

series called *The Worst Of Hollywood*, curated by Michael Medved. Wood himself was promptly dubbed Worst Director Of All Time, once eager critics dug out dusty copies of *Glen Or Glenda?* [1953] and *Jail Bait* [1954]. Wood's works had long been part of an underground of low-budget features, shown in cinemas such as the (sadly gone, it was quite a thing) Scala in Pentonville Road alongside slasher pics, spaghetti westerns, mondo fantasies and grubby soft-core porn to hipster aficionados who hooted with ironic glee. After James's intervention, the films reappeared in the 80s on the "legitimate" arthouse circuit, to be hooted at again by Observer readers. As this kindly and often stylish biopic shows, Wood himself would probably have been mightily saddened by both responses.

The thesis of *Ed Wood* is that bad films don't have to be made by bad people for bad reasons. It selects only his "classic" films of the 1950s, not the fumbling erotica he made (commercial spirit of the times) from 1965; it covers nothing of his sad later years; and takes his word for his idyllic pre-war childhood in the town of Poughkeepsie in rural New York state.

As played by Johnny Depp, Wood is a bouncy optimistic hero worthy of the Frank Capra films he admired as a teenager. Matching this calculatedly retro feel, the film is shot in black and white, but exquisitely recreates the moody top- and back-lighting that characterised the "noir" cinematography of the era. In recent years, auteur directors have often chosen to use monochrome flatly-lit to create a sense of grubby desolation or "realism" (the most misused critical word in film and literary studies), but here everything is shone up to its moody and poignant best. Correctly so, for in Wood's own films he wanted beauty and style just like the big budget features being shot up the block on the big Hollywood lots. Horror films of the old school loved cranking up the lighting for that sense of occasion (and the film cannot resist an opening scene of "it was a dark and stormy night", complete with flickering house lights and a narrator rising from a coffin), and anyone who has seen the real thing will recognise how accurately Tim Burton recreates iconic scenes such as the two dimwit policemen being attacked by the zombie-monster in the graveyard in *Plan Nine*, or the tender climax (worthy of Rita Hayworth at her most alluring) of *Glen Or Glenda?* where the girlfriend

shyly peels off her angora cardigan and hands it to her cross-dressing boyfriend and stands in her bra as he revels in its glinting fluffiness.

Ah yes, the cross-dressing. We are this side of Grayson Perry as national treasure: since Wood's angora fetish is one of the few generally known biographical details, the film ploughs in to the theme early on, without quite offering the context of how "deviance" was perceived in Eisenhower's strait-laced America of the 1950s. Or maybe Hollywood rules became everybody's rules? Wood breezily declares: "I even paratrooped wearing a brassiere and panties. I wasn't scared of being killed but I was terrified of getting wounded and having the medics discover my secret". (Wood saw action in the Far East as a Marine in WW2 and was discharged as a corporal after gunshot wounds in the leg. He also lost teeth after being hit by a Japanese soldier's rifle butt, and wore dentures, used as one of the film's best jokes). *Glen Or Glenda?* was a bold inquiry into the pleasure of cross-dressing, and became a latter-day LGBT classic, though Wood himself was not gay.

The nature of Wood's career – and the cause of his critical reputation – was that he was loyal (mostly) to friends and collaborators, even when they were clearly not filmstar material. Ego never came into it: anything done by good people was good enough for the public. His monster in *Plan Nine* was played by a hulking Swedish wrestler who could barely string a sentence together, Tor Johnson (played here by real wrestler George Steele), his leading lady in *Glen Or Glenda?* was patient girlfriend Dolores Fuller (Sarah Jessica Parker, who gamely gets through the line about looking like a horse). But the centre of the film, and its most compelling performance, is Wood's relationship, adoring and vexed, with the declining horror star Bela Lugosi (Martin Landau). Lugosi is old Hollywood, and before that old Europe; weakened by drink and morphine, mourning the lurid heyday of silent horror movies and in a perpetual feud with Boris Karloff, he nevertheless conducts himself like the great star he once was, while giving way to ever more desperate breakdowns that Wood nurses him through. It is a bromance only fit for movies and movietown, but it propels and justifies the narrative in a way that the mere making of bad movies never could.

Why were Wood's films so reviled?

Apart from continuity bloopers and scripts that threw in everything and nothing (zombies, flying saucers, hints of soft porn and teen deviance, nuclear disaster, police procedure, clueless journalists: anything that could resemble a plot and make a good title was used), what about the unexpressive acting, the hopeless framing and above all the jerky (non-) editing? Wood never shot retakes or reviewed his rushes: if he saw what he liked, then that was what he used – including leftover stock footage and any prop he could borrow. A high point is the loving recreation of a scene in which Lugosi wallows in a tiny pond attempting to fight a rubber octopus incapable of moving because its motor was missing. The premise is risible, but for a few brief seconds Lugosi invests it with the crackle of real acting and commitment. No-one would want to waste such a spark of passion, and Wood duly didn't.

Movies have always proceeded by mavericks hearing "it can't be done" and duly doing it. If it gets on the film, then it happened. Nobody knows anything: cinema is an artform invented from scratch and creating its own parallel universe on the hills behind Los Angeles that were once orchards. Wood was not alone with his time, and without his perverse example the underworld of zero-budget film making would have been the poorer. He kept the door ajar for Roger Corman, John Waters, David Lynch, Larry Clark, Todd Solondz, Wes Anderson. (And for some bigger names: Francis Ford Coppola learned his trade as gofer on the prolific Corman's cheap mondo flicks of the 60s).

Towards the end of the movie, at a low point, he comes across his idol Orson Welles (Vincent d'Onofrio) in a bar. "Visions are worth fighting for. Why spend your life making other people's dreams?" slurs the kindly Welles before going back to the lot to make *Touch Of Evil*. Ed Wood went back to his smaller lot and set fire to pizza plates hung from fishing rods, convinced to the end that they looked just like menacing flying saucers.

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