Written by Tony Timpone
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I’m a sucker for seeing vintage frights on the big screen, and if you’re a New Yorker, it has been a cinematic feast in the Big Apple these last few weeks. The Film Forum recently concluded its 3-D fest and then directly segued into a gimmick-laden William Castle salute (ending this Monday), while Linco In Center has a bunch of cool screenings coming, starting with Ridley Scott’s ALIEN on Monday (see item here). Meanwhile, over at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s repertory house, the ongoing Bela Lugosi’s Dead, Vampires Live Forever festival (see item here) will be running till September 30. That’s where I caught 1970’s COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE on the big screen for the first time last week, and dug every grindhouse minute of it.

Just like today’s modern vampire craze with TWILIGHT and TRUE BLOOD, ’70s audiences had no shortage of bloodsuckers, with DARK SHADOWS and THE NIGHT STALKER staking out the boob tube and Christopher Lee’s Dracula putting a bite on drive-ins. Legend has it that COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE—about a cultured Romanian blood-drainer who settles in modern-day LA—started out as a softcore movie before star Robert Quarry convinced the producers to take a legit approach to the material. Smart move. Reportedly shot for a meager $64,000 (with Quarry only earning $1,200 for his lead role!), the film became a hit after American International Pictures acquired it for release in 1970. Plotwise, writer/director Bob Kelljan closely follows the template set by Tod Browning’s 1931 DRACULA, with the aristocratic Yorga settling into his new mansion while preying on two romantic couples. A blood doctor (Roger Perry), suspecting a supernatural menace afoot, matches wits with Yorga—not unlike the verbal dueling of Bela Lugosi and Edward Van Sloan in DRACULA. And there’s also a mute henchman named Brudah (Edward Walsh) serving as the Renfield substitute, and a climax where the good guys sneak into the villain’s lair to put a stop to the bloodshed.

The unflappable Quarry sets COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE (originally lensed as THE LOVES OF COUNT IORGA, the onscreen title on the BAM print) apart from other typical fanged fare from the period. The guy exudes a commanding screen presence, has a great air about him, but can also launch into Lee-style animal ferocity when his back gets pushed up against the wall. The California-born, classically trained actor wisely plays the role straight and *sans* accent, and seems to relish his verbal sparring with Perry and company, with the Count almost too proud to hide his true nature. This vampire, alas, also has a romantic streak, and keeps a harem of turned lasses in his basement. Both COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE and, even more, its year-later sequel THE RETURN OF COUNT YORGA emphasize the vampire’s equal needs for love and blood, angles further explored in 1992’s BRAM STOKER’S DRACULA (also playing BAM) and THE TWILIGHT SAGA, to name a few. Oh, the eternal loneliness… The film’s best shock scene finds the bitten (and smitten) Erica (Judy Lang) discovered gorily feasting on an eviscerated cat by her startled friends.

Symptomatic of its budget, not a whole lot happens in COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE. There’s a *lot* of talk between the protagonists, plus a long travelogue scene with two of our heroes wandering the sunny streets of Los Angeles (fun for nostalgia/time-capsule reasons, though). Yorga’s eventual demise comes a little too abruptly, and the film’s surprise ending probably worked much better 40 years ago than it does today.

Director Kelljan went on to co-write and direct YORGA’s better-budgeted sequel and SCREAM, BLACULA SCREAM, as well as tons of ’70s TV action shows like CHARLIE’S ANGELS and STARSKY & HUTCH. Actor Michael Murphy, whose love-van-driving character suffers Yorga’s violent wrath, carved himself a nice Hollywood career after this exploitation debut, appearing in such diverse films as Woody Allen’s MANHATTAN, Tim Burton’s BATMAN RETURNS and Wes Craven’s SHOCKER. Quarry, alas, never emerged as the ’70s successor to Vincent Price, which AIP unsuccessfully groomed him for. Audience tastes changed, and by 1973, tuxedo-wearing monsters were just not as scary anymore when compared to devil-possessed 13-year-old girls.

Watch for a Fango Flashback on THE RETURN OF COUNT YORGA next week, and check out the classic Quarry (who died in 2009) interview in Fango #64.

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