

Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein

By Ron Palumbo

“Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein” would probably be the last film anyone would think of as divisive or controversial. But one of its stars hated the script; one regretted doing it; another horror icon refused to see it; theater exhibitors complained about it; censors edited it; and horror fans reviled it.

Even so, “Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein” was an instant hit when it was released, and has remained a perennial favorite from its 1959 debut on television and 8mm home movies, through VHS, laser disc and Blu-ray releases. It is easily the most famous of the comedy team’s 35 films. In addition to the National Registry, it is part of the American Film Institute’s 100 Years, 100 Laughs as well as “Reader’s Digest” list of the funniest movies of all time. It’s as mandatory at Halloween as “A Christmas Story” and “It’s a Wonderful Life” are at Christmas. It counts among its fans Elvis Presley, Jerry Garcia, Robert DeNiro, Judd Apatow and John Landis. Comedians in both Mexico and Egypt produced virtual shot-by-shot remakes.

Some horror purists spurn the film as an ignoble end to the monsters. Lon Chaney, Jr., who played the Wolf Man, later rued it. Apologists suggest that it is a standalone film not related to others in the series. While it doesn’t exactly fit the story continuity of Universal’s franchises, neither do the “serious” entries where the monsters were killed off and resurrected as needed. It is also more respectful to the horror icons than many of its predecessors, and allows the monsters more screen time by fully integrating them into the story.

Universal’s horror franchise began in 1931 with two enormous hits that saved the studio during the Depression — Bela Lugosi in “Dracula” and Boris Karloff in “Frankenstein.” “The Wolf Man,” starring Lon Chaney, Jr., joined the roster in 1941. But too many sequels, rehashed plots and the real-life horrors of the war eroded their impact. The 1943 concoction “Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man” showed that by then neither monster could carry a film on its own.

Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were the studio’s sensation and saviors in 1941. “Buck Privates” and a string of quickly made hits kept the duo among the Top 10 box office stars throughout the war. But seventeen films in only six years eroded their impact as well, and the boys slipped to 20th place in 1946. That year, Universal merged with International



Bud Abbott and Lou Costello encounter Frankenstein (Glenn Strange), the Wolf Man (Lon Chaney, Jr.) and Dracula (Bela Lugosi). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Pictures and many contract players were dropped. But Abbott and Costello, the only Universal stars on the box office list, were secure.

Producer Robert Arthur suggested rebooting the team by revisiting their early triumphs. When “Buck Privates Come Home” helped the boys rebound to 16th place in 1947, Universal signed the team for an additional seven years. Arthur considered another early smash, “Hold That Ghost” (1941), which leveraged Costello’s priceless “scare” take to great reviews and profits. Arthur suggested exponentially multiplying the fright quotient by pairing the boys with the Frankenstein Monster, who had been idle since 1945. That notion wasn’t new; in 1942 Bud and Lou made “It Ain’t Hay” while “Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man” was in production, and the team mused about doing a Broadway show with the Monster, Dracula, and the Wolf Man. The logistics quashed that idea, but moviegoers saw the possibilities when both films played on double bills nationwide.

Screenwriters Robert Lees and Fred Rinaldo, who wrote “Hold That Ghost” and “Buck Privates Come Home,” were put on the project. They thought it was, in Lee’s words, “the greatest idea for a comedy that ever was.” Their wry title, “The Brain of Frankenstein,” implied a straight horror film and was softened to “Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein” during production. The new name also saved money on advertising: the title said it all.

Many assumed it would ridicule the genre, and Boris Karloff wouldn’t see the film. But Lees and Rinaldo avoided the hackneyed, and crafted a tight, plausible monster plot to give Bud and Lou something dangerous—better yet, terrifying—to play off. As a self-reflective satire of Universal’s horror films,

“Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein” references all of the genre’s familiar conventions and brilliantly exploits the brain transplant trope for its linchpin. It not only merges two of Universal’s signature franchises, but goes further by literally trying to merge Costello with the Monster. Abbott’s incredulity, meanwhile, stops short of meta-cinema scoffing that monsters exist only in movies, and preserves the credibility of these horror icons.

