

Photo: Mark Davis

the gore horror fans were then beginning to demand, yet also possessing delicate character work from an unusual cast.

Forced by ill health to retire from filmmaking, Sasdy now teaches master classes through the Director's Guild and is a popular guest at worldwide festivals and conventions; his work is now undergoing a sudden and welcome disc renaissance.



Vampires—and their weaknesses—were transplanted across continents in Peter Sasdy's Hammer series entry.

The name Hammer Films conjures up a wealth of Gothic signifiers: mist-shrouded landscapes, barely restrained, heaving bosoms and splashes of Technicolor gore. And yet Hammer was very much the sum of its parts, for mixing this delicious cocktail of sex and horror was a select group of directors—master craftsmen whose work has transcended their initial controversy to become legendary, among them Peter Sasdy.

Born in Budapest, Hungary in 1935, Sasdy boasts genre-TV credentials that are possibly without equal. Beyond the critically acclaimed *The Stone Tape* (written by Quatermass creator Nigel Kneale), Sasdy helmed numerous installments of the Orson Welles-hosted *Great Mysteries* and three episodes of TV's *Hammer House of Horror*, as well as a further seven for *Hammer House of Mystery and Suspense*. His big-screen credits include 1972's

Doomwatch, 1973's *Nothing But the Night* (see sidebar) and the 1975 Joan Collins-starrer *The Devil Within Her*.

It was, however, his three pictures for Hammer that made his name synonymous with horror. *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1970) took the Count out of his comfortable Transylvanian confines into the

"I had no problems with Ingrid Pitt whatsoever, and regardless of what she's said, I will always stand up for her."

moral hypocrisy of Victorian London. *Countess Dracula* (1971) introduced the world to the ravishing Ingrid Pitt via a bloodthirsty tale of terror hidden within the robes of a classical fairy tale. And *Hands of the Ripper* (1971), which Sasdy declares to be his finest work, was an archetypal Hammer film combining the sophistication expected of the studio with

sance, with *Nothing* and *Devil* out this fall on DVD from Scorpion Releasing and *Countess*, *Ripper* and *House of Horror* all headed for release next year from Synapse Films. Fango was lucky enough to secure

an interview with Sasdy at Britain's National Media Museum's 2011 Fantastic Films Weekend to talk of his years with Hammer.

FANGORIA: As a young director, how did you initially feel about working for Hammer?

PETER SASDY: When you work in television exclusively, as I was in 1969, like everyone you're growing up—like a baby growing up to a child, a child to a young man—so I started wearing baby shoes, but by the time we got to the mid-'60s they were very tight! So I wanted something different; I was keen to change my shoes, and that meant a bigger screen. I'd had some success with commercial television at ATV and later the BBC, and thought that was a good bargaining chip. The word had gone round that I would very much like to make a feature, and one of the staff producers within Hammer, Aida Young, became aware of that desire, and made the introduction to Sir James Carreras. Because when we say Hammer or the producers there, that basically meant one person: Jimmy Carreras. He was the one who signed the checks! So to get into Hammer—I was *delighted!* A great opportunity.

FANG: So you were offered *Taste the Blood of Dracula*—now you were working with



an established brand, an established star in Christopher Lee, on what was still very much their flagship franchise...

SASDY: What was important to me was that my first film be noticed. But in fact, when you say *Dracula* was the flagship, mine was different. The first draft of *Taste the Blood* wasn't set where the final picture was set. I felt that instead of repeating the usual setting of Transylvania, the "strange place," woooooo! [*throws up his arms howling in mock terror, then laughs*], I wanted to bring it closer to us, to the home country, to Victorian England. That was already my contribution, to bring the horror back home. So when we see the hypocrisy of the three very important, very moral Victorian gentlemen having double lives, if you like, it made the audience of the time feel a bit more uncomfortable, because we were talking about their grandparents' generation. So the hypocrisy and their immoral activity was very much bang, bang, bang—bring it all home! The *truth*. If you go to no man's land somewhere in Transylvania, that's about "them"; the way I brought him to the screen, it was about "us". That's how I put my stamp on my first Hammer film, how it was different from the previous ones; doesn't mean it's better at all—the others are probably more faithful to *Dracula*—but it became *my Dracula* film.

