



BY STEVEN X. REA

NASTASSIA KINSKI doesn't like what she's been reading about herself lately, particularly the business that began after *Tess* regarding her "uncanny," "eerie" and "remarkable" resemblance to the young Ingrid Bergman. "I really don't look like her at all," insists the 21-year-old Berlin-born actress about the sad-eyed screen star of *Casablanca*, *Spellbound* and *Notorious*. Still, as she ambles idly through the cold, stoney, Gothic set of a 1901 New Orleans zoo on Stage 27 at Universal Studios, kicking the toe of one penny loafer against the heel of her other, dressed in a simple skirt-and-sweater combo, her hair cropped short and straight, the similarities are hard to ig-

cat people

Fifties Horror Classic Mutates Anew

nore. Amidst the zoo's ominous dreamscape of bas-relief animal scenes, giant statues of perched panthers and urine-stained cages with real live baboons and cats nervously pacing within, Nastassia Kinski exudes something of the same quiet, innocent sexuality that became such a box office boon for the Swedish actress in the Forties (but which Nastassia uses to minimal advantage in *One from the Heart*).

And it's that look of innocent sexuality — whether it recalls Ingrid Bergman or not — that is what Nastassia Kinski's character in *Cat People* is all about. Directed by Paul Schrader (*American Gigolo*, *Hardcore*, *Blue Collar*) and co-starring Malcolm McDowell, John Heard, Annette O'Toole and Ruby Dee, *Cat People* draws its inspiration from Val Newton's 1942 yarn of the same name, a low-budget scarie about a woman (Simone Simon) who could turn herself into a panther. But, as Schrader is quick to point out, his version is anything but a remake. In fact, only one scene — the dark, creepy swimming bath episode — remains from the original.

Kinski is Irena, a bright, lonely girl, an orphan whose family history is shrouded in mystery. She discovers that she has a brother in New Orleans — Paul (McDowell), a minister for some vague pentecostal sect — and travels there to live with him and his housekeeper (Ruby Dee). McDowell, as it turns out, is a cat person with strong sexual urges towards his young sister; John Heard, who plays Oliver, an official at the zoo, falls in love with Nastassia; while Nastassia, attracted to Heard, discovers that she's a cat person as well. The upshot of all this being that the transformation from human to ferocious feline is sparked by sexual desire; the metamorphosis is some sort of symbolic manifestation of a fearsome primeval passion — sex that literally turns man into an animal. As Paul, trying to seduce his virginal sibling, tells Irena: "Each time it happens you tell yourself it's love, but it isn't. It's blood. It's death. And you can't be free from the nightmare, except with me. And I with you. I've waited so long for you."

Pretty silly stuff, all right, but the way

Nastassia Kinski sees it, it's also a disarmingly simple "love story." As she waits between takes for Schrader and cinematographer John Bailey (*American Gigolo*, *Ordinary People*) to work out the moves of an elaborate tracking shot, Kinski leans against one of the empty zoo cages and talks about the sensuality of cats and how humans have a cat-like side to their nature. "This film is really about sexual awakening, and about true love. About bringing out the cat in us all," she says.

As for Schrader — an intensely serious film critic-turned-filmmaker whose worldview has been shaped by a strict Calvinist upbringing and years immersed in the flickering, shadowy recesses of movie theaters — he likes to refer to *Cat People* as his "fun" movie. "Not fun in terms of a movie like *Arthur*," Schrader explains, sitting in his Prowler trailer (the Prowler logo, coincidentally, is a cat), "but fun like a play can be fun. We're not dealing with terribly important issues here — I mean, they are terribly important but we're not making a 'statement' that has to be dealt with."

Schrader confesses that he's not exactly sure how to categorize *Cat People*: "To tell you the truth, I don't quite know what genre I'm working in at this point. Certainly it's not a horror genre because it fulfills none of the needs and has very few of the premises of that. It's not a monster genre because it doesn't intend to work at that level. So, it's more on a level of erotic fantasy, with a few elements of horror and monstrosity thrown in, but not to the extent where they define the movie.

"It's nothing terribly profound," he continues, "it's just an exploration into sexual fantasy. Why these certain images hold sway over us — you know, white horses and black panthers — that Jungian stuff. These images and feelings that seem to be inbred into the race. *Cat People* just has fun playing with those elements."

Some of Schrader's "fun" includes a prologue set in a surreally orange desert that establishes the legend of the cat people via a tribal sacrifice of a 5-year-old girl. Schrader, grinning, calls his opening sequence "a lot of mystical hokey and mumbo jumbo." Then there's the scene where Ed Begley, Jr., who plays one of Heard's zookeepers, starts washing down a panther's cage singing "What's New Pussycat." What's new is that the pussycat's about to have Begley for lunch.

Certainly, *Cat People* is a departure for Schrader. For one thing, it's the first film he's directed that isn't based on his own screenplay. Alan Ormsby (*My Bodyguard*) gets the credit for the *Cat People* writing job, though Schrader reports that the movie he's finishing up is "80 percent or more different than the script I was first handed." (Schrader says that both he and Ormsby handled the rewrites.) As for just being the hired-on director, "Initially it was liberating," he explains,

"because I didn't feel like it was my story or that I was a participant in the film. But as I became more involved in the story and found that in fact I was a participant, I began to rewrite it more. I began to relate to John Heard's character, so I expanded his role tremendously. Now I feel quite proprietary, quite personal about the film in a way I didn't when I began."

Cat People also marks a major departure in style and mood for the filmmaker. Gone is the hyper-psychothic energy that permeated his script of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. Gone is the downbeat, dour realism of *Blue Collar*, the languid high-tech tones of *American Gigolo*. Along with cinematographer Bailey and famed production designer Ferdinando Scarfiotti (*The Conformist*, *Death in Venice*), Schrader has shaped a rich, illusory vision that resonates like some come-to-life Symbolist painting.

"It's far more non-verbal than anything I've done before," says Schrader. "It is not realistic, it is not street-oriented. It finds its truth in sexual fable and myth and fantasy. It's more magical, more stylized. The narrative is defined within a kind of dream logic."

Scarfiotti, who designed the spectacular vine-tangled Victorian zoo and who, according to Schrader, practically authored the opening desert scene and Nastassia Kinski's dream sequence, was in fact essential to Schrader's character concept. "He was in my contract. When I agreed to do the movie I put in a clause saying that if they didn't have him I didn't have to do the movie.

"I don't know what film buffs are going to make of this movie," muses Schrader as he puts on a blue blazer and heads back to the soundstage. "It's going to be very hard for them to make comparisons because there are different characters, different settings, different scenes, a different plot. But the title's the same," he laughs. "All of which is fine by me, since I never had any intention of remaking the original anyway."

Probably because he is one himself, Schrader seems especially concerned with "film buffs" and critics and their various reactions to his efforts. At Universal's Alfred Hitchcock theater, where Schrader was overseeing the dubbing of some last minute scenes, prints of some new matte effects for the desert prologue were screened. Joked Schrader, as he studied the exotic panorama on screen: "Now I have to think of some horrible story for the press. How it took us two long, terrible weeks in Morocco to get this sequence. How the Assistant Director was kidnapped and we were trapped in the mountains by a band of guerilla soldiers."

Whatever the press and the public's reaction to *Cat People*, Schrader is proud of his \$13 million erotic fantasy. "I've used this opportunity to heighten, to improve my ability to tell stories visually rather than literarily. And I think I've got a winning hand."

Nastassia Kinski and Malcolm McDowell (left) as brother and sister with more than the usual sibling ties. . . .

