



**7 FACES OF DR. LAO** is an October, 2015 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

Below is a review of that film by Kino Ken.

14 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

Key: \* indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

United States 1964 color 100 minutes live action feature fantasy seriocomedy

George Pal Productions Producer: George Pal

**Points:**

- Direction: George Pal
- 1 Editing: George Tomasini
- 1 Cinematography: Robert Bronner
- 1 Lighting
- 2 Special Visual Effects: Paul Byrd, Wah Chung, Jim Danforth, Robert Hoag, Ralph Rodine, Tim Baar, and Pete Kleinow
- 2 Screenplay: Charles Beaumont, Charles Finney, and Ben Hecht, based on the novel THE CIRCUS OF DR. LAO by Charles Finney
- 1 Music: Leigh Harline Orchestrator: Gus Levene Score Remixer: Michael McDonald  
Choreographer: Alex Romero
- Art Direction: George Davis and Gabriel Somerville
- Set Decoration: Henry Grace and Hugh Hunt
- Costumer: Robert Fuca
- 2 Makeup: William Tuttle\*
- Magic Advisor: George Boston
- 1 Sound: Franklin Milton

- 1 Acting
  - 2 Creativity
- 14 total points

**Cast: Tony Randall (Dr. Lao / The Abominable Snowman / Merlin the Magician / Apollonius of Tyana / Pan / The Giant Serpent / Medusa), Barbara Eden\* (Angela Benedict), Arthur O'Connell (Clint Stark), John Ericson (Ed Cunningham / Transformed Pan), Noah Beery, Jr. (Sam, the printer), Lee Patrick (Mrs. Howard Cassin), Minerva Urecal (Kate Lindquist), John Qualen (Luther Lindquist), Frank Kreig (Peter Ramsey), Peggy Rea (Mrs. Peter Ramsey), Eddie Little Sky (George C. George), Royal Dano (Carey), Argentina Brunetti (Sarah Benedict), John Doucette (Lucas), Dal McKennon (Lean Cowboy), Frank Cady (Mayor James Sargent), Chubby Johnston (Fat Cowboy), Douglas Fowley (Toothless Cowboy), Kevin Tate (j) (Mike Benedict), Mary Benoit (Mother), George Cisar (Drunken Townsman), Betsy Hale (j) (Little Girl), George Lewis (Mr. Frisco), Joe Ploski (Saloonkeeper), Péter Pál (Abominable Snowman), Fred Scheiwiller (Sheriff)**

Conceived as a triple showcase for actor Tony Randall, makeup designer William Tuttle, and the MGM Visual Effects Department, **7 FACES OF DR. LAO** combines a traditional western setting with oriental mysticism and classical mythology. The film is based on a popular novel by Charles Finney, in which a travelling Chinese showman comes to the rescue of a small town in frontier America. Since automobiles, motorcycle, and silent film are all utilized as décor elements, the setting must be later than the turn of the century.

One man has obtained somehow pre-knowledge of the plan to bring a railroad through the hamlet of Abalone. How Mr. Stark obtained this information is never explained. He intends to make the most of it, banking on gullibility and greed of town residents. Those traits should enable him to buy up their properties at premium prices. He will then sell those same parcels of land to the railroad and associated businesses for a substantial profit.

Ed Cunningham, who publishes and edits Abalone's newspaper, has recently issued a broadside in print against tyrannical domination of the town by Stark. Judging from enthusiasm of those attending a town meeting, the populace can't wait to sell out and move on. It will cost them hundreds of dollars apiece to repair their sole water pipe, corroded and apt to fail completely in a few months, at least according to Stark's pessimistic report. Far better to just abandon the place to native animals than shell out that much money.

A speech by Cunningham on behalf of original inhabitant Eddie Little Sky slows down a rush to take the cash and run. Librarian / Schoolmarm Angela Benedict makes it clear she's in no hurry to relocate. Neither is Ed. Nor his printer Sam. Eddie Little Sky would prefer staying, too. They happen to like the remote settlement where they live.

What will become of them if the others leave?

This gives more community-minded folks something to think about. One of them asks if they must decide that very night what to do.

Stark reassures listeners immediate sell-offs are what he had hoped for, but not mandatory. He can wait a couple more days.

Relieved at the prospect of procrastination, a throng inside Abalone's meeting house departs, for the most part cheerfully. Ed will have at least one more day to generate resistance. Everyone else can enjoy the wonders of Dr. Lao's travelling circus, with a premiere performance scheduled the next evening.

In exchange for displaying a card trick and offering to help Lao distribute flyers, young Peter Benedict has earned free admission to his upcoming circus. For a boy of eight, this is a wonderful bargain.

His mother Angela escorts the lad to a massive tent, perhaps just as curious as her son to know what Dr. Lao has hidden inside its impressive folds.

The rest of Abalone journey there as well to inspect and marvel at assorted freaks promoted on posters all over town. Who could resist an opportunity to gawk at a genuine Medusa, trade insults with a wizened snake, poke fun at an anachronistic, forgetful Merlin the Magician?

