

# Dracula

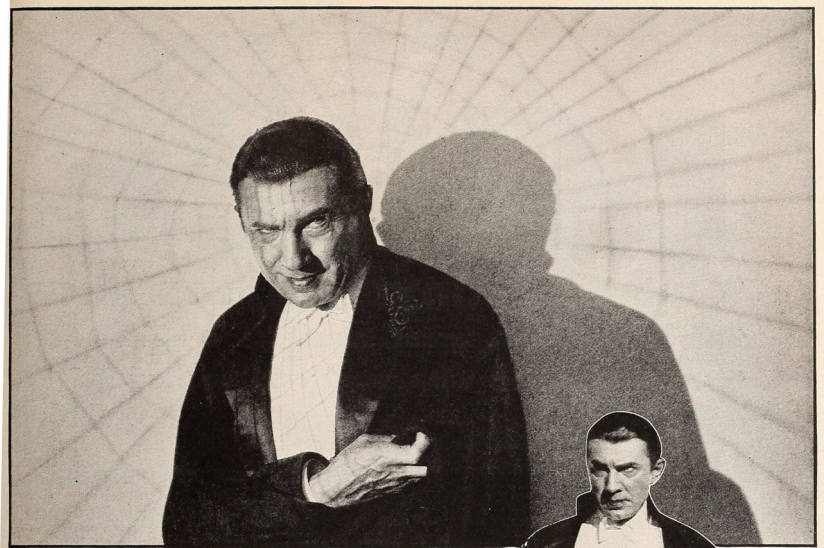
By Gary Rhodes

Few characters in the history of literature and film have proven as deathless as Count Dracula, the vampire that has haunted nightmares for well over a century. His existence and initial fame depended upon author Bram Stoker, who created him for the 1897 novel. But there is a second reason the character has flourished in popular culture: Tod Browning's 1931 film "Dracula."

Vampires certainly have deeper roots in America than Count Dracula, with accounts of them published in colonial newspapers as early as 1732. Then, during the nineteenth century, Americans enjoyed such stage plays as Planché's *The Vampyre, or The Bride of the Isles* (1820) and Boucicault's *The Phantom* (1852, aka *The Vampire*). Nevertheless, the definition of "vampire" changed noticeably in the fin de siècle period. The popularity of Philip Burne-Jones' painting *The Vampire* (1897) and Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same name transformed the term such that – instead of conjuring a supernatural creature – it instead suggested a powerful woman capable of draining a man dry, both emotionally and financially. The nascent American cinema furthered this new definition, particularly in such movies as "A Fool There Was" (1915) with Theda Bara.

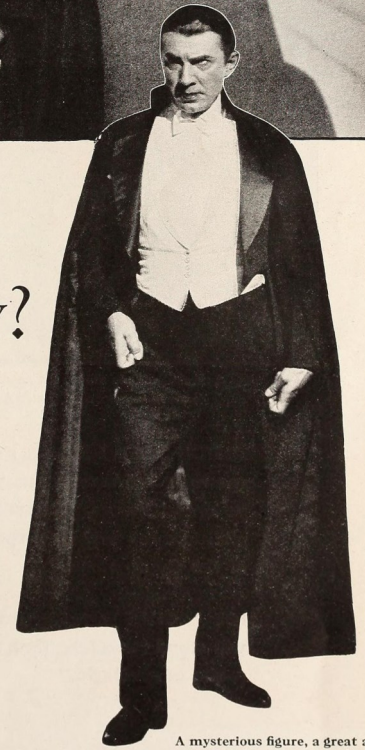
Film director Tod Browning saw matters quite differently. In 1920, he approached Universal Pictures with plans to adapt Stoker's *Dracula* as a feature film. Studio founder Carl Laemmle, Sr. turned the project down, not only that year, but also on later occasions during the Roaring Twenties. Once *Dracula – The Vampire Play* became a Broadway hit in 1927, other studios took an interest in the property, but none of them were brave enough to proceed. For one, *Dracula* required a serious depiction of the supernatural, something that had been largely absent in American film history up until that time. Secondly, many in Hollywood believed *Dracula* was too gruesome to achieve widespread appeal.

