

A vintage movie poster for 'The Tomb of Ligelia'. The central focus is a woman's face, pale and serene, framed within a dark, ornate wooden coffin. The coffin is set against a dark, atmospheric background of a tomb interior, with faint outlines of stone carvings and a snake coiled around a column on the right. In the lower right corner, a man's face is shown in profile, looking upwards with a look of intense concern or fear. The title 'THE TOMB OF LIGELIA' is written in large, bold, stylized letters across the center, with 'THE' in a smaller font above 'TOMB', 'OF' in a smaller font between 'TOMB' and 'LIGELIA', and 'LIGELIA' in the largest font at the bottom. The overall color palette is dark and moody, with highlights in the woman's face and the man's features.

THE
TOMB
OF
LIGELIA

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TOMB of LIGEIA

CREW

Directed by ROGER CORMAN

Written by ROBERT TOWNE

Based on the Story by EDGAR ALLAN POE

Director of Photography ARTHUR GRANT

Original Music by KENNETH V. JONES

Edited by ALFRED COX

Art Direction by COLIN SOUTHCOTT

and DANIEL HALLER (uncredited)

Produced by PAT GREEN

CAST

VINCENT PRICE as Verden Fell

ELIZABETH SHEPHERD

as The Lady Rowena Trevanion / The Lady Ligeia

JOHN WESTBROOK as Christopher Gough

DEREK FRANCIS as Lord Trevanion

OLIVER JOHNSTON as Kenrick

RICHARD VERNON as Dr. Vivian

FRANK THORNTON as Peperel



THE LAST OF THE CORMAN-POES: EXCAVATING THE TOMB OF LIGEIA

by Julian Upton

In 1963, American-International Pictures' chief Samuel Z. Arkoff decided he could transport Roger Corman's Edgar Allan Poe films to the other side of the Atlantic "and not leave any of the terror behind".¹ AIP had been making movies in the UK for some years. Never ones to miss a fiscal opportunity, Arkoff and partner James H. Nicholson had eyed with great interest the establishment of the UK's Eady Levy, an exhibition tax that channelled a portion of the British box office returns from Hollywood movies to producers of British-made films. Like a lot of savvy US distributors, Arkoff and Nicholson realised they could get a piece of the Levy by setting up in Britain the same kind of movies they were making in America. Thus, AIP forged an alliance with Anglo-Amalgamated to make, among others, *Cat Girl* (1957), *Horrors of the Black Museum* (1959), *Circus of Horrors* (1960) and *Night of the Eagle* (1962). As well as qualifying for Levy money, Arkoff found to his liking that it was "easier to cut corners and pinch pennies in England".²

¹ Sam Arkoff (with Richard Trubo), *Flying through Hollywood by the Seat of My Pants* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1992), p. 139.

² *Ibid.*

It wasn't difficult to convince Corman of this benefit. Also serving as the Poe films' producer, Corman was even tighter with a buck than Arkoff. So the director duly travelled to London in late 1963 to make *The Masque of the Red Death*. *Masque* proved a great success as a film and a shooting experience; Corman was impressed with the high-quality actors and crews he found in England. He decided not just to stay in the country for his next film, but this time to explore its countryside, where an abundance of history and atmosphere lay just waiting to be Poe-ified.

Corman had the luxury of 25-day shoots in Britain, as opposed to the 15-day schedules he'd been used to in the US. Even with the slower pace of the British crews (and their fanatical adherence to tea breaks), the extra time opened up a wealth of possibilities for a director who worked as quickly as Corman. It would allow him a whole week's location shooting, as well as an extra week in the studio. So, after a breakneck recce of almost the entire British Isles in a hired Mini, Corman settled on Castle Acre Priory in Swaffham, Norfolk, as the setting for his new Poe film: *The Tomb of Ligeia*.

Ligeia is an early Poe story, published before the author's more famous works. An exquisite Gothic riff, it is narrated by an unnamed, opium-addled nobleman who retreats to the darkness of a ruined abbey in "one of the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England" after the death of his wife, the mysterious, raven-haired and preternaturally gifted Ligeia. A "moment of mental alienation" leads him to take a new bride, the blonde and blue-eyed Lady Rowena, a woman who could be Ligeia's antithesis. But, still morbidly obsessed with his lost love, the narrator pays little attention to Rowena. That is until she falls sick and, on her deathbed, appears to undergo a chilling metamorphosis before his very eyes.

