HALLOWEEN HORRORS

It's time for our traditional Halloween nod to the horror film, and doubtless all over town both the grisliest and the least of the horror films are being revived this weekend. It seems fairly safe to say that our combination may well be the most sedate and bloodless of them all, which is precisely why we are reviving them. Both of tonight's films are stylish, even literate essays in Grand Guignol, but because of their lack of the kind of gore that is expected today, to say nothing of the absence of stars names like Karloff and Lugosi, they have been (and indeed always were) relegated to the status of poor relations. Neither film is currently in either theatrical or non-theatrical distribution, and can only be seen, if at all, on television.

Stylistically, there is an interesting cohesive link between the two. "Dracula's Daughter" was directed by Lambert Hillyer, primarily a director of action films and westerns (including in the silent period, some of the best William S. Hart's). "Son of Dracula" was produced by Ford Beebe, essentially a producer and director of ultra-economical westerns, serials and action pictures. Both were used to getting the absolute maximum out of small budgets, and making every dollar show on the screen. Given (for them) larger budgets, they rise to the occasion admirably, turning out classic products that look far more expensive than they were, using all the existing sets and pools of creative talent available under the old and long-gone mass production studio system.

"Son of Dracula" is actually a misnomer, since it appears that it's merely Dracula sr. up to his old tricks again, masquerading under a title that is far too ordinary for such a good picture. "Dracula's Daughter" of course brings up all the questions that one always ponders over when these unorthodox offspring suddenly emerge full-grown on the screen. One would give a great deal to know what these characters will have to decide about home life and domestic arrangements. At what age does a vampire trot up its embarrassing personal habits, and what are the mechanics of satisfying them? Does a vampire baby sleep in a cradle sprinkled with native earth?

Incidentally, despite their series-like titles, both of tonight's films were made before Dracula (and for that matter, the Frankenstein Monster, The Mummy and The Wolf Man) became standardised heavies, turning up regularly almost as guest stars in picture after picture, to be followed by a whole series of English/Hammer remakes. "Dracula's Daughter" was a sequel made some five years after the original, while "Son..." came along seven years after that. There is a limit, after all, to what vampires can get up to, and Universal wisely spaced its frolics in earlier years.

DRACULA'S DAUGHTER (Universal, 1936) Directed by Lambert Hillyer; produced by E.M.asher; Screenplay by Garrett Fort, suggested from characters created by Bram Stoker; Camera, George Robinson; 72 mins.; With Otto Kruger (Jeffrey Garth); Gloria Holden (Countess Marya Zalebska); Marguerite Churchill (Janet Blake); Edward Van Sloan (Professor van Helsing); Irving Pichel (Sanson); Gilbert Roland (Sir Basil Hume); Halliwell Hobbes (Constable Hawes); Alexander Hであること (Lord Carden); Donald MacBride (Sir John Ayers); Hedda Hopper (Lady Hammond); Claude Allister (Sir Aubrey); Paul Weigel (Inspector); Christian Rub (coach driver); William von Brincken (Police officer); Billy Malyon (Miss Peabody); Edgar Norton (Hobbs, the valet).

"Dracula's Daughter" is allegedly based on "Dracula's Guest", an excised chapter from the original novel that was later issued as a short story, but, except atmospherically, has virtually nothing in common with it. In 1936, due at least partially due to opposition from the British Censors, the initial horror cycle (which peaked in 1935) was being deliberately soft-pedalled. The titles remained good bait for the horror-lovers (e.g. "The Walking Dead") but the plots veered more to melodrama and atmosphere, or even to science-fiction, as in the second and more elaborate chiller that Hillyer directed that year, "The Invisible Ray". At the time "Dracula's Daughter" seemed somewhat disappointing, but today one can appreciate it rather more: it's a thoughtful, well constructed film with some excellent camerawork, a first-class score and some well written dialogue. Surely, "Silly Devil" far surpasses the demands of the audience (one can't help wishing that the long-suffering hero would face a much more interesting future if he gave in to the vampire's demands to share eternal life with her) and the amateurish acting of a bit player (George Kirby as the owner of the bookshop) seem somewhat below par. The opening reel launches the film well, picking up exactly where "Dracula" left off, dropping a couple of characters and on the assumption that everybody is dead, not even bothering with a resumé. With so much uncontrolled undercurrent of humor, this first section is extremely well done. The middle portion slackens a little, but well before the end the loose strings are tautened, and the pacing of the final reel leaves nothing to be desired at all. (In both films, once the vampire is disposed of, we proceed immediately to the 2nd title with no time wasted over romantic wrap-ups!) And even in the slower middle area, there are rewarding sequences, particularly the vampire's utilisation of a young girl (well played by Nan Grey) to test her
own powers of resistance to the vampire taint — a sequence that has the
interesting hint of a vampiric-lesbian relationship that was carried to a more
erotic extreme in Vadim's much later "Blood and Roses". Most of our favorite
lines and situations are trotted out on cue. Dear old Edward Van Sloan has his
inevitable "Destroy it!" speech, a product of the brand of single-mindedness that
he brought to his earlier encounters with Dracula, Frankenstein's monster and the
Mummy. The doctors muse once again about the significance of those two little
punches underneath the jaguar vein, and the vampire, in addition to repeating one of
his father's best-remembered party lines, waxes enthusiastically over the joys of
eternal life. Her entrances and exits from the coffin are photographed in exactly
the same way as Lugosi's in the original, presumably on the theory that getting in
and out of coffins is commonplace, and the illusion of undead elegance is better
served by not showing the actual mechanics. (It certainly doesn't hurt but in terms of sex as well!)"Dracula's Daughter" holds up well, its illusions of size helped along by a glass
shot or two and utilisation of standing sets — including Ming's laboratory from
the same year's "Flash Gordon". Of course, it is somewhat of a mystery why
Universal didn't do a really elaborate sequel to "Dracula" with Lugosi repeating,
just as it is a mystery why RKO followed up "King Kong" only with the quickie "Son
of Kong". But while that film was a most unworthy sequel, even playing for laughs
as though to kill it off once and for all, "Dracula's Daughter" is a serious and
careful follow-up that one can both respect and enjoy.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

