

# Dracula Untold - a bloody marvellous spectacle

 By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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Fact and fiction clash head-on as blood runs thick in *Dracula Untold*, an outstanding reawakening of one of legend's most captivating creatures.

Almost an entire century after the world's cinematic introduction to Dracula placed audiences under his haunting spell, Gary Shore, who makes his directorial debut, delivers a sumptuous visual feast of spectacle and melodrama, exploring the origin of the story of the alluring immortal we have come to fear as the sun sets: Dracula.

What's great about *Dracula Untold* is that it really tells a story that deserves to be told, since the fearful-fanged Prince of Darkness invaded our minds with *Nosferatu* in 1921.



It's a story that has dominated our film culture with Christopher Lee wearing the cape in the unforgettable Hammer Classics, David Bowie turned the monstrous creature into a stylish and sexy beast in *The Hunger*, Brad Pitt sizzled in *Interview with a Vampire*, Francis Ford Coppola turned the legend inside out in *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, the *Twilight* saga turned the legend into a teen romance, and a whole new generations of television viewers got hooked on *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*.

## Guaranteed to garner new fans

The fresh and invigorating sensibility of *Dracula Untold* is guaranteed to garner new fans and satisfy the curiosity of ardent followers.

Set in 1462, we journey into the world of Transylvania, which has enjoyed a prolonged period of peace under the just-and-fair rule of the battle-weary Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia (Luke Evans), and his beloved and brave wife, Mirena (Sarah Gadon), have brokered peace for their country and ensured its people are well protected, especially from the powerful Ottoman Empire- an ever-expanding scourge that has its sights on global domination.

But when Sultan Mehmed II (Dominic Cooper) demands 1000 of Wallachia's boys-including Vlad's own son - to be torn from their parents' homes and forced to become child soldiers in his army, Vlad must decide: do the same as his father before him and give up his son to the sultan, or seek the help of a monster to defeat the Turks but ultimately doom his soul to a life of servitude.



Vlad journeys to Broken Tooth Mountain, where he encounters a foul demon (Charles Dance) and enters into a Faustian bargain-one that gives the prince the strength of 100 men, the speed of a falling star and enough power to crush his enemies. However, he will be inflicted with an insatiable thirst to drink human blood.

If by the end of three days Vlad manages to resist, he will return to his former self, and perhaps in that time manage to save his people. Though should he drink, he will be forced to dwell in the darkness for the rest of his days, feeding only on the blood of humans and destroying all that he holds dear.

## As relevant today as 120 years ago

Since the publication of Bram Stoker's definitive Dracula in 1897, one of the most enduring literary and popular characters of our time has been explored in film, animation, literature and music, and is as relevant today as he was when his creator spawned a cultural phenomenon almost 120 years ago.

Although Dracula's presence remains ubiquitous in culture, it remains surprising that the origins of this undead icon have never been explored on film.

Producer Michael de Luca, who has brought to the screen blockbusters from The Social Network and Ghost Rider to Moneyball and Captain Phillips, shares what brought him to the journey of uncovering the monster's origins: "As a kid, I always wanted to know who turned Dracula into a vampire. I wondered: 'Was he the first? Were there others?' It was a delicious, unanswered question that's not been covered, even in Bram Stoker's novel."

When a script by the up-and-coming writing team of Matt Sazama and Burk Sharpless landed on De Luca's desk, it ignited the filmmaker's imagination. "I thought it was ingenious," he commends, "the untold origin story and an unknown chapter of an archetypal character we all know."



## Compassionate take

What really contributes to the profound impact of *Dracula Untold* is Shore's compassionate take on the narrative. He decided to dispatch with the sensational elements shown many times before on screens big and small, and look at its core: one man's struggle to protect his family. It's Shore's articulation of the film as a father/son saga that offers an emotional exploration of the legend that is captivating.

Says Shore: "It's a coming-of-age story, but it's really an exploration of the idea of legacy. Vampire mythology is about legacy, about handing something down to the next person, whether it is DNA, memories or responsibility. I felt people would be able to relate and respond to the father/son idea. It continues to be the most inspiring part of the story. Grounding the character in the real world was also an important element to getting that balance right."

"For this movie to work, you have to care about Vlad's inner life, as well as his emotional ties to his son and his wife."

De Luca offers: "There's a lot of humanity in this story, which you wouldn't expect from a story about Dracula; emotion drives him. From the second you meet Vlad, you see an emotional human being, a man with care and love as well as violence and power. There's a lot driving him, and he has to use all of this in equal measure throughout the film."

This desire to take the character of Dracula to unexplored territory became the hallmark of the production.

Shore says: "We wanted to find new ways of exploring vampire mythology that wasn't slavish to its roots. This is an adventure story; we see how the character of Vlad reacts to certain situations based on decisions he makes at that time. We are observing Vlad having to make difficult decisions that affect his wife and son, while trying to maintain his family and his people."

## A tough order

Vlad III was many things to many people: ruthless dictator, unrivalled warrior, father, husband and rumoured vampire. There are not many characters in film and literary history that present such a complex set of emotions and challenging transitions as Dracula. Having the audience rooting for a character with such a dark-and-violent past, and whose destiny is even darker and more threatening, is a tough order.

"If you look at Dracula as an archetypal character, he's an anti-hero you invest in and love throughout the film, but you can see he has to make difficult decisions and he'll end up on his own because of them. Your hero is somebody who you generally shouldn't like for their ruthlessness and what they have to do, but you respect them. It was a difficult arc to get right, but Luke did a terrific job."

It's all a question of balance, Luke Evans suggests: "As much as you know about the dark side of Vlad, we wanted the audience to see the passionate, loving, vibrant side of him."

Read more about Dracula Untold and other new films opening this week at [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)

## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)

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