

Victorians abroad

Time after Time

Movie Review by Lasha Seniuk

When thinking of Jack the Ripper, the image that comes to mind is one of a half-crazed, cross-eyed, maniac wearing a black top hat and a cape with a blood red lining. And this demonic figure is stalking the cobblestone streets of London in 1893 preying on young women Right? Wrong!

Jack the Ripper is alive and well and living in San Francisco. He wears a denim vest, a black turtle neck sweater (probably polyester), dress shoes, square framed glasses and stretch denim jeans that are just about three inches too short. He could even be the man behind you in the line at MacDonalds.

Or so says the movie *Time After Time* written and directed by Nicholas Meyer.

Rough Cut

by Diane Young

My grade eight teacher, in a burst of originality, devised a truly remarkable scheme designed to interest his students in writing business letters. Thirty-four of us dutifully addressed Lola's Dating Service, allowing my teacher to combine a standard subject with having his repressed students express themselves. He must have been filled with the kind of exultation only an education student who majored in psychology could know — he would now be able to analyze each child's self-concept from the pictures we ourselves created.

This convoluted exercise didn't do any real harm, I suppose, but its ramifications hit me several weeks later. My mother found the first draft of the letter. Her hands shook as she thrust the offending paper under my nose, and I was treated to a general summary of the types who wrote to dating services. I have forgotten the exact words of vilification, although I remember she said she would never tell my father about this revelation of some leprous defect in my character. I was left with the impression that the people who did use service's like Lola's were loathsome, probably hunchbacked and definitely not human beings whom anyone would want to be friends with in the first place.

This memory emerged the other day when I was reading the *New York Times Review of Books*, a publication which I expected to be exempt from the pleas of the loathsome and the hunchbacked. To my absolute amazement, it was crammed full of ads insisting on responses from only "slim", "imaginative", "intelligent", and "classy" people. Some, however, were even more specific:

WOMAN 30, enjoys museums, mythology, poetry, looking for someone who read the *Divine Comedy*, jogs, non-sexist, committed to his work, financially secure.

Would a rich, committed non-sexist male jogger who preferred *Paradise Lost* be unacceptable? Maybe she really swallowed the line that a gentleman could always be discerned by the books in his library. Maybe she really believed that reading the *Divine Comedy* truly separated the wheat from the chaff, ensuring that anyone who replied would be The Real Thing. While critical discrimination should apply to people as well as to literature, this woman seems to be asking for a person exactly tailored to an incredibly well-delineated figure in her head.

Anyway, the next spirited, creative, bright and attractive woman wanted to share New York with a man who appreciated the absurdities of life. There are probably only three or four cities in North America where the "absurdities of life" are as obvious or omnipresent, but those particular cities are not renowned for their populace chuckling in happy fulfillment as they walk down the street followed by the new species of giant, poison-immune brown rats. Perhaps that is not what she meant; maybe she saw Erma Bombeckian columns about the reproduction of socks in the dryer as the definitive statement on absurdity. On the other hand, she could have meant that absurdity that Kafka or Camus addressed, but I know of only three people personally who can cope with that central and poetic skew to the world and stay in balance. Somehow, thinking of them writing to the NYT Book Review for a partner in their vision is antithetical to the premises.

There is a point to this. One hundred and four fantasies of themselves wrote in search of finding fantasies for themselves. The one I love best I still don't understand. It goes:

SAN FRANCISCO woman with mind of Germaine Greer and body of Raquel Welch wanted by man with body of Woody Allen and mind of Howard Cosell.

That's terrific, but I don't know why. Maybe it's because he recognized that people who write into the personal ads, while neither loathsome nor hunchbacked, are desperately lonely. The response is to appear as magically unique as possible, but I get the feeling anyone who replies damn well better not reveal any flaws in the facade, for living in Wonderland anyway, the edict will be "Off with his head!" The one who is really laughing at not only this pathetic and ludicrous world, but at his participation in it as well, is Woody Cosell.

I finally got the joke.

The setting is 1893 and the home of H.G. Wells. He is a meager, slippery little character that could easily pass himself off as an accountant or someone named Casper Milquetoast. He has just explained to his friends, who he had gathered together for an after dinner drink, that he has created a time machine. He shows them the plans for his "jolly-jumper" which look like the designs for a taco stand. When the machine is finally revealed it resembles a demented Volkswagen from a Dali painting.

However the plot does thicken. Jack the Ripper, one of Wells' friends, escapes through the time machine. Of course, Wells has to follow him to save humanity.

Well, up to this point the movie is pretty hard to believe. It's sort of a bubble gum plot that makes one want to giggle. Just when you're about to dub the movie incredibly silly, the plot jumps with leaps and bounds.

There is a truly fantastic scene where Wells travels through time. It's sort of a montage of colors and hues that keep whirling and winding towards the center. These patches of fog and space are coupled with a sound track of historical speeches bringing you to the present. You are mesmerized by it and then before you realize it you're plunked down in an H.G. Wells exhibit in a museum in 1979.

What follows are some extremely funny scenes of what Wells experiences in 1979. It's at about this point that the audience suspends its disbelief and loses itself in the story. Suddenly the dumb plot doesn't seem to matter and the movie can be enjoyed.

The characterization however is somewhat lacking. Both Wells (Malcolm McDowell) and the Ripper (David Warner) are quite nerdy which leads to a couple of great, humorous moments. There is a problem with the Ripper however, he seems too sane. He seems to know and cope with everything. This is not the way I visualize a deranged murderer, I mean at times he is down right sensible! He has accepted his brutal insanity and comes out with lines like "in my time I was a freak, now I'm an amateur."

