

VAMPIRE GIRL

David Lynch backs an art film Roger Corman style.

By Lawrence French

Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all.

—Andre Breton

NADJA is a stunningly beautiful black and white vampire film that embraces the rich heritage of the cinematic undead, while still managing to emerge with a style uniquely its own. Director Michael Almereyda wrote the script after deeply immersing himself in vampire films, fiction, and lore, including such classics as Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla* (1872), Carl Dreyer's *VAMPYR* (1932) and Lambert Hillyer's *DRACULA'S DAUGHTER* (1936). October Films opens the film in art venues this fall.

"I wanted to make a horror movie," said Almereyda, "because I was having trouble getting financing for scripts that weren't in any identifiable genre. David Lynch had been trying to help me raise money for a script about Edgar Allan Poe called *FEVER*, but we couldn't get the money to make it. I was sort of groping around, and then I thought about doing a vampire movie set in New York City.

Almereyda's initial inspiration for his script was provided by Andre Breton's surrealist volume, *Nadja*, first published in 1928. "That book was a kind of starting point for me," explained Almereyda. "There were a lot of things about madness, love, chance and identity in it that are related to what the movie is about. In Breton's book there's a feeling of a city having a separate life, and people being guided by and embracing chance. The book has a lot to do with surrealism in gen-

eral, but at the same time, it's a very different creature than the movie."

To cast the central role of Nadja, a mysterious and exotic female vampire, Almereyda picked a Romanian actress, Eilina Lowensohn. Almereyda had worked with Lowensohn on his previous film, *ANOTHER GIRL ANOTHER PLANET*, and she had a small role in *SCHINDLER'S LIST*. The script was written specifically with Lowensohn in mind, and focuses on Nadja's nocturnal wanderings in lower Manhattan, as she searches for victims to satiate her lust. Nadja also happens to be the daughter of Count Dracula, like Gloria Holden in *DRACULA'S DAUGHTER* (Universal's sequel to *DRACULA*). When Nadja discovers that Van Helsing has destroyed her father, she attempts to change her vampiric ways. However, trouble develops when Nadja seduces and falls in love with Lucy, who is married to Van Helsing's nephew, Jim.

Although the script was in a commercial genre, it was still distinctly off-beat, and Almereyda faced money problems, partially because he wanted to shoot in black and



Romanian Eilina Lowensohn plays Nadja, the vampire, with Karl Geary as Renfield in *NADJA*.

white. "It would have been impossible to make the movie in color on the budget we had," noted Almereyda. "In black and white we could cut a lot of corners and get away with things you couldn't do in color. I always wanted to make it in black and white, though, because I could evoke and refer to a lot of old vampire movies. It meant we had a huge problem getting financing, because people are not very friendly to black and white. When people read the script they'd say, 'It's great, but could you do it in color?'"

David Lynch, who helped raise the initial funding for *NADJA*, called Almereyda "one of the best independent, new wave directors in America. I was very happy to support him, because I believe in his talent and ideas." Unfortunately, two days before shooting was scheduled to begin, the financial backing suddenly vanished. That left Lynch in the awkward position of either stopping the production, or financing it on his own. "David very bravely paid for the movie himself," revealed Almereyda. "It was really amazing, because it was a huge gamble for David to take, and it's still a precarious situation, on whether or not he'll make his money back."

With Lynch backing the project, Almereyda shot the film in 5 and 1/2 weeks, scaling back on an already low budget. "When we began this, I was inspired by the way Roger Corman made his pictures," said Almereyda. "Corman was able to make his Poe pictures very fast, and on a very low budget, so that was something we were trying to emulate. I tried to cover scenes in a single take, and sometimes you have to imply

Director Michael Almereyda on the set in New York. Almereyda considered titling the project *VAMPIRE GIRL* and cited Corman as a production model.





Peter Fonda (r) plays Dr. Van Helsing in director Michael Almereyda's black and white ode to classic horror. Executive producer Lynch backed the project with his own money, for release by October Films.

“I wanted to make it in black and white to evoke a lot of old vampire movies. It meant a huge problem getting financing.”

—Director Michael Almereyda—

things, rather than show them.” At one point, the film was even going to have the more commercial sounding title of *VAMPIRE GIRL*. No doubt, Corman himself would be pleased with that title, had he distributed the picture.

