

# Back Row

by **Brian Lumley, 1937–**

**Published: 1988**  
in »A Coven of Vampires«



I'll tell it exactly the way it happened.

They were showing a love story at the Odeon, a classic from years dead and all but forgotten. The first time I'd seen this picture had been with my wife—would you believe, thirty years ago? The picture had outlasted her, if not our love. Maybe that's why I wanted to see it again.

I picked a rainy Wednesday afternoon. No kids hooting and gibbering in the back rows, maybe a pair or two of lovers in the double seats back there, snuggling up to each other and blissfully, deliciously secure and secretive in the dark. I'd been young myself, once. But what with this ancient film and the middle of the week, and the miserable weather, the old Odeon should be just about empty; maybe a few dodderers like myself, down at the front where their eyes wouldn't feel the strain.

But not me, I'd be up in the gods, in the next but back row. Along with my memories, my eyes seemed to be the only things that hadn't faded on me.

I was there waiting for the doors to open, my collar turned up, a fifty-pence piece ready in my hand. That's one mercy: we oldies can get in cheap. Cheap? Hah! I remember when it was thuppence!

And these two kids in front of me, why, they'd be paying maybe two pounds each! For a bit of privacy, if you can call it that, in a mouldy old flea-trap like the Odeon.

Behind me a handful of people had gathered: Darby and Joans, some of them, but mainly singles.

Most of them were pensioners like myself, out chasing memories of their own, I supposed. And we all stood there waiting for the doors to open.

I had to look somewhere, and so I looked ahead of me, at these two kids. Well, I didn't actually look at them—I mean you don't, do you? I looked around them, over them, through them, the way you do. But something of them stuck to my mind—not very much, I'm afraid.

The lad would be eighteen, maybe nineteen, and the girl a couple of years younger. I didn't fix her face clearly, mind you, but she was what they call a looker: all pink and glowing, and a bit giggly, with a mass of shiny black hair under the hood of her bright red plastic rain-mac. White teeth and a stub of a nose, and eyes that sparkled when she smiled. A right Little Red Riding-Hood! And all of it in little more than sixty-two or -three inches; but then again they say nice things come in small packages. Damned if I could see what she saw in him! But she clung to him so close it was like he'd hypnotized her. And you know, I had to have a little smile to myself?

Jealousy, at my age!

About the lad: he was pale, gangly—or „gawky“ as we'd say in my neck of the woods—hollow-cheeked; he looked like someone had been neglecting him. A good feed would fix him up no end. But it probably wouldn't fix the fishy, unblinking stare that came through those thick-lensed spectacles of his. He wore a black mac a bit small for him, which made his wrists stick out like pipe-stems. A matched couple? Hardly, but they do say that opposites attract...

Anyway, before I could look at them more closely, if I'd wanted to, we went in.

The Odeon's a dowdy place. It always has been. Twenty years ago it was dowdy, since when it's well past the point of no return. The glitter's gone, I'm afraid and no putting it back. But I'll say one thing for it: they've never called bingo there. When telly came in and the cinemas slumped, the old Odeon continued to show films; somehow it came through it, but not without its share of scars.

These days... well, you could plaster and paint all you liked, and you still wouldn't cover up all the wrinkles. It would be like an old woman putting on her war-paint: she'd still come out mutton dressed as lamb. But that's the old Odeon: even with the lights up full, the place seems so dim as to be almost misty. Misty, yes, with that clinging miasma of old places. Not haunted, no, but old and creaking and about ready to be pulled down. Or maybe my eyes weren't so good after all, or perhaps there's a layer of dust on the light-bulbs in the high ceiling...

I went upstairs (taking it easy, you know, and leaning on my stick a bit) and headed for my usual seat near the back. And sure enough the young 'uns were right there ahead of me, not in my row but the one behind, at the very back—all very quiet and coy, they were—where they'd chosen one of the double seats. But I hadn't noticed them buying sweets or popcorn at the kiosk in the shabby foyer, so maybe they'd stay that way right through the show: nice and quiet.

