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LONGER VERSION:

THE SPARK OF DIODATI:
TALE-TELLERS AND THE GIFT FROM GOD

by

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A crack of lightning. Fear and electricity. Heady visions. It has assumed something like the status of a creation myth – the idea that gothic horror cinema was born at the Villa Diodati, the home of Lord Byron, during one feverish night of story-telling and who-knows-what in the month of June, 1816.

The facts are clear enough. Byron's house guests indisputable: his physician-companion Dr Polidori, Shelley, Mary Godwin and her half-sister Claire Clairmont. What could scarcely have been imagined, even by the greatest poets of their age, is that two of the tales conceived that night would endure and propagate immeasurably, becoming staples of popular culture for two hundred years. Polidori's "The Vampyre" – the direct progenitor of Dracula – and Mary's Frankenstein.

It was not, however, until I read David Pirie's pivotal masterwork A Heritage of Horror, that I discovered this catalytic, incendiary moment on the shores of Lake Geneva.

An old dark house on a stormy night, with even more stormy emotions within – this was a drama that cried out to be written, and it became my first produced screenplay, Gothic (1986), directed by Ken Russell, starring Natasha Richardson and Gabriel Byrne. I was frankly astonished that it hadn't been told before.

Yes, Bride of Frankenstein (1935) gave a witty, if unconvincing, vignette of Regency japes, but not the full story of the vivid characters I was now researching, and certainly conveyed nothing of the heated and malevolent passions circulating that summer. I wanted blood and thunder. Sin, blasphemy, and death. Not forgetting bad dreams. If it was about the birth of the horror it had to, surely, be a horror film itself?

More than that, my characters had to be gothic archetypes through and through (...Dark Lord, Fatal Woman, Corrupt Monk...), albeit that they were based on real people. Famous people, at that.

My “Byron” on the page wasn’t Dennis Price or Richard Chamberlain – (or Ken’s first choice, Bob Geldof) – but Peter Wyndgarde: he sneered in virtually every stage direction. He also enters the film in exactly the way the haughty, aristocratic Christopher Lee enters Dracula: gliding down a staircase to greet his guests, a deliberate signal on my part that this is a Hammer film, in all but name. A touch singularly lost on most critics, who, misdirected by the presence of Julian Sands as Shelley, perhaps expected a Merchant-Ivory biopic about the great Romantic poets. That wasn’t my intention at all. (The clue was in the title.)

The truth was, I hadn’t even done an English degree. I went to Art College, and my references were as much about painting as literature, from Joseph Wright of Derby to Piranesi’s carceri to Goya, whose title “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” is a perfect description of Gothic, as I saw it. There was Fuseli in the ape on horseback as well as The Nightmare itself, but also a nod to Surrealism in Dalí’s image of a dead rat dangling from the mouth of a pretty girl. By the end we have descended into the dungeon, the cave, into nakedness and the primal dark, where horror always ends, with all the safety of civilisation stripped away.

I also wanted it to feel like Peter Brook’s Marat/Sade (1967) – we are the audience looking through the bars of the asylum at the mad people, the hallucinating, the terrified, the deluded: those who thought they were God. The original script was bookended by scenes with Mary Shelley on her death bed, as unreliable narrator. But Ken wasn’t interested in Mary Shelley’s fantasies, he was interested in Ken Russell’s. In many ways, though, the proceedings are augmented by his irreverence: grand, grotesque, subversive, the perfect maestro to conduct unfettered imaginations, and someone who, if nothing else, understood creativity as an act of conjuration.

On the other hand Mary, pre-Freud, understood the essence of Horror – the desire and the repression of the desire. She wrote that she wished her child could be “warmed by the fire” and made alive again, yet the creature she brought back from the dead in fiction became an angel of wrath and murderous vengeance. So, notwithstanding James Whale’s teaser with Elsa Lanchester, her alter ego isn’t the “Bride” but Frankenstein himself; creator of life from dead matter.

Her brilliance is that she combined the external world of galvanism and scientific advancement with her internal anxiety, resulting in a work of mythic resonance. Likewise Polidori, using the raw material of his relationship with Byron, a vampiric combination of longing for power and sadomasochistic dread.

Extraordinarily – since it’d never been told before – there have been other versions of the events at Diodati since ours.

I'd heard about, but never read, the script for Haunted Summer (1988) (for a time, I believe, John Huston was going to direct it). Another blend of "mind games, drugs and sex", it starred Alex Winter as Polidori, leading to it, I'm sure, being dubbed "Byron and Percy's Excellent Adventure".

Released the same year, Rowing with the Wind (Remando al viento, wr/dir. Gonzalo Suárez), became famous for bringing together Hugh Grant and Elizabeth Hurley (as Byron and Claire respectively), causing me to ask myself, if Lord Byron were alive today, would he have had his phone hacked? (Almost certainly yes.)

But what does Diodati really mean? Literally?

I never investigated it at the time, but apparently the root "Deodatus" translates as "given by God" or "presented by God". A notable member of the family was Charles Diodati, close friend of John Milton, to whom Milton addressed two of his elegies. Would the connection of the name Diodati with Milton, creator of the exiled Satan, be entirely lost on Byron? Was it an irony, indeed, that attracted him there? It is mere coincidence, too, that Paradise Lost not only provides the epigraph for Frankenstein, but is alluded to throughout?

Interestingly, Charles's grandfather converted to Protestantism and, branded a heretic, fled to Geneva. His son Theodore studied medicine in Leyden before travelling to England and finding an English wife (Charles's mother).

Travels. Medical school. Geneva. Heresy... Is there any wonder the Villa Diodati provided the perfect cauldron of ideas that resulted in the birth of Frankenstein?

But to me, the real thing "given by God" at Diodati was the creative gift. Granted to two poet-geniuses, it enabled God's creation, Man, to turn against Him. Atheists challenging His ultimate power, defying His authority with acts of sin and heresy. With electricity they could raise the dead. With the drinking of blood they could achieve immortality. With the imagination, anything was possible.

Monsters were raised in 1816, and they could not be put back in the ground.

Thank God.