

Blu-ray Review: *Moonrise* (Criterion Collection)

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Chances are that many reading this have never heard of director Frank Borzage. Working in the early days of Hollywood, Borzage is one of the greatest, albeit underappreciated filmmakers. He has the distinction of winning the first Academy Award bestowed for directing (*7th Heaven*, 1927). *Moonrise* is one of his last films and like Borzage himself, I had never heard of it until a few months ago. I was going down a Google rabbit hole searching for film noir-related titles. That's when I came across a list by Eddie Muller. Now Muller lives and breathes noir. He is the host of TCM's "Noir Alley" and is the founder of the Film Noir Foundation, an organization that presents the yearly festival *Noir City*, which began in San Francisco and has branched all the way to Washington, D.C.

His list had the usual greatest hits including *Double Indemnity*, *In a Lonely Place*, *The Maltese Falcon*, but coming in at No. 10 was title called *Moonrise*. Released by Republic Pictures in 1948, the studio had budget constraints that forced Borzage to take the Theodore Strauss novel (adapted by producer Charles Haas) and maximize use of only a few production sets. (When you see the film then switch to the interview extra you'll be impressed in hearing how set dressing and camera angles can make two sound stages look like dozens.)

Set in the deep South, where dogs chasing after raccoons and drugstore employees call most people "squares" is commonplace, we have Danny Hawkins (Dane Clark). A local ne'er-do-well around town, Danny has been taunted by spoiled brat Jerry Sykes (Lloyd Bridges) since they were kids. Jerry finds humor in the fact that Danny's father was hung for murdering the town doctor. As the taunting increases as they grow from children into men, the festering rage and anger builds inside of Danny until it explodes in a violent act. All Danny wants is love and acceptance but his temper becomes his own worst enemy.

Though guilt-ridden for the crime committed that doesn't stop Danny from pursuing local schoolmarm Gilly Johnson (Gail Russell), fiancée to Jerry. Now Danny's intentions may be pure but the manner in how he quickly courts Gail and her rebuffs that bend to his deep kiss feels derisory. It's a dated trope in instigating what would be a tumultuous relationship, where Danny undergoes tremendous pressure as local authorities begin their search for the missing Sykes.

Moonrise is part southern gothic tale, melodrama, and film noir. It may not be true noir with its optimistic ending, but it impresses in a number of areas. The opening sequence is a master class in black-and-white photography (lensed by John L. Russell who would go on and do *Psycho*) and shadows with images that provoke Jews marching into the gulags as Danny's father steps up to the noose and is hanged. His shadow is juxtaposed with another as baby Danny cries as a stuffed animal hangs above his crib. The noir psychodrama elements seem very appropriate for the era, especially in post-war America. In some respects Danny's demeanor is not unlike the unhinged characteristics Joaquin Phoenix displayed in Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master*.

Moonrise explores Danny's tormented morality through the actions he does onto others. As is the case with Jerry Sykes, push a man hard enough he's bound to break. But redemption can be achieved if you are strong enough to move past the darkness that clouds judgement to see silver lining. Danny gets that from the local sheriff (Allyn Joslyn), who waxes philosophically in hangdog, southern drawl, and from Mose (Rex Ingram), who is very much Danny's divine intervenor in doing the right thing.

Moonrise is presented in an aspect ratio of 1.37:1. As per usual with Criterion they do their due diligence when it comes to presenting the best quality print. This is no exception. The booklet

included inside the case details what viewers will see when they pop in the disc:

"This new digital transfer was created in 4K resolution on a DFT Scenity film scanner from the original 35mm nitrate original camera negative. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches, splices, and warps were manually removed using MTI Film's DRS, while Digital Vision's Phoenix was used for jitter, flicker, small dirt, grain and noise management. The monaural soundtrack was remastered from the 35mm nitrate original soundtrack negative. Clicks, thumps, hiss, hum, and crackle were manually removed using Pro Tools HD and iZotope RX.

*Colorist: Sheri Eisenberg/Deluxe, Culver City, CA.
Audio transfer: Deluxe Audio Services, Los Angeles."*

In terms of audio, William Lava's impressive score can be heard on the disc's single standard audio track: English LPCM 1.0. No audio hiccups or distortions that I could tell.

The Criterion release comes with a booklet containing critic Philip Kemp's essay "Dark of the Moon" as well as technical notes about the production and its restoration.

On the disc there is an interview that was specifically filmed for the *Moonrise* release and it involves Herve Dumont and Peter Cowie. Dumont is the former director of the Cinemateque Suisse in Switzerland and author of *Frank Borzage: The Life and Films of a Hollywood Romantic*. Cowie is a critic and together the two look back at Borzage's life and career as a filmmaker, how his style evolved from silent to sound pictures, and some of the key themes of *Moonshine*.

My interest in *Moonrise* was spurred by my fascination with film noir. Much like Nicholas Ray did with *They Live by Night*, Frank Borzage takes noir out of the urban setting and into the country. With this being one of Borzage's last major film works, because of Criterion I am now inclined to seek out his earlier films, like *Lucky Star* (1929) and *Bad Girl* (1931).

Criterion presents *Moonrise*. Written by: Charles Haas (based on the novel "Moonrise" by Theodore Strauss). Directed by: Frank Borzage. Starring: Dane Clark, Gail Russell, Allyn Joslyn, Rex Ingram, Henry Morgan, Ethel Barrymore, and Lloyd Bridges. Running time: 90 Minutes.

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