



the movies
Louise Snider

Weird characters hang out together in 'The Howling'

What a howl. "The Howling" (R) that is a tale about werewolves and the intrepid female newscaster (is there any other line of employment for a movie heroine?) who breaks the story about a booming werewolf population to viewers who couldn't care less. The little inside jokes and microflashes of wit in this movie might redeem it from the junk heap of horror shock if it weren't for a few other things.

The situations, for example, are so cliché-ridden they are a joke. Yet, it's hard to believe they were intended that way because they sap the movie of any scare power.

"The Howling" is replete with ominous-sounding organ chords, shots of the moon peering through clouds, a dark forest and a heroine, who, though a television newscaster, ranks a couple of rungs below Little Red Riding Hood when it comes to naivete.

DEE WALLACE plays the slim-witted reporter who uses herself as bait to trap the man suspected of a series of grisly murders. Their meeting occurs in a porno shop, and she narrowly escapes with her life when the police trailing her lose radio contact.

She survives, but her memory of what her assailant looked like has been blocked from her conscious mind. (We get a quick glimpse, however, and we know he needed a haircut desperately.) She turns for help to a psychiatrist, Patrick MacVee. We spot him as a smooth, suspicious character. Of course, she thinks he's terrific. When he suggests a rest cure at an isolated colony he runs for his "special patients," she and her husband accept.

The doctor's colony is less a funny farm than a weirdo wonderland where peculiar howls are heard every night. Her husband (Christopher Stone) reassures her. They're just animals, he says. Having been brought up in Los Angeles, she is not used to anything wilder than Wolfman Jack, he tells her (ha, ha).

EVEN SO, this retreat is not filled with your usual Club Med crowd. There's John Carradine trying to throw himself into a bonfire and braying at the moon, a nymphomaniac who likes to chop up rabbits; her brother who has a decidedly wolfish grin, and for good of home-country balance, Sheriff Slim Pickens. You know you can trust him, can't you?

When one of Dee's colleagues (Belinda Balaski) shows up at the colony to do some investigating of her own, there is a little bit of confusion as to who is the heroine of this movie.

With the help of the werewolves, this problem is resolved. Things begin to sort themselves out, but not before we get the idiot speech of the year. MacVee lectures his werewolf patients on the need to integrate with the locals and adapt to changing tipes. They don't buy this.

"The Howling's" claim to fame is not in sociology, however. It's in special effects. Right before your very eyes, a human changes into a werewolf — a dark, ugly, fangome beast that seems to perspire a lot, or maybe it's just slathering.

Having gotten the hang of this transformation, the moviemakers repeat it again and again right up to an inconclusive ending, so that, you bet, they just might try to howl again.



Comedies held over

(Above) Gary Coleman makes his movie debut as a free-spirited orphan in the comedy fable "On the Right Track." Michael Lerner co-stars as a juvenile services officer who becomes the boy's surrogate father. Jerry Lewis (below) is an out-of-work circus clown romancing Donna Lund in the slapstick comedy "Hardly Working." Both films are holding over at metropolitan Detroit theaters.



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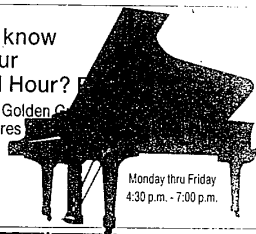
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