

The Fly | Return of the Fly

“HELP MEEEEEE”

There are certain iconic moments when seen at an impressionable age that stay with you forever. The original 1958 version of *The Fly* has two – the first is when the pretty wife of the scientist, whose experiment in teleportation (reducing matter to atoms in one machine and then reassembling them in another) has run amok and left him with the head and the arm of a fly, unmasks him. I can tell you for certain, that at least one little boy ran up the aisle and into the safety of the lobby of the Picfair Theater in Los Angeles, so horrifying was that fly head. And then, at the end of the film, when all has ended badly for the mutated scientist, we hear that whiny little voice saying “Help meeeee” and then see a little itty-bitsy fly with the head and arm of the scientist caught in a spider’s web and about to be made mincemeat of. Thankfully, a nice man stops that impending horror by smashing the fly and the spider with a rock. And yes, those two images have stayed with that impressionable youngster ever since. As dated as *The Fly* may seem now, especially compared to the David Cronenberg remake, those two scenes have never lost their iconic status.

The Fly began life as a short story by George Langelaan. The story was published in the June 1957 issue of *Playboy*. Twentieth Century-Fox snapped up the rights and hired James Clavell to write the script, his first screenplay assignment (Clavell would go on to write the screenplays for *The Great Escape*, *633 Squadron*, *The Satan Bug*, *To Sir, With Love*, the latter which he also directed – he also became a very successful novelist, turning out such books as *King Rat*, *Tai-Pan*, *Shogun*, and *Noble House*, all of which became either films or mini-series). Kurt Neumann was in the director chair. He’d already done a couple of sci-fi films, *Rocketship X-M* and *Kronos*. Of course, *The Fly* was both science fiction and horror and Neumann did a great job with not only those aspects of the film, but with the human aspects, as well. Sadly, Neumann died shortly after a preview screening of the film, never knowing what a classic it would become.

A top-drawer cast was assembled, including young Al Hedison (who would soon change his name to David), Vincent Price, Herbert Marshall, Patricia Owens, and the child actor, Charles Herbert. It was given the Cinemascope and color treatment (shot by veteran cameraman Karl Struss). And it was a smash hit with audiences everywhere, grossing \$3,000,000 on a budget of \$700,000, in at time when those figures actually meant something.

At the beginning of the film, scientist Andre Delambre (Hedison) is found quite dead, his arm and head crushed in a hydraulic press. His wife, Helene (Owens), confesses to the murder and goes on about finding a fly with a white head. That behavior seems odd to Andre’s brother, Francois, and then, in flashback, we finally find out why, when she recounts the story. Since that story is very well known there’s no reason to recount it here – suffice it to say that it’s always best to never get in a teleportation machine without first checking to make sure that a fly isn’t in the machine with you. Actually, it’s probably best not to get into a teleportation machine period.

The Fly was surprisingly well-received by critics, with *Variety* saying, “One strong factor of the picture is its unusual believability. It is told as a mystery suspense story, so that it has a compelling interest aside from its macabre effects. There is an appealing and poignant romance between Owens and Hedison, which adds to the reality of the story...” and the *New York Times* raving, “It does indeed contain, briefly, two of the most sickening sights one casual swatter-wielder ever beheld on the screen. At one point, the hooded hero discloses his head as that of a giant-size fly. And the climax, when this balcony-sitter nearly shot through the roof, is a fat close-up of a fly, with a tiny, screaming human’s head, trapped by a spider on its web. To any random customer expecting a pleasant doze, watch out! Short as these two scenes are, there’s no escaping them. Otherwise, believe it or not, *The Fly* happens to be one of the better, more restrained entries of the ‘shock’ school. As produced and directed by the late Kurt Neumann, with an earnest little cast headed by Al Hedison, Patricia Owens and Vincent Price, this is a quiet, uncluttered and even unpretentious picture, building up almost unbearable tension by simple suggestion.”

In those days, sequels were not all that common, but after the success of the first film, Fox decided to do another Fly picture, *Return of the Fly*, which was rushed into production and released a year later. Written and directed by low-budget director Edward Bernds (*World Without End*, *Queen of Outer Space*), the sequel takes place fifteen years after the events of *The Fly*, with Delambre’s son trying to vindicate his father by successfully completing the experiment that went so horribly wrong. But the sequel had nowhere near the appeal of the first film – still shot in Cinemascope but this time in black-and-white, it was a low-budget affair costing much less than the original. This time *Variety* did not rave, saying, “*Return of the Fly* was conceived and executed as a sequel to *The Fly* in order to cash in on the latter’s reputation as a grosser. With justice, it will be unfavorably compared with the first, which was a superior horror film.”

