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My Own PRIVATE LIBRARY



A peek inside the personal library of a librarian

by Douglas Rednour

An obsession for experiencing the spine-tingle of dark and fantastic cinema has led me over the years to amass a decent little personal library of horror-related materials.

The earliest memories I have of watching horror films involve the classic Universal cycle of black and white moody horror. Nineteen thirty-three's *The Invisible Man*, starring Claude Rains as H.G. Wells' titular mad scientist, is the first scary flick I remember specifically staying up late to watch. It was rereleased on DVD in a special *Invisible Man Legacy Set* in 2004, containing the entire Universal Studios' Invisible Man series plus various documentaries. Other great Legacy collections have been made for their *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Wolfman*, *Mummy*, and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* series. These releases cover the main core of the Universal Studios' classic horror canon, and I snatched up a copy of each.

It was through these sets that I finally got to see the legendary Spanish-language *Dracula*! It was shot at night on the same locations and even used the same basic script as the famous Bela Lugosi *Dracula*, but it was specifically made to show a version of Dracula in Spanish-speaking countries. The filmmakers on the Spanish version got to see daily footage of the previous morning's set-ups, which allowed for improving the camera work and stage direction in their version of the film, so much so that it's generally thought to be the better directed and produced version of the two. Better, that is, other than the superiority of Bela Lugosi's performance as the blood-sucking Count.

While I do love these classic Universal films, my favorite studio for horror is Hammer, the British studio that dripped blood. Famous for the bodice-wrapped gothic supernatural horrors with great British actors like Peter

Cushing and Christopher Lee, Hammer also excelled at creating great atmosphere by filming in more authentic-looking locations than Hollywood had access to, with the final ingredient in their formula being the use of color film to push the impact of the blood and gruesomeness. They are also harder to collect in sets, because Hammer sold various films to American distributors as best they could. So, there will never be a complete Hammer box containing all their mummy films or vampire films, at least not in America, because no one entity owns all of Hammer Films' output. One of my favorite Hammer films, the art-film-influenced *Vampire Circus*, was recently restored by Synapse Films and was released much to my wallet's regret as a BluRay/DVD combo pack. The market is shrinking for fans of classic horror films due to the general shrinking audience interested in old films as well as the toll peer-to-peer file sharing takes on the impetus to buy films. So, it made more sense for Synapse Films to do a combo pack to save production costs, even though it costs more for fans who can only play the DVD copy.

Aside from various sets and individual titles for the Hammer films, I also have a complete run of Richard Klemensen's *Little Shoppe of Horrors*, a Hammer fanzine that started in 1972 and whose most recent issue, #26, was released this spring. The Klem (as he's known to friends) has worked directly with Hammer personnel of all kinds for 39 years, from producers to stunt players and everybody in between, and has had many talented writers and artists contribute scholarship and original art about this beloved film company. He has even branched out into having articles about some of the smaller rival British horror studios like Amicus and Tigon, which I also collect.

Another book that I'm proud to own is *Video Watchdog* publisher Tim Lucas's massive 12 pound, 1128 page

book *Mario Bava: All The Colors Of The Dark*. This shot-put of a tome is dedicated to the Italian director, auteur, and special-effects genius who made so many of the great European horrors of the '60s. Many of his iconic films are available in two sets from Starz. *The Mario Bava Collection, Volume 1* includes such greats as the '60s gothic horror *Black Sunday*, which immortalized Barbara Steele as a horror icon; the Boris Karloff anthology film *Black Sabbath*; the first Italian giallo film *The Girl Who Knew Too Much*; and the sublime *Kill Baby Kill*, whose ghostly image of a demonic child and her sinister bouncing ball was utilized by "Il Maestro" Federico Fellini for his short film *Toby Damnit*. *The Mario Bava Collection, Volume 2* includes both versions of his late masterpiece – the original *Lisa and the Devil* and the horribly reedited American version *House of Exorcism* which saw the producer bringing back some of the cast to attempt to make the lyric film tie into the big horror hit of the early '70s, *The Exorcist*.

