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FREDDY AND JASON – THEIR NEW FULL-LENGTH FEATURE

Stella Castelli

When in his short story ‘The Killers’ Ernest Hemingway characterizes the proverbial killers as a vaudeville team in appearance, the text not only implies a comedic undercurrent within the fictionalized murderous agency, but also exposes these killers explicitly as a double act. At the height of its popularity in the 1940s and 1950s, American vaudeville had produced numerous renowned comedic acts such as Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy, marking itself as a type of comedy which hinges on a power dynamic relying on the often diametrically opposed relationship between two actors. It is this binary structure of American vaudeville which is translated into Ronny Yu’s contemporary slasher-crossover *Freddy vs Jason*. Tapping into two vast and durable horror franchises, the film experiments with the afterlives of these seminal villains proposing a vaudeville aesthetic. As its rather nonchalant title suggests, the picture pits two pivotal figures of the slasher genre, Elm Street’s nightmarish Freddy Krueger and Crystal Lake’s drowning boy Jason Voorhees against one another, all the while maintaining an ironic distance, which is ultimately created to elicit a comedic response despite the horrific pictures presented. Endowed with iconicity, Jason Voorhees’ bloodthirsty machete slaying its way through Camp Crystal Lake remains as notorious as the villain himself even forty years after the release of Sean S. Cunningham’s original *Friday the 13th* in 1980. Doubling down on notoriety, Yu’s film invites another renowned horror figure to participate, Elm Street’s cunning Freddy Krueger, whose conniving wit alongside his red striped sweater and eerie claws fatally haunting the dreams of his victims matches Jason’s own reputation. While adhering to traditional conventions of the horror/slasher genre by featuring a virginal final girl who survives the many gruesome kills which haunt a group of teens throughout, the crossover-slasher ultimately redirects its focus on the battle between the iconic villains. Hinging on said iconicity within the horror genre, *Freddy vs Jason* marks the eighth (re-)appearance of Krueger and no less than the eleventh (re-)appearance of Voorhees. Rather

than establishing the ultimate triumph of good over evil, however, the film resurrects these villains with an interest in the spectacle generated by evil versus evil. Tenaciously unkillable not only within their respective diegeses but also on the level of meta-productivity, as the substantial carriers of their respective franchises, their immortality has been thoroughly established by the time of the release of the film in 2003. This begs the question of how this battle can be resolved if neither character will ultimately fall to his demise, with the villain's perpetuity marking an inherent trope of the slasher genre.

Seemingly sabotaged by the protagonist's immortality, the interest of telling the tale of *Freddy vs. Jason* must thus lie elsewhere; not in the question of who wins the battle but in the dynamics of their relationship itself and, by extension, the staged performativity of this against the backdrop of well-established spaces such as Elm Street and Crystal Lake. While the titular 'versus' implies battle, the immortality of both villains places significance on the performance of said battle rather than on an implicitly impossible outcome. The experienced slasher audience is well aware that these villains are essentially immortal and have the ability to endlessly resurrect themselves. Hence, what is at stake in the proposition of *Freddy vs Jason*, so heavily pregnant with iconicity, is not triumph but the intricate ways in which the pair could and will battle one another. As such, the picture avidly plays with this performativity, reformatting the slasher towards screwball comedy. Leaning on Hemingway's description of his killers as a vaudeville team, said performativity of Kruger and Voorhees in *Freddy vs Jason* can be translated to that of a comedy duo, their performance during combat implementing a vaudeville aesthetic which instrumentalizes their previously established, distinct personalities for the rendition of a villainous extravaganza which, in its exaggeration, cannot but become comedic. The slasher genre then becomes a toolbox of props for this comedic act in which the villains' immortal bodies appear particularly apt for the motions of slapstick, their final showdown becoming almost cartoonish, in which their neglect for the laws of physics comes to parallel infamous pairs such as Tom and Jerry or the Road Runner and his counterpart Wile E. Coyote. Employing their carnivalesque physiques, Voorhees and Krueger come to create a humorous response

by violently playing off their pre-established personalities. By reading the film as pure (comedic) showmanship, the final lack of closure, which results from not being able to categorize either villain as positively deceased, is solidified; their immortality renders their battle purely theatrical while their clownesque dynamic remains marked as the grotesque throughout, the staging of their capacities against one another becoming ultimately geared towards humor rather than horror.

