

## THE RETURN OF THE VAMPIRE

Directed by Lew Landers  
(1943) Scream Factory Blu-ray



Columbia Pictures borrows a page from the great *universal* playbook on the Dracula legend in the first few minutes of 1943's *The Return of the Vampire*. However, despite the resemblances to that iconic vampire *not* being purely coincidental, the film offers some wonderfully atmospheric scenes, an intriguing plotline, and most importantly, Bela Lugosi.

In *The Return of the Vampire*, Lugosi again dons his classic vampire cape . . . and almost the rest of his iconic costume from Universal's *Dracula* (1931). Except this time around he isn't the famed Transylvania count, but plays the role of Armand Tesla, a Romanian scientist-come-vampire from the 1700's who now lurks about the outskirts of London in 1918.

Even as the credits roll, fright fans sense they are in for a treat as a terrified and hapless woman is obscured entirely by an encroaching high-collared caped figure. In a swift whirl of fog, the scene quickly shifts to a classic dilapidated cemetery—the crooked gravestones, craggy terrain, and fog shrouded ground worthy of the best graveyards Universal Pictures had to offer during its monster golden age.

Into this gloomy scene creeps a lone figure, soon to be revealed as the werewolf (of sorts) Andreas Obyr, played by Matt Willis. Andreas heads straight to the crypt to awaken his master, the sleeping Armand Tesla (Lugosi). Taking on the Renfield role of faithful servant-slave, Andreas has to be the most benign werewolf in the entire pantheon of horror films, looking more like a humanoid-schnauzer hybrid than a fearful lycanthrope. He also speaks the King's English, a rarity in horror cinema for this wolf-like creature. While for most of the film Columbia follows accepted vampire conventions almost to the letter, they completely miss the mark with Willis' lycanthropic incarnation, his lupine transformation having little to do with the lunar calendar and all to do with the strength and will of Armand Tesla.

Once awakened, we hear the unmistakable intonations of Lugosi as Tesla's shadow rises from its coffin. The vampire calmly saunters to the far edge of the cemetery to "disappear" with a flourish of his cape, and an engulfing swirl of studio fog—a simple but effective effect. How the Romanian Tesla ended up in an English cemetery is never really answered, but at the Ainsworth Sanitarium nearby, Lady Ainsworth (Freda Inescort, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1940; *A Place in the Sun*, 1951) and her Oxford mentor, Dr. Walter Saunders (Gilbert Emery, *A Farewell to Arms*, 1932; *Dracula's Daughter*, 1936) are answering the questions posed by the discovery of a nearly bloodless patient with small pinpricks on her neck.

Assuming the Professor Van Helsing role, Dr. Saunders (Emery) quickly informs his former student (Inescort) of Armand Tesla's fixation with vampirism, thus also revealing the basic tenants of vampirism—no walking around in daylight, native soil in the coffin, not casting a reflection in a mirror, destruction via stake (or spike in this case) through the heart, etc.

Unfortunately, Dr. Saunders' young granddaughter Nicki (who accompanied him on his visit to Ainsworth Sanitarium as a playmate for Lady Ainsworth's son John) soon becomes a victim of Tesla's. As Nicki sleeps snug in her bed, the ominous figure of the vampire in cape and top hat lies in wait outside as the fog gathers. In an instant, a window pane in the French doors crashes to the ground, the doors fly open, and the vampire enters to claim his victim.

Discovering that his own granddaughter has fallen victim to Tesla, Dr. Saunders and Lady Ainsworth head quickly to the vampire's lair and dispatch him via spike through the heart, thus also releasing the werewolf Andreas from his servitude as well.

The story then fast forwards twenty-three years, placing the action firmly in 1941 amidst Nazi Germany's relentless daily Blitz raids over London. Enter Miles Mander as Sir Frederick Fleet, the Chief Commissioner for Scotland Yard. Sir Frederick informs Lady Ainsworth that her mentor Dr. Saunders has died in a plane crash—but that his manuscript regarding Armand Tesla was found among the remains. Lady Ainsworth then quickly verifies the entire Tesla-Vampire affair, which Sir Frederick promptly dismisses as "rubbish." Mander's Sir Frederick delivers some wonderfully calm and collected British-esque dialogue, such as informing Lady Ainsworth, "My dear lady, you can't go around the country driving things through people's hearts."

Unfortunately for Lady Ainsworth, and the now adult and engaged John (Roland Varno) and Nicki (Nina Foch, *Sparticus*, 1960; *The Ten Commandments*, 1956), an errant German bomb lands squarely in Armand Tesla's old stomping ground of a cemetery, dislodging his spiked remains from its makeshift grave. Two bumbling British civil defense workers, played with comic aplomb by screen veteran Billy Bevan and Harold De Becker, are tasked with reinterring any bodies disturbed by the Nazi raid. Discovering Tesla's body, the two men assume the spike to be shrapnel from the bomb attack, with one of them remarking that, "It ain't right for a man to be buried proper, and then get him with a blooming bomb splint!" When the braver of the two removes the spike, a low guttural moan is heard, and the men move even more quickly to rebury the body.

