

Fitzcarraldo-1982: Where mad visions provide us with visions of madness....

This is a work of fiction I've seen three times, and the impact just gets better for me, each time. The idea for the story and the name came from a real person who actually lived at Iquitos, Peru, and who was a rubber baron in the eighteen-nineties.

I think Klaus Kinski (as the fictional Fitzcarraldo) was born to play the main role – although Werner Herzog considered taking up the role himself. But, no one could play an eccentric the way Kinski did in this film. It's not *Nosferatu* (1979), but the wide, staring eyes are looking at you, all the time, in the same spooky way.

Briefly, the story relates how Fitzcarraldo, an opera 'nut' in 1900 Peru, wants to make money by extracting rubber from the Amazonian rainforest. Why? Because he wants the money to finance efforts to bring opera to Iquitos and invite Caruso to the grand opening! How about that for moxie? That's nothing – because, when Fitz finds out that the only way to get to the rubber is to move his big boat over a mountain, well, what's a mountain when you gotta stage an opera? So, put aside Spencer Tracy's over-the-mountain efforts with boats in *Northwest Passage* (1940) – this is *Madman's Passage*, with a vengeance.

Only an eccentric of the most outrageous kind would dare to take a 340-ton ship, *Molly*, up the Amazon and then winch it over a mountain down to another river! Isn't that just one of the craziest things you've ever heard of? Well, the truth is Herzog actually did do that and simply used Kinski as his surrogate to prance around the mud and clay, with the local Indians. So, who should get the praise for a job well done? Kinski is magnificent in the role, but Herzog's there pulling the strings – so to speak. There were no special effects – the production team and the Indians actually pushed and pulled that hulk up a slope of hundreds of meters and then down to another river. When you see the extent of the cutting over the ridge, and the pulley system used, you can only shake your head and hope that real injuries were kept to the bare minimum.

So, who's *really* the crazy one: Herzog or the fictional Fitzcarraldo? Frankly, there's not another film I can readily think of that has such a self-referential aspect.

Never mind that, though: just see this movie for the lush, primeval jungles of South America; for the rich tones of Caruso (on a phonograph) wafting across water; for the stunning photography aboard the ill-fated *Molly*; for the antics of Kinski, as he thrashes around, pushing himself and others to the limits; for the army of local Indians, pulling the ship over the mountain; for the haunting sound-track provided by Popul Vuh, Herzog's perennial musical team of choice; and, of course, for the lovely Claudia Cardinale – past her prime but still remarkable...

I love this movie and I hope you do also. And, when you have seen it, then see *Burden of Dreams* (1982), the film that tells the story of the making of Fitzcarraldo. It's maybe better than the fiction....

Although Kinski is, sadly, no longer with us, Herzog is still cranking them out. Long may he do so.

Rating: 9

January 27, 2007

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