

My Rendez-vous With The Baroness

by Michael Orlando Yaccarino

Anyone who has experienced *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein* (1973) inevitably comes away with the same reaction. Instead of commenting upon the visceral 3-D effects or the kinky zombie sex, the fans of this fabulous gore epic simply want to know, "Who is that strange woman?" Belgian performer Monique Van Vooren has shown up more than once as a bizarre seductress in the most unlikely places. But whether terrorizing the loinclothed hero of *Tarzan And The She-Devil* (1953), appearing in Pasolini's much lauded *The Decameron* (1970) or sharing in the murderous fun of the cult classic *Sugar Cookies* (1975), she manages to push the proceedings into elegant outrageousness. With her svelte figure, platinum blonde coiffure and delicious accent, it's not difficult to imagine why director Paul Morrissey chose Van Vooren to embody the wicked Baroness of his grand creature opus resulting in her most notorious role. Sans eyebrow and exuding vice, the insatiable temptress storms Frankenstein's lair in vintage negligees while commandeering both the hired help and man-made monsters to her boudoir. But there's much more to this graceful veteran of screen, stage and television than an immediately recognizable and singular beauty. A Fullbright Scholar, this multilingual personality is also a praised chanteuse on the international nightclub scene as well as the author of the phenomenally successful novel *Night Sanctuary*. Since Paul Morrissey has just premiered a fully-restored director's cut of their Frankenstein film at New

York City's Film Forum before its European re-release on video, this was the perfect moment to catch up with Van Vooren. It was a genuine delight to meet with the star in her luxurious Manhattan home, an eclectic fusion of Old World opulence and sophisticated glitz presided over by Pistache, her enchanting white cat. Here, in an exclusive interview for World Of Fandom, the ever-stylish actress reminisces about breathing life into the Baroness and reveals what she found beyond the castle gates.

World Of Fandom: How were you chosen for the role of the Baroness, the female lead in *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein*?

Monique Van Vooren: I was a very good friend at the time of that whole group centering around Paul Morrissey and Andy Warhol. When Paul mentioned that they were going to do this film, which was his idea, he told me that he always had me in mind for the part. So, there was never a question of having to audition for the role.

WOF: So he knew there was something unique

you could bring to the role as an actress
MVV: They knew me and knew that I could be mean enough as the Baroness!

WOF: I believe the film was made in Italy?

MVV: Yes, that is correct. The film was shot in the studios at Cinecittà and the exteriors were of a very famous castle outside of Rome. At the time, I was living in Rome, where I had made several films -- *Blue Gang* with Jack Palance, *Ash Wednesday* with Elizabeth Taylor, a lot of films that never came here. I did enjoy living in Italy.

WOF: Tell us more about your conception of the

was definitely not a written script. We sort of made up our dialogue as we went along. I know that my lines were my own as were Udo Kier's as the Baron. We had structure as to where we were going. The actors were given a couple of pages the night before each day of shooting. But Paul was the first one to say that if you could do better than what was provided, go ahead! For instance, have you seen the version of the film where Joe Dallesandro is nude in my boudoir?
WOF: No, the readily available U.S. domestic release on video does not clearly show much nudity during your love making scenes with him.

And since you brought it up, I cannot resist but ask you about the infamous armpit slurping...

MVV: Yes! You know, before we shot the scene that morning, Paul told me that I should do something with Joe that had never been done before. But everything's been done before! So I came up with the idea for the lapping of the armpit. And later, they added all those sounds! It's too late now, but I thought of a line I wished I had said during that scene. If you recall, while I am doing this to Joe, he is going on and on about his unfortunate friend who has had his head cut off earlier in the film. Wouldn't it have been very funny if I had interrupted him during this speech by saying, "Shut up! Can't you hear I'm busy?"

WOF: That would have been hilarious! The element of parody in the film is very strong. How did you deal with this as an actress in making it work?

MVV: Although we did have so much fun making the film, Paul told us that he wanted it done very seriously. Not spoof! And even though I have already given you the reasons why I could not wear any make-up in the film, it did upset me all the same. And I must admit, sometimes in the morning, I would sneak to the make-up room. But of course, Paul would see it right away and say, "Monique! You have eye make-up on that is not of the period. Take it off!"

WOF: And speaking of getting the correct period look to the film, were those magnificent costumes authentic?

MVV: Yes, they were mostly all original period clothing. And the ones that were made for the film were done by our fabulous wardrobe supervisor, Benito Persico, who did many of Visconti's films. You know that wonderful negligee I wear in the film? He gave it to me. I still have it! And I must not forget the tremendous art direction by Enrico Job.

WOF: I would like you to finally lay to rest the



Monique Van Vooren puts a little Frankenstein to bed.

continuing controversy about who was the actual director of the film. Some confusion concerning this has occurred since the Italian version of the film credits horror maestro Antonio Margheriti as its director...

