

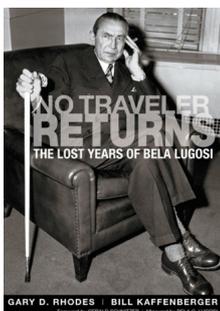
“NO TRAVELER RETURNS: THE LOST YEARS OF BELA LUGOSI” (Book Review)

Written by David-Elijah Nahmod
Monday, 17 December 2012 12:04



Author/filmmaker Gary D. Rhodes, a film scholar who has painstakingly documented every aspect of Bela Lugosi's career, may be primarily responsible for the cult of Lugosi that exists today; his 1997 documentary *LUGOSI: HOLLYWOOD'S DRACULA* is an almost romantic homage to the late actor's extraordinary talent. Rhodes joined forces with another noted Lugosi historian, Bill Kaffenberger, to fill in the blanks—the years between the collapse of the actor's Hollywood career and his entry into Ed Wood's world—with BearManor Media's *NO TRAVELER RETURNS*—and their research is extraordinary.

For many years, the rumor mill suggested that, save for one last hurrah in *ABBOTT AND COSTELLO MEET FRANKENSTEIN* (1948), Lugosi was largely unemployable during the late '40s. While Hollywood certainly didn't accord the actor the respect he so richly deserved, other venues remained open to him, and the book takes its title from the first of several original plays Lugosi performed in during this period. *NO TRAVELER RETURNS* was a touring-company production originally headed for Broadway, until bad reviews killed those plans. A comic thriller with similarities to Lugosi's 1929 film *THE 13TH CHAIR* (his first collaboration with *DRACULA* director Tod Browning) *TRAVELER* sounds like it might have been an enjoyable little timewaster. Lugosi was cast for the marquee value of his name; he was, at the time, in the final decade of his life, and the grueling travel schedule no doubt took a toll on his health. But he was hardly unemployable, and was reasonably well-paid for his efforts.



For more than 300 pages, the authors document the next-to-last phase in Lugosi's acting career. As he performed in other original productions as well as summer stock revivals of

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DRACULA and ARSENIC AND OLD LACE and made personal appearances, trouper Lugosi gave his all, living a hard life on the road. Also documented are his attempts to restart his stalled film career, without success. As great an actor as he was, Lugosi was never able to garner the industry’s respect, even though several influential entertainment journalists took up his cause.

Rhodes and Kaffenberger offer a history lesson that will make readers appreciate Lugosi’s professionalism and dedication to his craft all the more. The book might also make his sizable fan base furious at a film industry that treated him so shabbily, never acknowledging his incomparable talents until Martin Landau won an Oscar for his portrayal of Lugosi in Tim Burton’s ED WOOD. (Some have argued that Landau won a statuette that should have been given to Lugosi for his unforgettable performance as Ygor in 1939’s SON OF FRANKENSTEIN.

The book opens with a real coup for the authors—an introduction by 95-year-old Gerald Schnitzer, who acted alongside Lugosi at Monogram Studios during the early 1940s—and closes with a loving, moving statement from the actor’s son Bela G. Lugosi. Thanks to Rhodes and Kaffenberger’s superbly written prose, Lugosi’s only offspring now understands why he saw so little of his father during those years. His dad was on the road, earning money where he could so as to provide for his child.

Bravo, Bela. And Bravo to these authors.

