

Topper Returns

Topper Returns is a 1941 film directed by Roy Del Ruth. It is the third and final entry in the initial series of supernatural comedy films inspired by the novels of Thorne Smith. It followed *Topper* (1937) and *Topper Takes a Trip* (1938).

As in the prior films, Roland Young plays Cosmo Topper, a mousy banker who gets into trouble because of his ability to see and speak with ghosts, and Billie Burke plays his wife, who is constantly befuddled by his strange antics. The plot revolves around a murder mystery. Joan Blondell portrays a slain woman who seeks out the reluctant Topper and enlists his help in identifying her killer and saving her friend, played by Carole Landis. Most of the action takes place in a spooky mansion filled with eccentric characters, trapdoors and secret passages.

The film was nominated for the Academy Awards for Best Special Effects (Roy Seawright and Elmer Raguse) and Best Sound Recording (Elmer Raguse).^[1]

A TV series of *Topper* premiered in 1953 and ran for two seasons.^[2] A pilot called *Topper Returns* (1973)^[3] was later made for a proposed TV series. There was also a made-for-TV remake of the original film *Topper* in 1979.^[4]

In 1969, "Topper Returns" entered the public domain in the United States because the claimants did not renew its copyright registration in the 28th year after publication.^[5]

Contents

Plot summary

Cast

Reception

See also

References

External links

Plot summary

Wealthy young heiress Ann Carrington (Carole Landis), and her best friend Gail Richards (Joan Blondell) are riding in a speeding taxi driven by Bob (Dennis O'Keefe), along the coast. A figure dressed all in black, with covered face and hat, aims a rifle with the

<i>Topper Returns</i>	
	
	theatrical release poster
Directed by	Roy Del Ruth
Produced by	Hal Roach
Written by	Jonathan Latimer
Based on	Characters created by Thorne Smith
Starring	Joan Blondell Roland Young Carole Landis Billie Burke
Music by	Werner R. Heymann
Cinematography	Norbert Brodine
Edited by	James Newcom
Production company	Hal Roach Studios
Distributed by	United Artists
Release date	March 21, 1941 (US)
Running time	88 minutes

telescopic sight crosshairs focused on the cab from a distance and shoots out the rear tire. The taxi flips over on its side at the very edge of a cliff, inches away from having fallen into crashing ocean waves below. Bob, the taxi driver, extracts his passengers from the vehicle and leaves them at the side of the road so he can walk back to a garage they passed back down the road to seek help.

Country	United States
Language	English

Ann and Gail try hitchhiking and get passed by the first car. Gail raises Ann's skirt to expose her leg when a second car passes and the driver ends up leaving the road and crashing into a tree. Next they block the road by sitting on their suitcases in the middle of the road so the next car is forced to stop. In the sports car is banker Cosmo Topper (Roland Young) and his chauffeur Eddie (Eddie "Rochester" Anderson). The two girls brazenly load their luggage and climb into the car. They insist on being driven to Ann's destination, the Carrington mansion. The back seat of the car is loaded with luggage and Ann so Gail volunteers to ride sitting on Cosmo's lap ignoring his protests.

Joan Blondell

As they drive past Topper's house, Mrs. Clara Topper (Billie Burke) is out front with her maid and waves to the approaching car. She is surprised to see her husband drive past with a young blonde sitting on his lap, and distraughtly concludes he is having an adventure. The girls are dropped off at the stately cliff top mansion next door to Topper's residence, where they are received by three creepy staff members, butler Rama (Trevor Bardette), housekeeper Lillian (Rafaella Ottiano), and another unnamed staff member (William H. O'Brien). Ann is directed to the study to see her father by the housekeeper but her friend Gail is to stay behind. Ann is then intercepted by the creepy Dr. Jeris (George Zucco). Dr. Jeris warns Ann that her father Henry Carrington (H. B. Warner) is in poor health and takes her to meet her father, who is sitting in a chair with a blanket over his legs. In the conversation we find out that Ann has been raised in the East at her mother's request. Ann has no memories of her father, as they have been separated since her mother and Carrington's business partner died in a cave in while inspecting a company mine. Ann's father also reveals that the next day would be Ann's twenty-first birthday and, according to her mother's will, she is to come into full control of the family fortune.

