

The Outcasts: A forgotten, wyrd classic of British folk horror

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The Outcasts: A forgotten, wyrd classic of British folk horror

By Diane A. Rodgers

It is doubtful I would have come across *The Outcasts* (1982) had not Piers Haggard (whom I was recently interviewing about folklore in film and television) suggested that I speak with *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) writer Robert Wynne-Simmons. *The Outcasts*, written by Wynne-Simmons, was also his directorial debut and he explained to me how the film was inspired by a mixture of Irish myth, legend and Celtic Twilight poetry to weave a tale of folk belief: "there was still quite a lot of pagan belief underneath it all ... Those things have persisted in Ireland... there's quite a strong sense of that which interests me. And it relates to this idea of stepping from the real world into an imaginary fantasy world or into a magical world outside of reality."

Having seen the film, I am astounded at its lack of profile within the cult of the folk horror revival. Made in 1982, *The Outcasts* was screened at a number of festivals, released on VHS in 1983 and screened on Channel 4 in June 1984 before a UK cinema release in 1985 but seems to have since disappeared from view. *The Outcasts* is easily something of a hidden folk horror classic on a par with the work of David Rudkin (*Penda's Fen*, 1974) and Alan Garner (*Red Shift*, 1978). As with many films, television plays and programmes labelled as 'folk horror', *The Outcasts* is not necessarily horrific, but shares the ubiquitous sense of eeriness, domineering landscape and, most importantly, employment of folklore and folkloric belief that link many offerings in this 'wyrd' genre.

The story is set in rural 19th century Ireland just as the curse of blight and famine are beginning to sweep the land. It centres around Maura (Mary Ryan), a young woman who sees the world differently to her sisters and those around her, who treat her as strange and tease her incessantly. The character of Scarf Michael (Mick Lally) is introduced as a children's folk tale; an outcast from the community who has passed into legend as an evil bogeyman for fireside tales: "He's the one plays a fiddle with a bow made of dead men's hair...and wears a mask and a cloak like a great black bird all made of shadows which he steals from folks when they die." It becomes apparent that Scarf Michael is more than just a myth, appearing to Maura on her sister's wedding night to toy with the revellers. When he plays his fiddle for Maura, he demonstrates abilities to do mischief and magic: "I can make my fiddle laugh. It frightens them when it laughs." Michael's music apparently causes one lover of a drunken couple to turn into a goat, to his girlfriend's horror. For Maura, Michael lifts down a glowing piece of the moon for her in his hands and she is enamoured with the world that Scarf Michael represents. Wynne Simmons describes Michael as a "folk hero outside of this world who... occasionally becomes present in the real world". He is a kind of dark prince that could whisk Maura away from a life of toil and torment, but there is no neat Disneyfied fairytale here, rather a bleak and wintry one that is as harsh as it is beautiful, and as cruel and unforgiving as only human nature can be.

In a short article such as this, it is difficult to convey much of what *The Outcasts* encompasses without doing it a disservice. So much of the important weight of the film is carried in its tone; the austere, sweeping landscapes and poetic, dreamlike sequences that suggest a world between fantasy and reality, the living and the dead. There is no twee romanticism here but a wild desolation, a strangeness of rocks and mountains in the haunting atmosphere conjured up by the photography of Seamus Corcoran and the dirtied, care-worn faces of the actors. The wonderfully characterful Cyril Cusack, who plays smiling village sage Miles Keenan, describes director Wynne-Simmons in his diary as having "an ingenuity worthy of Orson Welles". This is not a staid, scrubbed costume drama; the characters are at one with the landscape from the opening scenes when Maura wades through thick, wet, clinging mud away from her childish tormentors, pulling her heavy, sodden skirts behind her.

