

Evil Under the Blu-Ray

Why are Agatha Christie movies so bad?

September 15, 2020 Michael Giltz

Kenneth Branagh's new version of Agatha Christie's *Death On The Nile* ostensibly hits theaters this October with an ALL-STAR cast, as movies of this sort do. Annette Bening! Armie Hammer! Gal Gadot! And of course Branagh the self-satisfied Belgian sleuth, Hercule Poirot! It follows 2017's *Murder On The Orient Express*, Branagh's massively successful reboot with another all-star cast.

Commercially-successful reboot, that is. Like most big screen adaptations of Agatha Christie, Branagh overstuffing his *Murder*, and it overlooked the main appeal of Christie's work: her sleuths. You don't return to 221-B Baker Street for the eccentric characters peopling each adventure, however colorful they may be. You return to spend time with Holmes and Watson. You don't pop into the brownstone at West 35th Street in Manhattan to find out whodunit. You return to dine on gourmet meals with Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. And Agatha Christie's most enduring creations are not her clever twists on murder; they're the quietly inquisitive Miss Marple and the understandably egotistical Hercule Poirot.

Those two are perfect for the small screen, where the likes of Joan Hickson and David Suchet have embodied them to perfection. Murderers come and go but it's the comforting, cozy, enduring presence of the sleuths, those keen analysts of human nature who Explain It All in satisfying detail, that warm the hearts of murder mystery buffs. Someone always dies, but it's never anyone you really know or care about. Brew a cuppa and enjoy.

Yet Hollywood can't leave poor Christie alone. It's been adapting her books, poorly, since 1928. Christie said only two of the dozens and dozens of movies based on her work got it right. The 1957 stand-alone courtroom drama *Witness For The Prosecution* is a clockwork device that runs smoothly. And 1974's version of *Murder On The Orient Express*, directed by Sidney Lumet, enjoys the tremendous benefit of being based on a novel that's fiendishly satisfying in its construction. In it, Christie gently subverts the classic murder mystery by finding the perfect solution for a crime that's audacious, amusing and wonderful all at the same time.

It's a comfort to know Christie died in 1976, just after Lumet's ALL-STAR version played to massive acclaim, Oscar wins and boffo box office. She passed away before producers John Brabourne and Richard Goodwin followed that platinum success with the brass, lead and tin grosses of three more Christie adaptations: 1978's *Death On The Nile*, 1980's *The Mirror Crack'd* and 1982's *Evil Under The Sun*.

Thanks to Branagh making a killing with *Orient Express* (sue me), all three are newly available on BluRay in nice prints from Kino Lorber. In particular, Kino presents *Nile* in a well-done restoration. But all three look good, feature modest extras (*Nile* and *Evil Under the Sun* feature bland promo material generated at the time) and enthusiastic audio commentary from film historians Howard S. Berger, Steven Mitchell and Nathaniel Thompson.

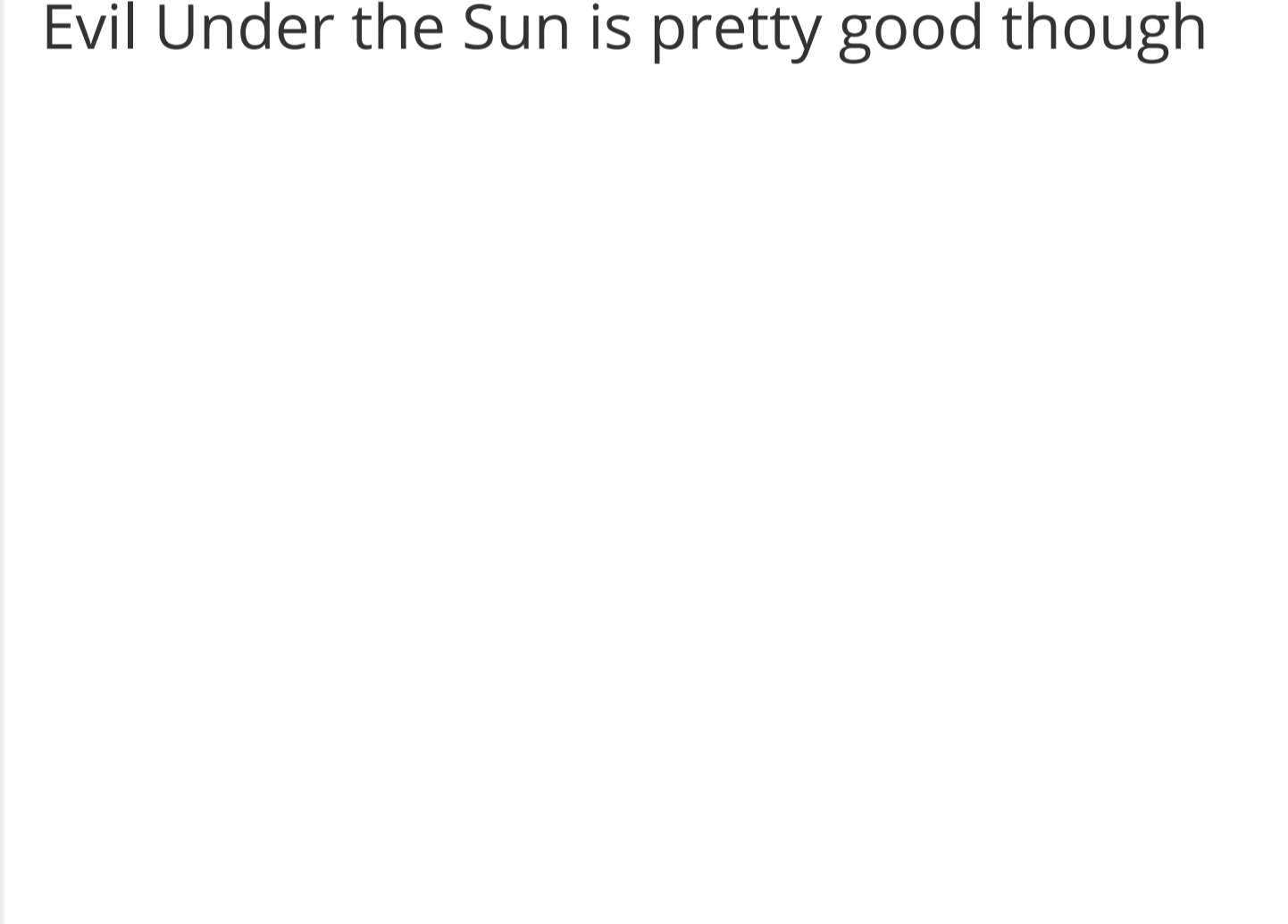
Nile in particular is hard to rent or even stream online, so if you're inclined to buy it, jump. But beware: it's also the least satisfying. Whereas *Orient Express* has the most enjoyable solution of them all, *Death On The Nile's* murder plot is nonsense.