FANG: What was Lee's reaction to this? At that point, he was already beginning to resist the role.

SASDY: Lee had less to do in this film; he liked that in a way, actually. There were maneuvers behind the scenes—and now we can talk about it because, well...he's not doing another *Dracula*, and I'm not [*laughs*]! He had an idea—though he was wrong about it—that the reason Ralph Bates came in [to play Lord Courtney] was that maybe I, as the new director, wanted Ralph to play the new *Dracula*! I genuinely didn't have that idea, but somehow,



Would *Taste's* Ralph Bates have made a good *Dracula*? Apparently Christopher Lee didn't think so.

someone put that thought in Chris' mind. Now, Chris is very stubborn, so as soon as he heard that, he became interested in doing another *Dracula* [*laughs*]. *Immediately*. So Chris was actually very helpful...

FANG: I'm sure he was!

SASDY: Now, now. Also, I had a little technical idea for Chris; he always had the



Watch out when you *Taste the Blood of Dracula*—it'll make him see red.

same reactions in his close-ups before he did "the kiss"...

FANG: The bite...

SASDY: Yes, his eyes always looked the same, so I took him off Harley Street to a very good eye specialist, and for the first and to the best of my knowledge only time, I got contact lenses made for Chris—*red*. He got quite excited about it—until they started hurting on the shoot. So we just put them in for the moments when he comes out of the bite, and instead of having the same reaction, his eyes were *red*! He liked the idea; we were friends. Then after three or four takes and they started to hurt, he didn't like me that much [*laughs*].

FANG: Let's talk about Ingrid Pitt and *Countess Dracula*.

SASDY: Don't believe everything you read in her book!

FANG: Here was a vehicle designed to showcase a personality Hammer was grooming—trying to turn her into a female equivalent of Lee and Cushing. It seems like perfect casting—part sex symbol, part character actress—but how did you approach that particular movie?

SASDY: Ingrid came in much, much later than the project. There was no looking for a film for her; she was *nowhere* in the permutation. The movie came about when I read a short article in the *Times* by a fellow ex-Hungarian called Gabriel Ronay, about Elisabeth Bathory. I knew the name from my early school days, and the story—true or not—about killing the virgin girls and so on. There was enough in that story that I got together with Alexander Paal, another ex-Hungarian—a film producer who worked with Alexander Korda—that very weekend and scribbled a little less

than a page for a treatment.

I went to see Sir James Carreras on Monday morning—don't forget, I was "in" now with *Taste the Blood* behind me—and showed him what we had written. It had to be short, because he didn't read more than a page; Jimmy Carreras never read two pages. He read it, seemed to like it and said, "Hmmm, I have an interesting lunch meeting today; could you go upstairs to graphics? A rough poster would be very good, something selling the idea." So I went upstairs and said, "Boys, do a very attractive woman, a bit of [*mimes cleavage*], lots of blood...and a title. It had to be *Countess*, and as I had just finished *Taste the Blood of Dracula*, I thought, *Blood...Countess...Dracula*." "Put 'Hammer Films presents *Countess Dracula*.' "

I called Jimmy before lunch and he said, "Great, I'll take it to my meeting. Come back after 3 and we'll have a chat. I went back with a big smile—and Jimmy

***Countess Dracula* (Ingrid Pitt) is rather more alluring than her male Count-erpart.**



said, "Can you start in six weeks' time at Pinewood? I had a wonderful lunch with Rank, and they are backing the picture!" They had a gap, and smack, there I was! So I had to get a script. I got together

anyone from my staff. She never forgave me that I did it, but I only did it for her. And that's the truth.
FANG: You'd assume that because of her background, regardless of her abilities as an actress, the way she sounded would have been perfect...
SASDY: She gave a good performance. But you could not understand the words. I tried, and it cost me a lot of time and money, to get a brilliant revoicing artist—

so good that people said it must be her.
FANG: In retrospect, did you see her casting as something of an imposition by Rank?
SASDY: No. Because by then, I had enough muscles after the success of the first movie and my TV background that Sir James just said, "Peter my boy, the decision is yours."

