

Exploring the Bite Life With

NADJA

At first glance, the cool but beautiful Nadja seems like any other young woman attempting to cope with a dysfunctional upbringing. Even though she's moved to the big city, she's still dealing with her past, including a father whom she refers to as "a cruel and distant man who didn't care that we existed," plus a twin brother who's broken off all contact with her. And no matter how hard she tries to make friends, things never seem to go as planned. Sounds like a familiar story? Well, the difference in this case is that Nadja happens to be the daughter of Count Dracula.

So begins *Nadja*, the latest big-screen excursion into the vampire genre, which takes a fresh look at the well-worn legend and is scheduled to open beginning in late August from October Films. Executive-produced by David Lynch and set in modern-day New York City, writer/director Michael Almereyda's black-and-white movie is a lush, erotic tale that evokes the old-fashioned chills of the Universal monster classics (especially *Dracula's Daughter*). The film also uses the genre framework to make haunting observations about the intrinsic pain and emptiness of life, and in doing so, bridges the usual chasm between horror films and more serious independent cinema. But as he sits in a quiet East Village bar to discuss his latest feature on a bright, warm morning, the unassuming, Kansas-born Almereyda seems a world away from the nocturnal urban landscape that his characters inhabit.

"I wanted to do something fast and cheap," Almereyda explains, "and horror movies seemed very



Amidst the big-budget bloodsucker trend, Michael Almereyda takes an independent, esoteric look at vampires.

attractive on a low budget. I also wanted to do a horror film because it taps into the primal emotions. You have license to get into deep emotional water, and at the same time muck about in clichés too. It's fun, but it can also be profound. There's no reason it can't be."

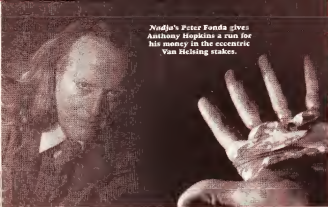
His appreciation for vampire movies led him in this particular direction. "It's impossible not to be a fan," because some of the best movies ever made are vampire films," he says. "You can't do a history of cinema without acknowledging Murnau's *Nosferatu*. Or Dreyer's *Vampyr*. They're cornerstones for anyone who cares about movies, both stylistically and emotionally. And there's a current of that in my thinking."

Nadja begins like a feverish dream, pulling the viewer into the stark, monochromatic twilight of Manhattan. Although Nadja (Elina

Löwensohn), Dracula's enticing young daughter, is now living in the urban center, she still follows the age-old predatory route of picking up strangers (not a difficult task, thanks to her alluring looks), pulling them into her web and having a quick snack from their open throats, accompanied by her trusty manservant, Renfield (Karl Geary). But unlike most screen vampires, who get more power-hungry over the years, these modern-day undead seem bored with their bar-hopping lifestyle. Instead of the stylized dementia that many modern vampire films strive for, Almereyda's vision is one of world-weary melancholia, which helps anchor the script's deeper emotions.

Nadja's world is shaken when she learns that her infamous father (in her words, "a real bastard") has been killed by Van Helsing (Peter Fonda). First on her agenda is to

Nadja's Peter Fonda gives Anthony Hopkins a run for his money in the eccentric Van Helsing stakes.



recover the body; after that, she tries to get the upper hand with Van Helsing before she becomes his next victim. But instead of the professorial vampire killer that we've come to know and love, Almereyda presents us with Fonda as a scraggly-haired kook who bikes about the East Village and rambles incessantly to his skeptical nephew, Jim (Martin Donovan), about Dracula ("He was like Elvis in the end... Drugs, confused, surrounded by zombies. The magic was gone"). But when Jim's wife, Lucy (Galaxy Craze), is seduced and pulled into the "realm of shadows," Van Helsing and Jim team up and go in search of the vengeful vamp.

The film also introduces us to Nadja's bed-ridden twin brother, Edgar (Jared Harris), who's fallen in love with Jim's half-sister, Cassandra (Suzy Amis)—thus making this one big, twisted family affair. Amongst these human characters, Almereyda creates a tapestry of rocky relationships, loneliness and pain, juxtaposed against Nadja's own unorthodox lifestyle. "One early impulse was to be able to show how everyday experience can cross over into something horrifying," the director explains, and through this mix of disintegrating relationships and supernatural forces, the viewer can understand how horror movie-style emotions can rise out of ordinary experience.

But it's not all solemn introspection, because Almereyda also laces the script with touches of unexpected humor. During her first barroom encounter with Nadja, Lucy opens up and discusses her brother, who is now "born again"—a term which the literally born again Nadja seems more than a little confused about.

Then there's Geary's dry comic turn as Renfield, whom Nadja matter-of-factly introduces to strangers as "my slave."

Almereyda is no newcomer to the world of science fiction and horror, having written early drafts of *Until the End of the World*, *Total Recall* and *Nightmare on Elm Street 5*. But he's currently focused on directing his own, more personal visions; he first won attention with *Twister*, a quirky comedy featuring cult favorites Crispin Glover and Harry Dean Stanton, followed by the critically acclaimed East Village slice of life *Another Girl, Another Planet*.

Nadja began as an idea entitled *Vampire Girl*, which Almereyda recalls had a very different approach. "I originally was thinking of making something really trashy and

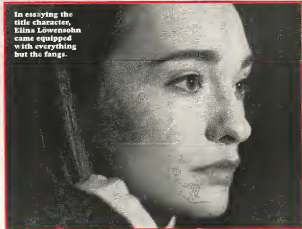
Cartoonish," he says. "But Nadja turned out to be more resolved and polished and earnest than we first imagined. Maybe that's something in my personality that I couldn't repress. I couldn't be trashy enough."