While the minimalistic title of the film alone already carries the implication that their iconicity carries enough momentum for a crossover, in a comedic wink to the literate horror audience, they ultimately also mirror each other using their trademark weapons



The comedic showmanship of Freddy and Jason

against one another during their final showdown. It is also already on a superficial level that the adherence to a comic duo is echoed, namely in the costumes which both villains wear, and, which remain seminal in the construction of their afterlives. As such, their costumes serve a double

purpose; on the one hand, they perpetuate the respective franchises of these horror icons and on the other, they become a uniform in adherence to the vaudeville aesthetic in which each player obtains a certain role as well as a trademark appearance. Being clearly discernible by their distinct outfits, their final battle is staged as a dance during which each is given a platform to showcase his respective characteristics. However, only during the interaction with one another, as a dual act, do their theatrics become an act of comedy. This is further reflected in the subtlety with which the franchise's respective scores are seemingly seamlessly combined into a harmonious overture. Against the backdrop of the horror-slasher, the implementation of a comedy duo aesthetic seems to become particularly fruitful as comedy is said to instrumentalize genre hybridity in order to

produce itself as “[v]audeville, musical revue, musical comedy, radio and early sound film comedy drew upon each other’s practices, performers, and producers” [1]. Read as a vaudeville performance, *Freddy vs Jason* draws on previously established characteristics of these horror film icons which are amplified towards a ridiculous absurdity in the particularly poignant final showdown. Being among themselves, the *entre nous* of the villains allows for the cruelty of physical comedy to become overtly cartoonish, a caricature nurtured by vaudeville’s “cross-fertilization of comic forms” [2].

Staging the film as such plays into Henry Jenkins’ definition of “the vaudeville aesthetic: fast-paced word play, gags, and physical humor” [3], in which a resilient physicality is complemented by wit and irony. By making use of the slasher genre as a prop for their act, it is also at the beginning of the film that screwball comedy is explicitly referenced. Having established Freddy’s return by means of resurrecting Jason’s bloodthirstiness in order for the world to remember them, the film opens on a characteristically foggy Elm Street which is otherwise cloaked in darkness. Upon a brief reference to Jason’s jingle, the first words spoken by Gibb, whose nonchalance and sexual promiscuity check all the boxes of becoming a victim of Jason’s, are “marry, fuck or kill, your choices are, your choices are the three Stooges. Go.” This invocation of the Stooges against a setting of marrying, fucking or killing both frames and solidifies a reading of the villainous pair as a vaudeville team. The game suggests that no matter which one of the Stooges is chosen, the participant has to engage with all three slapstick aficionados in one way or another. One might even say that the picture itself fucks, marries as well as ultimately kills as a comedic duo. It unites, i.e. *marries* two of the most iconic villains from the horror genre. They heavily physically engage with one another, i.e. *fuck* towards a cathartic response. And while they do remain immortal, they ultimately *kill* as a vaudeville team, implementing a comedy aesthetic as subtext and the clay along which they mold their final battle.

The film being ultimately concerned with the performance of said final showdown, the people that get slain along the way merely serve as a characterizing force which establishes

and solidifies their vaudeville personalities. Over the bodies of the ultimately only supporting human presence which is reduced to a peripheral necessity, Freddy crafts his witty intellectual dominance, which is cast vis-a-vis Jason's more physically inclined slapstick personality. Together, they become a comedic duo, entertainment becoming their ultimate objective. If Yanning is correct in asserting that the power relation of the comedic duo hinges on the intellectual dominance of one over the other as "[e]ven if, in past comedic duos, both members displayed idiocy to the audience, there was always some semblance of one member's being more serious, smarter, or more sane" [4] then Freddy clearly assumes intellectual dominance over Jason. The dynamic of the pair as a comedic duo casts Krueger as the witty intellectual and Voorhees as the physically indestructible slapstick artist. This becomes evident in Krueger's opening monologue outlining his grand resurrection. Lamenting the fact that he has been forgotten and thus no longer able to haunt the dreams of the unsuspecting tenants of Elm Street, he is forced to rely on a helping hand in order to resurrect himself: "I can't come back if nobody's afraid. I had to search the bones of hell. But I found someone. Someone who'll make 'em remember." Drawing on Jason, he foreshadows their respective positions as a comedy duo when he states that "He may get the blood but I'll get the glory" marking Jason with physicality and himself with cranial reputation. Further consolidating this reading of the pair, the characterization of Krueger in a scene during which he steals Kia's nose becomes illustrative. When her previously established discontent regarding her appearance inspires her to browse a magazine catering to the clientele of plastic surgery as she conveniently finds herself waiting for her friend Lori at a doctor's office, she is even more conveniently in a state of exhaustion. When she gives in and so fatally falls asleep, Krueger emerges in her dream and, inserting his claw into her nose, slays it off, chanting "got your nose". Framing his own orchestration of rhinoplasty with child's play, he turns the common trick of stealing somebody's nose into that nightmare from which he crafts the cloth of his existence. At the same time, he is ridiculing the horrors executed on her body using an ironic stance which implements his notorious wit, casting him as the intellectual party of the duo against taciturn Jason, a dynamic which is eventually consolidated by Lori identifying him as the

