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JOHN BROSNAN

# THE HORROR PEOPLE

including  
Boris Karloff  
Bela Lugosi  
Lon Chaney  
Vincent Price  
Lon Chaney Jr  
Peter Cushing  
Christopher Lee  
James Whale  
Val Lewton  
Robert Bloch  
Terence Fisher  
William Castle  
Richard Matheson  
Roger Corman



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## Introduction

Boris Karloff, Peter Lorre and Vincent Price together on the set of *The Raven*

The horror film business is a strange cinematic phenomenon. By many in the film industry it is regarded as a sort of Sargasso Sea where the wrecks of second-rate actors and directors collect when they are no longer able to keep afloat in the more turbulent waters of the mainstream cinema, and many critics continue to dismiss horror films as mere fodder for the mentally under-developed. But in recent years a new generation of critics and film historians has come into being, and their assessments has moved to the opposite extreme - accompanied by a great deal of intellectual pretentiousness. Horror films have come to be regarded by this critical 'new wave' as important works that more accurately reflect the obsessions and tensions of society than their more serious, and respectable counterparts. In some cases such claims are justifiable, but too often it becomes ludicrous when a manner of complicated symbolism



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is read into a film that has obviously been designed as pure exploitation.

Nevertheless, I do support the new and rather audacious theory that the Hammer films of the 1950s, with their vitality, their colour and their sensuality, served to help revolutionize the then staid and frigid British cinema. An American parallel is the theory that the artistic liberation of the current Hollywood product grew not from the influence of the underground/avant-garde film-makers but from the cheapest roots of the commercial cinema itself- American International Pictures, who, in the 1950s and 1960s, adapted their films, often horror ones, to the changing tastes of the teenagers who adult America dozed in front of its collective television set.

Horror films have also gained a certain amount of respect within the industry simply because, since the mid-1950s, they have consistently made money. In Chapter 6, I quote Michael Carreras of Hammer Films, who points out that it wasn't until 1968, when the company received the Queen's Award for Industry, that many of his fellow British film-makers began to take Hammer seriously. Before the 1950s the popularity of horror films moved in cycles - the first major one occurring in the first half of the 1930s following the release of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (I am mainly concerned, in this book, with the people connected with the 'Hollywood' horror film and the later British production that grew from it), and it was during this period that a number of films were produced that are now regarded as horror classics, such as *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *The Island of Lost Souls*, *Freaks*, *The Hands of Orlac*, *The Mummy*, and *The Bride of Frankenstein*. It was also during the 1930s that these films came to be considered as part of a separate genre - and thus the 'horror film' as such was born. (There were American horror films prior to 1930, of course, such as the work of Tod Browning and Lon Chaney, but at that time the category didn't exist. Their films can also be better described as cinema of the grotesque rather than Gothic horror - it took the influx of European talent, particularly German, to create the Hollywood horror film as we know it.)

By the mid-1930s the first horror cycle was practically finished, and though a few notable horror films, such as *Dracula's Daughter* and *The Son of Frankenstein*, were made during the second half of the decade (after the successful re-release of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* together) it wasn't until the early 1940s that another real horror boom began. As before it was Universal Studios who led the way but their horror films were no longer major productions - instead they had been relegated to the 'B' picture class. It was the period of Lon Chaney Jr's second-rate reign as King of Horror in such films as *The Wolfman* (in which he did rather well), *Son of Dracula* and *The Ghost of Frankenstein*. Once again the cycle came to an end by the middle of the decade.

The next cycle occurred at the beginning of the 1950s, but the Gothic settings and supernatural forces had been replaced by pseudo-science and atomic radiation - it was officially called a science fiction film boom, but the monsters in *The Thing from Another World* and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* had more in common with *Dracula* and the *Wolf Man* than with science fiction. The traditional horror film, however, seemed to have vanished from the screen (with the exception of the occasional film like *House of Wax*) but then, in the mid-1950s, it made an unexpected comeback partly because of the popularity of the old horror classics when shown on television and also because of the timely decision by Hammer Films in Britain to remake *Frankenstein* in colour. At the same time American International Pictures also began their long line of horror films with such epics as *Was a Teenage Frankenstein* and *Bucket of Blood* which later culminated in the more impressive Roger Corman/Poe series of the early 1960s. Since the 1950s the demand for horror films has remained undiminished and they are looked upon as a surefire way of making a profit - their big advantage being that they can be made for a relatively small sum of money, even today.

Another interesting aspect of horror films is that they seem to grow in stature as the years go by. Of the countless number of films made since the beginning of the film industry it's often the horror ones that manage to keep their heads above the waters of oblivion. Mention the early German cinema to anyone, for instance, and among the titles that readily spring to mind are usually *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *Nosferatu*, *The Student of Prague*, *The Hands of Orlac* and *The Golem*. Commenting on this tendency, Robert Bloch, who has many horror screenplays to his credit, said: 'In 1933 when *King Kong* was released the Academy Awards went to a picture called *Cavalcade*, which was a classic film of its time. It had been a classic play, Noel Coward had done an excellent job on it, and the *Titanic*

sequence was a very moving one, but who goes to see Cavalcade today? How many people would even recognize the name if they weren't students of the theatre? And how many film buffs have even seen or care about it? But King Kong, which was just regarded as fun and games - though it did receive excellent reviews - is more alive today than it was forty years ago, and little kids in the street can tell you about Kong. They can also tell you about Dracula and Frankenstein, for the same reason.' One wonders which will be regarded in forty years' time as the film of 1974 - The Sting, which reaped so many Academy Awards, or The Exorcist?

In this book I use the term 'horror film' in its broadest sense - and if there is one thing that the people featured in the following pages all agree upon, it is their dislike of the word horror to describe the films. Personal definitions of horror films vary greatly - some feel that a true horror film

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must include a supernatural element or have a Gothic setting. William Friedkin, for instance, doesn't consider The Exorcist to be a horror film, while I couldn't describe it as anything else. To me a horror film is one that is basically involved with the bizarre; and so I include non-supernatural films such as Freaks, Psycho and so on, as well as the traditional ones like Dracula. I don't believe a film actually has to horrify to be called a horror film. For example, I have never found Frankenstein or The Bride of Frankenstein to be horrifying - I regard them instead as films of great beauty, as do many others, but for the sake of convenience one might as well continue to classify them as horror films rather than try and invent some new term.



