

## JOSEPH CROWLEY, FILMMAKER

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This story differs from the others in this conference<sup>1</sup> on cursed films in a variety of ways. First and foremost, our subject of study is not someone who was unknown and unappreciated in his time. Joseph Crowley—not his birth name of course—was a big name in the east coast experimental scene. He was often compared, favourably or otherwise, to Kenneth Anger, due to his unsettling imagery and use of bright colours. He was at one point connected romantically to Maya Deren, even though both denied it. He was always wherever the vanguard was, well into his final years, not to get too far ahead of ourselves here.

Crowley's experiments focused on dark themes, but frankly, there was nothing scary or troubling about them. His most famous work, the 1972 short *The Moon Hunts at Night*, a film still taught in universities as an exemplary work of the New York scene, is frequently brought up by the conspiracy minded as proof of what was to come, but despite likely being his darkest work, even his most ardent critics see little to nothing in these conspiracies. The film follows a solitary woman walking through the darkness, lit by a single spotlight as the darkness attempts to drag her out of it. Many of his contemporaries saw this film as making a great feminist statement, while others saw it as a treatise on depression. What has always been a constant is that no one who studied his work in good faith saw anything ominous in it. Even Crowley, after being pushed for an answer in the famous televised 1992 interview with Madison Argyle, simply stated that this film was about the human condition, before breaking into an uncharacteristic smile and admitting that working on it made him happy for the first time in years.

While this film was not his first, it was the dividing point between his early works and what was to come. While his earlier works were concerned with technique, this moment is often seen as the point where Crowley became more concerned with fame. He began to create films which were experimental-minded but marketable to a wider audience. His penultimate film, 1988's unfortunately lesser seen *Mugger* told the story of a criminal who

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<sup>1</sup> This conference, entitled "Cursed Cinema and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" took place in February of 2023 to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Exorcist. The keynote, presented by Dr Tyson Fernandez, entitled "Charles Crowley, Filmmaker" has been transcribed and presented here with additional notes by the presenter for your perusal.

finds it difficult to become law-abiding, eventually dying unarmed at a police stop. Despite being one of the few starring roles of Juno Anderson before her untimely death, *Mugger* was not what audiences were looking for. Despite rave reviews and some Oscar buzz, the film disappeared. Many suggest that it was the disappointment around *Mugger* that led Crowley to try his hand at his most audacious exercise in creativity. This new project is what would ultimately lead to his downfall.

A comedy.

Unlike the average “cursed film,” 1990’s *Different Folks* was Crowley’s attempt at a comedy, a straightforward one at that. The film received a wide release and developed something of a cult following before disappearing along with its creator. This film did away with any of the nuance for which Crowley had become famous: instead, *Different Folks* told the story of two very different families, the Atkinsons and the Carmichaels, who move into the same neighbourhood and find themselves in a turf war. The usual charm of Crowley was mixed in with pratfalls and innuendo, but it worked for wider audiences. The first week, the movie was only beaten in the box office by *Ghost*, gaining an unusually large viewership for a film with a cult director and no known stars. That was probably the one thing that kept the film from reaching the heights it could have: the stars of the film were all unknowns, people who were not named in the credit sequence—in fact, Crowley was the only name in the credits—and who did not seem to have any previous credits to their names. Of course, casting unknown actors was nothing new for Crowley, but *Different Folks* was not like his usual work.

The film continued to be successful for another few weeks. Audiences clamoured to see it, but what shocked many was how much the critics loved it. A generic comedy made by someone who could easily be described as a sellout did not seem like fodder for critics and yet every major American newspaper wrote raving reviews of the film, its performances, its cinematography, even the score which made use of minimalist electronic music in a masterful way. However, what Crowley scholars find fascinating about these reviews is that none of them seem to get the plot correct. Every review begins by pointing out the basic plot point of two warring neighbours, but then they begin to describe scenes that are not in the film. Roger Ebert describes a scene where a dog jumps through a window into the Carmichael house and headbutts Mr. Carmichael into a China cabinet, but this scene never occurred.<sup>2</sup> Some of

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<sup>2</sup> Author’s note: I am aware that there are several books currently in the works about Joseph Crowley and I am sure that they all have some type of description of *Different Folks*, but as

these scenes are scenes that could have occurred, but so many more of them reach outlandish heights, some critics commending the film's use of dark comedy with the incorporation of scenes including bloodletting and sacrificial rituals. It goes without saying that these scenes simply do not appear in *Different Folks*. The film's most outrageous scene is the one in which a furry creature mauls the Atkinsons' young son who is then written off as a character, but that makes perfect sense within the plot of the film, as well as within Crowley's brilliantly twisted humour.

