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Works Cited

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Section:

AMERICAN CHARACTERS

THE COUNT

Bela Lugosi began by playing Laertes and Romeo, only to become forever trapped in very different roles

IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE NOW, BUT THERE WAS a time when moviegoers did not know about vampires. Didn't know you do them in with a wooden stake through the heart, didn't know a ray of sunlight is injurious to their health, that they sleep in coffins all day and go about at night as bats and wolves. Didn't even know they drink the blood!

All that changed in a single magnificent cinematic achievement. The English solicitor has come by stagecoach past peasants fearfully crossing themselves and up a Mittel-Europa mountain-pass road to a castle of shattered and decayed battlements. On a grand staircase within, the unknown nobleman who has requested his presence awaits.

The accent of that menacing welcomer, his pauses and intonation, the graceful and slow hand motions, aristocratic bearing, formal white-tie wear with sash and raised-collar cape--does there exist a kid today who has not seen and heard and understood it all, in Saturday-morning cartoons, on cereal boxes, in television ads, comic books, greeting cards, toys, paint kits, plastic representations, Halloween costumes complete with gleaming fangs?

And who inspired all of this? Well, can you name a king off the top of your head? Of course you

can: Richard III, Henry VIII, John, Edward VII. A czar? Peter, Nicholas II. A prince ? Hamlet, Charles. A duke? Wellington. Now--quick--a count? Who comes to mind? What, Tolstoy? Marie Antoinette's boyfriend Axel Fersen? Monte Cristo? Please. There's only one count.

"I am Dracula. I bid you.., welcome." So declared Bela Lugosi. At the New York opening, the theater advertised that a trained nurse would be in attendance to care for those succumbing to such fearsomeness as had never before been seen on the screen. There followed for Bela Lugosi the mad scientist concocting devil bats and rays and potions of most terrible intent. He became soul stealer, priest of the living dead, master of the occult, transplanter of brains, demented presence aiming to destroy worlds or to make the world bow down before him. He was ghoul, sorcerer, zombie maker, leader of the wandering dead, chieftain of the dark forces of the world of shadow, clutched-hand maniac of fog-shrouded cemetery, evil experimenter in dank cellar laboratory.

The portrayer of all these and more--and worse! --was born in 1882 in Lugos, in the foothills of--where else?--the Transylvanian Alps, his father a baker turned banker. Bela Blasko left off schooling at eleven, and used his hometown to create a new name for use on the stage. He sang in operettas for provincial Hungarian companies, performed baritone parts in operas, was Jesus in a passion play, Laertes in Hamlet, Lucentio in The Taming of the Shrew, Cassio in Othello, Clarence in Richard III, and in Szeged, his country's second city after Budapest, rose to a Romeo of whom a critic wrote, "Beautifully fiery, passionately loving and dying!"

He was matinee-idol handsome, of great intensity and immense stage presence and dignity, polished, his persona such that women flocked about for the appeal he had been born with. (He lost his virginity at thirteen, records his biographer Robert Cremer.) The First World War came, and he served as a lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian forces, twice to be wounded. Afterward he went to Berlin, alternately leading man and character actor and, in 1921, working his ship's-hand way across the ocean, to America--to New Orleans. He was thirty-eight. He made for New York, where, he knew, stage opportunities could be found despite his all but complete lack of English. He obtained parts phonetically learned and was marked by a New York Times critic as "of quite splendid mien, romantically handsome," of "the truly noble spirit."

He was stagy, stylized, elegant, Continental, of sonorous deliberate line delivery with significant pauses, with great carriage and stately demeanor, a natural to play the lead in the dramatization of Bram Stoker's novel 'of the Carpathian Mountains nobleman who drinks the blood not solely because he wants to but because he must. Lugosi was fascinating, showing in poetic manner a soulless being, forsaken even as he is satanically deadly. From the stage version came the 1931 movie, which saved Universal from Depression bankruptcy. Can anyone forget "Listen to them, the children of the night" as the count hears the dark cries of tortured beings he has made undead, as he is himself? "What music they make!"

A star, Lugosi lived in high fashion--the financial supporter of soccer teams remindful of the old

country, the softest of touches for anyone asking for money. With his wives, of whom in time there were five, he was dictatorial and jealous, the image of a European aristocrat and autocrat. He was offered the role of the monster in *Frankenstein*. The stitched-together creature was to lumber about grotesquely with bolts sticking out of its neck, the dialogue consisting of howls, grunts, mumbles. Lugosi's portrayal of *Dracula* saw him applying no makeup at all, save some liner between his brows, and with his delivery of lines showing subtle dramatic power and eloquence. He turned the monster role down. Boris Karloff took it.

Lugosi saw himself as soon to be called upon for stage appearances in New York and perhaps on tour; but his grand Old World life needed funding, so he began to take whatever was offered in Hollywood. And no casting director could see for a moment Count *Dracula's* portrayer, he who was Count *Dracula*, as the leading man in a happyending adventure, or as dramatic tragedian, or in lighttouch frothy comedy. He was for the sinister, bizarre, menacing, scarifying--typecast beyond redemption. Karloff could graduate to new types of roles upon occasion, taking off his thickly laid-on makeup and persona, but Lugosi never, having no masking and no voice other than his own. He was hopelessly trapped. It went on and on, B movie after B movie, and cheapies even lower in the scale. He made a hundred films, all of the same genre.

But, a dedicated and proud craftsman, he gave his all, every time. You cannot do things with tongue in cheek, he said, for the screen magnifies everything, even the way you think. So you must believe in it while you play a part --no matter what. On tacky sets with awful scripts and talentless hacks playing opposite, Lugosi brought to his work what range he could. The hypnotic eyes shone, and he displayed sadness and resignation as well as overweening formula evil. To junk productions he brought sensitively imaginative characterizations. Sometimes he was signed to play bit parts opposite the best of his day, Garbo, Bogart, Laughton, Lionel Barrymore, Loretta Young, Ava Gardner, and then it was back to the low-budget potboilers. "He always lamented what might have been," writes his biographer Arthur Lennig. He told a young actress offered a horror film, "Don't do it, don't do it. The same thing will happen to you that has happened to me. You'll just be haunting houses the rest of your life."

With spiders and fogs, shrouds, decay, black drapes, cheesy-looking representations of castles and mausoleums, he did his second-feature quickies. He drank too much. Suffering from sciatica, he took morphine for the pain. He became addicted. He carried needles and illegally obtained supplies of the drug with him as he went on tour to put on an awful horror act in shabby houses, a "spook show" with a man dressed as a gorilla led by a chain and a shuddering woman to menace. He had Band-Aids on his legs from constant needle injections. "I look in the mirror," he said, "and I say, 'Can it be you who once played *Romeo*?' Always it is the same. When a film company is in the red they come to me and say, 'Okay, so we make a horror film.' And so that is what we do. It is what I always do."

He committed himself, insolvent, thin, wasted, and emerged from the hospital as the first well-

known person in Hollywood ever to speak of addiction in frank terms. His great role was a quarter century in the past, the enormous interest in the early horror films just around a corner he would not live to see. In August of 1956, attired in the count's cape, white tie, sash, he lay in a funeral-parlor coffin from which this time he would not arise.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Lugosi in the part that changed the course of his life: A still from the 1931 Dracula.

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By Gene Smith

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