TO BE CONTINUED



with Jeremy Paul—a dear friend who only last month passed away—and rushed through a screenplay. Still no Ingrid, regardless of what you've read. Once pre-production was in place, then the casting idea came about. A list was drawn up and at the suggestion of the Rank Organisation, due to her knowing one of the executives quite well, Ingrid was introduced to me. We did some screen tests and she was very nice, very professional, and as opposed to whatever has been written—I take this opportunity again—Ingrid was a

"Instead of repeating the usual setting of Transylvania...I wanted to bring [Dracula] closer to us, to the home country."

very hard-working, professional actress. I had no problems with her whatsoever, and regardless of what she's said, I will always stand up for her.

The only reason she turned against me—and she wouldn't have said anything had she been a bit brighter about it—was that I revoiced her completely. Not a single word in the film is her voice. And I did it because I liked her and wanted to save her performance. She was foolish, because if she had been quiet about it, no one in the world would have known. We had full secrecy agreed on by the dubbing crew. Hammer totally backed me on that; I never said anything to anyone, nor did

"Night" of the Terror Titans

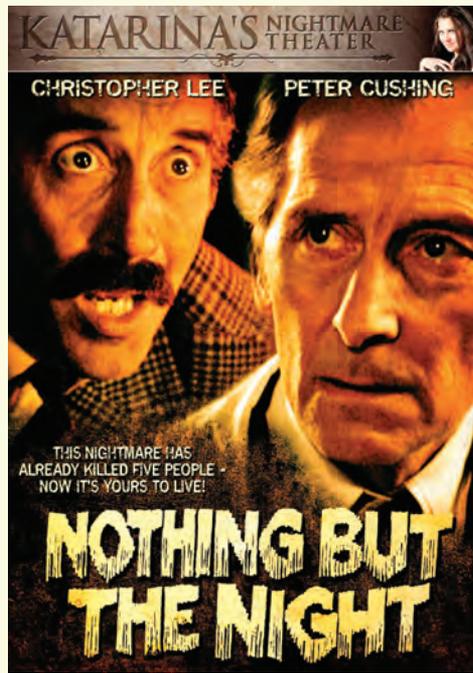
Peter Sasdy directed three features for Hammer, but it took a project conceived outside the studio to unite him with both of that studio's signature stars: Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing. That film was 1973's *Nothing But the Night*, with Lee as a police colonel and Cushing as a pathologist looking into mysterious deaths surrounding an orphanage. Making its U.S. DVD debut this month from Scorpion Releasing (which also issued Sasdy's *The Devil Within Her*; see page 73), *Nothing* screened at Britain's 10th annual Fantastic Films Weekend this past summer, at which Sasdy recalled its conception:

"I remember it was soon after the release of *Hands of the Ripper* when I had a telephone call at home, and a deep voice at the other end of the line in almost perfect Hungarian said, 'It's the Hungarian Secret Service...we've been watching you...a surprise is waiting for you.' The surprise was the identity of the voice: It was Christopher Lee, doing one of his wonderful accents and telling me he had formed his own production company, Charlemagne Productions—named after the Frankish king with whom Chris Lee's family can claim ancestral associations on his mother's side—and asking me if I would be interested in directing their first project: *Nothing But the Night*. I felt very honored that out of all the directors he had worked with, he asked me to be at the helm of this film starring himself and Peter Cushing.

"The film provided for both actors a complete breakaway from their usual horror roles of Dracula and Frankenstein, and also, the setting is far away from fantasyland or the world of vampires. I liked the idea behind the subject; the story probes realities and truths that are very much with us today. The implications are there for thinking people to ponder, and the consequences are certainly terrifying.

"For me, it was a fun picture to make. I much enjoyed the casting; almost all my first-choice actors came on board, some of them playing very different roles—just like our two stars—from their usual parts, like Diana Dors. You should have seen the faces in Pinewood Studios' restaurant on the first day when she appeared not as a glamorous blonde, but wearing a dark wig, with a very dirty face and filthy clothes. Also, I loved working with Georgia Brown, and it was a delight to discover a very talented 12-year-old girl to play the story's main catalytic force. At the end of the shoot I sent my thank-you letter to young Gwyneth [Strong], and in return I received a beautiful handwritten note from her with a pressed red rose attached. It brought a little tear to this horror director's eye."