Corman knew as he began shooting that *The Tomb of Ligeia* would be his last Poe film. It was his eighth, and he wanted to move onto newer, hipper projects. So he set out to bring a fresh style to the film, to mark it out from the others, to go out on a high. Where the previous Poe films were studio-bound, *The Tomb of Ligeia* takes to the open air, embracing the English countryside in widescreen tracking shots that follow the characters through the decorative ruins or tail them as they ride on horseback through rich, green fields. And where other, outdoor-shot horror movies might favour shadowy night shooting or portentous, gloomy weather, much of *The Tomb of Ligeia* is bathed in sunlight. Handsomely captured in Eastmancolor by cinematographer Arthur Grant, this amounts to a lush visual style. But it one that is essential in contrasting the brighter world of the feisty, vivacious Rowena (Elizabeth Shepherd) with the dark, tortured solipsism of Vincent Price's Verden Fell (as Poe's narrator is here named).

Rowena first encounters Verden after breaking away from her foxhunting party, which includes her father (Derek Francis) and suitor (John Westbrook). She finds herself instead more interested in exploring Verden's crumbling abbey, stopping to look upon the gravestone marked 'Ligeia', on top of which sits a snarling black cat. The cat leaps and knocks Rowena from her horse; she is then further startled when the imposing Verden steps into view.

Corman's outdoor shooting, while evoking a 'realistic' aesthetic, does not preclude a tightly controlled colour scheme in these scenes. The strawberry-blonde Rowena wears a riding habit of striking red velvet; Verden is clad in black and, bizarrely, sports futuristic, blinkered sunglasses to combat his "morbid reaction to light". She has an open appetite for life; he occupies a gloomy world of his own.



Verden shows kindness to Rowena, however, taking her into his home to bandage the ankle that she injures in the fall. She is intrigued by this enigmatic man; her face betrays a quizzical, flirtatious look. Where her young suitor, Christopher, is safe and dull, Verden is brooding and artistic. Before long, Rowena, who's both drawn to and unnerved by Verden, has fallen in love with him.

In its first few minutes, then, *The Tomb of Ligeia* presents major creative diversions from Poe's original story and a level of complexity not generally associated with Corman's previous films. A fair portion of the credit must go to the screenplay by Robert Towne. Towne would later make his name as the hotshot writer of *Chinatown* (1974) and become a leading light of the 1970s New Hollywood wave, but it's clear from *The Tomb of Ligeia* that he was already taking pains over his scripts even when he was working for peanuts.

Towne's characterisation of Rowena, for example, alters the dynamic of the story. Poe's Rowena is an empty shell, easily overtaken by the spirit of Ligeia. But here Rowena will fight back (while she is surprised by the black cat at the start of the film, she is not frightened by it). She comes to see it as her role to save the weaker Verden from the heavy burden of his involuntary obsession with his dead wife. She is independent and headstrong, the Corman Poe films' first feminist.

As Rowena, Elizabeth Shepherd is not unlike a Hitchcock blonde, exuding a sophisticated allure that would have had Alfred bouncing in his director's chair. And she portrays *both* Rowena and Ligeia, just as Kim Novak played *femme fatale* Madeleine and the dowdy 'Judy Barton' in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). Critics have long acknowledged *The Tomb of Ligeia*'s link to *Vertigo* — the scene where the black cat/Ligeia lures Rowena into danger at the top of the abbey's bell tower,

for example, boils over with *hommage*. But the idea of a morbid but romantic obsession driving a man to project the ghost of an idolised love onto his current surroundings is so strongly expressed in Poe's original story that it might be fairer to say that *Vertigo* owes a debt to *Ligeia*. Also, Rowena's hair is tinged with red, and this is significant in terms of the film's colour scheme. Her recklessness and wilfulness exasperate the men around her, but these qualities fortify her against the taunting of Ligeia's spirit.

