

Lady in a Cage

In 1962, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* burst forth on movie screens all over the world. It was a “shocker” and one of the biggest shocks in it was seeing two aging Golden Age screen icons, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, let their hair down and dive into a genre film. Of course, because it was an unexpected smash hit, the floodgates opened and we soon got all manner of imitations, some good, some bad, and some in-between. One of the weirdest and the best came in 1964 when Paramount released *Lady in a Cage*, starring Academy Award-winner Olivia de Havilland, who’d already done one shocker previously the year before, *Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte*. But *Lady in a Cage* was something wholly other – as nasty as *Baby Jane* and *Charlotte* could be, *Lady in a Cage* was in a whole other universe.

The plot is simple: On a swelteringly hot day, a widow recovering from a hip injury becomes trapped in the elevator she’s had installed in her home when there is a power failure. Her son Malcolm is away for the weekend and, too high up to get out of the elevator, she uses the emergency button to try to summon help (it rings a bell).

Unfortunately for her, the wrong people hear it and thus ensues a torturous time for Mrs. Hilyard. A wino, his prostitute girlfriend, and a sadistic trio of young people get in the house and make life a living hell for the well-ordered and very composed Mrs. Hilyard. By the end of the film, she’s anything but well-ordered and very composed, especially when one of the sadistic trio of hoodlums finds a letter from Mrs. Hilyard’s son, in which he says he’s going to commit suicide because his mother is so domineering.

This revelation gets Mrs. Hilyard in full survival mode and that’s the rest of the film, as she finally escapes her “cage” and – well – it wouldn’t be sporting to reveal any more.

Olivia de Havilland, who’d won Oscars for *To Each His Own* and *The Heiress*, is superb as the lady in a cage, doing whatever she needs to to survive her horrible ordeal. Jeff Corey and Ann Southern are terrific, especially Miss Southern. And making his first credited movie appearance as one of the young hoods is James Caan in a truly creepy performance. The film is tautly directed by Walter Grauman, who spent most of his directing life in TV, although he did three back to back features in 1964 and 1965 – *633 Squadron*, *Lady in a Cage*, and *A Rage to Live*. Shot in evocative black-and-white, the cameraman was Lee Garmes, who’d shot many wonderful films, including *Since You Went Away*, *Love Letters*, *Duel in the Sun*, *Nightmare Alley*, *Portrait of Jennie*, *The Paradine Case*, and many others. So, despite the film’s lurid qualities, the creative team was first class all the way.

Whoever’s decision it was to hire composer Paul Glass, it was a completely original and inspired choice. Glass was born in Los Angeles in 1934. He went to USC, studied composition abroad, and soon began writing classical music. He made his film-scoring debut in 1957 with a pair of films, *Burden of Truth* and *The Abductors*. During the late 1950s and mid-1960s he seemed more interested in his classical work, but did keep his hand in with very sporadic film assignments. After *Lady in a Cage* he did a low-budget film called *Nightmare in the Sun*, then had his biggest scoring assignment with Otto Preminger’s *Bunny*

Lake Is Missing. It would then be five years before he did any more scoring work, and when he came back it was mostly for television, doing several *Night Gallery* episodes, a few TV movies, some episodes of *The Rookies*, and then the feature film *To the Devil a Daughter*. He continued to write sporadically through the 80s and 90s, and his most recent credit is for the 2009 Italian film, *The Valley*. But his classical compositions have continued unabated through each decade.

Glass’s score for *Lady in a Cage* is dissonant, creepy, jagged, and perfectly suited to the film. There are no real themes here – just music of unsettling atonality that keeps one on the edge of one’s seat and completely off-balance, much like the film’s heroine. In 1964 it was the polar opposite of most film scores being written but it was absolutely perfect for *Lady in a Cage* and, for its time, a fairly unique score.

Since its release, *Lady in a Cage* has become something of a cult film. Its director, Walter Grauman, is justifiably proud of its afterlife and his work on the movie. If you haven’t seen it, it’s well worth seeking out the DVD from Paramount. Even now, coming up on almost fifty years, it still manages to be thoroughly creepy and weird, yet somehow completely entertaining and fun.

— Bruce Kimmel