

# SINK YOUR TEETH INTO THE BLOODTHIRSTY TRILOGY

BY SHANE M. DALLMANN

In these days of point-and-click simplicity for virtually all of your entertainment needs, some younger readers may need to apply their imaginations to an era that predated not only the Internet but the entire home video revolution of the 1980s. For many of us who grew up in the late 1960s through the 1970s in particular, if you didn't manage to catch a movie on the big screen, you either saw it on television (edited or not) or you simply didn't see it. And for "monster kids" in those days, the small screen was almost certainly our introduction to the works of Japan's Toho Studios.

For most of us, "Saturday Afternoon" Toho was where it was at. With AIP-TV leading the charge, various and sundry suppliers of syndicated television "creature feature" product enthralled us with the myriad adventures of Godzilla and all of his *kaiju* friends, enemies, aspirants and imitators on a regular basis until the Toho logo became synonymous with monstrous fun for all.

Ah, but for some of us there was also "Sunday Night" Toho. Taking for granted that one didn't have revival theatres or special university screenings in their neck of the woods, some of us were blessed with 'cool' parents who would let us stay up late (even on a school night) if the local PBS station was running an Akira Kurosawa classic such as *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo* or *Throne of Blood*. Usually uninterrupted. Sometimes with subtitles. And yes, with that very same Toho logo.

Make no mistake—US distributors were savvy when it came time to market their Japanese imports. Serious historical dramas (no matter how action-packed) got the arthouse/PBS "prestige" treatment while giant monster movies were dubbed into English and made as kid (and American) friendly as possible for quick and profitable mainstream releases or straight-to-TV syndication. But what happened to Toho's *horror* films? They existed, all right, and reference books served up tantalizing stills from such in-house classics as *Onibaba* (which never hit PBS as it featured extensive nudity as well as demonic shock) and *Kwaidan* (you might have been blessed with this anthology if you were extremely lucky, and even then, an entire story was deleted from the original American release). And forget Saturday Afternoon Toho. We never starved for monsters and science fiction, but the closest thing we got to a supernatural thriller was Inoshiro Honda's surreal, hallucinatory *Matango* (which AIP condemned to decades of ridicule by serving it up straight to television as *Attack of the Mushroom People*).

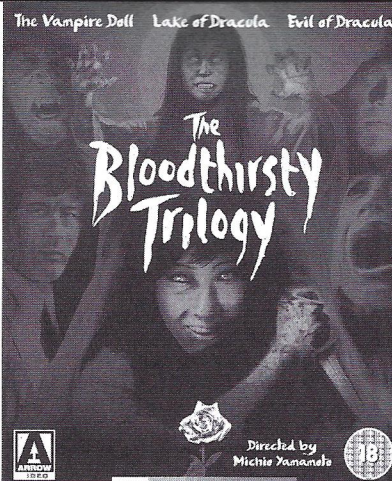
When Toho started creating shockers far more allied with Anglo/American tropes and tastes in 1970, things were changing on both shores. The Toho/AIP-TV deal was drawing to a close, and the death of beloved *kaiju* creature-creator and effects master Eiji Tsuburaya heralded drastic alterations to the look and feel of the immortal G-series. Saturday Afternoon Toho viewers got one heck of a taste of this paradigm shift when they first encountered 1971's *Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster* (this retitling of *Godzilla vs. Hedorah* was the last G-film handled by AIP). This was scarcely the kid-friendly "Monster Island" universe Honda and Tsuburaya had left us with. This was mean-spirited, creepy and surprisingly gruesome stuff in which human beings were graphically reduced to corroded skeletons (right in front of the child protagonist!) by acid mist and sludge spewed by the title menace. Gone were the catchy martial fanfares of Akira Ifukube: in their place was the would-be-pop-anthem "Save the Earth" and plenty of foreboding electronic weirdness from one Riichiro Manabe. What on earth had happened at Toho?