—Ashley Thorpe



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The Hammer Vault of Horror



With a foundation course in classic horror from late-night double-bills on British TV, and having worked with Hammer Films since the early '90s—initially as editor of its official magazine, and later

as rights and archive consultant—Marcus Hearn has come to be known as “the Hammer Films historian.” This enviable moniker was compounded by his crafting of three indispensable tomes: *The Hammer Story* (with Alan Barnes), *Hammer Glamour* and *The Art of Hammer*. This month sees the author digging even deeper with the release of *The Hammer Vault*, a chronicle of the pioneering company via its press materials, published by Titan Books.

FANGORIA: How did the creation of *The Hammer Vault* differ from that of your previous books?

MARCUS HEARN: It gets harder every time—not only because we did our very best with the first three books, but because there are others on the subject, plus fanzines and websites, emerging all the time. I’ve always felt that the official Hammer books should be authoritative but also accessible, and that means finding new information without swamping readers with facts. There is a self-imposed economy to the text in *The Hammer Vault* because I wanted to convey just one clear and unique thought about each film.

FANG: Some very delicate-looking artifacts are included—the glass from *Taste the Blood of Dracula*, the heart from *Evil of Frankenstein*—alongside tantalizing glimpses of the original Hammer prop house. How many of these objects still survive?

HEARN: Very few, unfortunately. Several collectors were kind enough to lend us items for the book, and we could have included even more, but there weren’t many props to choose from. Once a film had wrapped, Hammer didn’t feel the need to keep much of that stuff, and I suspect a lot of it was discarded when they left Bray Studios in 1966.

FANG: Apart from the props and photography, the book features a number of Tom Chantrell’s violently erotic preproduction paintings.

HEARN: I was very pleased to discover those. Of course, we’d known they were there for years, and we had been saving them up for this project. Chantrell was Hammer’s most important poster artist, and in my opinion his preproduction artwork is often superior to other artists’ finished posters for the same films. For example, I much prefer Chantrell’s early art for *Twins of Evil* and *Hands of the Ripper*, even though the latter is far too explicit to be seen outside a cinema, even now.

FANG: What, ultimately, was your aim with *The Hammer Vault*?

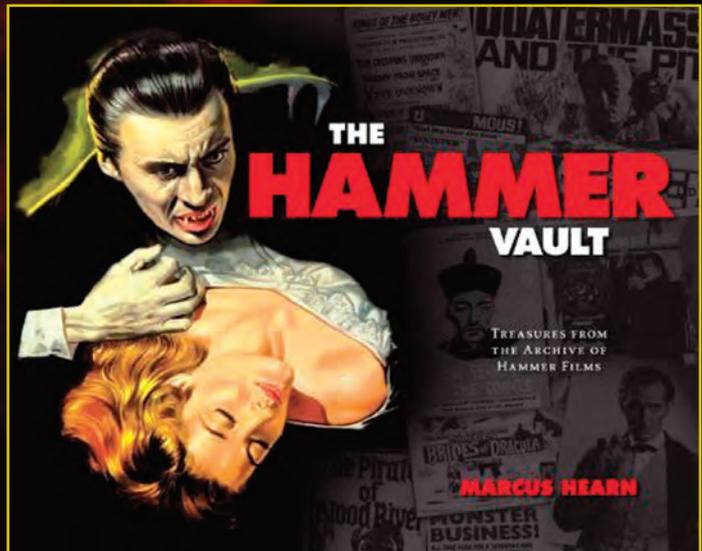
HEARN: It was my aim that every spread should include something that even dedicated fans won’t have seen before. And there are still plenty of images to be uncovered. Most of

the paperwork preserved in the archive seems to have come from the desk of company director Brian Lawrence, and it was fascinating to discover the influence this quiet and generally uncredited producer exerted over the films.

The people who made Hammer’s movies really gave the company its identity, so it was important to give them space in the book. And there is a sense that some of these guys—especially Bernard Robinson—died without knowing how important or acclaimed their work would become. Terence Fisher died in 1980, before the advent of home video and DVD led to the critical reappraisal of his work. So I hope that we’re doing our bit to belatedly celebrate these men and their achievements.

FANG: The uncensored cut of *Horror of Dracula* was recently discovered—what is this find’s potential historical significance, and will it lead to a special edition in the near future?

