

Dracula's Daughter: A Queer Monster Classic Turns 75

The clunky execution of Tod Browning's 1931 film *Dracula* is the elephant in the room as far as classic horror is concerned. Bela Lugosi impresses in the title role, certainly, and the movie has a handful of truly memorable moments, but most of it falls very flat. Viewed 80 years later, it is not so much a great film as a curiosity, notable for its seminal place in cinema history.

Dracula's Daughter, on the other hand, the direct sequel that celebrates its 75th anniversary this year, boasts a superior pace and a central performance at least equal to that of Lugosi in the first film. It achieves this despite being directed by Lambert Hillyer, a little-known studio hack whose main fare was B-grade westerns. Universal chief Carl Laemmle hired him after plans to use James Whale then Edward Sutherland fell through. (It was to be the Laemmle family's last film at Universal. Having run the studio into debt with increasingly lavish productions, the Laemmles lost the studio to their creditors as *Dracula's Daughter* wrapped.)

The 1936 film carries on exactly from where the 1931 original left off. Van Helsing, played by the only returning cast member, Edward Van Sloan, has staked Count Dracula, and two policemen escort him to the station on suspicion of murder. Lugosi received a handsome fee for participating in publicity, incidentally, although he doesn't appear in the film itself, even in this opening sequence – an obvious dummy stands in for his corpse.

Van Helsing tries to convince the police he had good reason for the staking, but without success, until Dracula's body mysteriously disappears from a locked prison cell. The thief is Countess Marya Zaleska (Holden), who, in one of the film's most mesmerizing scenes, performs a ritual over the body in order to end the "curse of the Draculas."

Zaleska is a reluctant vampire, trapped by her plight. From her first words, when she begins to pray for release from the spirit of her father, she is a tortured, pitiable and sympathetic creature. Holden portrays this forlornness exquisitely; hers is a beautiful, perfectly formed face, but her eyes betray emptiness and longing for freedom.

“You think this night will be like all the others, don’t you?” she asks her servant, Sandor (the actor and director Irving Pichel), as she struggles to resist the urge to claim another victim. “Well, you’re wrong. Dracula’s destroyed, his body’s in ashes. The spell is broken. I can live a normal life, think normal things, even play normal music again.” (This last phrase evokes the memory of the perverse music of Lugosi’s “children of the night.”)

Sandor, apparently one of her kind – earlier, he recoils from the sight of a cross – won’t let her contemplate freedom and insists she remain what she always has been. He tears ruthlessly through his mistress’s hopefulness and breaks her down.

It later becomes clear their kind is more than vampire. They are gay. In a scene of such startling candour one wonders how its lesbian implications were lost on the Hayes-era censors, Sandor commandeers a pretty young girl on the streets of Chelsea and takes her to an apartment, where Zaleska orders her to strip, ostensibly to pose for a portrait.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Won’t I do?” asks the girl.

Gazing intensely at the girl’s face and bare shoulders, the smitten countess replies, “Yes, you’ll do very well indeed.”

A smile of enchantment, not of malevolence, breaks across Zaleska’s face as she walks towards her screaming prey.

Sandor, too, appears to be homosexual. He's an ageing, androgynous bachelor, living in a queer relationship with his mistress, over whom he exerts an unhealthy control as he determines to keep her unhappy and locked in her fate. Sandor is, frankly, a bitter and bitchy old queen.

Her ritual clearly having failed to rid her of her inclination to evil, Zaleska attempts to find help through a psychiatrist, Dr Garth (Otto Kruger). She relates to him the "overpowering command ... I had to obey" and asks him to go away with her in the hope that she can escape her situation and he can cure her. When he refuses, she succumbs to her overwhelming desire for evil. In a remarkable transformation, she resigns herself to her own nature, abducts Garth's secretary, whom he loves, and schemes to force him into joining her in eternal vampirism.

This change is testament to the power of Holden's performance in the title role. She hated the film, yet her move from pitiable to brazenly manipulative is so convincingly executed; even when she finally gives in to her vampirism, she never stops being sympathetic. Holden gives the part more depth than Lugosi gave the role of Dracula, and her performance may well be one of the finest pieces of horror acting in film. (Mark Clark devotes five pages to the performance in his 2004 book *Smirk, Sneer and Scream: Great Acting in Horror Cinema*).

Dracula's Daughter failed to repeat the box office success of the inferior *Dracula* and has never enjoyed the same popularity fans and critics over the years. Nor has it received the same attention as another queer horror classic, James Whale's *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), or even Whale's equally gay *The Old Dark House* (1932). Its 75th birthday seems the right time for horror aficionados to revisit the film, but beware: Countess Zaleska's dangerous predilection runs in the family, and sometimes she just can't help herself. Heed the warning – especially if you're young, beautiful and female – that came with *Dracula's Daughter's* arrival in 1936: "Look out! She'll get you!"

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