





HOWLING II

CAST

CHRISTOPHER LEE as Stefan Crosscoe
ANNIE McENROE as Jenny Templeton
REB BROWN as Ben White
MARSHA A. HUNT as Mariana
SYBIL DANNING as Stirba
JUDD OMEN as Vlad
FERDINAND MAYNE as Erle

CREW

Directed by **PHILIPPE MORA**
Produced by **STEVEN LANE**
Screenplay by **ROBERT SARNO** and **GARY BRANDNER**
Based on the novel by **GARY BRANDNER**
Director of Photography **GEOFFREY STEPHENSON**
Edited by **CHARLES BORNSTEIN**
Music Composed by **STEVE PARSONS**

A woman with voluminous, curly, reddish-brown hair is the central figure. She is wearing a dark, possibly black, hooded cloak or cape with a high collar. Her right hand is raised, with her index and middle fingers extended in a 'V' or 'rock on' gesture. The background is a soft, golden-yellow glow, suggesting a bright light source behind her, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

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BIG, BAD WOLVES...

by Michael Blyth

The old adage 'so bad it's good' is often thrown around to justify our appreciation of those, how should we say, less distinguished pieces of filmmaking that we just can't help but love. We all have a guilty big-screen pleasure (or twenty), but for the truly hardcore connoisseur of trash cinema, there are those special rarities which go way beyond mere enjoyable incompetence, achieving levels of all-out ineptitude which stagger, thrill and horrify in equal measure. *Howling II* is one such glorious disasterpiece.

Released along the way under a variety of different names including *Howling II: ... Your Sister Is a Werewolf*, *Howling II: Bark at the Moon*, *Howling II: It's Not Over Yet*, and best (or should that be worst?) of all, *Howling II: Stirba – Werewolf Bitch*, this delightfully misjudged sequel is an entirely different beast to its beloved predecessor. Joe Dante's original may have had its roots in exploitation, but his killer style and playful wit made it an enduring classic of the genre. On the other hand, director Phillippe Mora, who apparently never even saw the first film, brought no such refinement to the sequel, which is every bit as crude and unsophisticated as its various subtitles might suggest.

It is clear from the outset that *Howling II* has no interest in its predecessor. Not only is it a stylistic and tonal departure from the first instalment, from a fundamental narrative perspective it makes absolutely no sense as an extension of Dante's original story. Wilfully ignoring the fact that Karen White (played memorably in the first film by Dee Wallace, here by Hana Ludvikova) was previously shot and killed on live TV following her lycanthropic transformation, Mora's tale kicks off at Karen's funeral, with guests none the wiser that their dearly departed is a now a werewolf. Through a series of events too contrived to justify explanation, Karen's brother Ben and her former colleague Jenny meet Stefan Crosscoe, a vigilante werewolf hunter who informs them of Karen's fate and insists they must destroy Karen's undead body when it returns from the grave. So impressed are Ben and Jenny by Stefan's wolf-slaying prowess that they decide to accompany this unhinged stranger to Transylvania to destroy immortal werewolf queen Stirba. As you do.

Howling II was co-written by Gary Brandner, author of the original book on which Dante's movie was based. The first film took Brandner's pulp novel as its starting point,



although the final result was markedly different, bearing only a passing resemblance to the original text. One might mistakenly assume that Brandner's participation with the sequel was an effort to ensure it adhered more closely to his vision, although, somewhat strangely, the plot bears even less resemblance to his own published sequel (also known as *Return of the Howling*) than the first film did to his original. Brandner's involvement in the film, and decision to all but ignore his own novel, is odd, but then part of the perverse pleasure of *Howling II* comes not only from accepting, but from revelling in its myriad bafflements, so let us not dwell too much on the finer details. Quite simply, forget what has come before. We ain't in Kansas anymore. Nope, we're in... erm... Where the hell are we? A cinematic no-man's land. A place that no other motion picture has ever taken us before – a nightmare landscape that is part gothic camp, part new wave sophistication, part '80s erotica. Yikes.

It is in the curious, often awkward mix of styles that Mora's film truly shines. *Howling II* is genuinely like nothing else, and as the film traverses from one perplexing set-piece to the next, there is the exhilarating sense that anything could happen. It might seem a wilful contradiction to say that the director's mishandling of the material is what makes it great (and in Mora's defence, who couldn't mishandle this material?), but it is his absolute disregard for consistency and apparent lack of control which makes it such a thrill. We are most definitely not in safe hands here. So strange are the shifts in tone, the variable acting quality, the bizarre editing choices, the nonsensical plotline, that *Howling II* often verges on the avant-garde. Either that or an elaborate joke which no one other than the director is in on. But while all this might sound horribly critical, it is in fact a gushing endorsement. Somewhere in amongst this cinematic car crash is a work of invigorating originality that never ceases to astound and perplex.

Of course, with a wreckage of this scale, there often aren't many survivors, and in the case of *Howling II*, sadly, there are just a couple; Christopher Lee and Sybil Danning. Legends in their own right, Lee and Danning both somehow manage to inject proceedings with a much needed hit of charisma, rising admirably above the risible material. Let us start with Christopher Lee. Poor Christopher Lee. All he wanted to do was star in a werewolf film (something which had thus far eluded him during his illustrious horror career). Little did he know he would end up appearing in one of the most critically-reviled werewolf movies of all time. Skulking between scenes with a look of vague embarrassment, it is said that Lee was so horrified with his involvement in the film that one of the first things he did when he worked with Joe Dante on *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (1990) was to apologise for his role as Stefan Crosscoe. It's OK, Chris, we forgive you.