Still, *Return of the Fly* had Vincent Price returning, and a good performance by Brett Halsey as the son, and it all moved along briskly at a brisk eighty minutes. Fox would go back to the Fly well once more, six years later with *Curse of the Fly*. This time, the film was shot in the UK, was again very low budget, and didn’t even replicate the less than stellar box-office of *Return of the Fly*. It came and went quickly and then disappeared for quite some time, not receiving its home video premiere until 2007. This time the director was Don Sharp, and the cast included Brian Donlevy, George Baker, Carole Gray, and Bert Kwouk. By that time audiences simply didn’t care, despite the film having some interesting elements. It seemed like what it really was – an afterthought. There would be no more Fly films at Fox for twenty-one years, but when they brought it back they brought it back right – in a classy production directed by David Cronenberg, with a great script by Charles Edward Pogue. Once again, *The Fly* was critically acclaimed and a huge hit, which just goes to show that you can’t keep a good Fly down, and how potent the original idea was and is.

The scores to *The Fly* and *Return of the Fly* were written by the team of Paul Sawtell and Bert Shefter. Obviously, composing teams were a rarity in Hollywood – in fact, Sawtell and Shefter were basically it. Sawtell was born in 1906 and began scoring

films in the late 1930s, working on mostly B-movies at RKO and then Universal (and others). He scored several classic film noirs, *The Devil Thumbs a Ride*, *T-Men*, *Raw Deal*, *Walk a Crooked Mile*, in addition to tons of scores in just about every genre. Shefter was born in 1902 but came to film music a decade later than Sawtell, mostly working as conductor, music supervisor and orchestrator, until serendipity happened, when he paired up with Sawtell in 1957. Suddenly Hollywood had a composing team and because of the way they collaborated, they could turn out scores in quick time, which they did, one after another, ultimately doing over sixty films together before Sawtell’s untimely death in 1970. Just as Sawtell had done during his many years solo, Sawtell and Shefter did whatever was thrown their way – westerns, drama, action, comedy – but it’s their sci-fi, horror, and fantasy scores that made them beloved by film music fans everywhere. It’s an impressive list, which includes *Kronos*, *She-Devil*, *It! The Terror from Beyond Space*, *The Lost World*, *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *Jack*, *The Giant Killer*, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, and *The Last Man on Earth*, among others, including, of course, *The Fly* and *Return of the Fly*.

Beginning with just the kind of bombastic and memorable music you’d want for a movie called *The Fly*, Sawtell and Shefter immediately introduce the theme for the happy couple at the film’s center, and it establishes immediately the human element of the story, which is so important for any sci-fi or horror film. From there it’s classic Sawtell and Shefter, with the scary music and the human music balancing out each other and creating a symphony of terror and things gone wrong, all in that unbelievably great Fox stereo sound. It’s one of the great sci-fi/horror scores. *Return of the Fly* is equally strong as a score and it’s not just a rehash of the first score, which is refreshing. *The Fly* was a fairly brief score, lasting only about twenty minutes, while *Return of the Fly* is double that length. But again, Sawtell and Shefter play the scary music against the human music and it works wonderfully. While the sequel might not be all that it could have been, the score certainly was one its strongest components.

The Fly and *Return of the Fly* were both previously released in a box set on Percepto Records (which also contained *Curse of the Fly*, composed by Shefter alone), which has been long out of print and hard to find. For this reissue, we decided to just present the first two films, since they were made only a year apart and were both composed by Sawtell and Shefter. We’ve done some clean-up work and remastered the sound, combined a couple of shorter cues and removed the “Fox Fanfare” since it obviously wasn’t composed by Sawtell and Shefter. Both scores are complete – *The Fly* in glorious stereo, and the low budget *Return of the Fly* in glorious mono. So, turn off the lights and bask in the eerie glow of two classic sci-fi/horror scores by the great team of Paul Sawtell and Bert Shefter. Oh, yeah, and in case you haven’t figured it out yet, I was the young lad who ran terrified up the aisle of the Picfair Theater back in 1958. That moment has stayed with me forever, as has this great music.

— Bruce Kimmel