The rich tradition of horror cinema flies under the radar of many film fans. While many times there are similar themes, filming techniques, and editing techniques to scare an audience, horror films from other countries can have very unusual scenarios, or attempts to unsettle an audience in ways far beyond average American horror. Over the years, I've been able to track down horror film representation from countries as diverse as Indonesia (1989's *Lady Terminator*, a film that combines the imagery of the American hit film *The Terminator* with the local legends of Nyai Loro Kidul, aka the Queen of the Southern Sea of Java); Turkey (1973's *The Deathless Devil*, an action-packed and gore-filled superhero film based on American movie serials of the 30s and 40s); South Africa (1992's *Dust Devil*, which was based on a true tale of a Namibian serial killer who was rumored to have supernatural powers); Japan (1977's *House*, which the studio intended to be the Japanese box-office equivalent to *Jaws*, but instead got a uniquely Japanese take on the tradition of the haunted house influenced by the director's daughter, who gave her father a number of scenarios she thought were scary, like being buried under falling futons or a piano that eats fingers); Mexico (1957's *The Vampire* and 1958's *The Vampire's Coffin*, which were produced like the Universal films of the 1940s in gloriously rich black and white, and possibly the first films to show a vampire with fangs); the USSR (1967's *Viy*, or *Spirit of Evil*, which is a folkloric tale of a priest who is forced to say prayers over the body of a dead woman for three days to save her soul, but the woman comes to life each night and tries to kill him); Germany (1960's *Horrors of Spider Island*, a completely nutty tale about a dance troop that crashes on an island only to have their manager become

transformed by spider bite into a half-spider creature with a single big fang); and Thailand (2004's *Sars Wars: Bangkok Zombie Crisis*, which is both a scary zombie film and a vague parody of the Star Wars films as seen through the filter of Thai culture).

Horror film cultists like me are always on the hunt for more horror obscurities as well as new releases and remastered oldies. For instance, one of the gems in my collection is Ed Wood's obscure 1970s film *Venus Flytrap* that came in a set of 100 cheapie public domain horror films. Once this film was discovered by fans, they were amazed to see that the film bore all the examples of Wood's own efforts, such as lousy day-for-night shooting and terrible acting. The reason it was odd was because it was based on a '50s era Ed Wood script, but made by American actors living on a military base Japan in 1970. So somehow, though just contributing a script, Ed Wood influenced a film to be shot in the same slapdash style of his famously bad films. I've also gotten 1966's cult legend *Incubus*, starring William Shatner, directed by *Outer Limits* creator Leslie Stevens, and filmed with dialogue in the artificial language of Esperanto (which gives the film an eerie feel). For years this strange film, about a demonic creature who tires of taking the souls of the evil and thus takes on the challenge of corrupting a single good man, was thought to be lost. However, it was discovered that the Cinémathèque Française in Paris had a print with burned in subtitles, and that is the print that has been made available through DVD.

There are still plenty of films that I have only on VHS that I'd like to upgrade, like Avery Crounse's *Eyes of Fire* from 1983, an independent horror film set in 1750 in which a group of colonists discover the place on earth where all the evil in the world pools, and the dark tree spirit that lives there. It's one of my all-time favorites, but it's an obscurity to even most seasoned horror buffs, so it's unlikely a DVD is forthcoming. And some films haven't been released on DVD yet, nor was I able to track down their obscure VHS releases. These titles, like *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*, the '50s era classic that brought Michael Landon to the world of pop culture, or *Island of Terror*, a British horror film about giant cancer cells running amok (that gave me a nightmare-infested sleep after I saw it as a kid) have entered the popular consciousness, but are still very difficult to locate. Like Van Helsing searching eternally for all of Dracula's coffins, so am I on the eternal quest to collect every horror film I can.

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