SON OF DRACULA (Universal, 1943) Directed by Robert Siodmak; produced by Ford Beebe Screenplay by Eric Taylor from an original story by Curt Siodmak; Camer, George Robinson; Musical Score, Hans J. Salter; (Originally titled "Destiny", a working title Universal used more than once for their slightly bigger horror
films); 78 mins.

With: Lon Chaney Jr. (Count Alucard); Robert Paige (Frank Stanley); Louise Allbritton (Kla); Marilyn Ankers (Claire Caldwell); J. Edward Bromberg (Professor
Largo); Frank Ormian (Dr. Brewater); Samuel S. Hind (Judge Simmons); Pat Mortarty (Sheriff); Eta McDaniel (Sarah); Adeline deWalt Reynolds (Queen Zina); Jack Rockwell (Deputy sheriff); George Irving (Capt. Caldwell); Sam McDaniel (Andy);
Walter Sande (Jailer); Cyril Delevanti (Coroner).

"Son of Dracula" was perhaps the last really good Universal horror film, before
they turned the genre into as standardised a product as the "F" western. It was
also director Robert Siodmak's by major (and typical) Hollywood movie,
following five increasingly "slick" movies and "moments" immediately
followed by "Cobra Woman" and, starting with "Phantom Lady", ten major film noir
in succession over a mere five year period. Despite its genre plot and trimmings,
"Son of Dracula" is also very much of a film noir: a nightmarish story of
entrapment, morbidly obsessed with death, and in which the nominal hero (Robert
Paige) is quite as much of a "loser" as Mitchum or Lancaster in more traditional
noirs. While there are some excellent special effects, and a marvellous scene
of Dracula willing himself, in some fatalistic fashion, into the grave, the man is more effective for that.
Too, in the best German traditions of
Lang, the color and glamour are all vested in the villain/vampires, and those
pitted against them are a pretty drab, colorless lot. This must have been a
quite intentional ploy, as it would have been quite easy to acquire Edward Van
Sloan to give Professor van Helsing a third outing. Instead, J. Edgar Bromberg is
used quite effectively. Some of his vampire explanations for the paleness and quality has its own peculiar charm too.
The one major shortcoming is Lon Chaney, who has neither the charm and panache,
or certainly the malevolence and the "look" of death that any effective vampire
should have. He certainly looks far too robust and healthy too. It's not a bad
performance and he tries extremely hard, given his somewhat limited talent, but
it's a major casting mistake, presumably made out of the necessity of having a
horror name for such a title. It was the only time that Chaney played the role,
and John Carradine came in on the next bus. "Son of Dracula" is a welcome reminder of
the real care and craftsmanship that still went into relatively minor films
in the 40's... especially when a director trying to establish a reputation for
himself, was at the helm.
--- William K. Everson

Program ends approx.10.20. Discussion follows.

NOTE re Next week's program (a short, THE SMALLEST SHOW ON EARTH and PICTURE SHOW MAN)
Due to a conflicting NYU obligation, I can't be on hand next week. It had been my
intention initially to have an informal question and discussion session at 7.00
and leave promptly at 7.30. However, the timing of one of the New School's
periodic jazz concerts being presented that night, if normal experiences repeat themselves,
the theatre will empty out close to starting time, and the program may be a few
minutes late getting under way. It is also a slightly longer program than usual,
which is unfortunate. However, in order to save cooling your heels in a crowded
lobby, be aware that it IS a concert night, and that once the film audience has
come in the program will start immediately without an introduction. Hopefully,
all will go smoothly. Notes will be available in the Lobby from 6.30 on.