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## Simply the Best: Louis Jourdon as Count Dracula

### Cover Page Footnote

Victoria Amador is an independent scholar and former university professor. Her research interests include Hollywood Golden Era cinema, gothic representations in popular culture, and fashion history.

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Louis Jourdan's film legacy was built upon his turn as the charming pawn of Alfred Hitchcock's 1947 *The Paradine Case*, the handsomely diffident Gaston Lachailles in the 1958 Oscar-winning *Gigi*, as Dr. Anton Arcane in Wes Craven's cult horror film *Swamp Thing* (1982) and its 1989 sequel, and as the suave villain Prince Kamal Khan in 1983's James Bond fantasia *Octopussy*. Upon his death in February 2015, Terrence Rafferty, in his *New York Times* obituary for the actor, noted,

For the last 30 years of his performing life Mr. Jourdan — still attractive and still impeccably dignified, but looking a bit more world-weary with every passing year — was cast more often as a Prince of Darkness than as Prince Charming....Mr. Jourdan had the opportunity to play more nuanced villains on television....[and] he gave a seductive and chilling performance in the title role of 'Count Dracula' on the BBC (Para. 2).

The role of Bram Stoker's archetypal vampire has provided a number of actors with

opportunities to establish their careers (Bela Lugosi), stereotype their careers (Lugosi and Christopher Lee), reboot their careers (Jack Palance), and redefine their careers (Frank Langella and Gary Oldman). *Dracula* is universal; in October 2016, there was even a stage version performed in Dubai by a local community theatre. The productions, however, whether on film or on stage, vary in terms of *mise-en-scene*, art direction, textual adaptations of the novel, tone, and depiction of the Count. This last point is the most significant if one wants to view a representation of Stoker's work which captures the essence of a monster and a warrior, a seducer and a destroyer.

The 1977 BBC2 television film *Count Dracula*, debuting on December 22 of that year, while making some emendations to the novel, offers a reimagining of Stoker's novel which "must be the most careful adaptation of the novel to date, and the most successful" (Skal, *Hollywood Gothic* 275). This version is generally faithful to the plot, characters, themes, and locations of the original. The length of the production—150 minutes—gave director Philip Saville the opportunity to present more of the original text's language, ideas, and tropes. Filming on location in Whitby further contributed to the film's effectiveness. The special effects of the time add now to the viewing an almost archaic quality which seems most appropriate to a Victorian tale. Above all, Louis Jourdan's depiction of Count Dracula embodies the charm, the terror, the arrogance, the erudition, and the malice of this king of the vampires. As Ken Gelder notes, "some

vampires attract, others repel; some do both” (30). The same is true of Jourdan’s performance. This paper will address the script adaptation, the visual properties, the performances, and Jourdan’s incarnation as the most effective of all of the Draculas.

### **The text and the shooting script**

Perhaps one day, there will be a mini-series of *Dracula* which covers every scene and character in Stoker’s novel. In the meantime, of all of the film and television adaptations, *Count Dracula*’s changes to the original, made by screenwriter Gerald Savory, are relatively small and do not distract enormously from the main thrust of the plot and themes. It is considered by many critics to be “one of the most faithful to the novel” (Landis 40). The production itself has the subtitle of “A Gothic Romance based on Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*,” so the relative fidelity to the original is particularly noteworthy.

The 1977 version makes changes which actually work quite well within the context of the production. Lucy and Mina become sisters, Mina a Westenra instead of a Murray, residing with their mother as would proper middle-class Victorian sisters. The father is presumably dead, as in Stoker’s novel, and while they have a maid and a cook, their homes both in Whitby and in London are the essence of Victorian homeliness. In Whitby, they share a bedroom, as would be appropriate in a holiday home. Their London home is a substantial brick two-story behind a wall and a gate, with a back garden protected by a tall tree, looming enough for Mina and

Jonathan to say a farewell under before he goes to Transylvania, yet it is not palatial but rather emblematic of a comfortably idealized Victorian family. That Mrs. Westenra asks “Cook to make up some sandwiches” (*Count Dracula* 1977) for Jonathan’s trip helps to contribute to not only the middle-class values of the Westenras but also strengthens the metaphor of the devoted English family soon to be threatened by the immigrant outsider.