The longevity of horror films also applies to their makers and their stars. Lon Chaney, Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff are still remembered today while many of their contemporaries have drifted into obscurity. Yet horror actors rarely enjoy being typecast in such roles, quite understandably. No creative actor likes to be typecast in any role; and to be typecast as a horror actor is to experience the handicap in its most limiting and frustrating form, for satisfying horror roles are few and far between. There have been a few actors who have made a name for themselves in the horror field, then used it as a springboard to better things - actors such as Oliver Reed, Jack Nicholson and, it now appears, Christopher

Valerie Hobson is menaced by Karloff as the Monster in The Bride of Frankenstein

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Lee. The unfortunate ones are those such as Bela Lugosi, Lionel Atwill, Ray Milland, Peter Cushing and Vincent Price, who found themselves reduced to horror roles after more varied and impressive careers. Lugosi was an actor who at first tried to resist the horror tag, though he soon succumbed whereas others like Cushing and Price have accepted it philosophically and exploited it for their own ends. Directors, even producers, can also be typecast and, like the actors, they have the choice of accepting and making the most of the situation or trying to break out. But the special ambience of the horror film has, in many cases, provided the opportunity for certain directors to display aspects of their talents that haven't been evident in their more conventional films. James Whale, always a stylish and impressive director no matter what his subject-matter, definitely produced his best work within the horror genre - though he himself probably wouldn't have agreed with that. The same applies to directors like Terence Fisher, Roger Corman, Val Guest and several others. Of course the sensationalist nature of many horror films is a major factor in their success, and even a mediocre director can't fail to attract attention when he's provided with the right ingredients. Tod Browning's *Dracula*, for instance, isn't a very good film, even in the context of its time, yet it's regarded as a classic - mainly because it was the first of its kind (and also because of Lugosi's performance). Hammer's *Curse of Frankenstein* is another example - a mediocre film, yet a breakthrough of a kind that would have caused a stir no matter who directed it. But it is still justifiable to claim that the making of a horror film can have a liberating effect on the creativity of its production team. Would Val Lewton be remembered today, one wonders, if he had, as he so dearly wished, managed to avoid becoming involved with horror films and had instead become a producer of 'prestige' films?

This book, as the title implies, is mainly concerned with the people who have been - or are - involved with horror films. It is not another survey of the horror field itself - that ground has already been exhaustively covered - but, of course, many horror films are discussed in relation to the actor, director, writer or producer concerned. The first section of the book deals with the careers of those actors whose names have become synonymous with the early horror films and of those directors who were most influential in the creation of the genre. The first three chapters, covering the careers of the Chaneyes, Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, Tod Browning, Karl Freund and James Whale, also span the development of the horror film from the 1920s to the 1940s. Chapter 4 is concerned with Val Lewton and his talented unit who, for a period during the 1940s, took the horror film in an entirely new direction by introducing such qualities as subtlety and intelligence - assets that were soon discarded by other horror film-makers. The next section of the book

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deals with four divergent developments in the horror film that took place in the 1950s and the people mainly responsible for them - Jack Arnold, whose films personify the science fiction/monster boom of the period; James and Michael Carreras of Hammer Films who, with directors and producers like Terence Fisher and Anthony Hinds, began their own horror boom in 1956; Samuel Z. Arkoff and James H. Nicholson who formed American International Pictures and financed Roger Corman in most of his productions; and William Castle, the flamboyant director/producer who made his horror films succeed by the use of audacious gimmicks rather than good scripts (though he later went on to make the classic *Rosemary's Baby*).

The book then deals with the careers of the three current reigning Kings of Horror - Vincent Price



The Creature from the Black Lagoon, looking rather self-satisfied, carries off his unwilling victim (Julie Adams)

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abdicate) and Peter Cushing (an interesting piece of trivia is the fact that all three were born on 2 May, though in different years). Chapters 12, 13 and 14 feature interviews with a cross-section of the people behind the scenes in horror films today - writers Robert Bloch and Richard Matheson talk about the problems involved in writing horror screenplays; Roy Ward Baker and Freddie Francis, both directors who have had varied careers in the film industry before they suddenly discovered that they had become typed as 'horror directors', discuss the effect this has had on them; and then two members of that much-maligned species - producers - are given the opportunity to talk about their profession. Milton Subotsky of Amicus Films and Kevin Francis of the newly-formed Tyburn Film Company discuss their careers and explain why they have chosen to make horror films. The book concludes with a brief look at the most enthusiastic supporters of horror films - the horror fans.

The format I have chosen for this book has meant the unavoidable omission of certain actors, actresses and directors (and their films) who have been involved, in varying degrees, with the horror film in America and Britain. There is also the possibility that some people may query my choice of the directors featured in the first half of the volume whom I consider to be the most important influences on the genre. With these points in mind I have included a comprehensive Appendix which contains information about the careers of many of the other people who have been, or still are, associated with the field.

The lives of many of the horror people have a bizarre streak running through them, but this has usually been imposed by the medium in which they work rather than having grown out of any innate quality

their own personalities, though in the case of people like Lon Chaney Snr and Roman Polanski there is room for speculation. But the very making of a horror film is a bizarre act in itself, and it's sometimes difficult for the people who work in the field, no matter how hard they may try, to remain totally unaffected.



## 1 The Chaney's

Chaney in his bizarre make-up for the role of Erik in *The Phantom of the Opera*

The story of Lon Chaney, the first real horror star, has all the elements of a classic tragedy; a humble beginning as the son of deaf mutes, years of hard struggle followed by fame and success, and then, at the peak of it all - illness and death. To many people Chaney was as bizarre a figure as any of the grotesque characters he portrayed on the screen. Studio publicity was partly to blame but he was, and remains to this day, something of a mystery man.

He was born on April Fool's Day, 1886, in Colorado Springs, the second of four children. According to the publicity stories he refused, out of sympathy with his deaf and dumb parents, to utter a word until he was eight years old - which sounds unlikely. But he was taken out of school, when he was in the fourth grade, to care for his mother who had become bedridden with inflammatory rheumatism. In his efforts to communicate with her more effectively during this period he became skilled in the use

pantomime, a talent which was to prove useful in later years. By the time Chaney had reached his teens his elder brother, John, had formed a small travelling theatre company. Chaney wanted to join him - he had already received a taste of theatre life while working briefly as a stage hand and scenery painter - but his father disapproved and sent him away to learn a safe trade: carpet laying and paper hanging. Chaney endured it for a short time but when he turned seventeen he abandoned his apprenticeship and joined his brother's company.