puppet master of the operation when she states that Krueger is “the one pulling the strings”. Marking only one half of the duo, Freddy’s intellectual superiority is then completed by Jason’s overt physicality and blind, urge-driven bloodlust. This contrast is already enacted during the setting of the initial tone of the film when, in the previously referenced opening on Elm Street, Gibb’s sexual interest is ultimately slain to illustriously gory abjection by Jason.

While each kill of Jason and each psychological trick of Freddy may be read as a solo number of their comedic act, it is only once united that they truly gain momentum and carry their act to extremes. They may have been cast as single acts in previous films and initially start out as such in *Freddy vs Jason*, however, their human-directed killing spree, which soon assumes a competitive undertone, ultimately only serves as individual characterization for their double act. The fact that they appear less and less interested in murdering people and more and more interested in battling one another points toward their portrayal over-the-human-corpse as the establishment of their respective personalities and power dynamic within their final act. It is their battle which is ultimately catering to the entertainment of the audience and becomes that which the film elaborately stages, devoting avid time to the choreographed performance between Freddy *and* Jason. As such, the final showdown then heavily implements their idiosyncratic killing styles. While Freddy narrates the battle with his characteristic wit, Jason remains heavily unkillable. Excessively marked with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, their final battle is rendered caricaturesque, extending the vaudeville dynamic towards their drawn counterparts; the slasher villains’ bodies allow for a cartoonish physicality. The theatricality of their ultimate showdown then peaks in Krueger relying on props when pitted against Jason’s resilient physical dominance. Set at Camp Crystal Lake, so conveniently under construction and thus laden with heavy objects, Krueger maneuvers anything and everything he can find in Jason’s way. Pestering him with small rockets and momentarily trapping him with metal spears, he attempts a final blow by means of a large container. When he ultimately trips and gets caught within an attached string, the

invocation of slapstick is completed by the final image of him hanging from that box upside down, while Jason remains his usual unfazed-by-physical harm self; clumsily Krueger eventually tumbles into the physically stoic Jason upside down, who aimlessly begins clobbering at him. Extensively exaggerated towards the cartoonish, the scene becomes overtly comic while its subtext – Krueger’s desperate “give me a break” upon the container remaining stuck and Jason’s seeming ignorance towards the reason for him even being attacked – cannot but evoke a comedic response.

Implementing their physicalities in this manner, the film burlesques their signature characteristics which have been established by their respective franchises.



Scenes designed for comedic effect

Excessive slapstick, which is executed to extremes on the un-killable physique of the horror villain, is intertwined with verbal humor hinging on irony and wit. Krueger’s exasperated “[w]hy won’t you die” mirrors as well as satirizes the horror genre and ridicules the human frustration at the villain’s ultimate survival. Exactly because these are figures from such durable franchises this exasperation resonates with an equally exasperatedly entertained audience, which traditionally roots for the protagonist’s triumph over the antagonist.

Thus, it is their durability which renders their battle so purely performative, a performativity which is endowed with self-reflexivity in the concluding image of the film. Having battled each other to non-death, they have simultaneously shaped their characteristics further – as part of a vaudeville team as well as within their respective franchises. It is poignant, then, that what remains of Freddy is merely his head; carried by Jason who resurrects his partner’s character-token, that trademark which complements Jason’s own physicality within their dynamic. Even at the end of the picture they remain,

head in severed hand, a double act in which a final wink re-establishes their immortality as they speak a final word in unison. Their unified emergence from water during the concluding scene thus highlights their characteristics within their dynamic as a comedy duo in which Freddy is physically reduced to a head but with his cheeky wink maintaining the final word while Jason's body is overtly physical, towering and carrying Freddy's wit, while both parts are equally necessary for the act. At the same time, their emergence from Crystal Lake, through which they surface in unison, can be extended to a reading of a reassuring baptism, as only the first act of their collaboration as a vaudeville team.

Notes:

[1] Glenn, 651.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jenkins, 336.

[4] Yanning, 82

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