Outside of Tod Browning, only one other person had complete confidence in *Dracula's* potential for the



## IS HE the SECOND CHANEY?

**H**IS NAME is Bela Lugosi. Like the beloved Lon, he is a man of mystery and a master of make-up. He is working in movies at Universal, where Lon Chaney worked, being directed by Tod Browning, the man who directed nearly all of Lon's greatest pictures. His great rôle, "Dracula," is that of an "undead" vampire who lives on the blood of humans, a part, that had he lived, would inevitably have gone to Chaney. Lugosi, when first approached to make a picture of "Dracula"—he had played it on the stage—refused. Tests of other players were made. No one could be discovered who could effectively portray this supernatural character. Finally Lugosi signed for four weeks. Before the cameras, he completed his work in one day. Again like Lon—an artist who knows his job and does it quietly and quickly. Only in appearance does he differ. He is six feet one in height, with the dreamy, strange face of a mystic. His deep-set eyes have a peculiar fascinating quality. Lon is gone but his art lives after him. May Lugosi be worthy of following in the path he made so thoroughly his own.



A mysterious figure, a great actor, will this man replace Lon?

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Advertisement in 1931 edition of *Silver Screen* magazine features Bela Lugosi in his *Dracula* costume. Courtesy [Media History Digital Library](#).

screen. In 1929, Carl Laemmle, Jr. assumed control of production at Universal Pictures. In an effort to make the studio's product more prestigious, "Junior" Laemmle, as he was known, took risks producing a number of projects, including "All Quiet on the Western Front" (1930) and – by the summer of 1930—"Dracula." By his side was Tod Browning, who would direct the first American film version of "Dracula" and the first sound version of the story produced in any country.

Various screenwriters drafted adaptations of "Dracula" for Universal, including novelist Louis Bromfield and experimental filmmaker Dudley Murphy. The final shooting script, which was written by Browning and Garrett Fort, drew upon a number of sources, ranging from the contributions of prior

screenwriters and a careful examination of F. W. Murnau's "Nosferatu" (1922) to Bram Stoker's novel and, most of all, its Broadway adaptation. By the time production began in September 1930, Junior Laemmle and Tod Browning had assembled an impressive cast, featuring Helen Chandler as Mina, Edward Van Sloan as Van Helsing, and, most notably, Bela Lugosi as Dracula. Wearing his famous cape and speaking in his distinctive accent, Lugosi's vampire count appeared on elaborate sets designed by Charles "Danny" Hall in expert cinematography by Karl Freund.

Principal photography ended on November 15, 1930, with "Dracula" quickly moving into post-production. By that time, Universal's music director Heinz Roemheld had undertaken a careful consideration of the film's minimal but effective score. Under Maurice Pivar's supervision, Milton Carruth completed a rough cut shortly before Christmas 1930, which likely incorporated "added scenes" filmed on December 13. After a preview screening, Browning shot retakes on January 2, 1931, with Carruth working on a final cut that premiered in New York on February 12, 1931.

Featuring an unforgettable performance by Lugosi, "Dracula" became an unforgettable experience, with its haunting, painterly images unfolding at an appropriately measured and otherworldly pace. The film is an expertly-crafted nightmare dreamt by others to which we have all been chillingly exposed.

The predominant number of critical reviews in magazines and industry trade publications in 1931 were extremely positive, with the trend continuing in newspaper reviews across America in the spring and summer of 1931. "Dracula" also became a box-office smash. As of March 1931, Junior Laemmle was already considering such possible sequels as "The Modern Dracula," "The Return of Dracula," and "The Son of Dracula."

In 1931, Universal's publicity heralded "Dracula" as "The Story of the Strangest Passion the World Has Ever Known." But film critics and the American public rechristened it as a "horror movie": its enormous success gave rise to what became the lasting name of a popular American film genre.

Beginning in the 1950s, film scholars began to decry Browning and his version of "Dracula," a trend that continued until the 1990s. Unfortunately, the "evidence" these critics used was largely erroneous. "Dracula" featured less music than its successor - "Frankenstein" (1931), one argument claimed, when in fact the two mathematically feature the same number of musical selections. The film's alleged "flaws" included a piece of cardboard accidentally left on the set, but even a cursory investigation reveals that the cardboard was in fact an intentional prop.

Universal's restoration of George Melford's Spanish-language version of "Dracula" (1931) in the early 1990s meant Browning's film faced new critical challenges from those who deemed Melford's to be superior. Once again the "evidence" used against Browning's film was largely faulty. Melford's version does not feature more moving camera shots than Browning's, or faster-paced editing, for example, even though many persons have made the mathematical miscalculation that it does.

Fortunately, at the dawn of the new millennium, Tod Browning's "Dracula" began to receive a wave of positive critical attention, ranging from Philip Glass' 1999 musical score for the film to a major restoration undertaken by Universal Home Video as released in 2012. New voices have gone far to restore the film's reputation and its key role in American cinema, offering a more careful consideration of its signal achievements and artistic merits.

The inclusion of "Dracula" in the National Film Registry is another testament to its lasting fame and ongoing influence. In the film, Dracula claims that vampires will "live through the centuries to come." So too will Tod Browning's film.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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