When his brother's show folded he continued on the road with the Columbia Musical Comedy Repertory Company. He was nineteen years old when the next major event in his life occurred - his marriage to a young singer called Cleva Creighton whom he met in Oklahoma City. This was in 1906 and in the following year a son was born. He was christened Creighton but he was later to become known as Lon Chaney Jnr. According to his own account he almost died at birth. He often told the story of how his father was forced to plunge him into the icy waters of the lake outside the cabin in which he was born in an attempt to shock him into breathing; and he was then kept in a primitive incubator that his father had made himself.

The Chaney family then went to Chicago where an actor friend, Lee Moran,

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found Chaney a job in a show called 'The Red Kimono'. Even so, times were hard for them. Chaney Jnr later recalled a Christmas Eve in Chicago when they were running out of money. 'Dad put most of it on the gas meter. Then he started out with me. When he came to the first saloon he sat me on the bar close to the free lunch. Then he did his dance and picked up the small change. Meanwhile I filled my overcoat pockets with pretzels and sandwiches.' 1

From Chicago the Chaney family moved to Los Angeles, fulfilling their long-held ambition to live on the West Coast. John Chaney was already there and had become stage manager of a Los Angeles theatre. Through his brother, Lon got a job as a song-and-dance comedian and then later joined a couple of German comedians, playing a season with them in San Francisco. His marriage had been steadily deteriorating for some time and in San Francisco the situation became intolerable. There Cleva enjoyed great success as a singer and was much in demand, completely eclipsing her husband's minor fame. Apparently Chaney's masculine pride was hurt by this and they quarrelled frequently. She began to drink too much and he accused her not only of neglecting their son but also of being unfaithful to him. Events reached a climax on the night when she attempted suicide by swallowing poison in the theatre where Chaney was performing. She survived, but the poison ruined her vocal cords and finished her career as a singer. She was then committed as an alcoholic and Chaney gained custody of the boy. Demonstrating the hard, ruthless streak he possessed, Chaney refused to let his wife see her son again and ignored her letters. He finally divorced her in 1914. In the meantime he had fallen in love with a chorus girl named Hazel who worked at San Francisco's Princess Theatre. It is one of the many ironies that permeate the story of the Chaney family that she was married to a legless man who ran the theatre's cigar counter. She divorced him and later married Chaney, a man who was to specialize in portraying cripples.

Out of a job in 1912, Chaney went to Universal Studios where he was once again helped by his friend Lee Moran who got him some film work. He appeared mostly in slapstick comedies and in 1913 became a regular member of Universal's stock company. In a television interview in 1969 Chaney Jnr described his father's working life in those early days: 'He used to sit in the bullpen at Universal



which was a room about the size of this tv studio. He'd sit there and an assistant director would come out and say, "Anybody here that can play a college boy?" Dad would say, "Yeah, I can play a college boy." Then he'd come back and they'd come out and say, "Anybody here who can play a Chinaman?" Well this went on a few times and there wasn't anybody who could. So my Dad, being a natural artist from the word go, got his make-up kit and his own stuff together and took it to Universal. And when they asked, "Anybody play

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### Chaney prepares his make-up for Blind Bargain



a Chinaman?" he'd say, "Yeah, I can play a Chinaman." He'd make himself up as a Chinaman, go and work for ten minutes, come back, then go out and play a Greek. And this way make three or four pictures a day.' 2

For six months he took a break from acting to direct an actor called J. Warren Kerrigan in a series of films. He was a competent director apparently, but he decided that he enjoyed acting most of all and returned to it, concentrating on his make-up techniques. He had already formed the opinion that his best chance of success lay in character acting, lacking, as he did, the good looks necessary for a leading man.

In 1918 he was still earning only \$5 a day at Universal. So he sought out the studio manager, William S. Siström, and asked for more money - \$25 a week and a five-year contract. It was a reasonable request as Chaney had become a relatively valuable member of the studio's stock company, but Siström turned him down. According to Chaney, Siström told him that he knew a good actor when he saw one but that looking directly at Chaney he saw only a wash-out. So Chaney walked off the lot. He was thirty-two years old at that stage. He had saved money during the years he had been working at Universal so he wasn't worried at first when he began looking for another job, but he soon discovered that outside Universal he was unknown. As the weeks of job-hunting

became months he was beginning to think Siström wasn't such an idiot, but before things really became desperate he was saved by the Western star William S. Hart. Hart had seen Chaney in some of his earlier Universal films, and offered him a part as a villain in one of his Westerns called Riddley Gwane. Chaney enjoyed working with Hart who, unlike many other stars of the period, expected him

co-actors to act instead of holding back and letting him reap all the glory. After that, things improved for Chaney. More parts followed and he even started working for Universal again. Then came the assignment that changed his whole career, and it is to Chaney's credit that he was fully aware of his potential. Director George Leone Tucker had asked him to play in a film called *The Miracle Man* (1919). Tucker described to Chaney the various roles in the film, including that of the cripple who played such an important part in the story. Chaney immediately decided that his whole future rested on getting it.

'Tucker didn't really want me for the role of the cripple in *The Miracle Man*,' said Chaney in an interview with Ruth Waterbury for *Photo Magazine* in 1928. 'He wanted a professional contortionist but the five he had tried out couldn't act it. Tucker explained to me that the first scene he would shoot would be the one where the fake cripple unwound himself in front of his pals. If I could do that I got the job. I went home to try it out. I'm not a contortionist, of course. It would have been a lot easier on my subsequent work if I had been. While I was sitting pondering over the part I unconsciously did a trick I've done since childhood. I crossed my legs, then double-crossed them, wrapping my left foot around my right ankle. When I came to the studio on the test day Tucker was already behind the camera. He gave me one glance and called "Camera!" I flopped down, dragging myself forward along the floor, my eyes rolling, my face twitching and my legs wrapped tighter and tighter around each other. Tucker didn't speak and the sweat rolled off me. Finally I heard a single whispered word from him. "God," Tucker said. I wanted to say that too, but not for the same reason.'