MVV: No, no! It was completely Paul. Who is this Margheriti? As far as I recall, I don't know him. It was 100% Paul. Absolutely! Maybe I had met him, but he was someone who certainly didn't stick in my mind. The film was entirely Paul's idea, Paul's project, Paul's everything...Paul's production.

WOF: And what about Andy Warhol's involvement in the film?

MVV: Andy Warhol had absolutely zero to do with the film. He showed up once or twice with his little dog to have lunch or to do a publicity photo-shoot.

WOF: Back to the Baroness...besides being almost constantly occupied in her boudoir, she does make time for her daughter and son played by Nicoletta Elmi and Marco Liofredi.

MVV: Aren't the children wonderful? I wonder whatever happened to them?

WOF: Well, Ms. Elmi has had quite a career as every Euro-Horror fan's favorite child. She appeared in a number of films, including Mario Bava's *Baron Blood* and Dario Argento's *Deep Red*. You can see how she has grown up into quite a lovely lady in the film *Demons* directed by Mario Bava's son, Lamberto.

MVV: Really? I am so happy for her! She was a beautiful little girl.

WOF: I like the idea that both children do not utter a word.

MVV: Well, the film was shot completely in English and neither one of them could speak a word of it.

WOF: I think one of the brilliant aspects of the film was its use of an international cast, freely mixing established actors and unknowns.

MVV: Paul chose and found many of the actors. For example, he found Dalila Di Lazzaro, the Baron's female creation. She was a beautiful girl

from outside Venice. She became the girlfriend of Carlo Ponti, who produced the film, for years. And Joe Dallesandro looks great in the film. You know, his skin was translucent as if lit from within. I've known two men like that.

WOF: May I ask who was the other...?

MVV: Nureyev.

WOF: A word must be said about the truly spectacular 3-D effects in the film. How did it effect working on the production?

MVV: It took a long time to shoot, about seven weeks, because of the 3-D process. As an actor, you could not move one iota from your position. You were really very restricted in what you could do because of it. And to align the shot took forever! But it really was worth it. The scene in the children's bedroom with the fish in the tank and the carriage scene at the opening of the film came out very well indeed.

WOF: So it was you driving that carriage on your own?

MVV: Of course! Anybody can drive a carriage! Oh, but it took so many takes to get it right. We had to do it over and over again.

WOF: The film's many admirers will be happy to learn that Paul Morrissey has put together a director's cut of the film to be re-released on video in Europe. What is your opinion of the film seeing it now more than twenty years later?

MVV: Looking back at it now, it is more than a cult film. I believe that, eventually, it will become a classic of its genre. The film is done exquisitely...even if the gore at the end is a bit much.

WOF: The bloody finale becomes something beyond gore, closer to the operatic.

MVV: True! And when the Wagner comes in during that one scene...it's so Paul! When I saw the new print, it was absolutely wonderful. It has great beauty to it.

WOF: Especially the soundtrack by Claudio Gizzi, who also scored *Andy Warhol's Dracula*.

MVV: Don't you love that score? And this is why you are here! I was so pleased to hear it on

your answering machine!

WOF: It was all a moment of fortuitous synchronicity! Since it's my favorite score, I want anyone calling me to enjoy it as well.

MVV: Well, anyone who has that kind of feeling for the magnificent music, I want to meet! And you know, much of my career has happened just because of such chance circumstances.

WOF: In what way?

MVV: Well, I come from a Belgian family where being an actress is next to whoredom. I had been an award-winning figure skating champion in my country and would have been an ice skater if I had not come to America on a Fullbright Scholarship. Once here, I got into acting accidentally. You know, everything came to me accidentally. Accidentally, I became a showgirl for a Broadway musical named *Almanac*. Then I made a film which I thought was only a temporary job. Then, what was temporary became a way of life. So when I went back to visit in Belgium I was not given a friendly reception by all of my family. You know, I was raised in a convent.

WOF: So the future wicked Baroness was raised in a convent!

MVV: Can you imagine? And I think because of it, I'm quite mystic. I am not at all the wild person people imagine me to be.

WOF: All joking aside, because of the sometimes outrageous nature of your career, do some fans have certain preconceived notions about who you are as a person?

MVV: Absolutely! People always have expectations, even to this day, of what I should look like and do. But I've never indulged because of my strict background. So I've always lead a very disciplined life.

WOF: What is coming up next on your current agenda?

MVV: I am opening at the Cinegrill in Los Angeles later this year. I will be performing a lot of Brel and Aznavour as well as many of the songs I've written myself. It is really a shame that there are so few nightclubs anymore. But, all the same, I love performing and I will continue to do so.



Monique Van Vooren
Photo: Francesco Scavullo