He stands head and shoulders above the rest, and his name itself is enough to bring chills. His eyes are piercing and his brow furrowed…he stands like a dark god daring you to breathe…and when he starts to move toward you, a gliding pillar of black, you know it's too late to do anything but die.

His name is Christopher Lee, who celebrates his 88th birthday today, May 27. His career started on stage and in costume films (he was an uncredited spear carrier in Laurence Olivier's 1948 HAMLET—and by coincidence, his soon-to-be co-star Peter Cushing played Osric, though the two did not meet onscreen). His exotic good looks and impressive height made him unsuitable for romantic leads, so he did the next logical thing: After appearing in 38 movies, he became monsters! Actually, while in school, he made his stage debut as the demonic lead in RUMPELSTILTSKIN—a sign of things to come.

In 1957, Lee's career truly came to life with Hammer Films' CURSE OF FRANKENSTEIN. Pieced and patched together by Cushing's eponymous doctor, Lee's first monster was a clumsy, murderous child. He played Mary Shelley's creature with the damaged brain as a believable suffering being, but his danger and hideousness were very real. You could almost smell the rot (thank you, makeup artist Phil Leakey).

The cold stone of a Gothic castle became Lee's next home, and he joined the ranks of the undead as their Prince of Darkness in 1958's HORROR OF DRACULA. He was noble, frightening and fierce while also tormented, agonized and sad. Lee's Count was very much a warrior prince, battling Cushing as his nemesis again. His tigerlike interpretation of Bram Stoker's suave, deadly vampire became his calling card, etched in dripping red. So identified would he become with the role that he was almost as enveloped in his massive black shadow as Bela Lugosi had been before him. But he knew when to quit, and after practicing some groovy SATANIC RITES in 1973, Lee hung up the cape.

He became another prince, Kharis, lurching through bogs and swamps in the dead of night on a mission of revenge in THE MUMMY (1959). Co-starring once again with Cushing, Lee got severely injured during filming. All that smashing through real glass windows and doors dislocated his shoulder and pulled his neck muscles—especially when he had to carry an actress with arms fully extended across a swamp, walking as much as 87 yards. Such was his pain and discomfort that Lee never again brought that particular ancient Egyptian back from the dead—which is a pity.

Lee later drank Robert Louis Stevenson's potion and became Mr. Blake! I'm sorry, who? Yes, oddly, the scriptwriters of 1971's I, MONSTER decided to change the name of Dr. Jekyll's darker half to be "Mr. Blake." Oh, and they also rechristened Jekyll…to Dr. Marlowe (!). Weird, because as Lee later lamented, everyone else from Stevenson's story was allowed to keep their original name!

In 1974, Lee challenged Roger Moore's agent 007 to a duel on a not-so-fantasy island as Francisco Scaramanga, THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN GUN. A distant cousin and frequent golfing partner of James Bond creator Ian Fleming, Lee was the author's personal pick for the title role of the series' first film, DR. NO (1962), but Joseph Wiseman won that part. However, fans of the literary Bond might want to check out Lee's portrayal of Sax Rohmer's insidious Chinese master criminal Fu Manchu in five films from the '60s, for an idea of how Fleming himself envisioned Dr. No. Lee's wave of villains continued as he mesmerized the Russian Royal family in 1966 as RASPUTIN (the maaaaad monk) and sacrificed Edward Woodard as Lord Summerisle in the 1973 classic THE WICKER MAN.

While he is best known for madmen, monsters, and villains, though, it's Lee's portrayals of heroic and brave characters that show him as he really is. A truly great man, Lee speaks French, Italian, Spanish and German and can "get along" in Swedish, Russian and Greek. A classically trained singer, he is descended from one of the oldest Italian noble families (Carandini, on his mother's side). Lee was awarded the rank of Commander of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem; was granted honorary citizenship by the Italian city of Casina (province of Reggio Emilia) where Sarzano, the castle of his ancestors, is situated; was made Commander of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth in her birthday honors list in 2001; and was knighted

by the Queen Mother in her birthday honors in 2009. Truly, this man is a hero!