It had *not* happened overnight, and there was a missing link.

1970's *Chi o Suu Ningyo* (*The Bloodthirsty Doll*) stands as Toho's first full-color Gothic horror film and also as the first in a thematic "trilogy" co-scripted by Ei Ogawa and directed by Michio Yamamoto (Kurosawa's assistant director on the aforementioned *Throne of Blood*). "It was a dark and stormy night . . ." when young Kazuhiko Sagawa (Atsuo Nakamura) set off to visit his fiancée Yuko (Yukiko Kobayashi); and, Kazuhiko hasn't been heard from since. This prompts his sister Keiko (top-billed Kayo Matsuo) and her fiancé Hiroshi (Akira Nakao) to trace his steps to the gloomy, palatial mansion that now only seems to be inhabited by Yuko's mother (Yoko Minakaze) and her brutish, hunchbacked servant Genzo (Kaku Takashina). The sad tale of Yuko's recent death in an automobile accident doesn't clear the air for Keiko (or bring her any closer to finding her brother). But the specter (?) of Yuko persists in putting in frightening appearances, and yes, there's something equally sinister about the doll left behind in her bedroom. Is Keiko hallucinating, or is Yuko's family not telling her the entire truth? Perhaps the local physician (Jun Usami as Dr. Yamaguchi) can provide some answers . . .

The word "vampire" is bandied about the dialogue sufficiently to justify the various attempts to sell the film as a straight-up bloodsucker tale (the film was known as *Legacy of Dracula* in the United Kingdom before *The Vampire Doll* became the generally accepted English-language title). But Yamamoto's first shocker avoids the out-and-out "Dracula" trappings (which were certainly on their way) for a supernatural tale of ancestral remorse that wouldn't have been at all out of place in a Roger Corman production starring Vincent Price—but which boasted a modern setting and an atypical score (Manabe)—and which climaxed with a startling burst of gore the likes of which AIP would never have allowed in such a release. Too strong for children but probably too esoteric for the R-rated drive-in movie audience, Yamamoto's brief (70-minutes) feature was never dubbed into English and received only the briefest of US arthouse releases (under the completely generic title *Night of the Vampire*) before vanishing from American memory.

Yamamoto, Ogawa and Manabe re-teamed for 1970's even more obscure *Terror in the Streets* (described as a twist-and-turn thriller aspiring to Hitchcock and Clouzot and which does not appear to have received any official American release at all) before brazenly staking (sorry) a claim in territory that had until very recently been considered the undisputed backyard of England's Hammer Films for their next sanguinary shocker in 1971. *Chi o Suu Me* (*Bloodthirsty Eyes*) also takes a page from 1970's *Count Yorga, Vampire* by taking a classic Dracula type and more or less dropping him into the modern world via the abrupt delivery of a coffin to an unsuspecting town (though with far less jarring and more traditional results than either *Yorga* or Hammer's subsequent *Dracula A.D. 1972*). An unsuspecting truck driver is transformed into a possessed "Renfield," and cases of extreme anemia come to dominate the caseload of the concerned Dr. Saeki (Choei Takahashi). Of particular concern to him is his ladyfriend Akiko (Midori Fujita), who appears to be wasting away in body and mind before his eyes (and those of her sister Natsuko, played by Sanae Emi). Only by unlocking the significance of Akiko's dormant childhood memory, involving a runaway dog and a mysterious old man, might the day be saved.