Mina’s identity as a New Woman is somewhat compromised by this familial connection. Instead of being an independent woman without any parents mentioned in Bram Stoker’s novel, she is essentially a home girl. Yet the adaptation makes a nod to Mina’s bravery and agency by her assertion that she will “practice [her] shorthand” (*Ibid.*) to help Jonathan when they’re married. She also shows individual agency, as in the novel, when she rescues Lucy from her sleepwalking expedition, travels alone to Budapest to retrieve the brain-fever-afflicted Jonathan, and she demonstrates a spirited participation in the hunt for Dracula both through private visits to Renfield and through accompanying the men to Transylvania for their final showdown with the count.

Lucy and Mina as sisters do help to intensify the differences between the characters in the novel as well. Lucy, portrayed with youthful exuberance by Susan Penhaligon, is lovely and funny and, like Mina, intent upon marriage but still wishing to marry more than one husband. Her sensuous response to Jourdan’s secret bedroom visits is restrained yet lush,

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providing a perfect earthy and earthly counterpoint to the almost unearthly beauty of Judi Bowker's prim Mina.

The script also eliminates completely the role of Arthur Holmwood, Lord Godalming, the affianced of Lucy Westenra in the novel. Rather, Quincey Morris, now renamed Quincey P. Holmwood, wins Lucy's hand, John Seward is still the disappointed suitor, and the two men along with Van Helsing and Harker represent the best of Western manhood against the threat of Eastern Dracula. The loss of Lord Godalming helps therefore in the production to assert middle class British morality against the decadent Eastern aristocracy represented by Dracula and focuses the production effectively.

These major textual changes provide this version with a structure providing tightly suspenseful moments while at the same time offering more time to develop characterization and portrayals of Western manhood which presented British audiences, at a time of unrest and uncertainty in the late-1970s' United Kingdom, a hopeful message.

### **Visual Properties**

If the 1970s was, at Stacey Abbott affirms, the "vampire decade" when "the United States, as well as the world beyond its borders, was taken over by vampires repeatedly in literature, film, and television" (*Celluloid Vampires* 79), not to mention the wild popularity of Anne Rice's 1976 *Interview with the Vampire*, it was also a decade in which more films were shot on location for the purpose of

realism, balanced with developing filmic technologies which could offset such realism with more symbolic and suggestive effects.

When viewed today, the special effects of *Count Dracula*, along with the mixture of 35-millimetre film and videotaped stock can be considered old fashioned, dated, and antiquated. However, another way to see the effects is through a filter of a television audience of forty years ago, making them actually, peculiarly appropriate, disconcerting, almost like a magic lantern show of strange sights and sounds projected upon an early cinematograph.

The effects begin with the use of the Theremin in the soundtrack, which is appropriately haunting, strange, and delicate. The score also uses electronic feedback and echoing to create a world which is strange but which would also resonate with a 1970s audience while suggesting a time warp to contemporary viewers.

The visual aspects of the production are even more interesting. Mixing the use of film for outdoor, location shots with videotape for indoor, studio shots was typical of television productions of the time by the BBC. The filmed scenes, on the other hand, have a richness to them reminiscent of 1960s and '70s studio releases by Hammer Films and American International Pictures. When juxtaposed with the videotape, however, the latter takes on a high definition, or HD, quality. There is hence for a contemporary viewer a sense when watching of the real versus the unreal, the natural versus the supernatural, the familiar with the strange.



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Even more effective is the company's location shoots. They used Alnwick Castle in Northumberland for some exterior shots, and its efficacy as a Gothic identifier certainly continued with the Harry Potter series. John Seward's clinic appears appropriately progressive and solid in its red brick façade and spacious grounds. While the interiors of Dracula's castle are both comfortable and confining and the tombs there and at Carfax filled with dust, detritus, and demons, the use of Whitby and its Abbey is the greatest benefit to this production. Watching Lucy jump up the 199 steps to the Abbey itself reinforces the illusion of safety and isolation afforded by its location, and the color of the first scene seems almost sepia-tinted. To wander through the Whitby tombstones is to experience today a suspension of time, particularly on a foggy or gray day. That Lucy and Mina are there both in the daytime in beautifully rendered broderie anglaise gowns, and photographed in the evening in white nightgowns and hastily-donned coats through gray and blue filters, provides a marvellous analogy to the light and dark they suffer upon Dracula's arrival in port.