Like *INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE*, *NADJA* is one of the rare vampire movies to be told from the living dead's point of view. To evoke this subjective feeling, Almereyda shot sequences using 'Pixelvision,' which gives the images a blurry, out of focus quality as if they were seen through translucent glass. "Pixelvision was a plastic video camera made by Fisher-Price as a toy for kids," explained Almereyda. "The images produced by the camera are composed of 2000 square pixels. The pixels shift and shimmer and seem to shed light as you watch, endowing everything the camera records with a distinct physicality, and a feel of floating weight and depth. It's unlike the flat, cold quality of ordinary video. I felt it would approximate this feeling the vampires have of being up all night. There's something very unsettling and hallucinatory about it."

Shooting the Pixelvision sequences, Almereyda adapted his \$45 toy camera to use beta videotape (it normally takes regular audio cassette tape). Those images were then blown up to 35mm film, making a nice contrast to the luminously sharp B&W images captured by cameraman Jim Denault. It's a splendid job of cinematography, which was influenced by the poetic and sinister light and shadows in such films as Jean Cocteau's *ORPHEUS* and Ingmar Bergman's *HOUR OF THE WOLF*.

Since Almereyda shifts to Pixelvision whenever there's a vampire attack, it also has the effect of making the bloodletting less explicit and more dreamlike than if it were shot with the kind of high contrast clarity used for the rest of the movie. However, the MPAA still rated the film R "for scenes of bizarre vampire sexuality and gore."

Playing the role of Van Helsing, with a kind of larger than life style that could easily have been borrowed from Vincent Price, is none other than former AIP superstar, Peter Fonda. Although the film is played basically straight, Fonda is able to bring a rich vein of black humor to his role, due to the largely incongruous nature of hunting chic vampires in modern-day New York. Strangely enough, Fonda came to the part by a chance occurrence.

"My daughter Bridget's boyfriend, Eric Stolz, had been asked to play Jim, Van Helsing's nephew," explained Fonda. "Eric couldn't do the part, but he suggested me for Van Helsing. I read the script and thought it was really very funny. Michael thought I wouldn't be interested, because

Executive producer David Lynch films his cameo as a morgue attendant. When financing collapsed Lynch put up the funds to complete the filming.



there was very little money, but I loved the script, and it turned out to be one of the best times I've ever had making a movie."

Like most modern vampire movies, the ever shifting rules of vampire lore have been changed to suit the particular needs of the story. In this case, Almereyda dispenses with the crucifixes and other icons of Christianity, although the story is set at Christmas time. "I wanted to avoid religious iconography," declared Almereyda. "It's so powerful and ever present in other movies, and other places. It didn't seem directly relevant to me. I felt there were other ways to evoke the things that are at the heart of the story. At one point Lucy asks Nadja if she knows what being 'born again' is, because her father is a born again Christian. That line usually gets a laugh, but the idea of being born again, or being purified, is entangled with what a vampire is. It's sort of the dark side of Christianity. In many vampire movies, there's a lot about the blood (... 'which is the life'). It's sort of a reaction towards Christianity. The idea of the blood of Jesus Christ, of resurrection and salvation, have always been entwined with vampire mythology, and consequently it's in *NADJA* as well."

Filming the story entirely in New York, Almereyda found several suitably baroque settings, including a 40-room town house on Park Avenue, that had an immense rococo stairway. For the climax of the film, Van Helsing and his cohorts pursue Nadja back to her ancestral castle in Transylvania. Almereyda cleverly suggests the trip to Romania by simply superimposing a map of eastern Europe on the screen (*a la* *INDIANA JONES*). "At one point we were actually going to show the plane trip," said Almereyda. "Nadja would go to the bathroom on the plane, and smoke a cigarette. She'd look into the mirror and all you'd see would be the glowing tip of her cigarette. We had it all worked out, but ultimately it would have been too expensive for a scene that wasn't that important. We also had a scene where Peter Fonda was piloting the plane in pursuit of Nadja, that

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was pretty wild.”

To stand in for the wilds of Transylvania, Almereyda filmed in Central Park, and at an abandoned hospital that doubles for Dracula's castle. “We went into the Chapel of a building that was the first cancer ward in Manhattan,” said Almereyda. “It was a sort of beautiful wreck, off of Central Park West, that had been all burnt out. We went in and cleaned it up, but it was actually a very dangerous place to work in. We had to pay a lot of insurance money to shoot there.”

With a restrictive budget, Almereyda relied on simple, but effective techniques, including lab effects, such as printing positive film negative (recalling NOSFERATU), lingering dissolves, and the use of found footage, (a shot of Bela Lugosi from the public domain WHITE ZOMBIE). When combined with the very effective impressionistic soundtrack, designed by Stuart Levy, NADJA proves to be a truly mesmerizing experience, and a worthy addition to the vampire genre. □