*The Miracle Man* proved a success and Chaney and Tucker became close friends. They planned many projects together (Chaney had even intended to direct one of Tucker's productions) and Tucker's sudden death was an event that greatly upset Chaney. Chaney's next film was *The Penalty* (1920) in which he was cast as a legless criminal. The director, Wallace Worsley, wanted to use trick camera angles; but Chaney designed a leather harness which bound the calves of his legs against his thighs and he walked on his knees. This was the first of the many roles for which he underwent excruciating self-torture in order to achieve a desired effect, and which resulted in his reputation as something of a masochist. For his role in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Wallace Worsley, 1923) he followed Victor Hugo's description of the creature very closely - and was later

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#### Chaney as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*



accused of overdoing the make-up. It entailed wearing a rubber hump, weighing 70 lbs, attached to a leather harness which connected a large breastplate and pads similar to those worn by football players in such a way that he was unable to stand erect. Over all this he wore a skin-tight, flesh-coloured rubber suit covered with animal hair. The heat inside the costume was almost unbearable and he was perpetually drenched with perspiration. To add to his discomfort his face make-up included a device that prevented him from closing his mouth. He wore this cruel rig almost every day for three months. And as an example of his obsession with detail, he sought out the actor playing the executioner in the flogging scene (a giant Mexican called Nick De Ruiz) and said to him, 'Don't be afraid to lay that whip on. If you try to pull the blows it'll look just like that on the screen.' 3

The following review, which appeared in the 29 November 1923 issue of Bioscope, was typical of the reception that Chaney's performance received.

Of the acting, Lon Chaney's remarkable performance as Quasimodo, the grateful hunchback, is, as should be, easily the outstanding feature. His extraordinary make-up as a veritable living gargoyle reaches the limit of grotesquery (and at moments seems to go a shade beyond it) but his sprawling movements and frantic

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gestures are brilliantly conceived, and his final dance of frenzy at the defeat of Clopin's rabble is a scene of delirious passion which has seldom been equalled on the screen.

His make-up in *The Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian, 1925) was another exercise in self-torture. For the scene where the girl (Mary Philbin) creeps up behind the phantom and removes his mask - one of the great moments in horror films - Chaney inserted a device in his nose that spread the nostrils and lifted the tip to produce the appearance of a naked skull. He emphasized this effect with protruding false teeth to which were attached small prongs that drew back the corners of his lips. Celluloid discs in his mouth were used to distort his cheekbones most effectively. Ruth Waterbury gave a first-hand description of Chaney's suffering after she visited the set of *The Hypnotist* (1928).

For nearly an hour it seemed impossible for a human body to suffer severer torture than that Lon Chaney subjected himself to in order to gain that effect with his eyes. [Chaney was playing a man with distended eyes] I promised him not to reveal the make-up trick yet it would make little difference to the profession if I did, for few men could have endured it. Yet in this visible suffering Lon was plainly an artist in the exquisite travail of creation. To endure pain for his work brought him a strange joy. 4



Chaney as the fake vampire in London After Midnight

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Was there something unhealthy behind his apparent need to cause himself pain while performing? It seems doubtful. After all, he wasn't obliged to suffer every time he played a character in make-up, it was just that the publicists of the time tended to emphasize that aspect of his work. And as far as he was concerned, the real Chaney appeared in *Tell It to the Marines* (George W. Hill, 1927) in which he played a tough sergeant -without make-up. His unusual childhood, his unhappy first marriage and other personal tragedies must have contributed to his melancholy outlook on life and his choice of roles. (For instance, during the making of *The Phantom of the Opera* his father fell ill and began to lose his sight - a terrible fate for somebody already deaf and dumb. It was a time of great strain for Chaney until his father died a few days after the picture was completed.) But it's more likely that the pain he inflicted upon himself was merely a combination of professional pride and the results of a strong puritan upbringing. Associates described him as being someone who despised all forms of weakness (demonstrated by his attitude to his first wife after her breakdown) and it's possible that deep down he considered acting a rather easy, unmanly way of earning a living unless it involved a certain amount of pain and discomfort. He certainly liked to think of himself as one of the workers rather than as a film star. Clarence A. Locan, writing in *Photoplay* after Chaney's death said :

On his days off he would be around the studios talking to the workers. He knew all their troubles and the first name of every worker in the studio. At Christmas there was a present for every worker from Lon. Every girl in the offices got a glove order, the office boys, the electricians, and the rest all had presents. It was genuine. 5

Even director Tod Browning referred to Chaney as: 'The star who lived like a clerk.' 6

Actually Chaney insisted that he didn't go out of his way to play grotesque characters. 'People seem to think I study scripts all the time,' he said in 1928.

I don't. I don't even try to find stories for myself like some stars. I wouldn't know where to look for them. I trust my producers to look out for my own good. All I want to know is what the character is like and what rules him. It takes me two to four weeks to work out a make-up for a new picture. The set I don't worry. 7

There is no doubt that Chaney's more gruelling performances affected his health. The primitive contact lenses he used to simulate blindness (believed to be the white of an egg but according to Chaney Jr his father

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devised, with the help of his doctor, a special lens) resulted in his having to wear glasses, and the various rigs he wore to contort his body affected his spine. He kept this a secret until after appearing in *The Unknown* (Tod Browning, 1927) in which he played an armless wonder who could throw knives with his toes. For this Chaney wore a straitjacket which bound his arms to his sides so tightly that the illusion was effective even when he appeared dressed in silk tights. He said later, 'I can't play the crippled roles any more. That trouble with my spine is worse every time I do one, and it's beginning to worry me.' 8



Chaney restrains his hairy companion in this scene from *The Unholy Three*

Apart from that his last few years seemed to be happy ones. He was successful and famous - he had become a household name and a common saying of the time was 'Don't step on it ... it may be Lon Chaney!' His marriage to his second wife, Hazel, was, by all accounts, a happy one. They lived quietly, avoiding the usual Hollywood social life, preferring a close circle of friends. His two main interests outside of acting, were visiting his private camp high in the mountains and filming with his own 16mm movie camera. He avoided publicity as much as possible and rarely gave interviews. His dislike of journalists apparently dated back to the time of his first wife's suicide attempt which had resulted in a lot of bad publicity.

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In 1928 he seemed almost complacent about his career, an unusual state of mind for any actor, particularly one who had had such a hard struggle to get to the top. Talking about directors he said : 'don't worry over who they hand me. The chief thing for an actor to remember is that it wasn't his brains that got him to stardom. It was only his acting. He isn't paid to think about production plans and when he starts he usually sinks his whole career.' 9

In 1929 Chaney began to have trouble with his throat. While filming *Thunder* (William Nigh),

railroad story set in the snowbound Northwest of America, a piece of artificial snow lodged in his throat and worsened the condition. Chaney went into hospital and his tonsils were removed, but his throat continued to trouble him. Nevertheless in 1930 he filmed his first talkie *The Unholy Three* (The Browning) which was a remake of the 1925 silent version. Chaney feared the talkies, not only because they had ended the careers of other silent stars whose voices had disappointed the public, but also because they meant the end of his speciality - pantomime. As it turned out, audiences and critics were just as impressed by Chaney's versatility with his voice as they had been with that of his body. During the film Chaney imitated the voice of an old

Chaney, as the ventriloquist, carries off his 'dummy' -actually midget Harry Earles



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lady, a ventriloquist and his dummy, a girl, and even a parrot. To prove it he had to sign an affidavit which was reproduced in the publicity material sent out with the film. A reviewer in *Bioscope* said, in the August 1930 issue:

Lon Chaney's first talking appearance is an event in film history. It is pleasing to state that he speaks with remarkable distinction. This is as much the case when he impersonates the old woman as when he plays the virile Echo.