Billie Burke and Patsy Kelly

After leaving her father, Ann and Gail are to be shown upstairs to their rooms. Gail is waiting on the stairs and as Ann crosses the main hall, a giant chandelier breaks loose from the ceiling. Ann escapes harm because Gail screams in time for Ann to stop and just barely be missed by the chandelier. The girls continue on to their rooms. The first room is Gail's and it is decorated in an Oriental motif. Gail is unimpressed as they have just returned from living in the East. Ann is then taken to her bedroom which is spectacularly decorated. Gail discovers the rooms are adjoining and she makes such a fuss about how beautiful the room is that Ann insists that they trade and Gail sleeps in what was supposed to be Ann's room.

In the middle of the night, a secret panel opens in the bedroom and the masked hatted figure dressed all in black enters the bedroom and opens the windows. Gail is knifed to death as she gets up to shut the window having been mistaken for Ann.

Gail's ghost separates from her body. Ghost-Gail walks out the window and goes down the road to the Topper's house to find someone who can help solve her murder. She finds Topper and convinces him to come to the Carrington mansion by threatening to create a scandal with his suspicious wife if he doesn't.

Topper calls Eddie the chauffeur to get the car ready. Eddie grumbles protests but he does drive Topper back to mansion. Eddie is unaware of the ghost and experiences a number of puzzles as doors open and shut, cushions depress, voices are heard, footprints appear on the snowy walkways, and so on. Eventually he gets so scared that he runs away and drives back to the Toppers and starts packing to leave. Mrs. Topper finds him and asks where Cosmo is, and then demands to be driven to the house next door to find him. Eddie says he's had it and wants to go back to work for his former employer, Mr. Benny, but Mrs. Topper bullies him into driving her and Emily the maid to the Carrington's.

Meantime, Topper with the guidance of Ghost-Gail finds the dead body of Gail, and goes downstairs to phone the police but the phone doesn't work. Dr. Jeris, armed with a pistol, and the three staff discover him, surround him and keep him confined. He insists on going up to the bedroom to show them the body but Gail's body is gone. The doctor and Mr. Carrington treat him as a lunatic. When Ann comes into the room, Topper tries to explain but the housekeeper finds a note that Gail apparently wrote saying she has left.

At this point Mrs. Topper, her maid Emily (Patsy Kelly), and Eddie arrive and insist Topper is in the house and they push their way in to look for him. By this time it is nearly daylight and Bob the taxi driver shows up at the house to collect his unpaid fare. Ann, who is wondering what happened to Gail, becomes frightened and asks Bob to stick around and escort her up to her room to get the fare. They go up to the bedroom where Bob volunteers to wait outside the room and while Ann is in the room the black dressed masked assassin appears but Ann sees him in the mirror, screams, and Bob responds in time to see the black figure escape through the window.

In the following sequences, there are lots of comings and goings with people disappearing and reappearing by way of concealed stairways and hallways reachable by moving or rotating wall panels. Mrs. Topper uses the phone and calls the police to report her missing husband and innocently mentions there has also been a murder. Soon police detective Roberts (Donald MacBride) with a squad of cops comes in and starts asking questions. He gets confused by the conflicting answers and by tricks that Ghost-Gail plays from time to time.

The creepy staff and Mr. Carrington confine Topper in the kitchen walk-in refrigerator. Later, when Topper is found by his wife and the bulk of the characters end up in the kitchen Ghost-Gail steals a pistol from the police detective Roberts' pocket. Ghost-Gail forces it on Topper and manipulates Topper with the gun to get everyone else into the refrigerator and lock them in. Ghost-Gail and Topper then proceed to look for her body to prove the murder. Eventually Bob breaks the window in the door and gets everyone out of the refrigerator. Ann is kidnapped by the figure in black and ultimately rescued by Bob with assistance from Ghost-Gail.

