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Theatre of Blood

Director: Edward Hickox

Producer: John Kohn, Stanley Mann.

Screenplay: Anthony Greville-Bell

Music: Michael J. Lewis.

Cinematography: Wolfgang Suschitsky

Editor: Malcolm Cooke

Cast: Vincent Price (Edward Lionheart), Diana Rigg, (Edwina Lionheart), Ian Hendry (Peregrine Devlin), Harry Andrews (Trevor Dickman), Coral Brown (Chloe Moon), Robert Coote (Oliver Landing), Jack Hawkins (Solomon Psaltery), Michael Hordern (George Maxwell), Arthur Lowe (Horace Sprout), Robert Morley (Meredith Merridew), Dennis Price (Hector Snipe), Milo O'Shea (Inspector Boot)

1973/British/104 minutes/15

SPOILER ALERT: The following notes give away some of the plot.

Stories of serial retribution have existed since at least Alexandre Dumas Pere's 1844 novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*. They focus on characters, left to death or dishonour, who return and take their revenge on those who have wronged them, one by one. The protagonist can be an investigator, an intended victim, or the avenger, as in the most famous British example, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), whose star, Dennis Price, appears as one of the victims in *Theatre of Blood*.

In the 1970s, there came a mini-cycle of horrors in which the focus was not on the fact of revenge, but the methods of killing. Vincent Price appears in three of them: *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971) in which the murders follow the Biblical Plagues of Egypt, its sequel *Dr Phibes Rises Again* (1972), and *Theatre of Blood*. In this film, Price plays Edward Lionheart, an actor who murders a series of hostile critics, using methods drawn from Shakespeare plays. He's assisted by his daughter, Edwina (Diana Rigg), who serves as both Cordelia and Miranda, and a chorus of spirit-like down-and-outs; the film bears a surely unique credit for 'Choreographer of Meths Drinkers'.

Lionheart has something in common with the single-minded villains of the British TV series *The Avengers*, and it's not surprising that the cast includes former Avengers Rigg and Ian Hendry, the latter as Devlin, most likeable of the critics, and a male equivalent of a splatter film's 'final girl'. Anthony Greville-Bells' hyper-literate script gives both Price and Hendry a number of James Bond-ish one-liners after each death; the most characteristic comes after the revelation that one murder is dependent on making an alteration (or 'one rather large

cut') to *The Merchant of Venice*: 'It's Lionheart alright. Only he would have the temerity to rewrite Shakespeare.' - how many horror films use the word 'temerity'?

In-jokes and actor allusions abound: the film starts with a paraphrase of the Caesar/Calphurnia scene from *Julius Caesar*, Robert Coote's bibulous critic meets his end in a wine merchant labelled 'Geo. Clarence and Sons', Robert Morley, a gourmet in real life, plays one in the film, and gets fed his own poodles. This murder, taken from *Titus Andronicus*, is the one that people tend to remember with greatest discomfort when recalling the film, and confirms what Robert McKee said about *Fatal Attraction* (1987); as an audience, we'll happily lend our sympathy to a character who kills people (or tries to), but withdraw it once s/he attacks an animal, especially one that's cute.

When Shakespeare is used in genre films, it's usually as a sign of 'high' culture, either to give a touch of class to a character, or to oppose it against the more dynamic 'low' culture of film – witness *The Last Action Hero* (1993) which imagines Hamlet as played by Arnold Schwarzenegger. *Theatre of Blood* is unusual in that its opposition is not between 'high' and 'low', but between two kinds of 'high'. Edward Kendal Sheridan Lionheart – his name evokes a nineteenth century actor and an eighteenth century playwright – loses the Critics' Circle Award to William Woodstock, whom he describes as a 'twitching, mumbling boy', suggesting a Brando-ish method actor. Lionheart belongs to the theatrical past – as superannuated as the actor-managers like Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Frank Benson whom we see on silent film under the opening credits.

The film is ambivalent towards Lionheart; his victims, played by an array of British character actors, are an unpleasant bunch (and far more well-heeled than any real-life theatre critic has ever been) but it's never made clear quite how good an actor he's supposed to be – the most complimentary word used about him is 'vigorous' (by Milo O'Shea, no shrinking violet himself). This is complicated by the fact that Price, though very well-spoken, is not a Shakespearean – when he plays Shylock to Rigg's Portia, it's like watching an amateur boxer getting in the ring with Mike Tyson. It's implied that Lionheart's murders may be his greatest performance, more credible than anything he ever did on a stage.

The film retains a considerable cult following, among both Shakespeareans and horror fans, and extends its influence into gimmicky murder films like *Se7en* (1995), which reuses several of its motifs – death through force-feeding, a pound of flesh, body parts in a box. One of the film's incidental pleasures is in the spotting of London locations, including, in the final scene, the Edwardian Putney Hippodrome, which had lain empty since 1960. Like Lionheart, and the Lear that he plays at the film's end, the building was a leftover from the past – *Theatre of Blood* allows all three to make one last grand exit.

David Cottis