Starring Olivia Hussey and Jack Warden

Unless you're one of those obsessive people who jot down clues and expect to solve the mystery before the sleuth, most people don't really care how a crime is committed. A murder can strain credulity as long as the characters are engaging and the detecting fun. But *Nile's* solution is idiotic and only works if everyone on a tiny paddle ship cruising up the Nile agree to stay put when shots ring out and then helpfully pile onto one side of the ship while the killer tip toes away on the other, to name just one plot hole. A dark twist at the end can't rescue it.

They fill the cast with stars, but definitely of *The Love Boat* variety, mainly older actors just before or well past or never in their prime. I'm thinking of you Bette Davis, Olivia Hussey, David Niven, Mia Farrow, Jack Warden and Peter Ustinov filling in for Albert Finney as Poirot. The costumes by Anthony Powell are eye-stirring, I guess, and won an Oscar. His win is only slightly less mysterious than Powell's victory six years earlier for the equally dreadful film *Travels With My Aunt*, which absurdly beat out *The Godfather* and *Lady Sings With The Blues*. Now that's criminal.

The Taylor Crack'd



Sensing the well would soon run dry after *Nile's* indifferent reception, the producers jumped ship. They launched a new franchise with *The Mirror Crack'd*, this time with Angela Lansbury as the pleasantly perceptive Miss Marple. A la Christie's novels, Marple spends most of the film inside her cottage or puttering around in the garden, missing nothing, asking sharp questions and figuring out the killer before be-stirring herself to finally confront the villain. It's very faithful and very dull.

The only pleasure is found in Elizabeth Taylor's hammy turn as an aging movie star making a comeback. Taylor has one gloriously campy, cannily-acted scene. She spars with an investigator while gliding about in an all-white flowing caftan that fills up the room. Suddenly she is emotionally overwhelmed and falls into an hysterical monologue...until the investigator starts saying her lines along with her, clueing us into the fact that Taylor is quoting one of her old movies.

The fading star's pleasure over his fandom is only slightly shadowed by the fact that she's been found out. And when the man says he would have counseled Taylor to make her case in a more heartfelt, low-key manner, damned if she doesn't immediately do that without any sense of irony. The fact that a few doesn't completely steal the scene is a credit to Taylor's magnetism. A few catty moments from co-stars Tony Curtis, Kim Novak and Rock Hudson aside, the only reason to watch it is to spy on Lansbury prepping for *Murder, She Wrote's* Jessica Fletcher.

Evil Under the Sun is pretty good though

But here's one final mystery. Why is *Evil Under The Sun* so unexpectedly good? It's just as satisfying as the 1974 *Murder On The Orient Express* though no one noticed...at first. As the film buffs point out on their audio commentary, the movie became a staple on HBO, back when that pay channel played any film on an endless loop, sometimes three or four times a day for weeks.