As to the special effects, they are far more apropos to the subject and far less distracting than, for example, the Maurice Binder sequence in the 1979 Universal production of *Dracula* featuring Frank Langella. That blood-red sequence, filmed during the apparent consummation between Dracula and the Mina (there named Lucy) character, benefits from John Williams' score but also looks like a James Bond title sequence, like "a swoony, slightly

kinky-sex tip out of one of the 1970s' popular bedroom manuals" (Skal, *Romancing the Vampire* 110).

The 1977 version, on the other hand, gives us a warmly seductive initiation scene between Mina and Dracula. Reflecting how the "mid-1970s proved pivotal for romantic vampires" (Ibid. 98), this blood exchanging appearing two years before Langella swooped away hearts on film. This production doesn't use the "[Hammer films] narrative formula...by fully exploiting the pornographic value of the relationship between the vampire and [his] victim" (Weiss 88).

*Count Dracula* also uses effects more appropriately in scenes which emphasize Dracula's power and supernatural abilities, while at the same time eschewing the tendency in contemporary "horror film and its special effects now overshadow[ing] the written imagination" (Bloom 14). The use of negative reverse images, of dissolves-to-close-ups, of a small Lucy twirling against the frame-filling face of Jourdan, and of slow motion entrances in various scenes now gives a rather melancholy, revisionist quality to those scenes. Only the scene in which the "thin white mist...or rather...the mist [which] had turned into his figure" (Stoker 250-1) manifests itself as a cartoon mask of a vampire face is an antiquated failure. The rest now add an historical element to the film. Watching it one might feel as the Victorian audience felt when watching fantastic stage effects or the first moving pictures—a kind of weird, unsettling delight. It could be argued even that Francis Ford Coppola's

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1992 adaptation pays a small kind of homage to these effects when Mina and Prince Vlad find themselves at the cinematograph; those then-current images projected behind their “contemporary” love story give a visual surreality to the unthinkable experience of a vampire in London. For today’s viewer, seeing the 1977 effects offers a similar metaphor.

Most controversially, this production gives us the baby snack provided by Dracula to the brides, “taken directly from the novel” (Skal, *Hollywood Gothic* 275) when they are diverted from tasting Jonathan Harker. They silkily purr at Dracula, pouting, “and are we to having nothing” (*Count Dracula* 1977). He points to a red carpetbag on the floor, in which something is squirming. Lifting their dinner out, they slaver over a naked, beautiful baby. Jonathan is horrified as the scene cuts to their red eyes and blood-drenched mouths. This scene was cut after the film was first shown on American television via the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) as being “apparently antithetical to public membership drives” (Skal, *Hollywood Gothic* 275), but the BBC 2007 reissue on DVD has restored these disturbing few seconds to great effect.

### **Performances**

The BBC has a richly-deserved reputation for producing superb period dramas, not only because of attention to detail and their genius in finding appropriate locations but for the stable of accomplished British actors upon whom they rely. This production offers an almost perfect cast of

characters bringing to life Stoker's family of friends, as well as the family of fiends of Dracula.

Frank Finlay's Prof. Dr. Abraham Van Helsing is, along with Peter Cushing, a faithful rendering of Stoker's superhero and "one of the best Van Helsing interpretations" (Ibid.). He is John Seward's "old master...the great specialist" (Stoker 110) who is almost supernaturally accomplished in many fields—medicine, rare diseases, folklore and history, law, theology, and combat among them. He has a humor and kindness in his dealings with Lucy, and his cocoa making hints at the eccentricities of a man whose English language skills veer wildly and who actually believes in vampires. But Finlay, like his predecessor Cushing, doesn't make a mockery of Van Helsing. He is mature and older, but not doddering like Laurence Olivier's parody. He is entertaining without being a thrillingly demented academic like Anthony Hopkins. His thick head of white hair, his large compassionate brown eyes, his gentlemanly demeanour, and his quiet authority render a Van Helsing with whom Dracula can truly engage as an equal.

