



## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

# Nosferatu

### Nosferatu

(*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*)

Director: F.W. Murnau

Production Company: Prana-Film

Producers: Albin Grau, Enrico Dieckmann

Screenplay: Henrik Galeen

Director of Photography: Fritz Arno Wagner

Camera Assistant: Günther Krampf

Art Director: Albin Grau

Costumes: Albin Grau

1922 Music for performance: Hans Erdmann

Cast:

Max Schreck (*Count Orlok*)

Alexander Granach (*Knock*)

Gustav von Wangenheim (*Hutter*)

Greta Schröder (*Ellen, Hutter's wife*)

Georg Heinrich Schnell (*Harding*)

Ruth Landshoff (*Ruth*)

John Gottowt (*Professor Bulwer*)

Gustav Botz (*Professor Sievers*)

Max Nemetz (*Captain*)

Wolfgang Heinz (*1st sailor*)

Albert Venohr (*2nd sailor*)

Guido Herzfeld (*innkeeper*)

Hardy von François (*hospital doctor*)

Heinrich Witte

Karl Etlinger

Germany 1922

95 mins

Digital

With live piano accompaniment (Wed 27 Mar only)

The screening on Wed 27 Mar will be introduced by Arike Oke, Executive Director of Knowledge, Learning & Collections

The question of how *Nosferatu* came to be made is still something of a mystery. Virtually the only film produced by Prana-Film – a financial sinking ship whose owners were subsequently taken to court for copyright violations by Bram Stoker's widow, despite having changed most of the characters' names – the project owed much to the enigmatic figure of Albin Grau, who signed for the decor and costumes but also seems to have been the driving force behind the production, both financially and artistically. Very little is known about Grau, though an article by Enno Patalas depicts him variously as a student of eastern philosophy, a freemason and master of the 'pansophic lodge of the light-seekers' in Berlin, a fan of Aleister Crowley, a friend of novelist-painter Alfred Kubin and the author of a pamphlet about the use of colour in décor and lighting in black-and-white films. More predictable collaborators were film industry professionals screenwriter Henrik Galeen (who co-wrote *The Golem*) and director of photography Fritz Arno Wagner, one of the three top cameramen at Ufa.

Germany in 1921-2 was recovering from the bloodletting of World War I. The spectres that haunted the new republic included the Spartacist uprisings in Berlin and Munich, based on the Soviet model and bloodily suppressed, raging inflation that bled the economy like an internal haemorrhage, and an army of horribly disfigured war cripples. But it was another memorable event that left its echo in *Nosferatu*: in the winter of 1919-20 a Spanish flu epidemic and famine hit Germany, ravaging the country and reportedly killing more civilians than the Great War itself. So the cholera, whose origins *Nosferatu* is supposed to record, is doubled by several successive disasters befalling a defeated Germany, during which public opinion only too readily blamed the victors of Versailles for not coming to the country's aid. Instead, the French, adding insult and humiliation to injury and penury, insisted on the prompt payment of war reparations and annexed the Rhineland, setting off a chain of events that gave the nationalist right its first electoral successes among the working class.

Most cultural-studies approaches to *Nosferatu* (or indeed to Stoker's *Dracula*) have little trouble relating the myth of the vampire to a historically new and politically troubling awareness of female sexuality. The somnambulist Mina and her friend Lucy have been compared to the hysterical females treated by Charcot in Paris at the Salpêtrière, where they were photographed by Albert Londe, thanks to his newly developed chronophotographic camera, while two young doctors from Germany and Austria, Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, looked on. (Stoker has van Helsing support his diagnosis of Lucy's symptoms with a pointed reference to having studied in Paris under Charcot.)

But Murnau's *Nosferatu* is open to another reading of its sexual pathology. Vampires in the movies are usually bisexual, often letting ambiguity hover over the question of whether, say, Dracula's brides are for the Count ends in themselves, or merely means to an end (as Venus-traps, to attract young men to their rescue who then become the juicier victims). But Murnau's *Nosferatu* would seem to be the prototype of another gender, not least because of the vampire's many animal features, from his pointed ears and birdlike claws to his rodent teeth, rather than the more usual fangs suddenly bared on an otherwise

## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

**The Picture of Dorian Gray** Thu 28 Mar 18:10;

Sun 7 Apr 12:50; Tue 23 Apr 12:00

**The Gospel According to Matthew**

Il Vangelo secondo Matteo

Fri 29 Mar 17:50

**Little Women** Sat 30 Mar 13:15; Tue 9 Apr 12:20;

Sat 27 Apr 20:30

**The Last Temptation of Christ**

Sat 30 Mar 19:50; Sun 14 Apr 17:30

**The Leopard** Il gattopardo

Sun 31 Mar 17:00; Tue 16 Apr 13:30;

Sun 28 Apr 19:30

**The Grapes of Wrath** Mon 1 Apr 20:10;

Sat 20 Apr 15:45

**Pather Panchali**

Tue 2 Apr 20:30; Mon 22 Apr 18:00;

Tue 30 Apr 12:10

**The Heiress** Wed 3 Apr 18:05 (+ intro by Ruby

McGuigan, BFI Programme and Acquisitions);