When the film was completed Chaney journeyed east to New York where he consulted throat specialists. They discovered that he had bronchial cancer, though they didn't tell him this. Chaney returned to his mountain cabin in California where he hoped that a long rest would improve his health but was then struck down with pneumonia. He rapidly deteriorated after that and died in hospital on August 1930, as the result of a throat haemorrhage. A grim, ironic touch was added to his final hours when he lost his voice and was forced to revert to the sign language that he had used as a child to communicate with his parents. Clarence A. Locan described his death scene to the readers of *Photoplay* in the November 1930 issue:

He had had a good day at the hospital. Messages from his friends had cheered him. They played the radio. He felt so much better that he asked for a smoke. 'Of course,' the nurse answered, 'You'll have to wait to see what the doctor says about that.' He had told the nurse that, if he found he could not speak

he would raise one finger. If he feared serious trouble he would raise two. During the night the nurse saw that he had raised one finger. She leaned over him. 'Speak, speak!' she urged him. Chaney smiled and raised two fingers. Then died.

Chaney had not wanted his son to follow him into the film business. When asked about it in 1927 when Creighton was twenty-two years old, he said, 'He's six feet two inches tall. That's too tall. He would always have had to have parts built around him. He couldn't build himself for the part. Besides he's happy in business and he's got a great wife.' 10 Chaney Jnr himself later verified this: 'Dad never wanted me to be an actor so he never made it attractive. I watched Dad work out his disguises at home so it was pretty much a business with me.' 11 Chaney Jnr rarely saw his father at work before the cameras. 'In the early days of motion pictures it was not considered a good thing for a star even to be married, much less have a son of my age. Therefore I saw very few of his performances.' 12 Chaney Jnr had once told his father, 'I wouldn't want to go into pictures on your name. If I could use another name - and top you - I'd give it a fling, but nobody's ever going to top you.' Prophetic words which he

## 19 The Horror People | The Chaney's

would be forced to ignore within a few short years.

At the time of his father's death Chaney Jnr was enjoying moderate success in the plumbing trade, but the Depression soon changed all that. He went against his better judgment and tried to get film work. His first film was a 1932 comedy called *Girl Crazy* in which he played a chorus dancer. From 1932 to 1935 he appeared as an extra or a stuntman in scores of thrillers, Westerns and serials. 'I worked under five names,' said Chaney, 'I did extras under one name, stunts under another name, bits under another and leads under my own name [Creighton Chaney]. I'd get a call to do a fight, so I'd get on the set and I'd go quick to the assistant director and I'd say, "How long's the fight going to take? And how long am I going to be here?" And he'd say about twenty minutes. "And when are you going to do it?" He'd say about an hour from now. "Okay, I'll see you." I'd run to the next set and work under a different name. And between the three or four sets I'd come off smelling like a

rose.

## ■13

Chaney had had a stock-acting contract with RKO, but after it expired in 1935 he went through a difficult period when he found it almost impossible to get work. It was during this time that his first marriage also came to an end. He decided to do what he had told his father would never happen - he changed his name to Lon Chaney Jnr. 'I am most proud

Lon Chaney Jnr (left) in his most famous role -that of Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* (Burgess Meredith is in the centre)

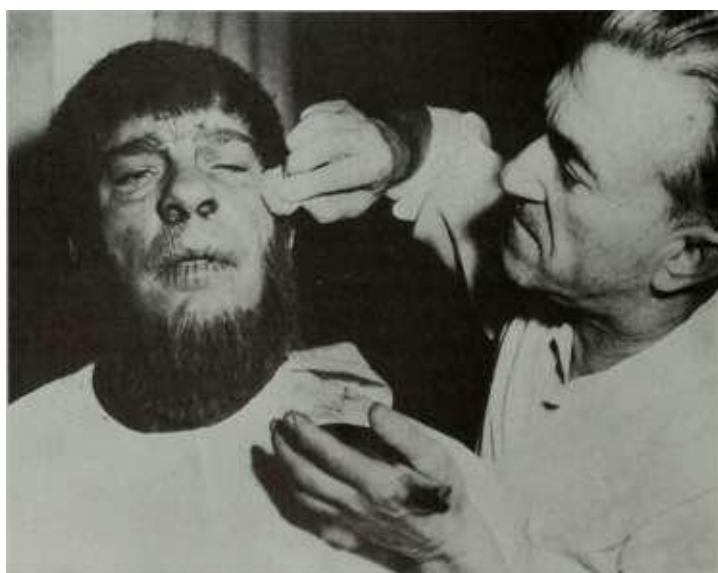


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of the name Lon Chaney,' he said later. 'I am not proud of Lon Chaney Jr, because they had to starve me to make me take this name.' 14 Even that drastic step didn't help his career at first. He married for a second time in 1937; his new wife was a former model called Patsy Beck, and by 1939 they were broke their car and furniture had been repossessed.

