

Without his fangs, Dracula's a nice guy

The Thing in the coffin writhed; and a hideous, blood-curdling screech came from the opened red lips. The body shook and quivered and twisted in wild convulsions; the sharp white teeth clamped together till the lips were cut, and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam. But Arthur never faltered. He looked like a figure of Thor as his untrembling arm rose and fell, dripping deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake, whilst the blood from the pierced heart welled and spurted up around it. . . . And then the writhing and quivering of the body became less, and the teeth seemed to clasp, and the face to quiver. Finally it lay still. The terrible task was over.

—Bram Stoker: "Dracula."

THE MAN in the chair had undergone an amazing transformation

The last I'd seen him he'd had blazing, magnetic eyes and razor-sharp fangs, and horrible sounds were bubbling from his throat. He was wrapped in a black cape, with a crimson lining, and he was busying himself with people's necks.

Now he looked harmless enough. The fangs were gone, the eyes were normal, and he was wearing a very unmenacing navy blue suit. He had left his rubbers on over his shoes. I don't know why—

Close-up

With
Jeff Lyon



my own lunacy I suppose—but I expected something else.

"You have to give the character up when you leave the theater," Jeremy Brett said, noticing my disappointment. "Count Dracula's an impossible character to live with on a day-to-day basis."

BRETT, WHO is starring in the Chicago production of "Dracula" at the Shubert Theater, did admit, though, that at a recent cocktail party a woman begged him to bite her neck and he consented, repeating the gesture several times over the evening. And the other morning he bit the hostess on "A. M. Chicago."

"There are people who want to keep their fantasies," Brett shrugged. "I don't want to destroy all of it by insisting on being Jeremy Brett all the time."

Brett's Dracula is quite different from Bela Lugosi's heavily accented

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Count. Not once does Brett say "I want to drink your blood." He also plays it differently from Frank Langella who had the role on Broadway before the current production went on the road.

"WE ALL COME at it from a different angle," Brett said. "I thought I'd play it for the first time as if Count Dracula were in love. He says 'I'll set my Lucy above all else.' My God, he's fallen in love. So I play this man who's gone out of control, who becomes terribly careless and makes mistakes because he's got this girl under his skin. He's 500 years old and he's become a love-sick child."

"He's a very sad creature, actually," Brett said, stubbing out a cigarette and shifting in his chair.

"I think he's very lonely and very old. He's deeply corrupted sexually. Sex is obviously his main preoccupation. Also he's hooked. He's an addict. It's terrible to be hooked on anything, and he's hooked on blood."

SIPPING JUGULAR cocktails nightly has been rough on Brett, he lamented. "All that roaring — I roar all through the show, you know — is bad on the throat."

He also has what he called "Dracula elbow" in his left arm from flinging his 30-pound cape around dramatically.

Once a night he lifts the 110-pound heroine and takes her to bed in an extremely sensual scene.

"The scene amazes me," Brett said. "Here a man in a black velvet cape comes in the window with a blast of mist blowing in, and he seduces a girl on the bed, and there isn't a laugh or a titter in the place. I think it affects women terribly. To be swept off their feet, to be possessed, is their widest dream. Men get an enormous fizz from it, too."

THE SHOW, which features the whimsically grotesque stage settings of macabre artist Edward Gorey, some fine acting, and terrific special effects, is the leading edge of a wave of Draculas.

At least four new movies based on the Stoker classic are coming out, including the hideous German remake of "Nosferatu" [The Undead], and half a dozen rival stage versions have been spawned. Such actors as George Hamilton, Louis Jourdan, and Jean LeClerc are all playing the venerable King of the Vampires.

People can't get enough of Dracula. There is even a Dracula breakfast cereal.

Close-up

FOR SOME insight into the continuing popularity of this 82-year-old horror classic, I consulted Martin Riccardo of suburban Burbank, who is president of the Vampire Study Society and editor of the Journal of Vampirism.

"Vampires have a kind of deadly sensuality and mystery about them that's compelling," Riccardo began.

"And by studying vampires, people can really reach into the darker aspects of their own natures. In some ways the vampire symbolizes the id—the sensual, primal, ruthless part of ourselves—and so a part of us unconsciously really wants to identify with him. He can do the things we can't do in real life, like enslaving the opposite sex. But another part of us feels secure when the vampire is stalked or burned at the end. People feel released. Their own baser nature has been destroyed."

"RIGHT NOW, I think there's a sudden fascination with evil in its purest form. It's a safety valve for people, mainly because they want the security that there really is an evil they can readily identify. That's because the boundaries between good and evil are getting fainter and fainter as society gets more and more complex."

"These days some people are attracted by the imagery of death. That's evident in rock groups which play up that imagery. Black costumes, blood-red makeup. Sid Vicious obviously had death fixations in his head."

"Do you believe in vampires?" the questioner asked.

Riccardo paused. "I don't believe in the movie type of vampire," he said, pensively. "But the way the occult theory works, a vampire is not really a dead body. Rather it's a body in suspended animation. Kind of a hibernation. The body sends out its ghost form, its astral form, to bring blood back to keep the body alive in the grave. The reason it wants to stay alive is that, if the body dies, the spirit is forced to face judgment in the next world."

"BUT DO YOU believe there are vampires?"

"Well, not these days, because of advances," Riccardo said. "Airtight coffins and embalming practices would ensure that nobody stayed alive in the grave to become vampires. So there's gotta be very few left."