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MOVIE NEWS

DUST DEVIL (The Final Cut) - 1992 South African Cult Film on DVD



Subversive Cinema's long-awaited director's cut of *Dust Devil* (1992) delivers five discs (including soundtrack) and plenty of food for thought. The making of *Dust Devil*, its various versions and writer/director Richard Stanley are subjects as fascinating as the film itself. But first, the movie:

Dust Devil (The Final Cut) is a rich, eerie ride through an Africa not often seen in film and through an even less charted land -- that of spirits, demons and magic. The borders of the two regions blur in this truly epic tale of divine punishment and destiny that ties, as in the most ancient stories, destruction to creation, with the monster and victim suffering alike as part of the same plan. In this case, a demonic and handsome traveler, Hitch (Robert Burke), is drawn to souls who have already sought their own end with thoughts of suicide and does them in with ritualistic thoroughness. Detective Ben Mukurob (Zakes Mokae) is called in to investigate the string of gruesome murders. But Ben himself becomes haunted by strange dreams involving his dead son and his wife, who left him. His involvement in the case becomes increasingly personal as the otherworldly aspects of the crimes pull him into their web, and his own pain and guilt for his son's death push him towards a place of desperation. Ultimately, the *Dust Devil*'s final victim/lover, Wendy (Chelsea Field), a woman who has fled her failed marriage, joins Ben in a showdown with Hitch. Their O.K. Corral is an incredibly desolate place -- a forgotten mining town in the desert, which has to win the prize for coolest film set ever.

The storyline in *Dust Devil* is inspired by the South African lore of the shape-shifter or Nagtloper. In the '80s, a series of ritualized murders in Namibia went unsolved when the main suspect had his head blown off and could not be identified. Local belief is that the real murderer was something other than human, a magician allied with the wind. The story is a personal one for Stanley, who became a suspect in the real-life investigation when he found himself one step behind the actual murderer, after deserting the South African army and fleeing into Namibia's blighted Bethany district, where the killings took place. In childhood Stanley had been haunted by dreams of a dark man with a hat, the inspiration for Hitch. The dreams, and his proximity to the real events, brought him back to the area at the tender age of 18 with a few friends and a 16mm camera, netting the first version of *Dust Devil*. Even during production of the 35mm version (which deserves a feature-length "making-of") he was haunted by the dreams and spooked in other respects as well. South African mythology and a predilection for the unexplainable

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Kansas City Confidential - Available 7/10!

To commit the perfect crime, a former detective keeps his colleagues' identities secret from each other in this classic 1953 film noir starring John Payne, Coleen Gray & Preston Foster.

come naturally to Stanley, who was raised in South Africa by a mother who populated his childhood with witch doctors and shamans while writing a book on the areas myths and legends.

Dust Devil is a film in which the land is a main character, since nature, both good and bad, is what propels the humans and demon alike. Like the monster hitchhiker, who is locked into his destiny, the victims too are set on their path by forces greater than them all, and the setting makes the supernatural seem very possible. Shot entirely on location in the Namib Desert (known as the oldest desert in the world) the terrain is massive, desolate and lovely. The Germanic imprint on the area stands in stark relief against the desert moonscape -- misplaced-looking towns seem to have been dropped there or grown up, inexplicably, through the sand. In this context, all of the film's characters are like aliens, stumbling through a land (both spiritual and material) that they do not understand and cannot control.

The film's cast and crew suffered similarly during production: mental and physical collapse, missing equipment, break-ins, supplies that never arrive and the forces of the Namib itself. Unfortunately, the shoot's aftermath was no better. With funds gone, there was no traditional post production, since there was no money to reassemble the cast for dialog looping or to put in originally planned special effects. In an interview included with the DVD, Stanley explains the nightmare of editing: "...Getting it to the stage where you can actually watch it pretty much destroyed my life at the time... At the end of the process I was homeless, I was single and I was \$45,000 into the red on my credit card." For his struggles, Stanley did deliver a 120-minute version of the film to Palace Pictures. But the company was sliding into bankruptcy, cut the film to 95 minutes and relinquished British distribution rights to Polygram, who shelved it. Miramax, the U.S. distributors, had the right to re-edit and exercised it, cutting the film to an 88-minute version, which bore little resemblance to the original and assured a miserable U.S. release. After spending years tracking down the ownership of the original print, Stanley invested more of his own funds to restore it to the 103-minute version in this DVD release.




Watching **Dust Devil**, one might suppose that this promising young filmmaker (Stanley was 25 during production) would have been on his way to an illustrious string of high-profile features. But his next narrative film was *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996), a project he spent years developing, only to be fired after four days. So maybe it's not surprising that the particular Stanley, who has thankfully written screenplays for two recent features, *The Abandoned* (2006) and *Stray* (2006), took a different path. He explains: "Long before I was a filmmaker I was an anthropologist and physiologist, and my initial desire was to move into some area of psychobiology. Since the events of **Dust Devil** and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, I've kind of returned to my roots." The three documentaries included in this set get down to Stanley's true interest -- the nexus between spirituality and culture: *The Secret Glory*, a 97-minute piece on the life of Otto Rahn, a Nazi poet and writer who was obsessed with finding the Holy Grail; *Voices of the Moon*, shot in Afghanistan in the late '80s; and *White Darkness*, a BBC-commissioned documentary on Voodoo in Haiti. All three films, though varying in degrees of polish, are worth a watch and further cement Richard Stanley as one of the most inquisitive and interesting filmmakers of our time. All told, this five-disc set is a mind-blowing collection not to be missed.

For more information about **Dust Devil**, visit Subversive Cinema. To order **Dust Devil**, go to TCM Shopping.



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by Emily Soares

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