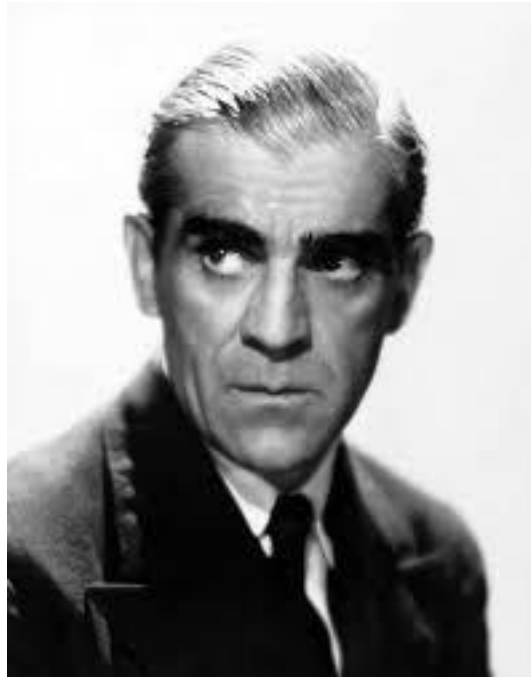


Reading Homework

Boris Karloff (1887-1969)



Born in England as William Henry Platt, he changed his name to Boris Karloff in Hollywood. Karloff had an unusually long and difficult path to stardom performing in eighty movies before landing the role of Frankenstein's monster at the age of forty-four. This was an extraordinary piece of luck. If Carl Laemmle Jr. had played it safe and let Tod Browning direct Frankenstein instead of turning to James Whale, or if Bela Lugosi had taken the part when it was offered to him, Karloff probably would have remained just an obscure actor the rest of his life. Instead, he went on to be Lugosi's great rival (eventually totally eclipsing him by the late 1930s).

There is a story (perhaps apocryphal) that Karloff was so poor he had to hitchhike to the studio. One day a large expensive car pulled over to give him a ride and when he climbed in he found himself face to face with Lon Chaney. Karloff expressed his admiration for the great man and finally got up the nerve to ask

“What advice would you give a fellow actor to help him with his career”. Chaney thought about it and told him to “find something that only you can do or something you do better than anyone else and focus on that”. It turned out to be excellent (though somewhat ironic) advice since what Karloff could do better than anyone else was to act in a way quite similar to Lon Chaney’s! But it would be years before he got his chance.

The chance came when he happened to be eating lunch in the Universal Studios cafeteria at the same time as James Whale. Karloff had false teeth on the left side of his mouth, which he removed because they were sensitive to temperature and he was eating hot soup for lunch. Whale glanced at him and noticed that he had had an interesting face and with his false teeth removed had a somewhat cadaverous look. He asked Karloff if he would like to test for a part and told him to be at a certain stage the next morning.

Karloff had no idea what he was testing for, but when he arrived he was asked to sit in a chair while the makeup artist Jac Pierce worked on him while James Whale watched. It seems to take a very long time, but finally Pierce stepped back and asked Whale what he thought. ‘I think we have our monster’, said Whale.



Karloff was more than “just a pretty face” though (that’s a joke!). It turned out that he was extraordinarily eager to master the part of the monster and devoted himself to learning how to walk and move like a person recovering from a stroke or suffering

from some sort of mental deterioration or disability. But more than that he brought such a genuine characterization to the Monster that it ended up making *him* the stand-out actor in the movie (when Colin Clive was supposed to have been the star). Karloff would go on to make a number of other horror films for Universal as well as other studios. He and Lugosi would be teamed up in five horror films (one usually ended up killing the other...in the movie).



A few of his Most famous roles were as Morgan the deranged butler in *The Old Dark House* (1932)

and Imhotep in *The Mummy* (1932).