As Duc de Richleau, battling the satanic Moccata in THE DEVIL RIDES OUT (1968), as Prof. Karl Meister wielding a sword against THE GORGON (1964) or as Sir Matthew Phillips, trying to warn his friend about a cursed cranium in THE SKULL (1965), you can really root for Lee on the side of the heroes. Likewise, as Professor Alexander Saxton, he joined Cushing once again to battle an ancient, body-jumping monster on the Trans-Siberian HORROR EXPRESS (1972). What's not to like about that?

Why, Lee even played Sherlock Holmes and his smarter brother Mycroft. As Cushing often played the great detective, it was natural for Lee to portray his sibling. In fact, Lee has essayed a staggering number of Victorian characters. He was Dracula 10 times, Dr. Fu Manchu five, Sherlock Holmes three, Mycroft Holmes once and Sherlock's friend Sir Henry Baskerville once.

Did you know Lee appears on the album cover of the Paul McCartney and Wings album BAND ON THE RUN (1973)? And when Cushing died in 1994, Lee read the eulogy at his funeral. He spoke of his frequent co-star fondly: "Without that voice on the telephone, I do feel very lonely, very lonely…real friendship is rare."

In 1999, Lee sent Johnny Depp to investigate SLEEPY HOLLOW, and played his father (yes, Willy Wonka's dad) in CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY (2005), both under the direction of Tim Burton. His voice also gave life to a character in Burton and Mike Johnson's CORPSE BRIDE (2005), and Lee collaborated again with Burton this year, voicing the monstrous Jabberwocky in ALICE IN WONDERLAND.

As captivating as Lee is as a hero, he could never get away from the villainous; he is too powerful, too commanding and too good at being bad. Time and again, he has turned his attentions to the dark side because no one else could have done the roles so well. His name once again became synonymous with evil in two 21st-century blockbuster film series: A whole

new younger generation now knows him as the Sith separatist Count Dooku (a.k.a. Darth Tyranus) in the second and third STAR WARS prequels and as the dark wizard of Middle Earth, Saruman the White, in Peter Jackson's LORD OF THE RINGS trilogy. In the audio commentary for RINGS, he states that it was a decades-long dream to play good wizard Gandalf, but he was now too old and physical limitations prevented his being considered. Saruman, by contrast, required no horseback-riding and much less fighting. Lee had met Tolkien once (making him the only person involved with the film trilogy to have done so), and makes a habit of reading the novels at least once a year. In addition, he performed for the album THE LORD OF THE RINGS: SONGS AND POEMS BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN in 2003. Lee's turn as Saruman for the third film were cut from the theatrical release, resulting in a frosty relationship with Jackson; however, this material was reinstated in the extended edition.

The first RINGS marked the beginning of a major career revival that continued in STAR WARS: EPISODE II—ATTACK OF THE CLONES (2002) and EPISODE III—REVENGE OF THE SITH (2005). The Count Dooku moniker was allegedly chosen by George Lucas to reflect Lee's fame playing Count Dracula. The actor's autobiography notes that he did much of the swordplay himself, though a double was required for the more vigorous footwork and his head was digitally added. As proof that it's a small galaxy after all, Cushing portrayed the equally icy Grand Moff Tarkin in 1977's original STAR WARS—and both Lee and his fellow Sith Lord, David Prowse, have played Frankenstein's monster opposite Cushing, the latter in 1974's FRANKENSTEIN AND THE MONSTER FROM HELL!

In his long career, Lee has demonstrated his skills at comedy and drama—but he will always be the Prince of Terror (he defers graciously to the late Boris Karloff as King), and thankfully for all of us, he is still working as hard as ever. 2010 and 2011 are shaping up as prolific years for the actor, with roles in the 21st-century Hammer thriller THE RESIDENT alongside Hilary Swank, the medieval fright film SEASON OF THE WITCH opposite Nicolas Cage and John Landis' historical black comedy BURKE & HARE with Simon Pegg, Andy Serkis and Tim Curry, plus a cameo in THE WICKER TREE, Robin Hardy's follow-up to WICKER MAN.

One final "Did you know?": Vincent Price was also born on this date, and Cushing was born May 26! So here's to a very happy birthday for Sir Christopher Lee—a great bad guy and a great man. Long may he reign!

{jcomments on}