

Strange and Wild

THE FORGOTTEN GENIUS OF JACK GARFEIN

Telluride honors a long-overlooked director: Jack Garfein, a Holocaust survivor who became a stalwart of the New York theater community of the 1950s and 60s. His ex-wife Carroll Baker called him "the greatest living acting teacher." His only two films (his career was derailed after battles with studio chiefs) will be screened at Telluride.

BY KIM MORGAN

It's not wild, necessarily. But it's unforgettable.

I never understood the title of Jack Garfein's beautiful, sad, confusingly romantic and richly empathetic *Something Wild*. If the title refers to the movie's brutal rape, a wild animalistic act, it's certainly nothing wild for the tragic protagonist, Mary Ann (played by a powerfully touching and brave Carroll Baker). Something dreadful is more apt, as she suffers the rough hands of a faceless brute, emerging from the trees like a demon spirit.

And her demise, repulsion, sickness, panic, alienation and, finally, near-life-ending depression aren't wild either. Something despondent. She's desperate. She cannot discuss nor process the rape. She can't even tell her parents. In a classic panic-stricken fight-or-flight scenario, she flees from a crowded subway car, gasping as commuters rub against her violated body. More and more, lovely Mary Ann turns into a withdrawn, depressed, misunderstood woman—a woman filled with terror and shame—a woman who hates herself though she did nothing wrong. A woman who was raped. This is how rape victims feel.

The picture starts as Mary Ann exits the subway and makes her way home. Something gives her a start. A rustle of trees, a paper cup blowing on the ground, a feeling of unease. Her fear is well founded. A large man, appearing like a monster, emerges from the trees, grabs Mary Ann and rapes her. The rape takes a long time—even tearing off the cross she wears on her neck. This rape is not titillating. This rape is sad and exhausting.

The film continues for a good 20 minutes (unprecedented for American movies at that time) without dialogue, as Mary Ann silently trudges her way home, where she bathes, scrubs, looks at the cuts on her body with horror, takes all of her clothes and cuts them



Jack Garfein directing on the set of *Something Wild*.

into tiny pieces. She flushes the tattered garments down the toilet. And then she sleeps.

She decides the best choice is to take her own life, and nearly jumps off the Manhattan Bridge. But Mike (Ralph Meeker) saves her from leaping. And then, he keeps her, a sad little butterfly—a butterfly without wings. But why? These are questions the picture never answers.

The movie, released in 1961, was far ahead of its time. It recalls Roman Polanski's *Repulsion*, before Polanski's film was made, and Bergman, and yet, with its actors and setting, it feels wholly American.

Garfein, who survived the Holocaust, well understood the idea of entrapment and subjugation. He deals with it as a kind of submersion into a subterranean world of dirty rooms and dreams—dreams, in one terrifying moment, where girls have no faces (Lars Von Trier would love this movie)—a world where trauma is expressed through the sounds of vulgar good-time girls, the oppressiveness of the subway,

the simultaneous attraction and repulsion to men, work, the city and sex. If anyone finds Mary Ann's feelings and actions unrealistic, they have no concept of the odd co-mingling of unreality and harshness that an act of rape can make a woman feel.

The great Aaron Copland provided the potent music; the legendary Saul Bass created the title sequence, and brilliant cinematographer Eugen Schufftan (*Metropolis*, *Port of Shadows*, *Napoleon*, *Eyes Without a Face*) worked as a director of photography.

The picture feels like trauma, it feels Jungian, dreamy, hyper-real. Garfein understands the horror and fairy tale nature of a victim floating above pain. Mary Ann wants to rid herself of anguish, she wants to float, and yet, she's stuck in a basement.

I hate her entrapment, and I hate that she feels she has nowhere to go, and yet, I pray Mike treats her sensitively. I feel wrong for this, but I want them to work out. This is a dream. Or a nightmare. I can only hope she's truly happy one day. Not wild, but, happy? **AV**

Kim Morgan writes essays for MSN Movies and authors and runs MSN's daily film blog "The Hitlist." Her work has been published in Huffington Post, Entertainment Weekly and Garage Magazine, where she authors the movie column "Drive, She Said."

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SPOTLIGHT: Jack Garfein

THE STRANGE ONE

U.S., 1957, 100m

Director: Jack Garfein

Starring: Ben Gazzara, Pat Hingle and Peter Mark Richman

SOMETHING WILD

U.S., 1961, 112m

Director: Jack Garfein

Starring: Carroll Baker, Ralph Meeker and Mildred Dunnock