B-movie queen Danning, on the other hand, seems far more game for a laugh, clearly relishing the high camp of the script and delighting in her vampy portrayal of werewolf bitch Stirba. Still, while the star of such exploitation gems as *Chained Heat* (1983) and *Reform School Girls* (1986) seems at ease with the material she is working with, Danning was far less impressed with the infamous end credits sequence, which sees an earlier moment in which she rips open her bodice to expose her ample breasts repeated a staggering 17 times. Exploitation in the purest sense, this cheap shot feels like a last ditch desperate attempt to win over (heterosexual male) audiences who may have been left flummoxed by the film, once again displaying a distinct lack of respect for the material at hand, and indeed a lack of respect for the performers. Looking back now though, even Danning must be able to admit the results are hilarious, more camp than titillating, especially as the repeated flashes are followed by shots of other characters from the film, as though reacting to what they have just seen.

And while we are on the subject of repetition, let us take a moment to acknowledge the contributions of new wave rockers Babel (a short-lived outfit assembled purely for this film), whose title song is used over and over (and over) again throughout the course of the movie. In actual fact, the song is not half bad, an enjoyable fusion of post-punk cool and throwaway pop trash, but after the 15th or so time you've heard it, it starts to get a little galling. Nevertheless, the new wave angle is one that's very important to the film, not just in the marketing campaign (the evocative tagline hailed the film as "The rocking, shocking, new wave of horror!"), but also in Mora's apparent fascination with the nexus between fetishistic eroticism and the new wave movement.

But while the film starts off with a distinctly contemporary, modern punk vibe, Mora juxtaposes this with a far more traditional gothic horror aesthetic, more old-school Hammer Horror than progressive punk. Early scenes in which angry rockers are terrorised by wolves in destitute warehouses and seedy punk nightclubs seem at awkward odds with later scenes in Transylvania, which in comparison feel flatly familiar. This jarring fusion of styles is most evident in a brief moment when Christopher Lee dons a pair of sleek '80s sunglasses. Intrinsicly linked to Hammer's Dracula films, Lee's casting can not help but infuse Mora's film with a retro gothic vibe from the outset. Meanwhile, setting the majority of the action in Transylvania (although most of the film was actually shot in Prague) is an obvious nod to the horror classics which had come before. Yet with his mod shades on, Lee looks like an ageing member of a Devo tribute act, a beacon of old attempting (and failing) to embrace the new. An old dude awkwardly donning a pair of trendy shades is an apt metaphor for a film which feels stuck between two worlds, never quite knowing who its audience really is. In an attempt to feel young and current, it ends up looking quite the opposite.



The film's most iconic poster also tapped into the icy new wave aesthetic – a close up of a woman's face, wearing big sunglasses and bearing her fangs – although the overall effect is more vampire than werewolf (evocative of sleek '80s bloodsucking classics like *The Hunger* [1983] or *Vamp* [1986], as opposed to the hairy horrors of *The Howling*). Still, the simplicity is striking, and the overall effect is a damn sight classier than the final film. Again, it is this odd contrast of disparate styles and elements (vamps vs. wolves, class vs. trash) which ultimately makes the poster so effective as a gloriously compelling lie. One couldn't help but feel a bit cheated by the film itself, given the sophistication of the artwork on display here. But at the same time, the deceit is all part of the appeal. *Howling II* never gives you what you want. It gives you something you never saw coming.

Given that even the film's poster appears to be suffering from some sort of identity crisis, it should come as no surprise that, underneath it all, Mora seems so distinctly uninterested in making a werewolf film, frequently confusing mythologies, and generally making things up as he goes along. What is strange is that this film was not his first, nor would it be his last lycanthrope picture. A couple of years before, Mora helmed teen werewolf shocker *The Beast Within* (1982), which, while critically mauled at the time, has gone on to find some admirers among more forgiving horror fans. Meanwhile, not long after *Howling II*, Mora returned to the franchise with the disastrous *Howling III* (also known as *Howling III: The Marsupials*), which sadly shares little of the fun of its predecessor and is probably best left forgotten. Given that he made several ventures into werewolf territory, one might be mistaken into thinking Mora was some kind of lycanthrope fanatic. Well, think again. This guy is most certainly no expert. And as for the creatures themselves, well, they are just as confused as their director.

One of the most memorable aspects of Dante's film were the remarkable transformation effects, in particular the extraordinarily protracted sequence in which Eddie Quist metamorphoses in front of Karen. The striking scene is a veritable masterclass in practical monster FX, gaining rightful acclaim for effects wiz Rob Bottin. Alas, Mora's film doesn't quite reach the dizzying technical heights of its precursor. However, this isn't strictly the fault of the production team. One particularly enjoyable on-set anecdote claims that when the expected werewolf costumes failed to arrive, the crew were sent a box of old monkey suits used for the filming of *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and left to make the best of a bad situation. Ever the consummate professional, Christopher Lee stepped up with his own explanation for the new-look beasts, ad-libbing an awkward scene of exposition in which he clarified how these monsters were some form of man/wolf hybrid. Nice try...

Say what you want about it, but *Howling II* really is a film that has to be seen to be believed. Time has in no way dulled its impact. If anything this outlandish hair-raiser is more unfathomably bizarre today than it ever was. But while it is easy to label the film as trash, it is by no means worthless. It's bracingly strange, frequently stylish, sometimes transgressive, and even, dare I say, rather visionary. It's completely preposterous, yes, but that is of course all part of the fun. Of all the cinematic pleasures in the world, this out-and-out howler might just be the guiltiest of the pack.

Michael Blyth is a film programmer for the BFI London Film Festival and BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Howling 2 is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono sound.
The HD master was provided by MGM via Hollywood Classics.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Production Assistant **Liane Cunje**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Authoring **Digital Cinema United**
Artist **Graham Humphreys**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Scott Grossman, Uwe Huber, Jennifer Rome and Melanie Tebb.



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