Tesla now awakened, he quickly sets in motion a plan for vengeance upon Lady Ainsworth and her family. Soon enough, Andreas, having been rehabilitated by Lady Ainsworth encounters Tesla and falls under the vampire's power, once again turning into a lycanthropic "Man Friday" (as Sir Frederick referred to him). Here Lugosi delivers some wonderful lines as only he can, via a mesmerizing glare and the rhythmic staccato of his thick European accent: "You are a fool, Andreas, a complete and utter fool.

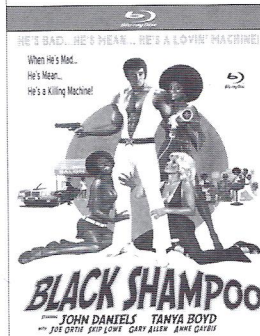
fate is to be what you are, and mine is to be what I am, your master."

From there the second half of the film belongs more to Lugosi as his Armand Tesla weaves a web of deceit in order to claim the adult Nicki as his own, with Sir Frederick's Scotland Yard detectives always several steps behind. The climax of the story has Tesla exposed to direct sunlight and disintegrating (melting?) away in a similar manner to Christopher Lee's iconic demise in Hammer's classic *The Horror of Dracula* (1958).

Prolific director Lew Landers, most notable for *The Raven*, 1935, creates some quite chilling and effective scenes of Tesla attacking his victims, often simply revealing just the vampire's shadow along with copious amounts of exploding fog swirls. And although Lugosi's Armand Tesla is a bit more subdued than his famous count, he is nonetheless one to be reckoned with. Freda Inescort is a bit flat in the role of Lady Ainsworth, playing most scenes with the same somewhat bland delivery—whether learning of a vampire's existence or assisting in murdering the creature. But, then again, several of the supporting players lack the energy or chemistry that the stock Universal Pictures horror players could have provided—one wonders how borrowing Ralph Bellamy, Patric Knowles, Dwight Frye, or Evelyn Ankers in supporting roles might have infused the story with a bit more vibrancy.

But in the end, with an assist from that wonderfully atmospheric use of fog and shadows, it's really all about Bela. *Dracula* cemented and sealed Lugosi's fate for the ages, but his Armand Tesla is a fine compliment to the immortal count.

David A. Kryniak



**BLACK SHAMPOO**  
Directed by Greydon Clark  
(1976) VCI Entertainment Blu-ray

The blaxploitation cycle produced a number of interesting hybrids and reworkings, some good, some bad, and some downright ugly. One interesting (and highly-qualitative) creation is writer/director Greydon Clark's *Black Shampoo*, an African-American take on Warren Beatty's 1975 hit film *Shampoo*. It's not a straight rip-off like, say, *Hit Man* was of

British crime classic *Get Carter* or *Abby* was of *The Exorcist*. With *Black Shampoo*, Clark simply lifted the idea of the hairdresser who screws his clientele and ran with it, taking things in a completely different direction and fashioning a violent revenge yarn involving the mob.

*Black Shampoo* is easily one of the finest offerings the blaxploitation cycle produced, and one of the main reasons for this is lead actor John Daniels. Although Daniels was in a handful of other films, hardly any of them notable with the possible exception of *The Candy Tangerine Man*. He was a talented performer who should have enjoyed a more successful career. He absolutely shines here. Perhaps he's not the kind of master thespian Warren Beatty was, but I'd gladly plunk down my ten bucks to watch Daniels in just about anything any day of the week. Daniels' Jonathan Knight, a.k.a. "Mr. Jonathan" (his character in the film) exudes laid-back confidence and machismo in a way that's naturalistic and never feels forced. He's got the sort of charisma that keeps viewers' eyes on him whenever he's on the screen, allowing him to steal every scene he's in. He carries himself on film in a way that's similar to Jim Kelly, the only difference being that Daniels can actually act.

The film features all the typical drive-in movie trademarks of the time, like sex, violence, and nudity. There's also lots of colorful language thrown in for good measure. The story's plot line is pretty thin, but the film flows, the dialogue is decent, and the movie is always entertaining. It also contains moments of real humor. Along for the ride is Daniels' co-star Tanya Boyd, who is best known for her twelve-year run (as Celeste Perrault) on the daytime soap *Days of Our Lives*. Like Daniels, Boyd is also quite good in the film. Another interesting thing to note is that most of the film's cinematography was handled by Dean Cundey, the Academy Award-nominated Director of Photography who later went on to shoot such iconic films as *Halloween*, *Back to the Future*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Apollo 13*.

Extras on VCI Entertainment's new Blu-ray edition are the same as featured on the 2005 DVD release. These include a commentary track by Greydon Clark, a text interview with *The Projection Room* podcast host Mike White (actually reprinted from *Cashiers du Cinemart* in my own 2013 book *Gods of Grindhouse*), and a telephone interview with John Daniels.

Andrew J. Rausch