



Cesare (Conrad Veidt) spends a night on the expressionistic town in 1919's *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI*.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

The great days of the silent horror cinema have left us with many indelible images. Once experienced, who could forget the spidery Max Schreck as he creeps through the shadows of *NOSFERATU* (1922), Lon Chaney's unmasking in *THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA* (1925), or the strangely beautiful Robotrix (Brigitte Helm) as she slowly moves down a glowing runway in *METROPOLIS* (1926)?

Included in the above esteemed group of films is *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI* (1919). The narrative, told in flashback, concerns the recurrence of an 11th-century myth involving an evil doctor who utilizes a helpless somnambulist to do his bidding. The mysterious Dr. Caligari (Werner Krauss) appears in the small village of Holstenwall to participate in a carnival as a sideshow attraction. Under his command, the sleepwalker Cesare (Conrad Veidt) can foretell the future of any paying customer.

Soon after the doctor's arrival, both the town clerk, who refused Caligari an exhibitor's permit, and one of the thrill-seekers are found murdered. It is discovered that the doctor wills Cesare to commit the murders in order to fulfill the somnambulist's predictions of death. After Cesare fails to abduct the fiancée (Lil Dagover) of the narrator (Friedrich Feher), Caligari is captured and put in an insane asylum. At this point, we return to the present to realize that it is the narrator who's truly mad, fabricating a delusional tale involving characters based on fellow inmates (Cesare and the fiancée) and the asylum's director (Caligari).

The most striking aspect of *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI* is its wonderfully expressionistic sets designed by Hermann Warm, Walter Reinmann, and Walter Rohrich. The discovery of the narrator's madness is an unexpected shock for the viewer (although today, as a result of overuse, it's considered a cliché), but with that realization comes the understanding of the bizarre "mise-en-scene" used throughout the film: everything, of course, is being filtered through the madman's mind.

Although the painted sets are obviously constructed of false fronts, the strength of the art direction is not diminished in any way. In fact, for that very rea-

son, the viewer is thrust into the horrific world of the narrator as characters move through twisted, claustrophobic landscapes and off-balanced rooms.

CALIGARI's many unforgettable images include the emaciated, black-clad Cesare awakening from his 25-year slumber; a room with a rear wall completely dominated by an enormous, glowing moon-like shape (a possible reference to the "lunatic" perspective of the narrative); Dr. Caligari's grotesque daily feeding of the somnambulist as he props him up in the coffin-shaped cabinet; and Cesare's search for the girl as he slides along the walls of the winding streets. Even after 70 years, the disturbing intensity of these haunting images has hardly been equalled.

After seeing the film, the viewer is left both startled and amazed by its ingenuity. Within the boundaries of a small production and about 55 minutes of screen time, a milestone of horror was created. It's ironic that, with the development of space-age technology and access to unlimited budgets, films do not necessarily attain the artistry of *THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI*. Many of the best films from the glorious silent age were born of the imaginations of great craftsmen and dreamers—something seldom seen today.

—Michael O. Yaccarino

