

Congratulations to Jeannie Berlin for "Margaret" (2011)

MARGARET

starring ANNA PAQUIN J. SMITH CAMERON written and directed by KENNETH LONERGAN Contact Maria Calabrese, MC²entertainment
JEANNIE BERLIN ALLISON JANNEY released by FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES 818-758-9353
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Spark of Being

By ROBERT KOEHLER

A Hypnotic Pictures and Greenleaf Music presentation. Directed, edited by Bill Morrison.

An inspired collaboration between one of the most adventurous American filmmakers and one of the most exploratory American jazz musicians, found-footage production "Spark of Being" takes Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" into fresh and unexpected territory. Director-editor Bill Morrison, best known for his gorgeous "Decasia" and fascination with chemically decayed archival film, matches found silent film with key sequences from Shelley's novel and cool compositions by composer Dave Douglas, resulting in a retelling of the tale predominantly from the Creature's p.o.v. Experimental and music venues are prime screening destinations.

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Structured in 13 chapters with silent-film title cards, the film faithfully follows Shelley's story: the early polar expedition, Dr. Frankenstein's medical education, his lab experiments that produce the Creature, and the Creature's subsequent escape and final confrontation with its creator. Here, dipping into myriad archival sources including the British Film Institute and Netherlands' Eye Film Institute (along with the assistance of filmmakers such as Craig Baldwin, himself a maker of experimental narrative films built on found footage), Morrison frequently uses aged materials as illustrations rather than as narrative devices.

Perhaps most strikingly, many of the sequences deploy footage that suggests images seen from the perspective of the Creature, whether of forested landscapes where it finds refuge, or of a mob observing suspiciously. The full extent of the artistic translation of Shelley's text to the silent images (often super-slowed down, per Morrison's style) is best appreciated by viewers acquainted with the novel, but also stands on its own as Morrison's latest venture in recovering old film not to restore it, but to relish its beautiful decay.

Douglas' massive jazz contribution stands as an equal contribution to the film's overall effect, blending the trumpeter's complex, lyrical compositions with more darkly electronic cues, all delivered by his large band, Keystone. The highly regarded musician, who's absorbed the influences of such jazz masters as Miles Davis, Kenny Wheeler and Tomasz Stanko, deploys a muted horn against his band's muscular sound. Besides indicating what possibilities creative jazz can offer film soundtracks, the music is a terrific counter to the standard, old-timey piano that's the silent-film norm.

"Spark of Being" draws fascinating parallels between the invention of cinema and that of the Creature, and pulls Shelley's 19th-century tale into the modern age. Stanford Lively Arts commissioned and developed the project, which has toured film and jazz fests.

Camera (B&W, HD, 16mm, 35mm), music, Dave Douglas; re-recording mixer (stereo), Geoff Countryman. Reviewed on DVD, Los Angeles, Dec. 8, 2011. (In AFI, Seattle film festivals.) Running time: 68 MIN.

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