Lillian the housekeeper, is eventually proved to be the writer of Gail's note. She decides to start talking to say she was in on some of the deceptions but had nothing to do with the murder. The lights go out suddenly and Lillian disappears. It turns out there is a secret chain in the fireplace that, when pulled, makes the chair in the center of the room tilt backwards and dump the occupant down a vertical shaft to a water-filled cave below the mansion.

Eventually, the threads come together, Topper and Ghost-Gail manage to get her body back from a small ship a short distance offshore from the water cave. The body is returned to the mansion and despite the comic total confusion of the detective, Topper states that the killer must have been the person who was standing nearest the fireplace when Lillian was about to talk, and that person was none other than . . . Mr. Carrington!

Mr. Carrington makes it away and gets in a car and drives off. Ghost-Gail gets into Topper's sports car, and goes in pursuit. Eddie is in the back seat, terrified at the car that is being driven at top speed on winding roads with an invisible driver. Mr. Carrington, followed in hot pursuit, eventually loses control and his car leaves the road and crashed into a tree. He dies and becomes a ghost himself. Before anyone else arrives,

Ghost-Gail browbeats Ghost-Carrington into writing a letter to Ann, confessing that he is not her father, but her father's business partner. Her father died in the mine together with Ann's mother, and he has been impersonating Carrington and wanted to kill Ann to keep the fortune for himself.

Ghost-Gail gives the letter to Topper when the rest of the characters arrives at the crash scene, and Topper hands it to Ann. Clara Topper sees that Cosmo was telling mostly truth about his adventures with the two young ladies, and Bob and Ann comfort each other. Eddie quits and Clara convinces the maid Emily to drive the Toppers home.

Cast

- Joan Blondell as Gail Richards
- Roland Young as Cosmo Topper
- Carole Landis as Ann Carrington
- Billie Burke as Clara Topper
- Dennis O'Keefe as Bob
- Patsy Kelly as Emily
- H. B. Warner as Henry Carrington
- Eddie "Rochester" Anderson as Eddie
- George Zucco as Dr. Jeris
- Donald McBride as Police Sergeant Roberts
- Rafaela Ottiano as Lillian
- Trevor Bardette as Rama

William O'Brian as unnamed second butler.

Reception

Rotten Tomatoes gives the film a "100% fresh" rating, indicating generally favorable reviews.^[6] Variety said the "[f]ilm begins to miss out when the story veers from its own premise to the level of a conventional mystery farce."^[7]

See also

- List of ghost films

References

1. "The 14th Academy Awards (1942) Nominees and Winners" (<http://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/1942>). *oscars.org*. Retrieved 2011-08-13.
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3. *Topper Returns* (1973 pilot for proposed TV series) at IMDB (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0458180/>)
4. *Topper* (1979 TV Movie) at IMDB (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080035/>)
5. Pierce, David (June 2007). "Forgotten Faces: Why Some of Our Cinema Heritage Is Part of the Public Domain". *Film History: An International Journal*. **19** (2): 125–43. doi:10.2979/FIL.2007.19.2.125 (<https://doi.org/10.2979%2FFIL.2007.19.2.125>). ISSN 0892-

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6. "Topper Returns (1941) - Rotten Tomatoes" (https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/topper_returns). *Rotten Tomatoes*. 10 September 2019. Retrieved 11 September 2019.
7. Variety, Staff (31 December 1940). "Topper Returns" (<https://variety.com/1940/film/reviews/topper-returns-1200413443/>). *Variety*. Retrieved 11 September 2019.

External links

- *Topper Returns* (<https://catalog.afi.com/Catalog/moviedetails/26970>) at the American Film Institute Catalog
 - *Topper Returns* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0034303/>) on IMDb
 - *Topper Returns* (<http://www.tcm.turner.com/tcmdb/title/title.jsp?stid=5870>) at the TCM Movie Database
 - *Topper Returns* (<https://www.allmovie.com/movie/v50463>) at AllMovie
 - *Topper Returns* (https://archive.org/details/Topper_Returns_41) is available for free download at the Internet Archive
 - *Topper Returns* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3eM52RQBew>) on YouTube
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