It was around the fifth week that things began to go awry. The film which was once beloved by all was suddenly beginning to come under attack. First, the audiences stopped showing up, not because of a lack of interest, but rather because of a sense of fear. Parents began complaining that their children had become almost catatonic after viewing the film. The production company tried responding to this by raising the rating from PG to R, but that did little to help as others complained of scenes that had traumatized them, scenes which again simply did not exist in the film. Eventually, even the daring few thrill seekers began to wane as an audience. What was more bizarre was the retractions from the critics. Many of the critics stood by their reviews, but some insisted that upon re-viewing the film, the reviews did not describe what they had seen. A select few even insisted that they had no memory of seeing the film or writing the review. Scott Carmichael—no relation—was one such critic. He had begun writing film reviews for the Miami Herald shortly before *Different Folks* came out and was one of the first to give it a glowing review. However, he soon after insisted that he had never seen the film. In a retraction, he admitted that reading his own alleged review gave him a panic attack, because the film he had reviewed did not seem like something he would have liked to begin with. He promised to watch the film that week and update his review, but that update never came. A week later, Scott Carmichael was found dead with a self-inflicted cut across his throat.

This one incident eventually led to the belief that *Different Folks* was a "cursed film." This label brought with it a new audience, but Crowley did not take advantage of this newfound infamy, instead choosing to take his film out

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someone who has seen the film several times and has devoted his time to writing about Crowley's works, I would like to caution you about believing anything said in those books. I have seen this film well over twenty times at this point and what I describe in this book and elsewhere is the unquestionable truth. No, no dog ever headbutts anyone in this film. The children do not take a bus to the bad side of town. No bloodletting scene occurs. These are all lies put forth by individuals who are trying to disparage the works of Crowley. I will leave this as the final word on this matter.

of circulation. There are a lot of stories about what happened after, but what is generally agreed upon is that Crowley never intended this to be his final work.

In 1992, Crowley began pre-production on his next project, a horror film he was making for Paramount which was given the production title *Rest*. Many argue over what this title was meant to mean because it was never completed. Owing to the infamy of his most recent work, Crowley became a hot commodity, this new production getting him plenty of interviews. However, it was the Argyle interview that became synonymous with this period of Crowley's career. This interview was meant to be the ultimate exposure of Crowley's character. Stephanie Argyle, a famously tough interviewer, always got to the heart of her subject: if the subject was pure, they would become more famous than ever before. Otherwise, well, she was responsible for the eventual imprisonment of Jonathan Carruthers after all. Crowley was a nervous individual and it showed in his interview. After going through his career up until that point, Argyle began to dive into *Different Folks*. This is where the interview began to go off the rails. At first, Crowley tried to give generic answers and change the subject, but it was obvious that Argyle had wanted this interview specifically because of this film. I have reproduced here some particularly interesting excerpts from the interview. First, Argyle attempted to get to the root of why Crowley had even made the film.

ARGYLE: So, after *Mugger* unfortunately, I guess I'll say it, flopped at the box office and with the critics.

CROWLEY: It did not flop. With all due respect, the right people saw it. It didn't, flop, no, not a flop.

ARGYLE: Okay, but it wasn't as big as you wanted it to be, I'm sure. So, why a comedy right after such a powerful film?

CROWLEY: Comedies are powerful.

After a bit of back and forth, obviously meant to change the subject, Argyle began to push for an answer.

ARGYLE: Look, I'm a fan of *Different Folks*. That scene where the old man gets crushed by the car was masterful. It seemed to come out of nowhere, but it was very well done. But it's just so inconsequential when compared to.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The transcript of the original interview has an additional bit of information written in with a pen, as this part did not appear on television. The note reads: "Crowley grimaces as Argyle talks. I noted this because I thought he was being an asshole, but he seemed to be in pain

CROWLEY: That didn't happen. Why do people keep insisting that I don't know what I made?

ARGYLE: Charlie, I'm sorry if I've hurt you, it was not my intention, but what are you talking about? I've seen the movie.

CROWLEY: I made the movie.

It is difficult to get a sense from the transcript, but Crowley appeared truly distraught here, screaming most of the preceding lines. A visible cut occurs here before the interview continues with questions about his current production.

I would however be remiss if I do not mention the other infamous part of the interview. Argyle asks Crowley about the actors.

ARGYLE: So, you are well known for giving jobs to non-professional actors. The young woman in *Moon Hunts at Night* was a friend of yours I believe?

CROWLEY: That's right.