It's interesting that the actors portraying Mina and Jonathan Harker both project, in terms of chemistry and physical appearance, a sibling relationship like that portrayed in Stoker's novel. Judi Bowker is almost indescribably fragile and vulnerable as Mina, and at the same time, her spirited retrieval of Lucy and commandeering of the horses through a short cut to the Count's castle offer the duality of the heroine Stoker created and both admired and feared. Her Mina is blonde, slim-

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waisted, with huge blue eyes and clear English rose skin, and she would seem to be too thoroughly Victorian to battle the King of the Vampires. Her intelligence, open emotionality, and particularly her pliancy during and horror after the bedroom seduction scene provide us with the novel's heroine. Stoker clearly admired Mina's independence yet gave her dialogue which mocked the New Woman she so obviously was. Bowker's internal reality of resolve and loyalty provides a curiously feminist reading of her external beauty, and at the same time, her beauty "inevitably excites the sensitive soul to tears" (Poe 74).

That Bosco Hogan is also blonde as Jonathan Harker perfectly matches his English rose bride Mina. Even his 1970s side-parted bowl cut provides a visual suggestion that his Jonathan is a young innocent when he engages with the three vampire brides, "feminised...the 'fair lady' he imagines to have inhabited the room before him" (Gelder 74). Portrayed in this film as "three young women, ladies by their dress and manner" (Stoker 41) as described in the novel, their white satin gowns and trailing locks reinforce this Jonathan's feminine sensitivity. Yet he scales the walls of Dracula's castle, survives his imprisonment, and returns to Transylvania to regain his manhood from the vampire who even invaded his marital bed. He's youthfully fit, articulate, educated, and gentlemanly—the ideal British gentleman.

John Seward as played by Mark Burns is a serious, solid English doctor. As to Quincey P. Holmwood, incorporating the absent Arthur, Lord

Godalming, Richard Barnes' Texas accent wasn't terribly successful, and he's rather overwrought at Lucy's deathbed. However, he looks young and strapping, and his beard rather marks him as something of a colonial without a razor, but he still plays a hero energetically.

As Mrs. Westenra, Ann Queensberry brings a fine balance of Victorian motherhood and semi-invalidism to the role. Her gray hair, warm voice, and slight figure lend the necessary pathos to her character, and her death rattle is not only grotesque, it is also tragic.

Susan Penhaligon's Lucy presents a character who is very like the young woman described by Stoker. She is flirtatious, younger than Mina, heartier than her sister/friend, as she skips up the Whitby Abbey steps and tries to joke that if "I know anything about men" (*Count Dracula* 1977), Jonathan is enjoying local wine with Dracula when he is missing. She is also demure, pretty without Mina's delicate beauty, not an obvious temptress. However, her propensity to be seduced and punished is obvious when she says breathlessly, "I love lightning" (*Ibid.*), indicating she's open to passionate storms of all sorts. She's charming in the scenes with Van Helsing, and the increasing dissipation of body and spirit are captured through her makeup and her exhaustion. Yet at the same time, "when Lucy becomes a vampire...she [is] allowed to be 'voluptuous'" (Roth 414). When she is dying, the tongue sticking out, wriggling and reaching for Quincey is almost comically childlike, yet this suits Lucy's state at this point of the film—she is young,

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she is innocent, and she is also corrupt and lost. After her transformation, her animalistic growling at Van Helsing and the others at her tomb is desperate and almost painful, and at her death, her sweet face regains its gentleness. No Sadie Frost, Susan Penhaligon's Lucy is a perfect incarnation of Stoker's lost girl.

Renfield, as played by Jack Shepherd, best known for the title role of *Wycliffe*, presents the best of all of the ill-fated minions of Dracula. He is not a grinning madman like Dwight Frye, nor an elegant bug eater like Tom Waits. Rather, he is tormented, obsessive, clever, mad, and in his moments of sanity, utterly heartbreaking. The scene with Judi Bowker's Mina, after she has been bitten by Dracula, in which he places her cheeks between his hands and kisses her forehead, saying, "I pray I never see your sweet face again" (*Count Dracula* 1977) is heartbreaking. Even his death, as grisly and gurgling as Mrs. Westenra's is a solemn moment in which the Count's cruelty is vividly depicted.