Shepherd gives the best performance in the film. When she is hypnotised by Verden during a parlour game and suddenly begins to channel Ligeia, it is the film's most chilling scene. (Mesmerism is a clever, reality-altering replacement for the opium of the original story.) Vincent Price is also effective; he's less hammy than usual, more restrained, guarded and beguiling. But, at 53, he is rather old to be playing the tragic-romantic protagonist; Towne, certainly, was against his casting. But AIP would only put up the money if Price was on board. And Corman had faith in his star, even if he tries to make him look younger by furnishing him with a black, wavy wig. The makeup fails, really, to knock many years off him — throughout his 30-year horror career Price always seemed to nudging 60 — but we can accept that a beautiful, unconventional woman like Rowena could fall for him; his cultivated presence, as always, has an elevating effect.

Price, of course, was one of the 'safe', tried-and-tested ingredients that Corman was prepared to retain from the previous Poe films. Another is the obsession with fire. But one suspects a major reason for staging *The Tomb of Ligeia*'s climactic inferno was so that Corman could once again re-use the footage of a burning barn he shot for *House of Usher* five years earlier. As Corman-school graduate Joe



Dante observes in his overview of the film on the website Trailers from Hell, “Those stone castles really can burn!”

Burning stone notwithstanding, *The Tomb of Ligeia* was released to great acclaim at the end of 1964. Corman was heartened to see it draw the best reviews not just of all his Poe films, but of his entire career. The *Los Angeles Times* (22 January, 1965) praised the film’s “fluid camerawork, first-rate color, sumptuous period sets and impassioned performance from Vincent Price”, while the UK’s *Times* (3 December, 1964) got very excited, calling it “a film which could without absurdity be spoken of in the same breath as [Jean] Cocteau’s *Orphée* [1950]”. Even the esteemed David Thomson later wrote that, of all Corman’s work, “*The Tomb of Ligeia*, at least, is worthy of a place in the history of screen horror”.³

AIP’s Sam Arkoff, on first seeing the finished movie, had concluded that it was just another “good picture, with enough sadomasochism, necrophilia, and black magic to appeal to the tastes of even the most aberrant moviegoers”. He was “stunned” by the gushing notices.⁴

Such acclaim surely helped convince Arkoff and Nicholson to continue milking the Poe theme, even without Corman’s involvement. So AIP foisted the title of a Poe poem (*The Conqueror Worm*, which also turns up in the *Ligeia* story) onto Michael Reeves’ *Witchfinder General* (1968) for its US release, and had star Vincent Price read the poem over the opening credits. Next, the studio served up a more legitimate, if less inspired, adaptation of Poe’s work, Gordon



³ David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (London: André Deutsch, 1995), p. 149.

⁴ Arkoff, p. 142.





Hessler's *The Oblong Box* (1969). But Hessler's follow-up, *Cry of the Banshee* (1970), only references an unrelated Poe poem, *The Bells*, in its title sequence. This didn't stop AIP's poster from screaming in huge letters, 'EDGAR ALLAN POE probes new depths of TERROR!'

This was all just typical AIP ballyhoo; these later efforts don't detract from the achievements of the earlier movies. The Corman–Poe film cycle remains the finest interpretation of Poe's literary *oeuvre* on the big screen, and it arguably reached its apogee with *The Tomb of Ligeia*.

*Julian Upton is the author of **Fallen Stars** (2004) and editor of **Offbeat: British Cinema's Curiosities, Obscurities and Forgotten Gems** (2012).*

ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Tomb of Ligeia is presented in its original aspect ratio with original mono audio. The HD master was created by MGM and delivered by Hollywood Classics. Additional picture restoration work was carried out at Deluxe Restoration, London under the supervision of Arrow Video.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield
Co-Producer: Michael Brooke

Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni

Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje

Technical Supervisor: James White

QC and Proofing: Michael Brooke, Anthony Nield

Authoring and Subtitling: David Mackenzie

Artwork: Twins of Evil

Design: Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Kenn Goodall, Scott Grossman, Luke Insect,
Kenneth V. Jones, Stephen Jones, Bob Jordan, Alistair Leach,
Paul Mayersberg, James McCabe, Jennifer Rome, Melanie Tebb,
David Tringham, Julian Upton





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