The Ripper knows that this is where he belongs, in this day and age of violence and inhumanity. This is the movie's theme. As the plot weaves in and out Wells realizes that the utopia he had expected in 1979 is

actually an arena for violence.

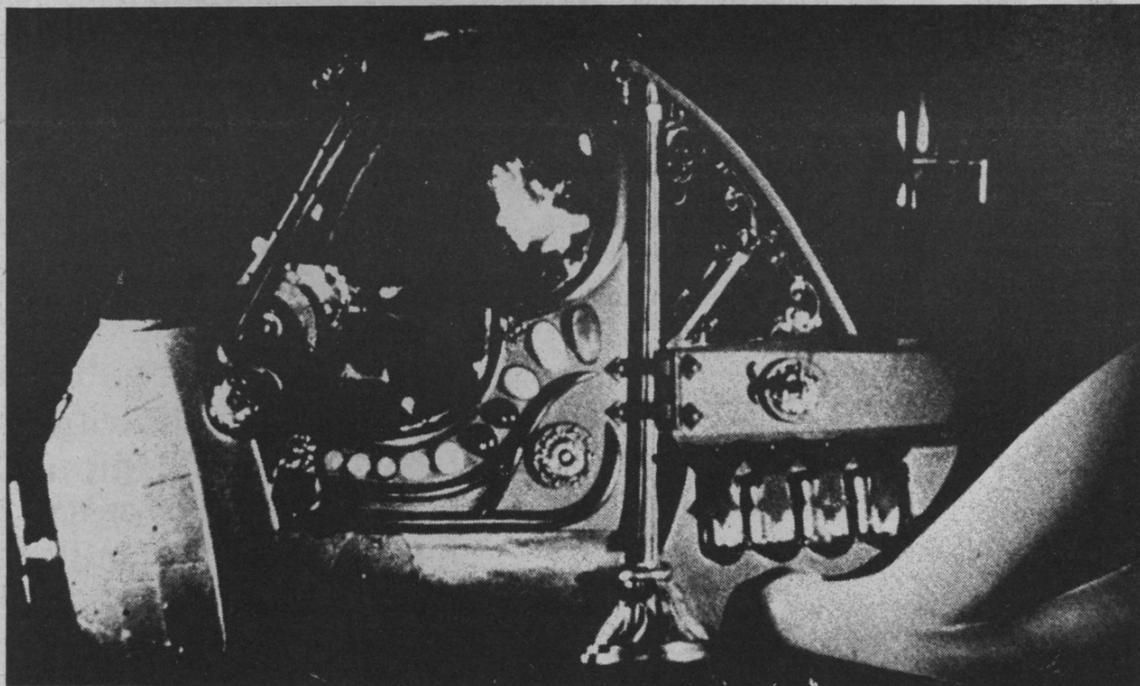
The violence itself in the movie, though none of it is actually shown, is incredibly gruesome. There is something about the idea of implied violence that is more shocking and terrifying than witnessing the actual act. For instance, in one scene the audience sees the Ripper go through the motions with his scalpel. One can then see a spattered drop of blood under his eye that slowly drips downward. The murders are exquisite, as far as murders go.

Well, at any rate, Wells eventually falls in love and is seduced by a modern woman. And that is an entire other sub-plot which makes for great enjoyment and drama.

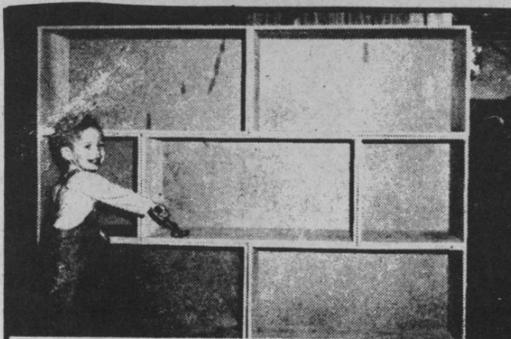
By far the most interesting aspect of the movie is the manner in which the audience is kept in suspense. Traditionally the way suspense happens is — beautiful heroine is pursued by big, ugly man, man gets closer, heroine screams, cavalry comes, saves heroine, end of big, ugly man.

Well, not so in *Time After Time*. The heroine (Mary Steenburger) is far from beautiful (there is a whole scene dedicated to how plain she is) and she has learned from a newspaper conjured up out of the future by the time machine that the Ripper will kill her. So of course she takes a sleeping pill and of course Wells can't get to her and then in comes the Ripper as she wakes up. The next scene is of a policeman being terribly sick to his stomach in her apartment which is covered in blood. She's dead — no she's not; the Ripper has killed someone else. He has kidnapped her instead. He threatens to kill her and then doesn't, and then threatens some more. This goes on and on. Does she die or doesn't she die? Believe me, not even her hairdresser knows for sure. Now that's true suspense.

Consequently, the outcome of the movie can't be determined until the last few seconds which makes for a very enjoyable, heart-pounding, suspenseful film. Does Wells die or if not is he stranded in the future by the scheming Ripper? Is he separated from his one true love by death, or by time, or both? And most importantly, what has become of Jack the Ripper? Well you'll have to go and see the movie to find out. Oh, and by the way, don't sit beside anyone with an English accent who's wearing stretch denim and square framed glasses.



Jack the Ripper zooms off in his time machine through a light show to present day San Francisco. Shades of psychedelia.



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