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*Underworld: The Underdone*

*Underworld* could have been a great film. Had the movie been made properly, I would be sitting here comparing it to the crème de la crème of vampire movies. It had the potential to remake the genre, to give a new face to the standard for supernatural action/horror films. Unfortunately, though, a combination of bad acting, some idiotic costume designs, and a nebulous script robbed the movie of the strength it could have had. While I enjoyed the movie, and will be buying it for my collection when Sony releases it on DVD, I cannot help but speculate on what might have been.

*Underworld* is at its core a revenge film. Forget any mention of the love story – any romance is a secondary plot at best. No, *Underworld* is a film about one man's revenge against the father of his dead wife, a father who had his daughter killed because of a forbidden union. That this revenge takes place about half a millennium after that killing, and features vampires and werewolves and an odd combination of the two, seems inconsequential. Lucian, the man/werewolf out for revenge, fakes his death with the help of an aptly named vampire called Kraven. Kraven just happens to be the man in charge while Lucian's ex-father-in-law, Viktor, takes a few centuries to

catch up on lost sleep. Selene, the character played by top-billed Kate Beckinsale, almost foils the plan, however, by finding the key to Lucian's revenge, awakening Viktor, and generally mucking things up. Lucian wins in the end, though, as the two races are united in Michael, and Viktor dies by his surrogate daughter's (Selene's) hand.

There were several key mistakes made in *Underworld*. The biggest by far was the decision to try to apply modern disease theory to the two breeds of supernatural creatures. Few decisions could have been worse. In *Blade*, vampirism is a disease, yet it also has a supernatural component, an element ignored in *Underworld*. There is no mention of a curse, no angry god, nor even a malevolent pact with something man was not meant to know. *Underworld* tells us that Lycan (werewolf) and Vampire both originated in a Hungarian plague victim fourteen centuries ago. We are not told how the progenitor managed to turn the Black Death into a form of immortality, only that he did so. This missing explanation could have answered many of the questions that I ask. For example, I would like to know how science might explain a man becoming a giant furry killing machine in less than ten seconds. I'd like to know how the original bat and wolf bites caused their resulting immortals to be allergic to sunlight and silver, respectively. Unfortunately, neither of these questions will be answered, barring a (much better) sequel.

For several reasons, I feel that the production department of *Underworld* should be re-educated. Some elements they perfected, and some they should have left to more collected minds. The setting is unclear, the actors' accents inconsistent, and the costuming ranges from brilliant to idiotic. Whilst I agree that the latex and corset getup Selene wears is awe inspiring in some shots, the design really was impractical. Latex creaks and would betray anyone trying to sneak across the subway to ambush a werewolf. The silver nitrate bullets are visually appealing, but silver nitrate simply would not spill out of a wound in streams of mercury-like liquid. Viktor's accoutrements, the werewolf lab, and most of the other sets are perfect. And the blurred flashbacks make everything that much more poignant – and more confusing – before the final flashback gives us the final story. Unfortunately, many little things also add to the confusion. The cops and a hospital intern speak with American accents. Cars have European license plates, which are longer and less detailed than American and Canadian versions. The city itself seems unable to decide where it is located. Because what little we see of it is old, or perhaps made to appear old, I assume Europe, but the cops and the accents give me problems. Some films don't have definite settings, but in a film about creatures that live for a millennium, setting is important. A nebulous setting leaves them adrift, instead of grounding them in history and giving them that much more believability.

*Underworld's* casting directors must have been under studio pressure. No other reason could have led them to hire Kate Beckinsale or Scott Speedman (Michael). The Lycan doctor, Singe, is played expertly by Erwin Leder, so well in fact that I almost regretted his death in the scene I refer to as "Ye Elder's Anger." Bill Nighy takes the vampire elder, Viktor, from a frail, barely ambulatory corpse to a walking force of nature. Through all of his makeup, he makes Viktor work. I found myself cheering for him as he waded through the werewolves, breaking one's neck as if it were a small child's. His presence in my favorite scene is monumental. I felt his irritation and unrest flowing like a tide as Singe spilled his guts. Nighy's fist then swings down into the camera, dealing a punch that caves in the werewolf medic's skull. A perfect moment of cinema is this one shot.

Kraven (Shane Brolly) and Lucian (Michael Sheen) serve as excellent foils, each portraying a different side of the same coin of desire. Kraven oozes his untrustworthiness, while Lucian's aura of command rivals that which Viktor sends booming across the theater. But Scott Speedman spends the entire movie in Keanu Reeves-ish confusion, sending his character, Michael, from one side of the conflict to the other like a frightened ping-pong ball. Kate Beckinsale has moments of believability as Selene, but her inconsistent accent and overall inattentive performance ruin most of her screen time.

*Underworld* could have been great. It could have done what all the best supernatural films do – make me believe that this could happen. *Blade* succeeded in this. So did *The Craft*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, and *John Carpenter's Vampires*. These films made me wonder if the old wives' tales had any truth to them. They inspired me to look into the legends a little more carefully. *Underworld* did not. Like *From Dusk Till Dawn*, it will be regarded as a mere popcorn film, as an interesting way to waste a couple of hours. As a popcorn movie, *Underworld* succeeded. It entertained without informing, without inspiring – and it will be entirely forgettable for most viewers. I will remember *Underworld*, though, because I can see what it could have been had those who made it not fouled the film's chances. And what a film it could have been.