from a Busch novel.

The Furies is compelling for several other reasons, including its blending of literary archetypes borrowed from Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, especially *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and, as Mann notes in a 1957 interview included in the print extras, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. Then there are the outstanding performances of Huston, who died before the film was released, and Stanwyck. At 43 she is too old for the part of a character who's 19 as the novel begins, but no one can do sexual jealousy and neurotic revenge as well as Stanwyck.

As a mostly interior drama *The Furies* lacks the grand sweep of Mann's westerns with James Stewart, but it has several stylistic flourishes. The two best scenes come back to back as Vance deflates Flo in a manner anticipating Lee Marvin and Gloria Grahame in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* and T. C. attacks Juan and his family. The amazing shot of T. C. and his men riding through a hole of light piercing the darkness demonstrates why Victor Milner's cinematography was nominated for an Oscar. Weaknesses include the bland Corey, whom producer Hal Wallis failed to make a star, and a hurried ending that thrashes about trying to wrap up all the strands of the story.

Kitses' commentary, read boringly from a script, makes clear his claim that Mann darkened and modernized the western. Much better is the print essay "Mann of the Western" by the great Robin Wood, who places *The Furies* in the context of the director's other westerns and analyzes Mann's obsession with *King Lear*.

"Actions Speak Louder than Words" is a 17-minute British television interview with Mann conducted during the making of *A Dandy in Aspic* by critic Paul Mayersberg, the future screenwriter of *Croupier*. Mayersberg talks about conflict as a theme in Mann's films and the "geometrical dimensions" central to the director's style, yet Mann, not the most eloquent speaker, touches only briefly on these matters. He admires F. W. Murnau's ability to tell stories in pictures and wishes he could have applied such techniques to the storm scene in *King Lear*.

Much less informative is a 17-minute 2008 interview with the director's daughter, Nina, who laments the constant absence of her father while she was growing up. There is a truly strange 1931 "interview" with Huston at his home. The nine-minute, obviously scripted routine involves the star putting on a rather dim interviewer, giving surreal responses in the manner of the Marx Brothers. Strange that Huston was never given the opportunity to do comedy.

Other extras are a still gallery, the theatrical trailer, and a paperback of Busch's 267-page novel. It is dedicated to the writer's mother, "who has always wanted me to write a book about a nice woman—but who will, I am afraid, be disappointed once more."—Michael Adams