A more serious tone arrives when Mrs. Howard Cassin, a garrulous, selfish widow, wanders into the sanctuary of Apollonius of Tyana. Apollonius is a blind seer who can predict the future. He is doomed to be brutally frank with paying customers, as Mrs. Cassin learns to her disgust. His words are more prophecy than prediction, relentlessly bleak, impolitic, scathingly insensitive. She cannot accept them, reverting to type immediately once she has left the cut-rate fortuneteller who, like Lucy Van Pelt, charges a nickel for advice. In the widow's opinion, he is a complete faker, not worth paying a penny. She tells Angela to avoid seeking enlightenment with such a lecher and fraud.

Confused by what she hears, Angela instead pays a visit to Pan, whose sensual flute-playing inflames her repressed passion. She, also a widow, is already courted persistently by bachelor Ed Cunningham. Now she listens entranced as Pan's seductive melody and increasingly propulsive dancing break down her customary veneer of formal politeness. If music is her aphrodisiac, Cunningham and his verbal flattery have been barking up the wrong tree.

Clint Stark favors a close encounter with Lao's caged snake, which happens to be of the speaking variety found in Eden alone. This twisted, cunning creature has a strong facial resemblance to Stark himself, implying a similarity of conduct and philosophy between the two. Stark's corruption of character, however, comes from an internal source. The snake can obtain nothing more than a stalemate from their conversation. It does rattle his interlocutor, though, in more ways than one.

To forestall Cunningham's anticipated final warning for the citizenry, Stark's two hired thugs break overnight into his office, demolishing everything in sight. When Ed and Carey return from visiting the showgrounds of Dr. Lao, they are greeted with chaotic ruin. The two stumble off to a saloon, intent on drinking troubles away in shared misery.

Lao, after promising visitors an even grander show the next evening, miraculously restores the print shop to its former state. This is implied, rather than explicit, when publisher and printer return after their mutual bender and are amazed at what they see.

Mike has had a strange time at the circus. Witnessing cynical comments of a trio usually camped out on the boardwalk of Abalone's main street and Merlin's pathetic failure to challenge them effectively, he's further disheartened by words and actions of a mother and daughter who find entertainment offered by Lao's magician boring, mundane, completely unsatisfying.

After the other townspeople have left, he goes to a disconsolate Merlin to offer encouragement, assuring him he still believes in the old man's skill. Mike comprehends Merlin is offering something far deeper than mere slight of hand. He doesn't understand just what that is, but trusts instinctively it is good and important.

On the following evening, fireworks are more spectacular. Buffoonish antics of an Abominable Snowman yield to a stern warning guests should steer clear of the "sea serpent" which resembles nothing more frightening at that moment than one small golden fish in a glass globe. Dr. Lao recounts habits of a blowfish, remarking the present specimen, obtained from a mysterious Scottish loch, can similarly inflate at an accelerated rate to monstrous size if removed from its watery habitat. Most auditors decide to keep a respectful distance away.

Then a magic lantern show begins. To the astonishment of spectators, the doctor narrates a tale of woe during a silent re-enactment of everyday scenes from a costume drama set in a foreign land and much earlier time period appears. A stranger appears in a busy city, offering money. Residents accept it unquestioningly as their due. This displeases God himself, who summons explosive, fiery natural forces to bring their civilization to catastrophic conclusion. Now it is nothing but an abandoned, forgotten waste. What happened once, long ago, could repeat itself.

Is that a message for Abalone?

Buoyed by a strong, thoughtful script, superlative makeup, and spectacular special visual effects, 7 FACES OF DR. LAO both entertains and instructs remarkably well despite Tony Randall's oddball irritating inconsistencies of speech and many characters that are nothing more than stereotypes.

Lighting is adequate, sound a trifle hampered by deficiencies in delivery enunciation, again by the lead, who is asking too much of his makeup and too little of his own resourcefulness.

Barbara Eden's sultriness as an emotionally pent-up mother about to open the floodgates to passion is more than satisfying compensation.

A music score attempting to join pentatonic scales to bouncy cowboy rhythms and timbres produces mixed results, fascinating, yet a bit too weird to be totally convincing for necessary arcane atmosphere.

Aside from contributions of William Tuttle, Art Department craft is more acceptable than unique or inspired. The publisher's motorcycle clashes too severely with an antiquated printing press inside Cunningham's print shop, leaving viewers unsure of what decade is truly being represented. The time period is definitely prior to World War I, but how much earlier? Cars look too modern for 1900, possibly Edwardian. Is this intentional? Or incidental?

Nonetheless, the film gets under viewer skins, largely thanks to dialogues which thrust deeper than most productions into character motives and conflicts between internal desires and verbal statements. While life as a circus is hardly an original metaphor, this film gives it new potency by showing in full starkness freaks of behavior all humans exhibit or hide, suggesting what we say is often not truly what we mean. There's strong criticism of capitalism here, too. Should accumulation of money be the main purpose for living?

In suggesting an alternative, 7 FACES OF DR. LAO does a significant public service. It's well worth seeing and remembering for teens and adults. A secondary message that power is not always relative to size or aggressiveness is also well worth pondering.

Warner Archives provides a behind-the-scenes seven-minute documentary titled WILLIAM TUTTLE: KING OF DUPLICATORS. Its dvd release contains a three-minute theatrical trailer for 7 FACES OF DR. LAO, scene selections, and a smattering of data about Tony Randall and George Pal. Subtitles and notice of William Tuttle's Special Oscar® for his makeup achievement here are also included.