

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Willem Dafoe** and
screening of **Shadow of the Vampire**

January 6, 2001

Series: *A Weekend with Willem Dafoe*

SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE

Lions Gate Films, 2000, 93 mins. 35mm print courtesy of Lions Gate Films.

Directed by E. Elias Merhige. Produced by Nicholas Cage and Jeff Levine. Written by Steve Katz. Photographed by Lou Bogue. Edited by Chris Wyatt. Production design by Assheton Gorton.

With: John Malkovich (F.W. Murnau), Willem Dafoe (Max Schreck), Udo Kier (Albin Grau), Cary Elwes (Fritz Wagner), Catherine McCormack (Greta Schroeder), Eddie Izzard (Gustav von Wangerheim), and Ronan Vibert (Wolfgang Muller).

From review by Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times, December 29, 2000:

Rare as a crucifix in *Dracula's* lair is a film opening for Oscar consideration in the last days of the year that actually has something in it worth considering. Willem Dafoe's performance in *Shadow of the Vampire* is so irresistible it not only breaks that cycle but turns an otherwise just adequate film into something everyone will want to take a look at.

Though it was ineligible for a prize, Dafoe's work was generally considered the best male performance at Cannes earlier this year and has already won the Los Angeles Film Critics' best supporting actor award. His role may sound like a stunt, but Dafoe imbues it with enough of a variety of emotional colors to make it poignant as well as mesmerizing.

The idea behind *Shadow* is an intriguing one. Imagine that the 1922 silent classic *Nosferatu*, the cinema's first great vampire film, was more of a documentary than anyone knew. Imagine that without alerting the rest of his cast F.W. Murnau, the film's obsessive director, found an actual vampire to take on the name of actor Max Schreck and play the king of the undead.

Directed by E. Elias Merhige and written by Steven Katz (who came up with the idea), *Shadow* has difficulty living up to its potential. The film has a mannered, pretentious air about it, a self-consciousness that's only encouraged by having a super-aware actor like John Malkovich playing Murnau and saying things like "our battle, our struggle is to create art, our weapon is the motion picture."

Even though we initially don't know what we're waiting for, *Shadow* marks time during its opening Berlin sequences. There we see Murnau shooting some of the early scenes of *Nosferatu* (a familiarity with the original adds amusement but isn't necessary) and doing his particular version of getting star Greta Schroeder (*Braveheart*'s Catherine McCormack) into the mood for what's to come. "The ultimate expression of love," he tells her, "is the most exquisite pain."

Producer Albin Grau (veteran Udo Kier) has other things on his mind. "We have to talk about the vampire," he tells his director as they prepare for their location shoot in Eastern Europe. Who will play him, what clothes will he need, what makeup? Not to worry, Murnau says. The actor Max Schreck will appear in full makeup and costume, and, sounding like an early Stanislavski adept, will agree to be filmed only at night.

Once Dafoe's vampire, complete with the elongated fingernails he habitually clicks together, makes his appearance, it's impossible to do anything but watch him. Simultaneously silly and sinister, pleased with himself yet nervous about this unaccustomed movie work, Dafoe's Schreck combines crazy dignity, towering presence and an unstoppable blood lust to create the kind of presence you just don't see every day.

All talk of being deeply into character notwithstanding, Schreck's otherworldly aura unsettles the rest of the cast. Though the vampire makes no secret of viewing the beautiful Greta as more than just a feast for the eyes, he has no intention of being a fussy eater in the interim. "I don't think we need the writer anymore," he says at one point, literally licking his chops in a way even the most cutthroat producers can't match.

All this drives Murnau the director into a grumpy rage, and a series of uninspired plot devices follows, none of which would be worth experiencing if they didn't allow us to

see more of Dafoe's completely realized performance as this petulant, thousand-year-old Peck's Bad Boy.

"Even in the most naturalistic parts, I'm always searching for a mask, because a mask is liberating," Dafoe, who required a minimum of three hours daily to have his makeup applied, said in Cannes of his performance. "For an actor, giving over to something that feels outside of yourself is the purest kind of performing." And for an audience, the purest kind of pleasure.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of screenings and discussions with significant creative figures in film, television, and digital media, as supported with a generous grant from The Pinewood Foundation.

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