Sat 6 Apr 20:30; Mon 15 Apr 20:45

**Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde** Thu 4 Apr 20:30; Wed 10

Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

### **The Last of the Mohicans**

Fri 5 Apr 18:10; Sun 21 Apr 20:20

**Nosferatu** Sat 6 Apr 13:15; Fri 12 Apr 21:00

**The Trial** Mon 8 Apr 12:20; Thu 18 Apr 17:25

**Women in Love** Thu 11 Apr 20:20;

Sat 20 Apr 13:00; Fri 26 Apr 14:40

**Beau Travail** Sat 13 Apr 13:20; Fri 19 Apr 20:45;

Wed 24 Apr 18:10 (+ intro)

**Great Expectations** Wed 17 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by

Jade Evans, AHRC REACH PhD student with

QMUL and BFI); Thu 25 Apr 12:00

**Ordet** The Word

Sat 27 Apr 13:15; Mon 29 Apr 14:40

**Rope** Wed 1 May 18:10 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon,

BFI National Archive Curator); Fri 3 May 21:00;

Tue 14 May 12:30; Sun 26 May 13:00

**Henry V** Thu 2 May 14:40; Thu 9 May 20:15;

Thu 30 May 14:30

**The Magic Flute** Trollflöjten

Fri 3 May 12:00; Fri 24 May 20:25;

Tue 28 May 14:30

**Pandora's Box** Die Büchse der Pandora

Sat 4 May 15:10; Fri 17 May 18:00;

Sat 25 May 13:10; Fri 31 May 14:30

**West Side Story** Sun 5 May 19:30;

Thu 16 May 14:30

**Cabaret** Mon 6 May 20:20; Sat 11 May 14:45;

Tue 21 May 14:30

**A Streetcar Named Desire**

Tue 7 May 12:10; Sat 18 May 20:30;

Fri 24 May 14:50; Sun 26 May 17:40

**Camille** Wed 8 May 18:10 (+ intro); Sun 12 May

20:40; Mon 27 May 12:30

**His Girl Friday** Fri 10 May 18:10; Sun 19 May

20:30; Thu 23 May 18:30; Wed 29 May 18:00 (+

intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

**Beautiful Thing** Mon 13 May 20:40; Wed 22 May

18:20 (+ intro by Simon McCallum, BFI National

Archive Curator); Thu 30 May 12:10

**Bluebeard's Castle** Herzog Blaubarts Burg

Wed 15 May 18:10 (+ intro by Alex Prideaux,

Marketing and Events Manager – Our Screen

Heritage); Fri 31 May 18:10

**Chi-Raq** Mon 20 May 18:05; Thu 30 May 20:30

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impeccably gentleman-dandy face and physique (as with Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee).

The French surrealists admired *Nosferatu* mainly for its eroticism, contrasting the anodyne puppy love of Mina and Harker with Nosferatu's necrophiliac lust, musty and potent at once, exuding the aroma of dank crypts and leathery flesh. According to Robin Wood, on the other hand, sexuality is branded in Murnau's films as the source of evil: Nosferatu stands for raw carnal desire which must be kept in check in the interest of higher spiritual values, and so Mina, expressing that mixture of desire, curiosity and horror typical of patriarchal culture's depiction of female sexuality, must die along with the vampire. But the love triangles in the film also lend themselves to an interpretation that brings out a more layered structure of sexual attraction and ambivalence. For instance, underlying the secret heterosexual bond between Nosferatu and Mina is the Renfield-Harker-Nosferatu relation. The initial situation suggests that the film superimposes two plot-lines, one heterosexual, the other developed around the homosexual relationship between Nosferatu and Renfield doubled by the homosocial story of Harker being befriended by Renfield, whereupon the older man introduces his younger friend to a very 'experienced' queen. Likewise the protagonists of Murnau's *Faust* (1926) – Mephisto and the rejuvenated Faust – could be called a queer couple, especially on their travel adventures to that celebrated destination of homoerotic desire, the Mediterranean, thinly disguised by the excessively heterosexual story of Faust and Gretchen.

Siegfried Kracauer had argued that Weimar cinema obsessively staged anxieties about male self-images and male sexuality: his 1966 *From Caligari to Hitler* even ties the theme of damaged masculinity to the vanishing of paternal authority after a lost war. Certainly the preferred stories of Expressionist cinema focus on male identity crises – often signalled by the appearance of a double – and toy with bisexuality by featuring love triangles in which the two males are usually 'best friends' or business associates who show an obvious but rarely openly acknowledged attraction to each other. In this respect Murnau's films are neither an exception nor unusually explicit. Doubles abound in Murnau as they do in other directors, whether by way of disguise (*Tartuffe*, 1926) or across a split male character (Faust old and young). Likewise, there are several crucial films where a pure, almost asexual love is threatened or destroyed by the intrusion of another male's predatory attentions – to the man (Nosferatu/Harker, Mephisto/Faust, *Tartuffe*/Orgon, *Tabu's* Hitu/Matahi).

For a novelist like Jim Shepard, Murnau's homosexuality is crucial to both his films and his life; sorrow and secrecy become the wellsprings of his creative drive, the motives behind a tale of love, longing, guilt and self-abjection. In his fictionalised 1998 biography of Murnau, *Nosferatu in Love*, Shepard makes the twin poles of self-deprecating humour and self-lacerating grief the protective armour behind which the director feeds on lascivious thoughts furtively indulged. For Shepard, the deepest wound the war inflicted on Murnau was the death on the Eastern Front of his intimate friend Hans Ehrenbaum-Degele, on whom he once recklessly cheated. Baffled and hurt, Hans voluntarily enlists and soon gets himself killed, to the undying shame and mortification of Murnau, at least according to Shepard.

Thomas Elsaesser, *Sight and Sound*, February 2001