

RESTORING Darkness

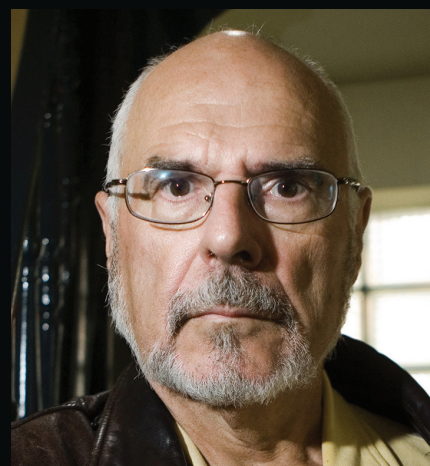
Director Harry Kümel discusses Blue Underground's new 4K UHD presentation of "Daughters of Darkness."

By CHRIS ALEXANDER

Belgian filmmaker Harry Kümel's 1971 masterwork **DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS** is one of the greatest films of the 1970s. Not just horror films—films, full stop. Telling the tale of the contemporary incarnation of "Blood Countess" Elizabeth Bathory (Delphine Seyrig) and her manipulation—sexual and otherwise—of a young couple (John Karlen and Danielle Ouimet) honeymooning in Ostend, Kümel's elegant film milks depravity, sexuality, danger and the blackest (or reddest) humor out of every scene. It's as much a balletic drama as it is a tale of

vampirism, dripping style and menace and beauty. Simply put, the picture is unforgettable.

Certainly Kümel hasn't forgotten it, and neither have the movie's legions of fans worldwide—among them William Lustig, head honcho of cult-movie disc label Blue Underground. With Lustig's help, Kümel was recently allowed to personally supervise an extensive, frame-by-frame color restoration and deluxe 4K transfer of his signature work for a soon-to-release UHD disc edition (including liner notes by **DELIRIUM**'s Michael Gin-



gold), something that pleased the director and will no doubt astonish and delight the film's devoted flock. We called up the outspoken Kümel to discuss the details of the restoration process and the legacy of **DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS**.

DELIRIUM: Why did you decide to revisit the film again now?

HARRY KÜMEL: The technology was available. Plus, I'm still here to do it! I've been very lucky to have Bill Lustig in my corner with **DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS**. He loves the movie, and we did what I consider the ultimate grading. I'm still lucky to be alive so I can control how my film will look, so I can make it as good—if not better—than it should be. For example, I shot the movie at all times of the day, and now I have corrected the day-for-night to look like night. Every little piece has been enhanced: The pallor of the countess is better, I've brought up some of the reds, diminished some blues. I have not changed the film itself, but when she puts the red scarf on the lamp, for example, the scarf is what changes the lighting. It was only a lamp, and we did it with a dissolve and lots of tricks, but now I've managed to make it look how I originally wanted it.

DELIRIUM: As you say, you're "still here to do it." What do you think of restorations that are done posthumously, without the involvement of the director?

KÜMEL: I think they do terrible things. Generally speaking, the people who do these restorations have no idea and have never seen the films when they came out. They can't even compare them to the original prints in many cases, as the prints have often faded. Take **PEEPING TOM**: It's an absolutely terrible restoration. It simply isn't the correct Rank/Eastman-color they had then. It should have had that Hammer look. **PEEPING TOM** is not a Hammer movie, but the British had those kinds of colors then. They were very particular. They ruined that film in the restoration. Michael Powell would *never* have accepted that. It's not even an enhancement; it's a horror compared to the original.

Color is important in terms of what the film means. I compare it in an analog way



to John Ford's *SHE WORE A YELLOW RIBBON*. They were shooting in Monument Valley and there was a windstorm, and the cinematographer said, "We can't shoot now, there's not enough light," and John Ford said, "Shoot the film!" They shot it, and Ford was right; it's a wonderful, wonderful shot. So when the grading is not in the hands of the director who controlled the picture, it's very often disastrous.

DELIRIUM: Presumably you are the owner of the film now, but I also presume that wasn't always the case.

KÜMEL: Yes, I do own it. And that's a long story, 15 years in the making. *DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS* was a co-production between five countries, and slowly, the owners vanished. Died. Disappeared. Whatever. Of course, the film was always being sold off, and the last owner was a French company that wasn't even in the film business; it was just a cover for money-laundering. They would buy films as a disguise to hide their activities. Now, in France there is a law that states that if there is no producer left alive, the movie is "orphaned" and the director becomes the owner. I had a very good lawyer in Belgium who worked with me to get it back from that French company and then proved that I was the real author of *DAUGHTERS*, and now my little company owns the film and it still makes money, which is very nice.

DELIRIUM: You've mentioned in the past that you were preparing a belated sequel. Is that still happening?

KÜMEL: Yes. I have a screenplay I wrote called *MOTHERS OF DARKNESS*. It's not a sequel; it's a revamp of the story. The interest in it fluctuates. Everyone thinks it's a good script, though I think the younger characters in it just aren't quite right. The big problem is that if we enhance the young people, they will override the story of the Countess. So we are still fine-tuning it, and we will get there.