Another reason that it's not as trashy as I first conceived is that it's expensive to make movies with lots of blood, even in black and white, because you have to have duplicates of the clothes. We also didn't have time to wait to wash the costumes if we had blood splattered all over them, so we had to be discreet with it. The movie just became more tasteful as it went along." Chuckling, he adds, "It's hopelessly tasteful. But we did our best."

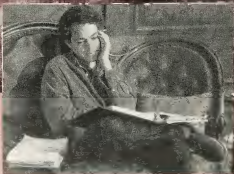
Longtime friend Lynch became involved early on. "I had a treatment and showed it to David," Almereyda explains. "He said he'd like to support it, and it happened very fast after that. I wrote the script in about a month." Lynch had previously helped Almereyda seek financing for a proposed Edgar Allan Poe movie, and, after reading the five-page treatment for *Nadja*, decided to fund it himself. The budget rose as they got more ambitious, moving from 16mm to 35mm, and even though Lynch had no creative hand in the project (aside from taking a cameo role as a morgue worker), his support was extraordinarily generous. According to Almereyda, "We had financing at one point that fell apart, and David bravely paid for it."

The cast includes several faces familiar from the growing New York City independent scene, including

In essaying the title character, Eilina Löwensohn came equipped with everything but the fangs.



No, it's not Fonda's cameo as an encased Dracula, but his Van Helsing in a more cultured resting place—a piano.



Director Michael Almereyda returned to the themes—and black-and-white photography—of the vampire classics.

another challenge for the filmmakers' ingenuity, as they turned an abandoned, burned-out hospital that served as New York's first cancer ward into Nadja's vast, ruinous family home. "We had to shovel out a lot of debris—you could film a war movie there," Almereyda recalls. "It was very beautiful, vast and dangerous too. The insurance claim was pretty steep."

Of course, filmmaking on a shoestring is never easy for the actors, especially when it came to such elements as Nadja's need to bathe in blood, with chocolate milk used as an inexpensive substitute. "We were

"I wanted to do a horror film because [you can] get into deep emotional water, and at the same time muck about in clichés."

in an \$8-million townhouse that we'd rented, and we had a coffin filled with chocolate milk, but there was no running hot water there."

Almereyda says. "So Elina had to very bravely suffer. She was wearing a flesh-tone body stocking, and Karl was helping with her bath and feeding her a mugful of blood. And he had to stop himself from laughing, because portions of her anatomy kept floating." Almereyda makes sure to add, "She suffered through a lot of indignities to make this film, so we made her very dignified in it."

The film's luminous black-and-white photography, which captures the seductive lure of the city after dark, was the work of Jim DeNault. According to Almereyda, the decision not to shoot in color was motivated by both simple economic factors and aesthetic ones. "In color, you can't suggest as many things," he says. "You have to be very explicit. In black and white, you can make it more of a dream. That was always an important aspect of it." The director does acknowledge that there's a commercial downside to the decision, since many studios dislike black-and-white productions. "It's something people resist. I feel lucky to have done it, because if you look around, the only people who are able to make black-and-white movies are very successful directors—Tim Burton, Steven Spielberg—and even then it causes them trouble." He adds, with a touch of dry humor, "I feel lucky that without having to be successful, I've managed to make black-and-white films. I hope to be successful someday and graduate to color."

Another, even more unique aspect of the movie is the use of a
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NADJA

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toy camera, the Fisher-Price FXL 2000, which Almereyda purchased for \$45 and on which he shot all of *Another Girl, Another Planet*. Although the discontinued camera is a favorite for underground filmmakers, this is the first time that it has been blown up onto 35mm film. "I wanted to use Fixelvision because I thought there was something inherently horrific about it," he says. "It's evocative and dreamy and has a hypnotic quality that seemed right."

Hypnotic is putting it mildly. The image recorded through this crude camera's lens is a hazy blur of reality that kicks in during any emotionally saturated moments, such as "anger, fear or desire—when the level starts to rise, it switches over to Fixelvision." Using this camera was a twofold benefit: Not only did it give the film the proper look, but it was easy to shoot with. "It's very flexible," Almereyda confirms. "Actors are at first puzzled by it, and you have to get very close to them, so it's disconcerting. But they also relax a lot, because it's plastic and about the size of a book," making the low-tech device less overbearing and more actor-friendly than 35mm equipment, ultimately giving the film a greater level of intimacy.

Almereyda shrugs off the potential for confusion with Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction*, another black-and-white New York City-lensed female vampire film, which is also set to be released by October this fall. "We finished before Abel even started, but he likes to go around saying I copied him. It's a very different movie." Almereyda then generously adds, "I think it's terrific, and that the two movies speak to each other and complement each other. Together, they'll be a great double bill someday."

Though he'd like to return to horror films in the future, Almereyda's next production will be a beach movie, which will take him into the bright sunshine for a much-needed change of pace. But when it comes to *Nadja*, Almereyda realizes that this isn't the last audiences will be seeing of screen vampires, since these fears are at the core of our moviegoing consciousness. "The idea was to make use of that history and acknowledge it, and not to pretend that this is a brand new idea. But because it is familiar, because people know about vampires, that gives you license to take it in new directions. Hopefully the audience will come along for the ride, no matter where you go." 