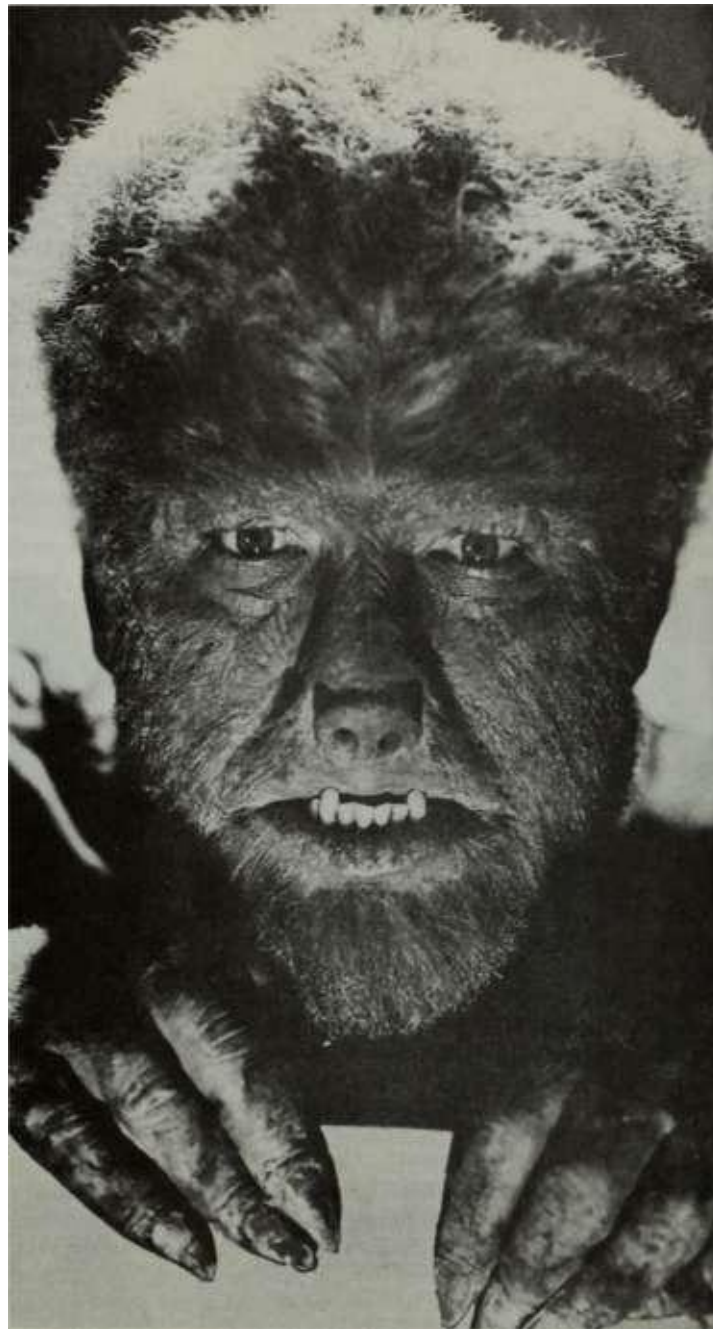
Then his luck changed when he landed a role in the West Coast production of *Of Mice and Men*. He played the part of the shambling, moronic Lennie and was so impressive he was cast in the film version made the following year (directed by Lewis Milestone), who had planned to star him in a remake of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in 1939 but that fell through (Charles Laughton got the part). His next film part after *Of Mice and Men* was Hal Roach's production *One Million Years B.C.* (1940) in which he played the disfigured and crippled tribal patriarch. Then Universal - his father's old studio - offered him a long-term contract. They had decided that the time was right for a new cycle of horror films, and who better to star in them than the son of the great Lon Chaney. With that Chaney fate was sealed.

He was originally promised *Phantom of the Opera* by Universal but Claude Rains got that role. Chaney had to settle for *Man Made Monster* (George Waggner, 1941) which was about a circus performer who is turned into an electrical freak. It wasn't a hit with audiences but another





The one horror character that Chaney Jnr considered to be solely his own - the Wolf Man



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film he made soon afterwards was - *The Wolf Man* (George Waggner, 1941). Apart from Lennie this was to be the role that Chaney Jnr became most associated with, and one which suited him better than the other traditional horror characters he was later to portray. 'Of course I believe that *The Wolf Man* is the best of my horror films - because he is mine!' 15 said Chaney in 1971. (Henry Hull had played wolf man in the 1935 film *Werewolf of London*, directed by Stuart Walker, but Chaney's was the definitive version). During the making of the film Chaney had to endure discomfort similar to that suffered by his father, especially during the complicated transformation sequence from man to monster. According to Chaney it took over twenty hours to film and for a lot of the time his head was held still by means of a brace. 'They pinned my fingers down with pins, through the skin, so I couldn't move them,' 16 said Chaney years later, though that was probably an exaggeration.



### Chaney Jnr as a somewhat overweight Dracula in Son of Dracula

Son of Dracula (Robert Siodmak) followed in 1942 with Dracula turning up in Louisiana before the turn of the last century. The film wasn't as bad as some have made it out to be, but Chaney, with his heavy build, wasn't physically suited for the role. He gave a good performance despite his handicap and the film contained a number of fine atmospheric moments - one such being when Dracula's coffin bearing the vampire, emerged from the middle of a mist-shrouded swamp and glided silently across to the water's edge.

### 23 The Horror People The Chaney

In the same year he played the Frankenstein monster in Ghost of Frankenstein (Erie C. Kenton) and again his physique worked against him. Not having Karloff's lean, expressive face his monster was the inferior of the two, though Chaney obviously tried hard and managed to invest the role with a few of his 'Lennie' characteristics (actually Lennie and the monster have much in common - both are child-like creatures possessed of great, and often uncontrollable, strength). In The Mummy's Ghost (Reginald Le Borg, 1944) Chaney again followed in Karloff's footsteps, but while Karloff, in The Mummy (Karl Freund, 1932), only appeared in his bandages briefly, Chaney was obliged to shuffle fully wrapped through the whole film.

His relations with Universal rapidly soured. Despite his relative popularity in the horror roles the studio insisted that he should perform routine parts in their most dismal productions. In between playing Dracula and the wolf man, Chaney was appearing in such films as Crazy House, Badlands, Dakota, Cobra Woman, Weird Woman, Follow the Boys and Ghost Catchers (in the last he had to dress up as a bear). His contract expired in 1946 and was not renewed. (When Chaney bought a new house overlooking the San Fernando Valley in 1957 he was quoted in a newspaper as saying: 'All my life I've wanted to look down on Universal Studios and now at last I can.')

After that Chaney battled on with various stage and film parts with other studios. He found that he had not only become typecast as a horror actor but also as the Lennie character. 'It haunts me,' he said, 'to get a call to play a dumb guy and the director tells me not to be Lennie but he's never happy until I play the part like Lennie. Then he doesn't know why he likes it.' 17 A typical example of this is his role in the 1947 Bob Hope comedy My Favourite Brunette (Elliot Nugent).

Things didn't improve in the early 1950s. Good roles such as that in High Noon (Fred Zinnema

1952) where he played the elderly ex-marshall who rejects Gary Cooper's plea for help were rare. More typical were films like *Bride of the Gorilla* (Curt Siodmak, 1951) in which he played a native policeman, and *The Black Castle* (Nathan Juran, 1952) which had him doing his Lennie role again. In the mid-1950s he appeared in a series of television films (some of which were theatrically released) based on the novel *Last of the Mohicans* in which he played the Indian with the jaw-breaking name Chingachgook.