The monsters wouldn’t be effective, however, without the authentic gravitas of the legitimate icons in the roles. Bela Lugosi plays his signature character for only the second time and, owing to seventeen years of film acting experience in the interim, is arguably better here than in the original. Lon Chaney, Jr., was the only actor to portray the tormented Larry Talbot, who nobly warns everyone about his alter ego, the Wolf Man. Since Boris Karloff vowed never to appear as the Monster after “Son of Frankenstein” (1939), the honors again defaulted to Glenn Strange, who played the role as often as Karloff. (Technically, he shares the part in this film: Chaney put on the Monster make-up to toss the doctor through the lab window after Strange broke his ankle on an earlier take.)

It’s no secret that Lou Costello hated the script. “My daughter could write a better script than this,” he told Robert Arthur. “You’re not serious about making it, are you?” Arthur had so much confidence in the screenplay that he offered to buy Costello’s portion of future profits. The deal fell through because of the tax laws and Lou never received any advance. Costello remained stubborn and required coaxing to do iconic scenes like the Moving Candle or sit in the Monster’s lap.

Robert Bloch, the author of “Psycho,” said that horror and comedy are two sides of the same coin. Both require the same suspension of disbelief. Comedians and monsters are transgressors, and we live vicariously through both. Both are indestructible; monsters are “killed,” but rise again, while comedians are routinely placed in peril with impunity. Alfred Hitchcock, James Whale and Quentin Tarantino use laughter to release tension in their thrillers, and the skilled filmmakers behind “Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein” knew that comedy thrives on incongruity and juxtaposition.

The film is a rite of passage for children as an introduction to one of the great comedy teams and the classic monsters. Kids crave stories about monsters, and being scared is an important part of maturing. At their most basic level, monsters represent our fears of the surrounding world. For generations of kids, the

film has served as a safe way to experience and subvert those fears. Yet in its day, the film was not so child-friendly. The animated opening credits are deceptively reassuring, but Frank Skinner’s score and Charles Barton’s atmospheric direction quickly change the mood. Roger Ebert wrote that as a kid, the film “scared the shit out of us.” Theater owners complained about crying kids, screaming women and walkouts. The Legion of Decency rated it for adults. It was banned in Finland, and Australian censors excised every scene featuring a monster. Perhaps it was so potent because kids strongly identify with Costello, who is so frightened that he cannot form words and sees things that Abbott, the parent figure, reflexively dismisses. Costello’s ultimate vindication is a vindication for kids, too.

It’s also a touchstone for contemporary writers, actors and directors. Quentin Tarantino cites it as one of his three most influential films: “I literally thought, ‘Wow this is the greatest movie ever — my two favorite types of movies in one. When it’s scary, it’s really scary, and when it’s funny, it’s really funny. And I guess I’ve been trying to do that my whole career.’” It paved the way for such horror comedies as “The Fearless Vampire Killers,” “Young Frankenstein,” “Ghostbusters,” “Gremlins,” “An American Werewolf in London,” “Evil Dead II,” “Shaun of the Dead,” and “Zombieland.”

With a final cost of \$793,000, the film was the studio’s second cheapest production of 1948 but its third highest grossing film at \$3.2 million. The team vaulted back to the upper reaches of the Top 10 box office list again, where they remained through 1951, and met, with diminishing returns, the Invisible Man, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the Mummy and, on live TV, the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

There was no expectation that the film would revive the passé horror characters, and Lugosi and Chaney did not see any renewed interest in their work. But far from killing off the monsters, “Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein” has helped keep them alive for generations. Universal now plans to reboot its monster stable as its answer to the Marvel Comics universe.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Ron Palumbo is the co-author of Abbott and Costello in Hollywood and the author of Buck Privates: The Original Screenplay. He founded the Official Abbott and Costello Fan Club in 1986, and has written the liner notes for boxed sets of the team’s films and television series. He has appeared on A&E Biography, the Today show, and several documentaries. He is an advertising creative director.