

Rats adapted by David Lilley and Stephen Gray, directed by Stephen Gray. Starring Craig Malpass as Thomson, Len Davies as Mr Betts, Theresa Roche as Mrs Betts, Brian Elloway as Dr Moran, Kate Davies as Villager, and Mark Montgomery as Ghost. For further information: www.luddite-films.com/items/show/13

Reviewed by Daniel McGachey.

When a link to Stephen Gray's dedicated M.R. James website, A Thin Ghost (www.thin-ghost.org/), first appeared on the G&S web site some years back, one of the most interesting things on the site was a short video clip. This brief sequence, showing a mass of heaving bed clothes and a succession of sepia-tinted photographs, served as a trailer for a work in progress, a short film adaptation of "Rats". For quite some time, this snippet remained all that was to be seen of the piece, and I had eventually assumed the project stalled or abandoned. But, between then and now, Mr Gray hadn't been idle, establishing the creative team of Loonatik & Drinks with David Lilley, which, under the banner "Luddite Films", has a remit to make short films for television, the web, and the film festival circuit. The Luddite Films web site now lists a whole range of films at various stages of completion, many of them, such as a production of "The Pit and the Pendulum" or original projects like The Hand or Vespers, showing a tendency towards the supernatural or the macabre. And on that list, completed in 2010, is that long awaited adaptation of "Rats". I'm pleased to say from the outset that the wait has been worth it, for this is an assured, arresting, faithful, and, above all, effectively scary adaptation of James's story. According to the web site, the Luddites "use movie-making, 3D modelling, traditional animation and motion graphic design to realise the most demanding of scripts and achieve some truly budget-defying results", and this is no idle boast. In its running time, Rats presents us with stage coach rides through moonlit woods, effective fades into dreamlike flashbacks, and steam engines charging across scenic countryside that utterly belie the film's limited budget. Behind the scenes photographs on the site show lead actor, Craig Malpass, being filmed before a green screen, which allows some impressive and authentic-looking period backgrounds to be inserted into the shot. Watching the film on a computer screen, I found it difficult to tell in places which scenes had been shot in genuine locations, and which were composite shots. With such skills to hand, it may have been tempting to overuse video effects and CGI to create a flashy, spectacle-based end-product. But Gray is happy to let the effects serve the story. The script, adapted by Lilley and Gray, remains faithful throughout to M.R. James. Of course, "Rats" is one of James's briefest tales, and while effective might be thought light on

incident to fill even the 20-minute duration of the film. But the script ingeniously delves into other stories by James and seamlessly blends these extra elements into the narrative. Preceded by a sequence showing that coach ride through the woods, with Thomson en route to the inn, the opening credits are accompanied by the narration of the passage which begins James's original tale and provides it with its title. This narration is drawn from a recording of the story by an actor whose much admired audio versions of many M.R. James stories, and his association with a highly regarded (by many, though not all) television adaptation of one of James's most famous tales, make this posthumous vocal appearance particularly apt.

Unlike the Thomson of the original, this young man has sought out the rural solitude for more than reading, as his bulky camera equipment and vials of developing chemicals show. He is a naturalist, seeking to photograph the local flora and fauna, giving rise to scenes of his wanderings through idyllic woodlands and shots of insect life and flowers. It's while photographing these sights that he discovers and captures on film the rectangular white stone that his hosts, the Betts, and the local doctor would have him believe is a sea-marker - the slight flaw to this being that the woodland clearing in which Thomson encounters it doesn't afford any view of the sea. While developing the plate, Thomson is given his first indications that all is not quite as peaceful around the inn as he may have thought. On the one hand, there is the girl from the village who enquires if he knows "the stories about this place" and why the staff sleep above the stables and not indoors, before moving on. More alarmingly, there is the shadowy outline which has formed on the photograph of the "sea-mark", which resolves itself into the clear shape of a gallows post, complete with the form of a hanged man. It is here that the script borrows quite successfully from "A View from a Hill", with Thomson's camera taking the place of the old watchmaker. Baxter's, bewitched binoculars; and with perhaps a dash of "The Mezzotint", its changing picture finding a new form in Thomson's photograph. After this, our young naturalist's stay at the inn becomes increasingly more disturbed. There are strange knockings and janglings from the room across the hall - a room whose door is alarmingly close to his own across an uncomfortably narrow corridor. On investigating, he discovers a genuinely frightening chamber, dark, grimy, and flyblown, in which the bed is occupied by something that doesn't rest easily. His dreams are invaded by images of violent crime and an execution - that these are glimpses of some past local event is effectively established by shots of the inn, not as Thomson found it on his arrival, but surrounded by forbidding trees. And the sight of the gallows is no longer confined to the photographic image. Eventually, Thomson will discover the truth from the Betts, but before this there is a return visit to that alarming room, and a foolish attempt to photograph it. The apparition that solidifies through the lens of his camera might not be quite the "scarecrow", but nevertheless follows James's description in every other particular; and the combination of Mark Montgomery's motions, "if never so stiffly, across the floor, with wagging head", and Charmaine Baker's memorable make-up design, makes for an effectively pathetic yet frightening apparition. Stephen Gray - who not only co-scripted and directed, but was also responsible for camera, design, editing and Video FX, as well as appearing in a couple of minor roles - and David Lille), are to be congratulated, as are a cast who serve the film well, certainly better than many actors I've seen in low budget (and a few high profile) ventures, for collaborating on an entertaining, highly polished and successful production. Following their seasonal ghost story offering, the BBC might want to take a look at how M.R. James can be successfully tackled without the need to modernise or reinterpret his works

Hopefully Rats will reach a wide audience on the festival circuit, before it finds a permanent home on the Loonatik & Drinks website. And if another of the films on their list of productions, an adaptation of "Wailing Well" [see Stephen's article in Newsletter 18. --- Ed.], is of a similar quality to this current production, then I would like to hope a DVD release of a Jamesian double bill wouldn't be out of the question before too long.