DELIRIUM: Was *DAUGHTERS OF*



DARKNESS meant to reflect anything political at the time?

KÜMEL: No! There is a phenomenon of younger audiences trying to quantify the film, to give it some kind of meaning that it was never meant to have. They try to analyze the "Mother" character as some sort of social comment when it was not meant to be; rather, the idea was a last-minute decision to have Mother played by a man [acclaimed Dutch filmmaker/actor Fons Rademakers]. They say to me, "You don't understand your own movie"; can you imagine that! Of course I know what the film's meaning is, but one doesn't talk about these things endlessly, because it's just not very interesting. When I'm no longer on this Earth, I don't want someone to say, "How stupid and arrogant of him to give meaning to this movie!" There is meaning in *DAUGHTERS*, but not some

kind of ridiculous social meaning; it has cinematic meaning. Today, of course, everyone thinks every movie must have meaning and self-importance. I find that terrible and totally emasculating for creators. Horrible, really. It's a castration of art.

DELIRIUM: You once told me that you think *DAUGHTERS* is "an agreeable entertainment, nothing more." With the new grading and presentation, has your opinion changed?

KÜMEL: Not especially, it's just more like I wanted it to be now. It will always be what it has always been: an exploitation movie that was formed by the fact that I thought I could make an exploitation movie that looks like an artistic movie. And I succeeded because I had a very effective trick: I managed to get an established art-cinema actress to essay the main part, and that was, of course, Delphine Seyrig as Bathory. That's why it succeeded. Because she had a sense of humor, a wonderful sense of mirth that these other actors did not have. Not the Canadian actress Danielle Ouimet, not the imported American actor John Karlen. They did not understand what they were doing. Delphine understood very well. And Andrea Rau, who played Ilona, was an intuitive person. She was not a great actress, but she had a wonderful presence. You have people who understand this sort of thing and people who do not.

DELIRIUM: And again, *Mother*. *Rademakers* adds so much unique menace to those moments.

KÜMEL: Ah yes, and for the new film, I bring *Mother* back. I had Rutger Hauer cast as *Mother* at one point, but of course, he passed away while we were trying to get it off the ground. Now I'm looking for someone else, but of course, Rutger would have been sensational.



DISCIPLE OF Darkness

Author and editor Kat Ellinger's new book goes to bat for a beloved vampire classic.

By CHRIS ALEXANDER

Writer, historian, editor in chief of *Diabolique* magazine and noted cinema iconoclast Kat Ellinger has made it her mission to push her passion for all things strange and sensual in horror. One of the key pictures Ellinger has held close to her heart, Harry Kümel's 1971 sapphic vampire melodrama *DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS*, is now the subject of her new book from Liverpool University Press, a deep-dive investigation into the inimitable allure of this elegant, erotic, dangerous and enigmatic horror masterwork. *DELIRIUM* cracked open Kat's coffin and posed questions to learn more.

DELIRIUM: When did you first see *DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS*, and what was your initial impression?

KAT ELLINGER: Vampires have always been my monsters. Growing up in the '70s in Britain on a diet of Hammer horror, it was never going to be any other way. And while they terrified me initially, it wasn't long before I started to wish that I could be in one. Ingrid Pitt was my first vampire

love. So powerful. So strong. I wanted to be her. But then *DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS* came into my life, and it opened up an entirely different world for me. Every so often, a film comes along and you feel like it was made just for you. That's how it was with *DAUGHTERS* for me. I have been under its spell ever since.

DELIRIUM: Do you feel *DAUGHTERS* belongs in the sub-subgenre of "lesbian vampire" cinema, or is it something else entirely?

ELLINGER: Yes and no. From a commercial point of view, it came from that whole early-'70s shift in the market when suddenly every producer and distributor working in genre wanted lesbian vampires because they were the new big thing. Tonally though, thematically, it comes from somewhere else altogether. It comes from the same esoteric pool that was propelling the explorations into the *fantastique* and Gothic grotesque that Walerian Borowczyk, Jean Rollin and even Miklós Jancsó were doing around the same time. It was almost anti-commercial



in a way—a resisting of convention, combining elements of art house and eroticism.

And that's not to say that that makes them better or more important than other genre films from the period, especially in the canon of lesbian vampires. All of these films have significant value, at least to me, because they changed the vampire from male predator to empowered female, which was one hell of a powerful, transgressive statement to make, even if some were dealing in commercial fantasy. Like its aforementioned kin, however, *DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS* was running on a slightly different track. All of the vampires came out of literature, but while Hammer was looking to a classic Gothic literary mold like Le Fanu or Stoker, these other movies came from Gothic's weirder, more perverse cousin, French Symbolism, and were packed with the mysterious strains of the *fantastique* rather than nar-



rative logic or the dominant conventions. **DELIRIUM:** Can you identify key elements that make it such a powerful and enduring picture?

