

Elegies: TruLee, MadLee, DeepLee, Part Three

Written by Tony Timpone
Friday, 04 March 2011 15:17



When my personal remembrances of Sir Christopher Lee left off in the last edition of Elegies (see [here](#) and [here](#) for previous installments), the actor had just survived the clutches of three obsessed fans who hounded him at his one and only FANGORIA convention appearance (see backstage footage of the event at the bottom of this blog). I thought I'd been lucky to meet the genre legend once, but as fate would have it, I would have two more memorable opportunities to hobnob with Lee in the years that followed...

Thanks to the courtesies of British journalist and sometime Fango scribe Nigel Floyd, in November 1992 I was a guest of the prestigious London Film Festival. Nigel was programming the event's midnight-movie section and had arranged for me to introduce the first FANGORIA feature film, MINDWARP, which I had served as an executive consultant on. Anyway, the wife and I stretched out our UK trip and stayed a few extra days to see the sights and hang with friends. I also decided to get some other horror business done. At the time, I was pitching a book called HORROR STARS to U.S. publishers, which was to feature new interviews with scream greats past and present. Of course, I put Christopher Lee on the top of the list of people I wanted to interview.



So before I left for London, I contacted Lee's reps to arrange an in-person sit-down with the revered thespian. His agent immediately replied in the affirmative, and on the long flight from JFK to Heathrow, I diligently did my research and prepared. I strove to ask Lee questions he hadn't been asked before—no easy task. Also, I knew that the man's very sensitive to being described as a "horror actor" and resented the typecasting that plagued him over the years (though he has never stopped working). Moreover, Lee has argued that he has made very few horror films during his career (debatable, of course), and frequently splits hairs by calling his Hammer Dracula films, for example, fairy tales (!). Actor Howard Vernon, who appeared with Lee in a few pictures like NIGHT OF THE BLOOD MONSTER, even alleged once that he saw an angry Lee tear up a Dracula photo when a fan asked him to sign it at a European film fest.

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Though I took that story with a *big* grain of salt, I knew I had to watch my Ps and Qs when grilling Lee for the book. In addition, the specter of our last meeting at the Fango show with those psycho fans would hang over the reunion. Hopefully, Lee wouldn't bring it up. I knew I wouldn't.

So on one typically overcast afternoon in London, Lee agreed to meet at a swank hotel near Harrad's department store, not far from where he lived. We were to do the interview in the lobby's restaurant, over tea, of course. I arrived early, and before long, the confident actor arrived and walked past registration to meet me. He wore the same overcoat he sported in New York nearly three years ago, the last time we had spoken.

"Oh, yes, I remember you," Lee said as he extended his hand after spotting me. "At your convention was when those three unbalanced people hounded me..." Oh, no!

Despite the awkward start, Lee and I settled into our comfy chairs to begin the interview, in plain view of hotel guests and visitors. Before we could even get started, an elderly woman approached Lee. Here we go again, I thought! But the two began chatting in friendly fashion. "Allow me to introduce my sister," Lee said to me during the happenstance encounter. After that, no one bothered us and the inquisition began.

Our conversation began with Lee probing *me* about Francis Coppola's BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA. The remake was due to open in the States in a few days, and I had already seen it. Having played the Count nine times, Lee wanted to know how the remake shaped up. Despite his misgivings of having played Dracula in several inferior sequels, he seemed very protective of the character and poo-pooed the whole notion of Coppola and co. calling their film the definitive version of Stoker's text.



As things progressed, we discussed Lee's rich genre career and hit all the bases. I was only supposed to get an hour with him, so at the 90-minute mark, realizing that I'd only made it through less than half the questions (the guy can talk!), I respectfully asked if he'd like to quit.

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“No, this is for a *book*,” Lee said. “I want this to be good. So let’s continue. But I do have to go to the loo.”

So Lee got up and headed to the bathroom. On his way back to our table, much to my horror, I noticed that his fly was open! How do you tell Dracula that his zipper’s undone?! Unheeded, we jumped right back into the interview, but all I kept thinking of was, “Should I embarrass Christopher and tell him about the draft in his trousers or just ignore it?” Luckily, Lee noticed himself, zipped up and even made a joke about it. Whew!

Anyway, I enjoyed our marathon *three-hour* interview. I loved all of Lee’s stories and only got his ire up once, when I pressed him on why he kept making movies for Jess Franco when so many of their films together were terrible. “One always hopes for the best,” he said. I never wound up writing that book, however, for various reasons, but you can read my two-part Lee interview in FANGORIA 227-228.

I’d meet Lee one more time in person, in August 1999. He made a transatlantic trip to the Big Apple again, this time to promote his updated autobiography, TALL, DARK AND GRUESOME (Midnight Marquee Press), and agreed to do a public signing (just his book, though) at the Times Square Virgin Megastore. Lee looked his distinguished best and seemed generally interested in those who conversed with him, even the couple of weirdos who turned up (luckily, the previous psycho fans were no-shows). The book sold out quickly (Lee complained to me that the store hadn’t ordered enough copies), and before long, fans ransacked the store searching for *anything* with Lee’s name on it that they could purchase and then have Lee autograph. The next day, he’d be leaving on a train to Baltimore, Maryland for another public book signing at a Fanex convention.

Later that year, Lee would begin enchanting a new generation of fans with more high-profile movie roles, beginning with Tim Burton’s marvelous SLEEPY HOLLOW and culminating with memorable turns in the LORD OF THE RINGS and STAR WARS franchises. And he’s still going strong at age 89. At this productive stage in his career, Lee’s more reluctant than ever to talk up his horror past, even passing on an interview request when Fango visited the set of THE RESIDENT (see FANGORIA #301) in New Mexico. After all those years of screen enjoyment, I suppose we can cut Sir Christopher a little slack...