In 1955 Chaney sold his father's life story to none other than Universal Studios. It should not have surprised him that there were problems, but apparently it did. He claimed later, with bitterness, that the day after he sold the story the studio put five writers on to the job rewriting it. The result was *Man of a Thousand Faces* (1956) starring James Cagney. Chaney didn't consider the film to be an accurate account of his father's life and

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career but he was pleased with Cagney's portrayal of Chaney Sr (handsome Roger Smith, who later starred in the 77 Sunset Strip TV series, played Chaney Jr in an odd piece of miscasting).

Chaney worked more frequently in the second half of the decade when a new cycle of horror films began (a whole new generation had discovered *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and friends when the old films were shown on late-night television). A number of producers quickly jumped on the bandwagon by turning out cheap new variations of the old themes. The first of these that Chaney appeared in was *The Indestructible Man* (Jack Pollexfen, 1956). He played an executed killer brought back to life by a mad scientist to commit more murders, a story similar to that of an old Boris Karloff film *The Walking Dead* (Michael Curtiz, 1936). One bright spot was his appearance in Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* (1958) when he gave a fine performance as Old Sam, a former convict met by escapees Tony Curtis and Sydney Poitier during their run for freedom.

Television was Chaney's mainstay during the 1960s though he still made films. Most of them, apart from exceptions like Roger Corman's *The Haunted Palace* (1963), were rather terrible. A few of them, such as *House of the Black Death* (1965) and *Night of the Beast* (1966), never even got a theatrical screening. As the years went by the films grew progressively worse, and so did their titles. Two of the films he made in 1967 were *Hillbillys in a Haunted House* and *Dr Terror's Gallery of Horrors* (described by *Films in Review* as the worst film of Chaney's career - a damning observation considering the quality of some of his previous films). In 1968 he made *Cannibal Orgy or The Maddest Story Ever Told*, and in 1969 made one of his last films *A Time to Run* (Al Adamson, released as *The Female Bunch* in 1971) in which he was cruelly billed as Lon Chaney Jr - for the first time in twenty-five years.

It wouldn't be surprising to learn that Chaney, especially in his later years, held a great bitterness towards the acting profession and Hollywood in particular. But Forrest J. Ackerman, editor of a magazine devoted to horror films and their stars, who knew Chaney slightly, doesn't think he did. He was even planning to make a big come-back in a new horror film. 'He had personally written a script,' said Ackerman, 'called *Gila Man* which was somewhat like another film he was in once called *The Alligator People* (1959). He had written in roles for two of his sons.' This was a curious change of heart for someone who had said in 1957: 'My sons in show business? Heck no! They're both solid citizens in good substantial businesses.' 18 These words unwittingly echo those of his father thirty years previously.

I don't think he was particularly bitter about the way his life had turned out,' said Ackerman, 'but the one meeting I had with him in his own home was extremely disappointing. I never reported anything of it

in my magazine because frankly there wasn't much to report. At any time I attempted to talk about his own career or his father's he would become very vague and uninterested. I asked where his father was buried and he said - "Oh, over there, somewhere." He didn't even know where he was pointing. He did tell me that he had assisted his father in many of his make-ups and took pride in the fact that he could make himself up very well too. I would say, judging from the one or two stills that survive, he'd done a very original job on himself for One Million Years BC [1940]. But he wasn't allowed to use it for the film because by then the unions had come into Hollywood and they required a make-up man to do all the make-up rather than the actor himself. Actually I thought Chaney had done a better job on himself than the make-up man subsequently did on One Million but he wasn't permitted to use that talent. It was a handicap that his father never had to face.

'But frankly, he just wasted my time that afternoon. He just wanted to talk about fishing and other subjects that were not in the least bit rewarding in trying to find out anything about his career. He had started work on a book called "A Century of Chaney's", which was going to go back earlier than his father and tell something about his grandfather. He asked me to participate in some way. I was going to supply some of the stills and write the captions for them. After his death there was talk of one of his relatives continuing the project but I'm rather sceptical that it will ever come off. Chaney's youngest brother, who must be quite old now, is also planning to write a biography of his brother.

I observed a real magic moment with Chaney once when the Count Dracula Society had him as their guest of honour at their annual banquet. I was sitting opposite him and I saw he didn't eat a morsel of food at the banquet, he just sat there drinking. It worried me because I knew from experience that he was only good until afternoon and from then on he was blotto. I had been slightly involved with a minor movie he had been making a year or two earlier and he had frankly warned the director and producer about his drinking. He told them, "Get everything you can out of me before 1 p.m. because after that I can't guarantee anything." He carried a hip flask that supposedly contained iced tea but was actually liberally laced with alcohol.

'When his name was announced at the banquet I made the introductory speech about him. He then appeared on the stage and he got a standing ovation and that really turned him on. He said, "Would you like to see me do Lennie?" Everyone said yes and he did Lennie. And he really had it down pat. He stood up there and he became that powerful figure from Of Mice and Men and it brought tears to everybody's eyes to see how great he could be when he tried.

'Ironically, just like his father, he died of cancer of the throat. I had

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known about it for some time but it was a closely guarded secret and I wasn't going to put it into print even when it looked like he might die. It was his own wife who chose to reveal it to our readers and she ran the letter she sent.

'He had absolutely clung to at least half a voice. He should have had all his vocal cords removed, but they just went halfway. I was told privately that the cobalt treatments were killing him faster than the

cancer. I guardedly called it to the attention of his fans that he was in serious shape, and that it might be wise to let him know right away if they cared for him. I asked them to please not pester him for pictures or ask him to tell stories of how it was in the old days and that sort of thing; but if they wanted to send get well cards or expressions of appreciation, now was the time. I was quite surprised and flattered when one day I picked up the telephone and heard a very rough, gruff voice say: "Say young fellow, you sure been doing a great job for me. Want to thank you for all them letters I been getting. Really makes me feel good."

'I don't know whether it was just bravado or whether he didn't know he had terminal cancer but he was preparing to go 3,000 miles back east to appear live on the stage in a revival of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I couldn't believe it when I received a phone call from someone in New York, very excited, who had heard the announcement on the radio. So I called his wife and she said yes, he's learning his lines and will be using a throat mike. And two weeks later he was dead [13 July 1973].'