HEARN: Whether you’re a Hammer fan or not, I believe most critics and historians would regard *Dracula* as one of Britain’s most important postwar films, so the discovery of an uncensored version of the climactic scene is very important indeed. A Blu-ray release is being discussed at the moment, and I’m confi-



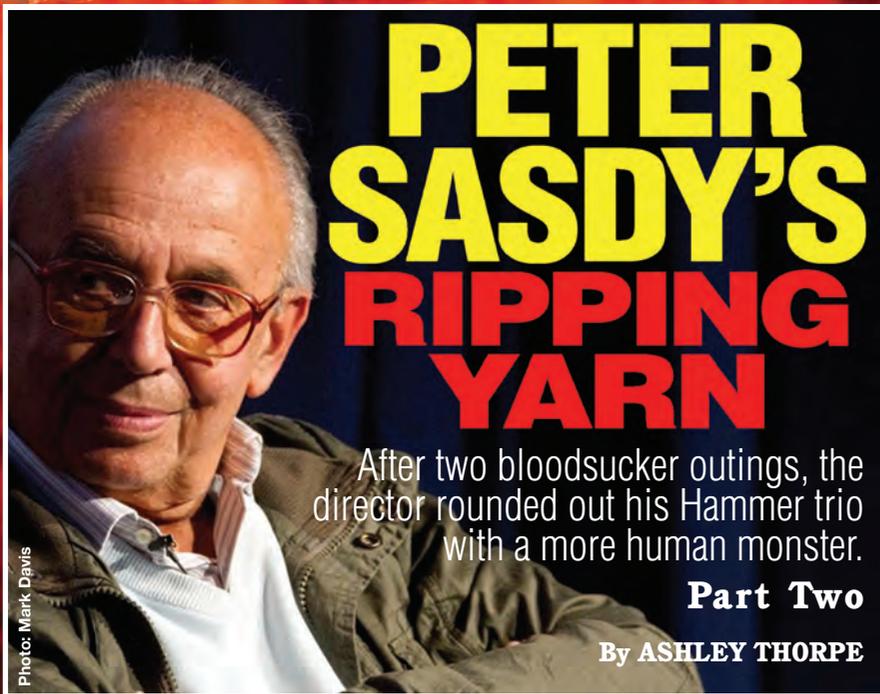
dent this will happen in 2012. Great care will be taken to ensure that it’s as good as it can possibly be.

—Ashley Thorpe

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PETER SASDY'S RIPPING YARN

After two bloodsucker outings, the director rounded out his Hammer trio with a more human monster.

Part Two

By ASHLEY THORPE

Photo: Mark Davis

In part one of this interview (see Fango #308), veteran British director Peter Sasdy recalled reinventing vampire standards for his first two features for Hammer Films, 1970's *Taste the Blood of Dracula* and 1971's *Countess Dracula*. Herein, he addresses his third Hammer picture and another fresh take on a clas-

sic subject, 1971's *Hands of the Ripper* behind that; it was the screenplays that brought those themes, from *Taste* onward. It was not something I set down to explore or develop, though I do see those themes

there in retrospect. I think those fears are common in family life. I have two daughters, and I am probably responsible for some of what they have done, and if I had said something 15 years ago they would have done things differently. We are all responsible for many of the next generation's actions, but very often we realize that too late.

FANG: *Hands* almost plays like a gory *Pygmalion*.

SASDY: Yes. *Hands* was much more personal to me; perhaps that's why, when people ask my favorite of the Hammer films, I name it as my personal choice. *Taste the Blood of Dracula* was welcomed in the spirit I intended by something like the *Sunday Times*—which usually didn't write about Hammer films, or if they did it was relegated to very few lines—and they spent some time welcoming the fresh blood [laughs] coming out of the old stable. They actually recognized my background, coming from the BBC classic dramas. I used that with *Hands of the Ripper*, but with a different approach. And that basically meant a different casting approach.

FANG: Angharad Rees as Anna, the daughter of Jack the Ripper, is not a typical bit of "Hammer glamour" casting, and



The *Hands of the Ripper* have left their fingerprints all over the mind of Anna (Angharad Rees).

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sic subject, 1971's *Hands of the Ripper* (coming, like *Countess*, on Blu-ray from Synapse Films in 2012).

