

MY LIFE WITH COUNT DRACULA

(DOCU)

A Hungry Jackal production. Produced, directed, edited by Dustin Lance Black. Camera (color, video), Black; music, Christopher Hoag; second unit camera, Brian Krinsky. Reviewed on videotape, L.A., July 2, 2003. (In IFP Los Angeles Film Festival.) Running time: 72 MIN. With: Dr. Donald A. Reed

By TODD McCARTHY

Although his film is intended as a tribute, filmmaker Dustin Lance Black doesn't do the late Dr. Donald A. Reed any favors in "My Life With Count Dracula." While saluting Reed's oddball contributions to film appreciation through the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films and its Saturn Awards, pic's inordinate focus on Reed's messy domestic life and sad final illness twists the salute into an unfortunate exercise in macabre voyeurism. As a result, what could have been a nifty specialized item for buffs and genre fans emerges as, at best, a curiosity item for trawlers of Hollywood esoterica.

A familiar face on the L.A. screening circuit for close to 40 years, Reed was a cherubic little fellow with a high-pitched voice and a law degree who always dressed in coat and tie and was usually surrounded by an entourage of conspicuously good-looking young men. Working out of the modest family home in which he grew up in South Central, Reed first sought celebrity — and celebrities — as founder of the Count Dracula Society, which got him (excerpted) TV time on CBS News and, amusingly, as a "real" contestant on "To Tell the Truth."

Seeking greater horizons for his entrepreneurial geekdom, Reed was in the right place at the right time during the sci-fi and horror explosion of the '70s and launched the Saturns. These awards were legitimized by Reed's contention that genre fare was unfairly ignored at the Oscars but were plainly most motivated, especially in their nationally televised heyday, by Reed's obvious delight at being ringmaster at events that were among the first to celebrate the work of Friedkin, Spielberg, Lucas, Schwarzenegger and Cameron, as well as many greats of yesteryear.

All this is documented in relatively chaotic fashion, just as evocative clips from "Nosferatu" and the original "Dracula" are interspersed willy-nilly into the proceedings. Dominating every-



UP TO BAT: Dr. Donald A. Reed greets Bat Girl at a Count Dracula Society meeting in docu "My Life With Count Dracula."

comfortably close and unflattering range having an MRI, trying on clothes in a changing room, giving himself an insulin shot in his drooping belly, using the bathroom in his suffocatingly cluttered house and visiting his doctor, who futilely instructs his patient to lay off the sweets. He's also seen trying to summon the energy to stage a 26th edition of the Saturn Awards in 2000, a year when few of the winners would be attending. Reed, who aptly states herein that the core appeal of Dracula lies in his powerful bid at immortality, died the following year at age 65.

But perhaps the low point is Black's coverage of legendary sci-fi collector/historian Forrest J. Ackerman's 84th birthday party, which reveals writer Ray Bradbury, in the wake of a stroke, attending in his underwear while sporting a cane.

Film does a cursory job of tracing Reed's life story, but shows little interest in getting to the bottom of his psychology and decidedly odd personality and lifestyle. On the one hand referencing a 12-year "girlfriend" while on the other allowing one associate to whisper that he thought Reed might be "homosexual," this look at an obsessive's life evidences no point of view other than tacit admiration for a man who was able to extend his childhood passions into an adult livelihood.

For anyone who knew Reed even slightly, pic disappoints on two counts: It's a shame to dwell on him so far removed from his enthusiastic prime, and his weirdness demanded much bolder and more clear-minded inquiry than it is afforded here.

Numerous industry pals and Saturn honorees, notably Bryan Singer, Doug Wick, Dean Devlin and Randall Kleiser, put in ap-

WHOLE

(DOCU)

A Frozen Feet Independent Prods. presentation. Produced, directed by Melody Gilbert. Camera (color, DV), Gilbert; editor, Charlie Geraszowski; music, CXR; sound, Gilbert; associate producer, Rita Beatty. Reviewed on videotape, L.A., June 23, 2003. (In IFP Los Angeles Film Festival — Documentary.) Running time: 55 MIN.

With: George Boyer, Dr. Michael First, Kees, Marlene, Baz, Dan Cooper, Kevin, Dr. Robert Smith, Dr. Leif Davis, Jennie Cooper, Francie Horn.

By ROBERT KOEHLER

Documaker Melody Gilbert's "Whole" deals with a tiny group of people obsessed with the need to remove a limb — usually a leg — from their bodies. Conventionally made but also bypassing the trap of turning the subject into something that belongs in a carny show, pic's great achievement is being able to shine light on this ultra-dark corner of the medical avant-garde, and draw out undoubtedly reluctant subjects to talk on camera. This is the sort of talking-point docu that fests adore, but commercial paths appear limited, even in deep cable.

Dr. Michael First terms the condition, which lacks a proper medical name, "a disorder that's completely off the map in the medical and psychiatric communities." The doctor stresses the disorder has little to do with apotemnophilia, involving the sexual fantasies of losing limbs dramatized in David Cronenberg's "Crash." What helmer Gilbert finds, despite the lack of a term, is a real problem shared mostly by men, who appear otherwise cogent, thoughtful and even unusually intelligent.

Baz, a middle-aged Liverpudlian and one of pic's sharpest subjects (and who, like most of these men, request to be known by first name only), was so fed up with his left leg that he stuck it in dry ice to promote frostbite — and amputation. George Boyer, a computer whiz from central Florida, describes how he once tried to shoot off one of his legs. Dutchman Kees is known as a "wannabe" amputee, who frequently binds up his fully functioning left leg in order to simulate leglessness. Brit university teacher Kevin went so far as to arrange surgery of a healthy leg with surgeon Dr. Robert Smith, who agreed to perform the operation and soon became the subject of press and public inquiries.

"Whole" nicely combines hard journalism with human close-ups, such as the marriage rift between wannabe Dan Cooper and his alienated wife Jennie — an approach that would be perfectly at home on a segment of "Oprah."