### **Simply the Best—Louis Jourdan's Count Dracula**

While not an obvious choice as the vampire king, Louis Jourdan "makes a fine, aristocratic Dracula with the stench of decay about him" (Landis 40). Aged 56 at the time of filming, Jourdan's mature visage is handsome but not pretty, intelligent but not kind, bemused but not overtly violent. While he doesn't grow younger, as does the vampire in Stoker's novel, his middle-aged attractiveness don't necessarily require such a profound transformation. We see him as the taxi driver when Mina and

Jonathan arrive back in London, and we see him confront Van Helsing as the professor sterilizes the extra boxes. Garbed in a long black suit jacket and trousers, rather like a priest's cassock, his vampire seems timeless, classless, without borders. He isn't Vlad Tepes, nor is he dressed in evening clothes, but he is "a Machiavellian monster, calm and calculating in his corruption of Britain" (Abbott, "TV Vampires" 19). He is not the tall vampire king embodied by Christopher Lee. Rather, he is compact, refined, and utterly lethal, his tactility disturbingly erotic. He not only "acts out our darkest desires" but also embodies so much that we actually do desire in a man. He is noble, exotic, experienced, wealthy, and brilliant. Tortured, vulnerable, uncanny. Romantic. A character at once unnaturally base and exquisitely refined. (Penner, Schneider & Duncan 57)

Jourdan found, as did many of Hollywood's golden era stars, a second, undead kind of stardom in the Grand Guignol films so popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Rather like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, Jourdan discovered the efficacy of his aging charm in *Octopussy*, *Swamp Thing* and its sequel, and *Count Dracula*. Simon Farquhar explained that "Jourdan's casting surprised the critics, but, speaking to the *Radio Times* in 1977, Saville explained that he saw Dracula as 'a romantic, sexually dashing anti-hero in the tradition of those figures usually dreamed up by women...Rochester, Heathcliff...figures that can overpower a strong heroine, inhuman figures that can't be civilised'" (Farquhar para. 7). His grace of movement and maturity stand him in good stead in



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this performance. He is erudite when discussing history with Jonathan Harker. When he confronts the brides as they're about to feast on the young man, he is not brutal but rather a doting pater familias who chucks each beauty under the chin and opens his black cape in an all-encompassing embrace of the three satin-garbed lovelies.

Even the flopping down the castle walls is both disturbing and dangerous. Jourdan's slide and flapping cloak, as well as his peering face make the vampire look like a prowling animal.

Above all, it is Jourdan's wit which informs his performance. Dracula knows Carfax is a version of "*quatre face*," or four corners (*Count Dracula* 1977), and his pleasure in identifying the source of the name is palpable. When he confronts Van Helsing, it's not violent but logical. Why try to kill me? We must all feed—what is your problem? He also notes, when Van Helsing orders him to stay back while holding a crucifix, "it always sounds more impressive in Latin." When Jonathan shoots at him, he opens his arms in mocking and disappears in the mist. Powerfully seductive to the end, his last moments in the coffin, when Van Helsing removes the lid before impaling him, show Jourdan's vampire smiling and pronouncing beatifically, "Sunset!" He is in Jourdan's hairy palms a true leader, a genuine threat, an eternal monster.

## **Conclusion**

*Count Dracula* remains the most faithful of all adaptations of Stoker's novel, demonstrating in 1977 that "television might well be the first place one

would look for contemporary Gothic” (Robson 242). That prediction as to television as a Gothic medium, and certainly as a populariser of vampire narratives, has certainly been realized through such ongoing series as *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Penny Dreadful*, and *Hemlock Grove*, to name but a few.

*Count Dracula*'s performances are not pastiche but rather faithful renderings of sometimes stereotypical characters while at the same time offering “contemporary approaches to Gothic themes” (Hervey 239). Its production values evoke both a Victorian England and an isolated Transylvania. Above all, Louis Jourdan remains a memorable Count Dracula—articulate, lethal, charming, and timeless. His charm, malice, suave physicality, European inscrutability, and disturbing eroticism established the same template for successive performances and Lugosi's for his generation. Louis Jourdan as Count Dracula is simply the best.

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