



Whale, James (1889-1957)

by Peter J. Holliday

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Director James Whale is best remembered for his four stylish horror films: *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Old Dark House* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933), and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Today these are still recognized as outstanding examples of the genre, noted for their semi-expressionistic mood and understated black humor.

In *The Celluloid Closet*, film historian Vito Russo interprets Whale's dramatizations as compelling allegories of a man grappling with his homosexuality. Perhaps equally important, Whale's career demonstrates that it was possible for an openly gay man to achieve success in 1930s Hollywood, at least behind the camera.

Whale was born into a working class family in Dudley, England, probably on July 22, 1889. Growing up poor deeply affected him, as did the fact that he found little support within his family for his artistic leanings and ambitions. Later in his life he would sometimes give the impression that he was of the British upper class or aristocracy, but he never forgot his humble beginnings.

He first pursued a career as a newspaper cartoonist, but was drafted for service in World War I. During the war Whale earned a commission as second lieutenant and was captured by the Germans. While a prisoner of war, he learned to stage plays.

After the war he pursued a career in the theater, first as an actor, then as a set designer, and, finally, as a director. In 1929, Whale won notice for his direction of the R. C. Sheriff play *Journey's End*. He was promptly imported to Hollywood in 1930 to direct the screen version. Enthralled by Hollywood and the opportunities it represented, he never left.

In addition to his horror classics, Whale also directed refined and intelligent films in other genres, usually adaptations from literature or the stage. His films are marked by fluid camera movement, leisurely pace, emphasis on detail, and discriminating restraint.

Among his films are the highly regarded *Show Boat* (1936), perhaps the best version of the musical; a pair of highly sophisticated comedies, *Remember Last Night?* (1935) and *The Great Garrick* (1937); and several sharply crafted melodramas, including *Waterloo Bridge* (1930) and *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1939).

Coming on the heels of *Show Boat*, *The Road Back* (1937), his film of Erich Remarque's sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, was expected to secure his growing reputation as one of Hollywood's most important directors.

But the Laemmle family, who helmed Universal and had given Whale *carte blanche* in the past, had lost control of the studio by the time production began. When the Nazi government objected to the film's supposedly anti-German elements, the studio's new owners took Whale off the project, and "comic relief" scenes shot by another director were inserted to tone down the elements the Nazis found objectionable. The result was a critical and commercial disaster.

Whale worked out his Universal contract with second-rate material, eventually walked off the set of his last contracted Universal film, and never directed again.

Wise investments allowed Whale to retire in comfort. Relieved of the necessity to earn a living, he returned to his first love, painting, occasionally directed plays, and often entertained young men at swimming parties.

In 1929, Whale and David Lewis, a young story editor and later a producer, began a relationship that lasted more than two decades. Although their sexual relationship was an open secret, they lived rather circumspect lives among the English colony in Hollywood.

The sexual component of their relationship ended in the early 1950s, but they remained friends until Whale's death. In the early 1950s, Whale began a relationship with Pierre Foegel, a Frenchman working as his chauffeur.

After a series of strokes left Whale physically and spiritually depleted, he committed suicide by throwing himself into his swimming pool on May 29, 1957. Because his suicide note was withheld until after Lewis's death (and first published in James Curtis's biography of the director), Whale's death was shrouded in mystery for many years.

Christopher Bram's excellent novel *Father of Frankenstein* (1995) offers a fictional account of Whale's final days. The novel was adapted to film by Bill Condon as *Gods and Monsters* (1998, produced by Clive Barker), in which Ian McKellen gives a stunning performance as Whale.

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