

The Old Dark House



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced and directed by William Castle. Screenplay by Robert Dillon. Based on J.B. Priestley's 1927 novel *Benighted*. Production Design by Bernard Robinson. Cinematography by Arthur Grant. Art Direction by. Music by Benjamin Frankel. Edited by James Needs. Key Costumer: Molly Arbuthnot Charles Adams of television's *The Adams Family* designed the titles. Cinematic length: 86 minutes: Distributed by Columbia Pictures. Cinematic release October 1963 USA. September 1966 England: DVD release 2009. Unrated. Rating 90%. All illustrations are from the public domain or *Wikipedia* under the Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike License.

Cast

- *Tom Poston* as Tom Penderel
- *Robert Morley* as Roderick Femm
- *Janette Scott* as Cecily Femm
- *Joyce Grenfell* as Agatha Femm
- *Mervyn Johns* as Potiphar Femm
- *Fenella Fielding* as Morgana Femm
- *Peter Bull* as Caspar/Jasper Femm
- *Danny Green* as Morgan Femm
- *John Harvey* as Club Receptionist

Review

I have not seen James Whale's original 1932 *The Old Dark House* which has become a cult classic. This 1963 film almost always gets a drubbing, being considered a remake and an inferior, but even without seeing the earlier version I am not so sure. Summaries reveal massive plot differences and different characters, despite both being based on J.B. Priestley's 1927 novel *Benighted*. This version is not a pallid copycat; it has the vintage charm of the English comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, combined with a sardonic sense of humour, a clever screenplay, a fine cast and also a 1960s style. All these factors would have been unavailable to the 1932 filmmakers. The cast, the set and the new screenplay are virtually perfect, nothing is spurious to the bizarre little world it creates. All these factors blend together seamlessly to make a memorable movie. This makes for a film that works more in the black comedy genre than the horror genre. It is not a straight

who-dunnit either and despite the first scenes at the house this film reverses crucial elements in the standard, neatly resolved ending.

As is usual in the genre the setting is an isolated, decaying family mansion. From story to story they vary very little: having towers, abounding gloomy ancestral portraits and a seldom used guest-room which will soon be used by the stranger stranded in the rain. This stranger is Tom Penderell, (John Polston) an amiable young American car salesman working in London. His flatmate Casper Femm (Peter Bull) buys a car from him and wants it delivered to the family estate on Dartmoor. As usual the car does not work when he wants to leave, the village is far off and the wires are cut. As usual the warning to the visitor to get out fast comes from the normal person Cecily Femm (Janette Scott) who is always a reluctant but trapped occupant wanting to go out into the world. As usual the eccentric and bizarre residents die off one by one in eccentric and bizarre ways before dawn's denouement.



Joyce Grenfell and Robert Morley, two of England's finest comic character actors in roles perfect for their talents.

What differs from the genre template is that even before the murders begin the motive for multiple murder appears to be as clear as glass. None of the eight members of the Femm family actually work. They depend on their annual payout for their costs and their eccentric hobbies. If any of the eight dies their share divides amongst the others and they have expensive and eccentric tastes. With the first two deaths it becomes clear that there is a certain heartlessness at the heart of their eccentricity, they are more concerned about the profit to be shared amongst the survivors than the loss of family members.



Tom Polston the stranded stranger.

One hobby includes a life-size replica of Noah's Ark replete with paired rare animals, including cages ready for the humans. Others are only a little saner and less extravagant. Aunt Agatha, the ultimate perpetual knitter, knitted "a hundred and fifty miles last year" – for no purpose. As mentioned, the denouement is full of surprises not to be spoiled. Curiously the critics generally hated this film, it seemed to have a limited release, not even being released in England, (where it was filmed with an English cast except for the lead) until September 1966. Even

Mexico and many European countries had it premiering in 1964. but when it was shown on television in the later sixties the public loved it – and rightly.

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William Castle 1914-1977