## 2 Lugosi and Karloff

The two names most synonymous with horror films in the 1930s were those of Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. Lugosi achieved fame as Count Dracula in 1930; and the following year Karloff made his mark as the Frankenstein monster. But though they shared the glory and even starred together in a number of films they had very little in common. In fact they were totally different in most ways - terms of personality, in their acting styles and especially in the way they reacted to the horror stardom that had suddenly been thrust upon them. By 1940, due to a certain amount of carelessness on his part, Lugosi's career was floundering; whereas Karloff was still relatively successful and remained so for the rest of his life. Relations between the two of them were not particularly warm. Lugosi actually resented Karloff's success, particularly since

Bela Lugosi as Ygor and Boris Karloff as the Monster in *Son of Frankenstein*



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it started with a role that was originally to have been Lugosi's. Karloff later said of him: 'We didn't really socialize. Ours was simply a professional relationship. But I have warm recollections of him as a fine actor and a great technician.' 19

Two things they did have in common were that they were both born outside America and both became

famous fairly late in life. Lugosi was born in a small Hungarian town in 1882 (though he later claimed he was born in 1888). His real name was Bela Blasko but after becoming an actor he changed it to Lugosi, after his home town of Lugos. He was attracted to the theatre at an early age and began acting professionally when in his twenty-first year. His subsequent career in the Hungarian theatre was moderately successful one, but certainly not as spectacular as later publicity hand-outs were to claim. For instance, one studio press release said that Lugosi became known as 'the idol of the Royal National Theatre in Budapest'. Robert Bloch commented, 'Several people I know have tried to verify that. They've tried to find out to just what degree he was famous in Hungary and how much of it was the product of his press agent. It's undoubtedly true that he played some of those classic roles he later talked about, but he was not, so far as those cast and credit listings that have been unearthed show, the great matinee idol of the stage prior to World War One.' Lugosi's biographer, Arthur Lennig, who researched Lugosi's early life quite extensively, has said: 'Lugosi was never a "great" actor in Hungary, nor was he ever a "leading" one at the National Theatre, although his very presence there showed that he was among the best.' 20

During the First World War Lugosi served in the Hungarian army as a lieutenant, but he returned to the National Theatre in 1916 after being badly wounded. In 1917 he became involved with the Hungarian film industry and made a number of films, none of which has survived. Also in that year he married for the first time. His wife was Ilona Szmik, the daughter of a Budapest banker. Those were good times for Lugosi and in later years he would look back on that period of his life with a great deal of nostalgia. When, in 1919, Bela Kun led a successful Communist revolution in Hungary, Lugosi was one of his ardent supporters- mainly because, it seems, he thought that actors would get a better deal under the new regime. But the Kun government was soon overthrown and in that same year Lugosi was obliged to flee the country. He first went to Vienna, then moved on to Germany where he appeared in several films. His wife had accompanied him to Vienna but had then returned home where, on her family's insistence, she divorced Lugosi.

Work was hard to find in Germany, so in 1921 Lugosi made his way to New York where he formed a small theatre company consisting of other out-of-work Hungarian actors. With this he toured various American cities, putting on plays for the Hungarian communities (at this point he

## 29 The Horror People | Lugosi and Karloff

still couldn't speak English). The venture wasn't a very successful one but it was during this period that he married for the second time - his new wife being Ilona Montagh de Nagybánvhegyes. In 1922 things improved when an American producer saw one of his plays and offered him a major part in a New York production of *The Red Poppy*. Since he was unable to speak English, legend has it that Lugosi learned his part entirely by rote. But however he managed it, his performance earned him praise from the critics. One, Alan Dale, said: 'Lugosi is the greatest actor to come to America !' The following year he appeared in his first American film - *The Silent Command* (J. Gordon Edwards) and as a sign of things to come in his film career he was cast as the villain (whereas in his Hungarian films he had usually played the romantic lead). The years between 1922 and 1927 were relatively successful ones for Lugosi - he made a number of films and appeared in several plays, but without having much impact on either public or critics, though the latter took note of his distinctive acting style. Then, in 1927, came the role that changed his life - *Count Dracula*. Lugosi got the part mainly because of his thick Hungarian accent, something that worked in his favour at times, as on the occasion, but was often to prove a handicap.

The play opened in New York in September 1927 and soon became a great success with audience though most of the critics were condescending about it. Lugosi went on tour with the play when it had finished its

Lugosi in his most famous role - Dracula



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profitable New York run in 1928, and the following year, while touring California, he met and later married Beatrice Woodruff, his third wife. That same year he appeared in a film called *The Thirteenth Chair*, playing a strange detective who solved his crimes with the assistance of the spirit world. The director was, significantly enough, Tod Browning.

Lugosi appeared in five other Hollywood films before being offered the lead in *Dracula*, a property that Universal had considered for several years but were dubious about buying because of its unusual and possibly controversial nature - until the success of the play convinced them otherwise. Filming began in September 1930 and covered a period of about seven weeks, actually running over schedule by a week (later scenes were apparently shot rather hastily, which accounts for some of the film's shoddiness in the second half). It was released in New York on 14 February 1931 and was an immediate box-office success, though the critics weren't very impressed. The main fault with the film lies in the fact that it was mainly adapted from the play and not from the novel. As a result it was a very static and talkative film, apart from the early scenes set in Transylvania. Lugosi's performance attracted the praise of many of the critics, but seen today it seems too theatrical and even a little ludicrous. At that time his acting methods were heavily stylized - something he inherited from his Hungarian film days - and he spoke with very slow and precise enunciation. But one must admit that his portrayal of the vampire was certainly a distinctive one; and for many people, even since the arrival of Christopher Lee, he remains the Count Dracula.

After *Dracula* had been completed Lugosi appeared in four non-horror films made by other studios but by April 1931, with the success of *Dracula* assured, Universal decided that Lugosi was going to be their replacement for the late Lon Chaney Sr and went ahead with plans to film *Frankenstein*. Originally Frenchman Robert Florey (see Appendix) was assigned to direct, and Lugosi was to play the monster. Some test reels were shot, but Carl Laemmle Jr, son of Universal's founder, didn't like what he saw and temporarily cancelled the picture (the assignment was then given to James Whale

much to Florey's disgust). Lugosi later claimed that he had turned down the role because it lacked dialogue and would have meant wearing too much make-up. It's possible there is some truth in the story because at that time Lugosi obviously believed that his overnight fame in Hollywood had come about because of his acting ability and personal charisma - he didn't realize it was due to the bizarre nature of his Count Dracula role. He certainly did not think of himself as the successor to Lon Chaney

The part of the Frankenstein monster went, of course, to Karloff and before long Lugosi was regretting his reluctance to don the make-up, for Karloff rapidly became the major horror star at Universal. Even then Lugosi

Edward Van Sloan and Bela Lugosi in a publicity shot for Dracula

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