The elegiac narrative makes nothing overly explicit: Scarf Michael appears and disappears and like a phantom leaving us to wonder if he is real or imagined. Witchcraft is alluded to but the word "witch" is only mentioned once during the film. A goat which stares at Maura could be demonic, a cart wheel that picks itself up and rolls across a field could be possessed, or the fear and magic could just be in Maura's perception. Mary Ryan's performance is perfectly pitched as a confused girl on the cusp of womanhood, she exhibits a fear and longing for dark knowledge whilst her eyes are full of both wonder and sadness. Maura recoils when a group of men dressed in sinister straw masks arrive to play music for the wedding party; a truly striking moment. There is no explanation for the wicker masked musicians' appearance in the film, and their menacing carousing is both mischievous and threatening. In fact this is based on long standing traditions of Mummers, (particularly here the Fermanagh 'Straw Men'), relating to pagan belief and fertility ritual, of which similar examples appear in Homer Sykes' folkloric photography of traditional British customs. Jarring moments like this cause the film to positively brim with the folklore it evokes, and a folk horror sense of the 'wyrd'.

Robert Wynne-Simmons, a highly literate and thoughtful man, admired by his peers, made a point of using folklore as inspiration for the film, employing not only 19th century Gaelic lore but also the poetry of Yeats to try to create a sense of "a time when magic had a meaning". Wynne-Simmons stated, during production, in a 1982 interview in *The Irish Times*: "I wanted to create a myth that was relevant to human experience". Again, in keeping with a similar tone to 'wyrd' folk horror such as *Penda's Fen* and *The Wicker Man* (1973), *The Outcasts* pits Christianity and paganism in a conflict of beliefs; a villager ties up the local priest to prevent him interfering in their methods of dealing with witches, telling him there are times when "the eye of God's minister should blink a little...it is better if you do not know anything, forgive me father". And there is an abstract, shocking, conclusion for Maura when Scarf Michael finally agrees to impart his knowledge, preparing her for "all that you've ever seen, everything you've ever felt". This visually discordant, supernatural moment in the film is brief and understated but is as full of mystique, and every bit as myth infused, as something from Alan Garner's *Red Shift* or *The Owl Service* (1969).

Contemporary reviewers noted the powerful effect of this film en masse, universally praising *The Outcasts* for its deft employment of folklore and poetically understated combination with magical elements. Jill Forbes in December 1985's *Monthly Film Bulletin* says the film's strength is "that it treats its material with respect... As a result, it also acquires a strong political dimension, as a powerful critique of materialism." *The Times* praised the "dramatically beautiful" settings, the film's "astonishing visual beauty" and camera effects that are "literally marvellous". Derek Malcolm in *The Guardian* noted "a remarkable unity about its style and content", stating that, despite the magical premise, "you come out feeling that both imagination and skill have somehow transcended absurdity". Even *The Daily Mail* spoke of "The film's power...brooding beauty and abundant squalor...strong, yet elusive stuff".

At festivals, the film won an impressive raft of awards including 'Best Film' at the Brussels Fantasy Film Festival in November 1983, 'Best First Feature' and 'Best Actress' (for Mary Ryan) in San Remo in April 1984, 'Special Prize for Originality' and 'Critics Prize' at Fantasporto in November 1984 amongst others.

All this considered, it is baffling as to why *The Outcasts* has still not yet enjoyed wider release on DVD. Perhaps it was in part due to its Irish folklore and funding origins in a difficult period of 1980s politics. Or perhaps, as *The Daily Telegraph* described it in 1984, it is "the kind of piece which wins awards at all manner of exotic festivals and then disappears. It is not for the literal minded...", simply being too abstract and not easily classifiable enough for wider consumption.

However, a revived interest in folk horror in recent years has created a thirst for exactly this type of fare. Frequent and pointed references by folk horror commentators to *The Blood on Satan's Claw* in the same breath as *The Wicker Man* and *Witchfinder General* (1968) (the latter both having enjoyed much more extensive attention across all forms of media) surely suggests that there should be a wealth of interest in other successful, folkloric fare from the writer of one of the 'holy triumvirate' of folk horror films, as Mark Gatiss described this selection in his BBC Four *History of Horror* (2010) series. If *The Outcasts* achieves a DVD release, and I for one am happy to do all I can to cheer it along, then I am confident it will find a willing and appreciative audience, gaining writer-director Robert Wynne Simmons the wider recognition he deserves.

With special thanks to Robert Wynne Simmons for the DVD transfer screening copy and to Richard Hing for the scan of the rare VHS cover.