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Review of I Wake Up Screaming

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I Wake Up Screaming
(Fox Home Entertainment, 6.6.2006)

I Wake Up Screaming is a perfect example of what could go right under the Hollywood studio system. Director Bruce Humberstone, cinematographer Edward Cronjager, and producer Milton Sperling had just collaborated on *Sun Valley Serenade*, a Sonja Henie musical for Twentieth-Century Fox. Screenwriter Dwight Taylor was also a musical specialist, having worked on three Astaire-Rogers movies. Yet they somehow adapted their talents to completely different material and created the first in a long line of Fox films noir. As noir expert Eddie Muller points out in his commentary, a case can be made that *I Wake Up Screaming* is, in fact, the first noir, having more of the genre's stylistic elements and a darker texture than *The Maltese Falcon*, released earlier in 1941.

Adapted from a novel by Steve Fisher, who later co-wrote the minor noir classic *Dead Reckoning*, *I Wake Up Screaming* tells in flashbacks the story of Vicky Lynn (Carole Landis), a New York waitress discovered by sports promoter Frankie Christopher (Victor Mature). With the help of his friends Robin Ray (Alan Mowbray), a Broadway actor, and Larry Evans (Allyn Joslyn), a gossip columnist, Frankie decides to make the comely Vicky a celebrity. Vicky's sister, Jill (Betty Grable), a stenographer, is initially suspicious of Frankie.

Flashbacks are a noir staple, but *I Wake Up Screaming* was shot in August 1941, just after *Citizen Kane* made the flashback structure acceptable. (Fisher's novel has a chronological narrative.) Flashbacks are necessary because Vicky has been murdered, and Frankie is the main suspect. Other suspects are Robin, Larry, and Harry Williams (Elisha Cook, Jr.), the switchboard operator in Vicky's apartment building. Ed Cornell (Laird Cregar), the cop in charge of the case, tries everything he can think of to pin the blame on Frankie. But we suspect Cornell, too, because he has long been infatuated with Vicky.

As Muller points out, Humberstone and Cronjager did not know it, but they were helping create a new genre from the very beginning by having Frankie grilled at the police station under harsh, direct lights, while the cops appear threateningly in shadows. (Fox made the movie as "Hot Spot," only for the cast to lobby for the novel's title.) Cronjager expertly uses shadows throughout the film, with a beautiful shot of Frankie covered by the outline of an elevator cage. There are also tilted camera angles, and the huge Cornell is shot from below, much as Sydney Greenstreet is in *The Maltese Falcon*.

Usually dismissed as a studio hack, Humberstone began his long career with B crime movies, including *Charlie Chan at the Opera*, often cited as the best in that series. In *I Wake Up Screaming*, he is a master at pacing, framing shots, and directing actors.

In only his fifth film, Mature has a naturalness that declined somewhat after he became a star. Muller says this is Grable's first dramatic role, though she had just made *A Yank in the R.A.F.* Some viewers may have difficulty understanding why she was such a big star and was the most popular pinup for American soldiers in World War II. As Muller observes, she has a wholesome sex appeal appropriate for the period.

The real star of *I Wake Up Screaming*, however, is Cregar. At 6-3 and well over 300 pounds, he is an imposing presence. His bulkiness is softened by a melodious voice reminiscent of Vincent Price's. Cregar wonderfully conveys Cornell's pain over Vicky's death. (Richard Boone is also terrific as Cornell in the 1953 remake *Vicki*.)

Fox's nearly perfect transfer is one of the most beautiful black-and-white DVDs I've seen, with especially deep blacks. The sweat on Frankie's face glistens, and Jill's hair has a sparkling sheen. As always, Muller is informative: discussing Cregar's fatal heart attack in 1944 and Landis's 1948 suicide and pointing out that Mowbray financed the creation of the Screen Actors Guild. He doesn't mention that Cregar's death is commemorated by J. D. Salinger in "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut."

Other extras include poster and still galleries, the original opening "Hot Spot" credits, and a deleted scene. Apparently, someone decided Fox couldn't have a Betty Grable picture without a musical number, but someone else had the good sense to remove the song that would have disrupted the film's tone.—Michael Adams