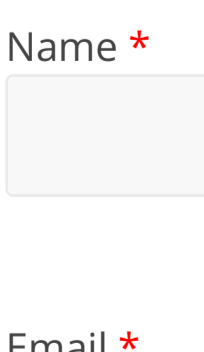
I'm pretty sure I saw it there for the first and second and seventh time, enjoying its old Hollywood camp, Ustinov's hamminess, and Powell's costumes. This time Powell really did deserve an Oscar nomination but didn't get it. The costumes aren't just lavish; they cleverly reveal character, like Roddy McDowall's queer and spoiled man-child of a sailor outfit. Powell's creations are also front and center for a jaw-dropping reveal at the end. Oh sure, any old film buff will see this moment coming a mile off but it's still great, sexy fun.

This time the stars are just that much livelier than before. Maggie Smith goofs around as a hotel proprietress with a yen for solving crime, Diana Rigg looks fabulous as her bitchy actress friend and James Mason glides through the sets without ever spilling a drop of his drink. The others are well cast, with Sylvia Miles asked to do no more than absolutely necessary and doing it well, while Nicholas Clay (*Lancelot in Excalibur*) looks indecently good in a dinner jacket or a skimpy bathing suit. At this point the cast feels like a rep company, since Smith and Jane Birkin and Ustinov are just two of the team back for another go-round, not to mention director Guy Hamilton and screenwriter Anthony Shaffer.

I've distracted you with these red herrings because the real reason *Evil Under The Sun* works is because the focus is always on Poirot, just as it would be in a long-running TV series. To be fair, director Hamilton of James Bond fame is much more on the ball here than *The Mirror Crack'd*. But Ustinov is what matters, offering a Poirot that is intelligent but more comical than Christie intended.

Mind you, Christie didn't like Poirot the way she liked Miss Marple. So she might approve of the way he's poked and prodded and punched and mocked and teased from start to finish. We never doubt Poirot's mental acuity. But Smith will roll her eyes when he prais himself. A gentleman will bash him in the face when Poirot is too pointed in his observations. And if no one is watching, the self-preserving Poirot will dip his toe into a too-cold ocean, shiver, mime swimming for a moment and then scurry back out again.

It's a delicious moment, capped later when someone wonders if he enjoyed his swim. Did you observe me, he asks quickly? Assured they haven't, Poirot disingenuously says it was rather refreshing. So is *Evil Under The Sun*, an under-appreciated film that proves adapting Poirot for the movies doesn't have to be a criminal waste of talent. But I fear Branagh will keep Poirot's silly moustache rather than the man front and center while steering his new film to commercial success. As with his *Orient Express*, sometimes crime does pay.



Tags: Agatha Christie, Angela Lansbury, Death on the Nile, Elizabeth Taylor, *Evil Under the Sun*, Gal Gadot, Hercule Poirot, Kenneth Branagh, Miss Marple, *Murder On The Orient Express*, Peter Ustinov, *The Mirror Crack'd*

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 Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast *Showbiz Sandbox*.

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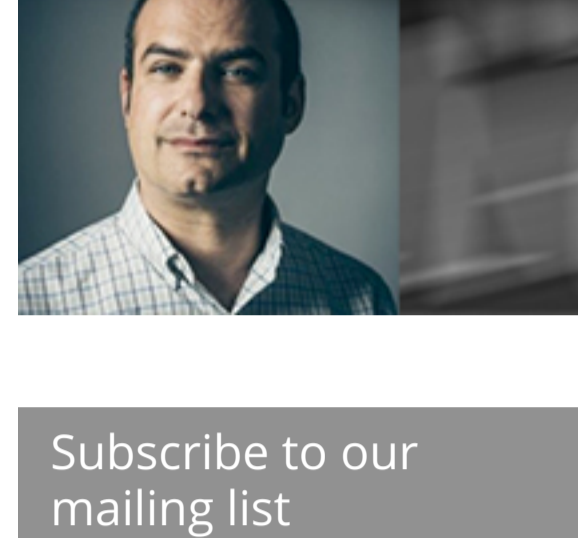


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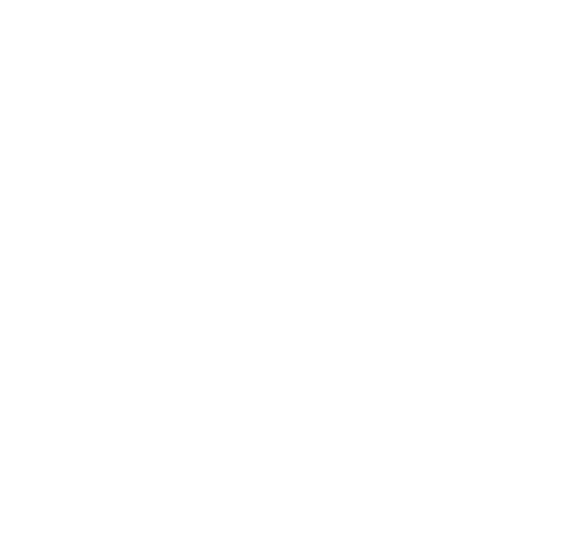
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