FANGORIA: Like both *Taste the Blood of Dracula* and *Countess Dracula*, *Hands of the Ripper* develops the idea of a crumbling, hypocritical, parochial society wherein the children pay for the crimes or attitudes of their parents. Authority figures are portrayed as either ineffectual or corrupt—part of the mood of the times, or fortuitous coincidence?

PETER SASDY: It would be easy for me to say yes, I planned it all. I didn't. There wasn't necessarily a great philosophy



Dolly (Marjie Lawrence) joins a new generation of Ripper victims.

that carries through to the soundtrack as well, with the unusual appointment of Christopher Gunning over, say, James Bernard.

SASDY: Yes, same idea. *Hands of the Ripper* had a *personal* touch. When you are a first-time director on a feature, you can't shout too much or they will tell you to shut up—they gave you an opportunity. After two, then three, they must have seen something and they asked me to stay on and stay on, so...I started shouting. And it meant I was trying to make it more personal.

FANG: L.W. Davidson's script reinvented many aspects of Edward Spencer Shew's source story—dispensing with the idea that Anna actually *is* Jack the Ripper and having her possessed by him, and changing the doctor's interest in her from an occult interest to a psychological one. Can you talk about the development of the script, which aspects were kept and which were altered or jettisoned?

SASDY: I personally only had the Lew Davidson script; I never saw the source material. I always find—and this applies to other adaptations—that my job is to interpret the script and put that on the screen, not what it is based upon. Because the audience in the cinema, who paid their money, only see what is on the screen. If I know more, then I am cheating. So my knowledge must be the same. So I read Davidson's first draft; he was a Canadian in London at the time. We had two long sessions talking over the script. He took my notes in a very good spirit and did his rewrites, never referring to the source material—and when he did, I stopped him.

He was a wonderful gentleman, he

“It was partly intentional not to make the script too horrific on the page, because some of the posh actors might not want to take it.”

really was, because he *listened*. And I do like writers who don't start interrupting within the first three or four minutes when I'm explaining myself. They are the good ones, who have the humility to listen; they don't really have to agree, but give the poor fellow a chance. The younger ones, the less talented ones, the less secure ones, always start with a “but” after three minutes, and I always think, “Oh, it's going to be a difficult one!”

But Lew was splendid. In the first session, we went for the size and for the focal point of the narrative: Anna *watching* rather than *doing*. She is observing, so that we in the cinema are watching it all through her eyes—until the unexpected shock when her eyes change and the observation becomes action, and that is shocking because we were not expecting it. When you say that she is possessed, it is not something you should telegraph—that's Western Union's job [*laughs*]. The character should be an innocent—a girl who for some reason is rather mysterious, but she shouldn't look evil, act evil, sound evil—



If you've seen *Hands*, you know why Dr. Pritchard (Eric Porter) looks so in pain.

she shouldn't project any of the character's negativity, or else there is no surprise. If you already know that someone is behind a tree, then why should you scream when they reveal themselves? The scream should come from the unexpected—the principle of any kind of shock.

FANG: It's a testament to Rees' performance that this fragile balance is so beautifully maintained.

SASDY: Anna was never in my mind, from day one, a character who set out to do evil, because she is not aware she is doing those things. So when she comes out of the momentum of the horrible action, she

Lynda Baron...

SASDY: That was the one that very clearly had problems. Actually, all the others, at script stage, had been cleared. That was mainly because I do not like to shoot anything unnecessarily; I liked clearing it, with Hammer's permission. I would send the script in advance, and then have a phone conversation to go over any observations. Because they appreciated the courtesy that I asked them, that made them feel more important. It cost me nothing [*laughs*]; it was a phone call. And I tended to give a little at that stage, which was easier than shooting it and having to recut and redub and all that.

The hatpin scene, which went on a bit, was very graphic because I got a bit stubborn about that, but at the same time I had to give a little. I don't think that the violent bits were more shocking so much as—without sounding too pleased with

is the last one to know what she has done. And that's the innocent beauty of it. We experience something that she has never experienced herself.

FANG: There's some really delicate character work in *Hands*; unlike Hammer's usual boy's-own-adventure approach, there's a real sense of sympathy, and ultimately tragedy, about these characters.

SASDY: You've used a very good word—*character*. They must be characters you care about. Whatever you do, whatever the subject, whatever supernatural or horrific thing is happening—if you care about the characters, the effect will work twice as well.