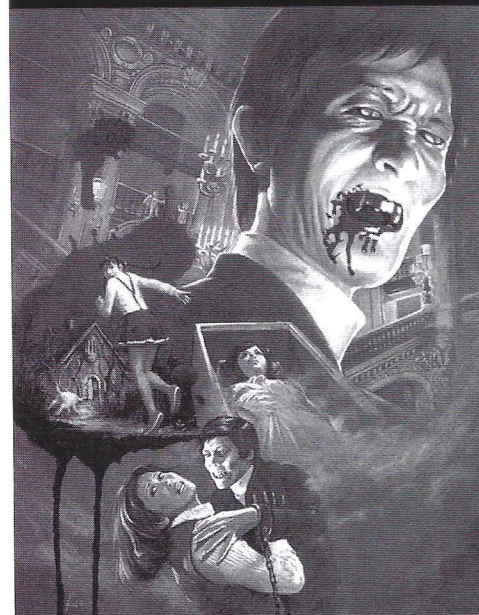


LAKE OF DRACULA





THE VAMPIRE DOLL



LAKE OF DRACULA



EVIL OF DRACULA

The story is boilerplate (we certainly know what's going on even if the protagonists don't), but Yamamoto and company certainly studied their inspirations well, and by casting Shin Kishida (the *Lone Wolf and Cub* series) as "The Vampire," they provided the actor with a signature role with which he would be associated all the way up to his premature death at age 43 in 1982. Indeed, Kishida's glowering, fanged countenance in full-blown Christopher Lee mode stood out among the illustrations in the reference books which often teased young, hungry fans with visions of films they were never given the opportunity to actually see. This particular holy grail was commonly referred to as *Lake of Dracula*, but the actual identity of Kishida's vampire remains elusive in the film proper. The English subtitles invoke the sobriquet "Dracula" on occasion, but the name isn't actually uttered by the on-screen actors. As with *The Vampire Doll* before it, *Lake* involves some closeted family history, but the question of ethnic origin on display is quickly skirted over with the non-conclusive line "I'm not Japanese." The goal here was to replicate a full-blooded Hammer Horror film in modern guise; and culture shock notwithstanding, the project stands as an unqualified success, boasting rich atmosphere, committed performances and even a show-stopping disintegration sequence worthy of the glory days of Terence Fisher. And as suggested earlier, *Doll* and *Lake* had an unmistakable influence on new Godzilla director Yoshimitsu Banno: The shots of the rocky seashore set to Manabe's music in Yamamoto's films could fool even a seasoned G-fan into thinking he was watching *Smog Monster* outtakes.

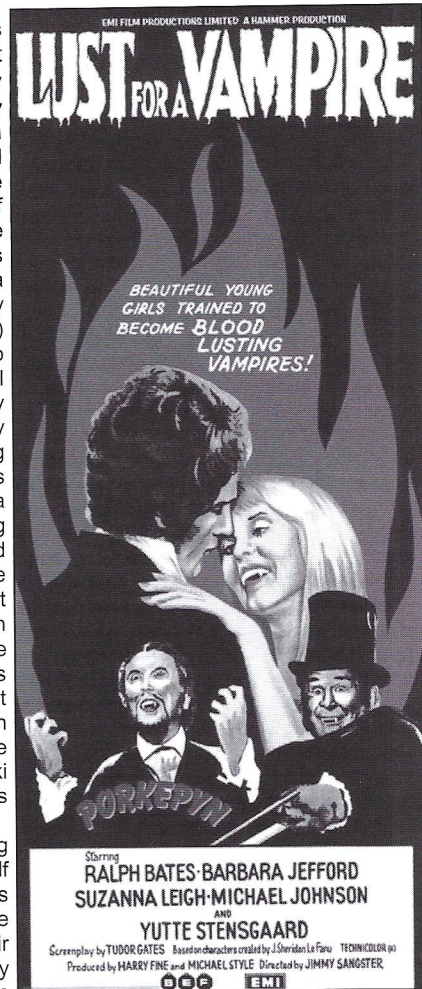
Yamamoto spent several years focusing on television work before reuniting with Ogawa and Manabe for one last trip to the bloody well in 1974. And while *Lake of Dracula* had copied the Hammer formula without specifically replicating one particular story, *Chi o Suu Bara* (*Bloodthirsty Roses*) rather blatantly swipes a peculiar choice for inspiration, namely Hammer's 1971 *Lust for a Vampire*, widely regarded as one of the studio's least successful outings. But where Jimmy Sangster's misfire associated itself tenuously with J. Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla," the Yamamoto/Ogawa opus (again set in the modern day) instead offers up the only official acknowledgement of Bram Stoker to be found in the series. It's confusing, yes, but it turns out to be proper in the long run. The framework comes straight out of the Sangster playbook: Young Professor Shiraki (played by

