

Interview with the Vampire

Gothic icon gets under our writer's skin

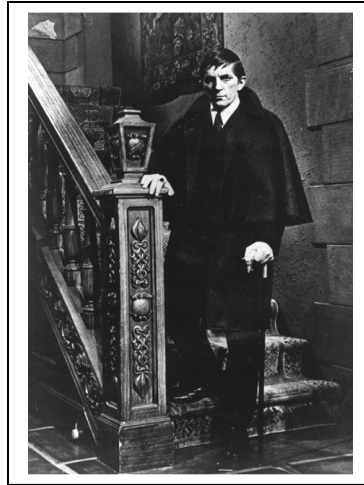
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31st October 2009



Before Twilight.

Or the taste of HBO's True Blood.



A generation removed from today's top grossing blood-suckers, there was Barnabas Collins -- a vampire you could believe in. Or at least, I did.

Centuries ago, the fears of children were born from village lore. In the 1800s, it came from dark prose in eerie novels.

But as a child of the 1960s and '70s, all my monsters lived large inside our small television.

If I even recall the 1969 pilot of TV's Night Gallery -- in which a painting owned by a murdered old man changes shape -- what little hair remains on the back of my neck stands up. And screams.

Thanks to the Exorcist, I still bite my nails.

And because of Barnabas Collins, the dark bat-man of the gothic TV soap opera, Dark Shadows, I suspect almost everyone of being a closet vampire.

The series ran on ABC from 1966 to '71, and was dying before Canadian actor, Jonathan Frid, flew in as a 175-year-old anti-hero.

The character was only supposed to stick around for 13 weeks. Instead, the hypnotic magnetism of Barnabas made Dark Shadows one of the most popular shows on daytime television.

Playing in the afternoons, and filled with parallel universes, witches, zombies and werewolves, Dark Shadows was a must-see for kids.

For me, all other vampires paled when compared to Barnabas.

Critics dismissed Dark Shadows as campy. But fans -- who gather still for Dark Shadows conventions -- recognized Barnabas as a figure with heart. However unbeating.

So, when news came that Tim Burton and Johnny Depp are collaborating on a movie version of Dark Shadows, I knew I had to resurrect Barnabas -- or at least his human side.

I find Frid in a secret lair, somewhere outside Hamilton, Ont. The mystery is for his protection. Fans still stalk one of the greatest vampires of the 20th century.

The actor is 85 years old and retired. Over the decades, he's played countless one-man shows and Shakespearian plays. And from the start, he never thought fangs fit.

We sit in the basement of his bungalow, surrounded by memories stacked in folders and bound in albums.

When he first took the roll of Barnabas, he was relieved it didn't immediately air around his home turf of Hamilton. That meant his friends wouldn't have to see it.

"But suddenly, it took off," he recalls. "And I was getting 5,000 pieces of (fan mail) every week."

His followers waited daily outside the studio in New York. Frid would run up to the glass doors, and scare them so badly, he feared stampedes would flatten someone.

But after Dark Shadows ended, Frid gladly moved on.

Over the years, he embodied living characters, and never wanted to dig up old bones.

"I thought I was ... dreadful. Awful," he adds of his work on the series.

"I tried to fight the vampire for years."

Frid -- who still attends one big fan show each year -- has discovered the power and profit of the Internet. On his site -- www.jonathanfrid.com -- you can hear him retrace the steps of Barnabas, buy DVDs and even autographed pictures for \$15.

He's become more comfortable in finding things to like about his vampire.

Still, he admits to not really understanding the die-hard fans.

And he has no real interest in a cameo in Depp's Dark Shadows revival.

Unless, he quickly adds: "I'm paid a good, hearty stipends."

But he does offer words of wisdom he's willing to divulge to young blood Depp: "The key (to playing Barnabas) is telling lies with such finesse that the other characters in the story can't see through them ... but of course the audience can.

"They are in on everything. Be sure to keep the two groups apart."

As we talk, I see the years have softened the strong lines in a face that was once so powerful, it followed me into my sleep.

"I'm Jonathan Frid, not Barnabas Collins," he firmly assures.

As we wrap up, the basement lights are lowered for a photo shoot.

I hand him a candle in the dark.

A bad back, from an accident while playing with a cat awhile back, has made Frid slightly shaky on his feet. But as he holds the flame close to his eyes his actor's stare is as still as night.

Dark Shadows fall again. And Barnabas returns.

Suddenly, I'm eight years old. Transfixed. Somewhere, off in the distance, mom is calling from the kitchen, telling me to turn off the TV and go outside.

As flame dances across his retinas, Frid -- voice commanding -- asks: "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No," I squeak, fumbling for the light. "You've already done enough."

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