ARGYLE: The children in *Sand Games* were your nephew's friends, the young man in *Napoleon* was I believe a total stranger. And then, after working with professionals on a few works, you suddenly bring in these fascinating actors for *Different Folks*. Where did you find them?

CROWLEY: They were what was necessary for the film.

There is a moment's silence, in which Argyle seems to realize that Crowley is once again trying to get out of answering the question.

ARGYLE: Well, that is true, a great actor is always necessary, but these people seem to have come out of the ether.

Crowley's discomfort is visible on camera here, as if he has just been found out.

CROWLEY: What do you mean? What are you trying to insinuate?

ARGYLE: I'm just saying, these performances are fantastically weird and comedic and almost...inhuman. I'm sure your direction had a lot to do with that, but the performances should also be commended.

CROWLEY: Absolutely. I often look for muses in strange places. Sometimes, that muse is a famous person, sometimes it's a friend or a stranger. And

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listening to what turns out to be Argyle speaking nonsense. I saw the movie and this scene really wasn't in it."

sometimes, that muse needs to come from within, sometimes one's own evils need to be incarnated, metastasized until they are simply new entities.

This line was often repeated by Crowley's biggest admirers after this interview, a belief that he was speaking metaphorically, of creativity as a sort of cancer. I truly believe he was not speaking metaphorically. These characters seemingly killed him.

In 1993, Paramount admitted that *Rest* was all but dead. Crowley had stopped showing up to work soon after the Argyle interview. This was unusual, as it was generally accepted that the interview had been a success. It had shown him as a figure with a fiery personality; many believed *Rest* would be his introduction into the mainstream. Crowley continued to live in New York City, occasionally appearing in photos with fans, but he never produced another creative work. By 1995, his appearance began to give away his health issues. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April in 1999, Crowley was found dead in his New York City apartment at the age of 49. It was believed that he had likely been dead for some time. His death did not make the news, nor did the cause. Due to his age and state, many assumed it was a drug overdose, suicide, cancer or AIDS, but none of these ended up being the cause. Instead, it was determined that Crowley had starved to death. His fridge was found full of rotting food, making his death even more mysterious. After a menial investigation, the NYPD determined that there was no foul play and closed the case. Crowley was cremated and his ashes were spread among some of his closest friends and relatives.

And yet, that is not where this story ends. It is often said that the Velvet Underground did not sell many albums, but everyone who bought one started a band. Something similar can be said of Crowley. Even though his career never quite took off, he went on to inspire many filmmakers, whether experimental, arthouse or mainstream. Elizabeth Dupree, a friend of Crowley whom I interviewed for this piece, stated that Crowley had once said, towards the end of his life, that he wishes he could have taken all of his work out of circulation. Thankfully, he could not. His works began to leave the academic spaces and reach a mainstream audience. This began with a Criterion release of *Mugger*. The release, approved by yours truly, led to the re-release of the rest of Crowley's oeuvre. However, what always remained a holy grail was *Different Folks*. Fans have been clamouring for this release for years. However, the issue is not rights. The issue is that no one seems to have a copy of it. Even my copy went missing over the years. At least, that was the issue. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, 2012, a newly created YouTube account uploaded the film,

introducing a new audience to it for the first time in decades. It was quickly taken down, but as the old adage says, once something is on the internet, it is there forever.

Since this upload, *Different Folks* has reached a larger audience than it ever did previously. Even though there is a strong, concentrated effort to remove it, the film continues to appear on streaming and torrenting sites. This reintroduction has had another effect. The actors of *Different Folks*, those people who fascinated so many, have begun to appear in other films. They are often simply background characters, the actors seeming to have not aged a day since *Different Folks*. They seem to seek out the works of Crowley's acolytes. Many of these filmmakers have admitted to me that they are ecstatic about this, but that they were not aware that these actors were even on their sets. Victor Holmes, that most Crowleyesque filmmaker, recently went so far as to make a statement that his most recent work would have to pull out of its Cannes premiere date, because some sequences that he had not shot had been added to it. Such a publicity stunt would have surely been appreciated by Crowley. Perhaps they can help Holmes reach the levels of fame that eluded Crowley before him.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shahbaz Khayambashi is an academic, curator, artist and educator based in Toronto. He is currently working toward a PhD at York University in the department of communications. His research is focused on the representations of death and protests in the media. His research has been published in a variety of places including *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying and Public*. He has also had short narrative pieces published in *Pressed Magazine* and an upcoming book, and videos screened in festivals in Toronto and Winnipeg. You can find him on Instagram as @sha.kha