Toshio Kurosawa) accepts a teaching assignment at an all-girls school, only to find himself instantly promoted to principal when the standing school head announces his immediate retirement in the wake of the death of his wife. (The fact that said principal is played by Shin Kishida should have immediately sounded a warning bell.) Shiraki finds it difficult to keep things under control on campus, especially when the mischievously flirty students start falling sway to a mysterious ailment (there's even a sinister figure hanging around the clinic and providing conveniently false diagnoses in a direct parallel to the Mike Raven character in *Lust*). The source of the evil comes as no surprise whatsoever, but there's still a richer than usual origin story to be savored here as Shiraki struggles to protect his charges.

While the long-standing rumor that Hammer itself shot extra-gory sequences specifically for the Japanese releases of their horror films was ultimately proven false, Yamamoto's Hammer-esque outings were sufficiently gruesome in their own right to be branded off-limits to young matinee audiences in the States (and as the main appeal of *Lust for a Vampire* was copious female nudity, its contemporary imitator even indulged in some brief titillation of its own). So as with *Vampire Doll* before them, both *Lake* and the film now best known as *Evil of Dracula* were deemed neither fish nor fowl on these shores and were sent out for brief arthouse releases in subtitled versions. Unlike *The Vampire Doll* however, the second and third entries in the so-called "Bloodthirsty Trilogy" went on to get additional US exposure . . . of a kind.

In 1994, Henry G. Saperstein/UPA acquired the US rights to four Toho thrillers never previously seen outside of foreign-language theatres in the States. In addition to *Lake* and *Evil*, the package included the Nostradamus prophecy/doomsday pastiche *The Last Days of Planet Earth* and Jun Fukuda's telepathic action outing *Espy* (written by Ogawa), both from 1974. These English-dubbed renditions were sent straight to the TNT network in utterly bowdlerized and mutilated versions which retained virtually none of their original power or entertainment value (the UPA version of *Lake* went so far as to delete the disintegration finale in its entirety in the most egregious example). Budget VHS versions of these titles then hit the shelves courtesy of Paramount/Gateway. These were available only in the EP/SLP mode (but not to worry—the all-new "MasterSharp" process guaranteed you the same picture quality as seen on professional SP mode tapes!) and, you guessed it, they were the same worthless TV prints, complete with commercial-break fadeouts and multiple splices, seemingly tossed out merely to add insult to injury.

It's been nearly twenty-five years since that debacle, but at long last Arrow Video has come to the rescue with the genuine articles in their beautiful original states on a Blu-ray collection, which is already on the short list for "Disc of the Year" status. As of this writing, final product has not been completely confirmed. The release version of the set will include new interviews with surviving cast members from all three films (alas, director Yamamoto and composer Manabe have joined actor Shin Kishida beyond the pale); a promo gallery; a reversible cover sleeve; and, a companion booklet by scholars Steven Hampton and Jasper Sharp. So whether you're a Saturday Afternoon or Sunday Evening viewer, whether you favored AIP, Hammer, the Big G, or any combination of the above, you've been waiting more than long enough for this payoff.



Starring  
RALPH BATES · BARBARA JEFFORD  
SUZANNA LEIGH · MICHAEL JOHNSON  
AND  
YUTTE STENSGAARD  
Screenplay by TUDOR GATES Based on characters created by J. Sheridan Le Fanu TECHNICOLOR  
Produced by HARRY FINE and MICHAEL STYLE Directed by JIMMY SANGSTER  
BEP EMI

