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REVIEWS



DRACULA UNTOLD

| Simon Abrams

October 10, 2014 | 9

First, some good news: "Dracula Untold," a sort of ["Batman Begins"](#) prequel, isn't as tacky as it sounds. There are glimmers of a brooding and icky horror epic scattered throughout the film, particularly in its surprisingly romantic, matte-painting-esque backdrops and impressionistic vampire's-point-of-view shots. But that leads me to the bad news: if you step away from "Dracula Untold" long enough to describe it, you'll realize how soul-crushingly unimaginative it is. This is, after all, a ["Maleficent"](#)-style anti-fable that relies on your instant recognition of Dracula while trying to rehabilitate and recast Bram Stoker's bloodsucker as a Byronic hero. Still, the good news barely outweighs the bad in "Dracula Untold," a lightweight war-adventure that is ultimately stranger and more enticing when it remembers it's also a horror film.

In the beginning, a boring narrator natters on about how Vlad "Dracula" Tepes ([Luke Evans](#)) was a former Transylvanian child soldier who was abducted by Turks, trained to fight, blah blah blah...he's a killing machine. Then, we actually meet the guy: a soldier kneeling in prayer before a forest of pikes bearing his impaled foes. It's a creepy image, and one that should be held for at least twice as long as it is. Unfortunately, the makers of "Dracula Untold" typically hit the fast-forward button, and rush to the next chain of events. Vlad is given an ultimatum from Turkish Sultan Mehmed ([Dominic Cooper](#)) while feasting with angelic wife Mirena ([Sarah Gadon](#)), she of the blue eyes, and generous cleavage: give Mehmed 1000 Transylvanian child soldiers, or take on Mehmed's overwhelming forces.

Herein enters the homo-eroticism that the film sometimes cannot suppress: Vlad and Mehmed are childhood rivals, trained together in the army of Mehmed's father. But Mehmed's threat is a visceral reminder of events that are only alluded to in the aforementioned voiceover-reliant introduction. Vlad strikes a deal with a vampire ([Charles Dance](#)) that offers him an alternative deal: stay human and die, or temporarily become a vampire and destroy Mehmed's army. This would be a simple choice were it not for a ridiculous convolution: if Vlad drinks human blood, he will permanently become a vampire, and wind up sucking forever. Yes, that was a pun, and no, you don't get an apology.

Nor should you expect one in a review of "Dracula Untold," a bizarrely ambitious popcorn cash-in that's also half-baked in all the expected ways. The film's battle scenes are over-edited, Cooper's villain is a snooze, and there's simply not enough sex and death in an origin story about the archetypal sexual predator. Instead, there's a predictable attempted-rape scene, and a lot of paradoxically plodding hints that Mehmed and the Turks weren't that into women. There are also several scenes where Dracula turns into a cloud of bats, and even one scene where he scales a black cliff bare-handed while wearing a red cape, as if he were Wagner's Siegfried.

If you can selectively ignore this litany of inanity, you may find some substantial earthy pleasures in "Dracula Untold." Despite its PG-13 rating, the film does periodically erupt into surprisingly gruesome violence, like when a vampire is gored, then reduced into an emaciated corpse. And cinematographer [John Schwartzman](#) ("[The Rock](#)," "[Armageddon](#)") reminds you why [Michael Bay](#) used to love working with him in every day-for-night landscape shot. Evans is surprisingly good at smoldering, and special-effects-reliant shots of Vlad turning into a monster are usually pretty enticing. These small, moody charms add up, and give a film that sounds so very dumb some much-needed atmosphere. There's not much more to "Dracula Untold," but it does periodically throb

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DRACULA UNTOLD (2014)

Cast

[Luke Evans](#) as *Dracula (Vlad Tepes)*

[Sarah Gadon](#) as *Mirena*

[Dominic Cooper](#) as *Mehmed*

[Art Parkinson](#) as *Ingeras*

[Charles Dance](#) as *Master Vampire*

[Diarmaid Murtagh](#) as *Dimitru*

[Paul Kaye](#) as *Brother Lucian*

[William Houston](#) as *Cazan*

[Noah Huntley](#) as *Captain Petru*

[Ronan Vibert](#) as *Simion*

Director

[Gary Shore](#)

Writer

[Matt Sazama](#)

[Burk Sharpless](#)

Action, Drama, Fantasy, Horror, War

Rated PG-13 for intense sequences of warfare, vampire attacks, disturbing images, and some sensuality

92 minutes

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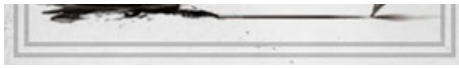
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