FANG: It's very violent for a Hammer film—surprisingly so for a British film of that period. Did you experience any problems with the censor?

SASDY: We were fortunate enough not to have too many such problems. The one sequence where I had to go backwards and forwards a little bit was the hatpins in the eyes.

FANG: Ah yes, the terrible sequence with



Honest affection is hard to come by in this scenario.



dreadfully imaginative way Eric Porter's Dr. Pritchard disentangles himself from the sword? Was that in the original script, or something else you brought to the project?

SASDY: All the shocking sequences—the poker through the door, the hat pins and Pritchard and the sword—were not described in the script, because we wanted to get the script out to actors a bit

FANG: There have been a great number of Ripper films, but *Hands of the Ripper* is very different. It deals solely with what has become the Ripper's mythology, as opposed to the details of the crimes themselves. Were the latter mentioned in the script enough, or did you do further research?

SASDY: Almost, except I did look into the possible connection with the Royal Fam-

“The scream should come from the unexpected—the principle of any kind of shock.”

ily. That was the one area that interested me. I didn't have enough material to incorporate. FANG: There are hints toward this during the Margaret Rawlings scene. SASDY: Yes, but I didn't explore it any further because I would have imposed something I didn't have a solution for. Hitchcock said you can cheat, cheat, cheat as long as at the very end, you know you haven't cheated at all [laughs]. Everything must have an answer. FANG: What are your feelings about *Hands of the Ripper* now? SASDY: I'm quite pleased that people are still very enthusiastic about it. I personally think it worked well for a couple of reasons. One, very lucky casting. For a British genre picture coming from the

Hammer stable, it's an exceptionally well-cast film. Porter, Angharad Rees...

FANG: Who delivers an astonishingly nuanced, poignant performance... SASDY: She was wonderful. A girl I auditioned, she hadn't done anything really to mention before. The score by Christopher Gunning, who had never done a Hammer film before...

FANG: Or after, in fact. His use of counterpoint is very rare in a horror picture of that era.

SASDY: Different class, different type of musician. He has proved it since. I was brave enough to impose a different quality to the score. My cinematographer Ken Talbot, who was with me on my Hammer films—I believed in him, trusted him. I owe a lot to him. The combination of

cast, music, photography within the very strict schedule Sir James Carreras put on the line, and the limitations of a late-'60s/early-'70s Hammer film, I feel we did more than what was actually expected. Maybe that's why in 2011, it's still kicking, and of course I'm delighted.

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myself—a little more original than the usual Dracula effects. I mean, if you analyze it without going into too many details, if you take the Dora Bryan character with the door slowly...swinging...in, it's a surprise, it's original. I hadn't seen it before.

FANG: That approach of the found weapon, the impalements with household objects, etc., became a staple of horror cinema about a decade later.

SASDY: Yes. I felt free to be creative within the genre. I didn't try to make it a different movie. It was a Hammer film, but a Hammer film my way. I wanted originality. The sequences were extra-shocking because, "My God, I have not seen that before."

Not gory, more horrible, but more shocking because it's new.

FANG: And because the shocks aren't signposted...

SASDY: Signposting is for the AA and RAC; I don't work for them [laughs]. I hate it when people talk about that. I don't do that, it's not my trade.

FANG: Can you talk a little about that

was of that generation that when you went on a film set and were asked to do something, they would do it. Whoever the director was, whatever background, whatever age or experience...the Guv was the Guv. The generation today, you will never hear it.

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cast, music, photography within the very strict schedule Sir James Carreras put on the line, and the limitations of a late-'60s/early-'70s Hammer film, I feel we did more than what was actually expected. Maybe that's why in 2011, it's still kicking, and of course I'm delighted.

Hammer stable, it's an exceptionally well-cast film. Porter, Angharad Rees...

FANG: Who delivers an astonishingly nuanced, poignant performance... SASDY: She was wonderful. A girl I auditioned, she hadn't done anything really to mention before. The score by Christopher Gunning, who had never done a Hammer film before...

FANG: Or after, in fact. His use of counterpoint is very rare in a horror picture of that era.

SASDY: Different class, different type of musician. He has proved it since. I was brave enough to impose a different quality to the score. My cinematographer Ken Talbot, who was with me on my Hammer films—I believed in him, trusted him. I owe a lot to him. The combination of