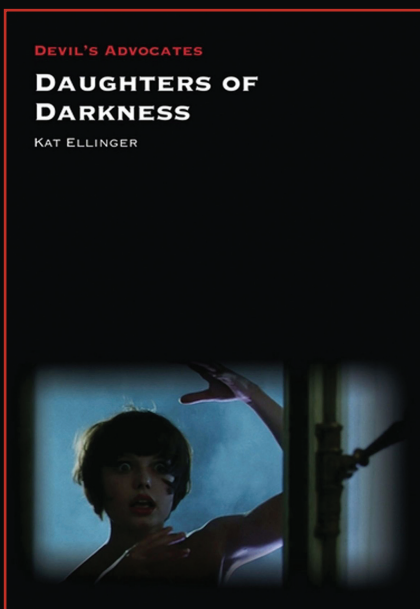
ELLINGER: Firstly, Bathory herself. There are so few adaptations of the Bathory myth in film, I believe because the idea of someone who was essentially a female serial killer still has the power to make people uncomfortable. DRACULA is a romantic story, CARMILLA is a romantic story, while Bathory is the woman we all fear: she is Lilith. As scholar Bridget Cherry noted, Delphine Seyrig's performance of Bathory is modeled more on male libertines of the 1800s than on the female vampires to come out of Gothic lit and cinema. She is a Byronic character, and a Sadean character, not a Carmilla—character types usually reserved for men because they are powerful. She kills because she enjoys the act of killing. She is cruel and manipulative. She toys with her prey. Because of this, she transgresses so many codes when it comes to the theme of women and violence. There are very few others who have attempted this in film, especially from that period. Violent women are often excused as brain-washed minions or mentally ill. Bathory, by contrast, knows exactly what she is doing and loves every second of it. She never loses control. DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS was one of the first of its kind in this respect. Jean Rollin's FASCINATION comes very close. THE HUNGER is another obvious ancestor. But DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS was there kicking things up way before those films.

And then there is Kümel's handling of the *fantastique*. Generally, Gothic horror comes from a universe where monsters are real. They are accepted as part of the landscape, as part of folklore. The *fantastique*, a typically French tradition, is a little different. As Tvedten Todorov said in his wonderful book about that tradition, it comes from "that moment of hesitation." So you are never quite sure, and Kümel keeps us hanging on that note for most of the film. He resists all the usual tropes. There is no speech on how to destroy the

vampire. No folklore. There are no fangs; all of the violence shown is very human and explainable. This is the *fantastique*, and Kümel understands and uses it in some of the most powerful ways to keep us hanging in that moment.

It is a truly decadent film. I don't mean decadent because it's visually very rich, which it is, but that it inhabits an attitude toward the themes of sex, death, cruelty and decay that is very much in sync with the writers coming out of the *fin de siècle*, the late 1800s—people like Charles Baudelaire, Jean Lorrain or J-K Huysmans, for example. It revels in moral decay as a source of power and beauty, when other genre films of its time always come with that tried-and-tested message that good will eventually triumph over evil. Here, by contrast, we meet a vampire who is truly majestic in ruin, like Lucifer, who is a trickster, a seducer, who is never punished for their fall into sin. In fact, sin is a point of celebration for the film. I will always consider this a great thing.

Also, Delphine Seyrig. She is simply enchanting. What a powerhouse. I can totally understand why Kümel said he



would not have made the film if it didn't have her in the lead.

DELIRIUM: On your journey, what did you learn about DAUGHTERS that surprised you?

ELLINGER: What stood out to me in my research, and from talking to both Kümel and Ouimet, was the fact that it was extremely difficult to make. From getting it financed to the sheer amount of physical work it took to get it off the ground; working away locked in a dark hotel for weeks, everyone rubbing up against one another, during a hot summer, on such a tight budget. It's easy to think things are effortless when you see them on the screen, especially in a film that's as flawlessly made as DAUGHTERS OF DARKNESS. So learning what they went through gave me even more admiration for what they achieved with this film. It was a true project of passion, blood, sweat and tears that might not have even been, but we are all the richer because it is.

DELIRIUM: Kümel has been developing a sequel for a while now. What do you think of this? Can a film as unique as DAUGHTERS ever be properly expanded? Should it be?

ELLINGER: It totally should be! And I can't wait to see it come to fruition. From the little I do know about it so far, I am very excited about the concepts Kümel is working with. I love the fact that he is taking it right back to Bram Stoker and [Victorian English stage actor] Henry Irving. Or at least, that's where the project was when I wrote about it for my book. Obviously it will be very different, because we do not have Seyrig, unfortunately, but from what I understand, this will be a fresh angle, a different beast altogether. People rarely talk about Kümel's work outside of DAUGHTERS, but his entire filmography, and even the episodes he did of the decadent erotic series SÉRIE ROSE, a.k.a. SOFTLY FROM PARIS, offers up such a rich tapestry of decadent themes, so I can't help but think this will be no exception. It gives me hope that we will, hopefully soon, be getting to sample more of his delicious delicacies.