Other patrons came upstairs, all heading for the front where there was a little more leg-room and they could lean on the mahogany balcony and look down on

the screen. When the lights started to go down in that slow way of theirs, there couldn't have been more than two dozen people in all up there, and most of them in the front two rows. Me and the kids, we had the back entirely to ourselves. It was a poor showing even for a Wednesday; maybe there'd be more people in the cheap seats downstairs.

In the old days this was the part I'd liked the best: the lights dimming, organ music (but only recorded, even in my time), and the curtains on stage slowly swishing open to reveal a dull, pearly, vacant screen. Then there'd be *The Queen* and the curtains would close again while the lights died completely. Followed by a supporting film, a cartoon, the trailers, and finally the feature film. Oh, yes—and between the cartoon and the main show there'd be an intermission, when the ice-cream ladies would come down the aisles with their trays. And at the end, *The Queen* again. Funny thing, but I can't go back as far as *The King*. I mean, I can, but my memory can't or won't! And even remembering what I can, I'm not sure I have it exactly right.

That's what getting old does to you. Anyway, the whole thing from going in to coming out would last two and a half to maybe three whole hours! That was value.

Nowadays... you get the trailer, local advertisements, the feature film—and that's it. Or if you're lucky there might be a short supporting picture. And here's me saying I was surprised at the poor turnout.

Well, the trailers weren't much, and the local ads were totally colourless and not even up to date—Paul's Unisex Hairdressing Salon had shut down months ago! Then the briefest of brief intervals when the lights came half-way up; and suddenly it dawned on me that I hadn't heard a peep out of the young couple behind me in the back row. Well, maybe the very faintest whisper or giggle or two. Certainly nothing to complain about.

The seats were stepped down in tiers from the back to the balcony, so that my row of seats was maybe six inches lower than theirs. I sneaked a backward glance and my eyes trapped just a snapshot of the two sitting there very close, wasting half their seat, the girl crammed in one corner with the pale lad's black-clad arm thrown lightly round her red-clad shoulders. And his fish-eyes behind their thick lenses, swivelling to meet mine, expressionless but probably wishing I'd go away. Then it was dark again and the titles rolling, and me settling down to enjoy this old picture, along with one or two old-fashioned memories.

That was when it started; the carrying-on in the back row. Of course I had seen it coming: when I'd glanced back at them, those kids had still been wearing their rain-macs. You don't have to be a dirty old man to see through that old ploy. It's amazing what can go on—or come off—under a rain-mac.

Very soon buttons would slowly be giving way, one by one, to trembly, groping fingers under the shiny plastic; garments would be loosened, warm, naked flesh cautiously exposed—but not to view.

No usherette's torch beam would find them out, and certainly not the prying eyes of some old duffer in the row in front. Indeed, the fact that I was there probably added to their excitement.

It amused me to think of myself as a prop in their loveplay, a spanner in their wet works, whom they must somehow deceive even knowing that I wasn't deceived.

And all the time this sick-looking excuse for a youth pretending the exploratory hand had nothing to do with him, and the girl pretending to be completely unaware of its creeping advance toward her nipples. And they'd only be its first objective. All of this assuming, of course, that they were just beginners. Oh, yes—it's a funny business, love in the back row of a cinema.

First there was the heavy breathing. Ah, but there's heavy breathing and there's heavy breathing!

And the moaning, very low at first but gradually becoming more than audible. I quickly changed my mind, restructured the scenario I'd devised for them. They weren't new to it, these two; by now all the buttons would be loose, and just about everything else for that matter! No exploratory work here. This was old ground, gone over many, many times before, together or with others; no prelude but a full-blown orchestration, which would gradually build to a crescendo.

Would they actually do it, I wondered? Right there in the back row? Fifteen minutes ago I'd seen myself as some sort of obstacle they'd have to overcome; now I was thinking they didn't give a damn about me, didn't care that I was there at all. I might as well not exist for these two, not here, not tonight. They had the darkness and each other—what the hell was the presence of one old man, who was probably deaf anyway?

A knee had found its way up onto the curved collar of my seat back; I felt its gentle pressure, then its vibration starting up like a mild electric current, building to a throb that came right through the wood and the padding to my shoulders. A knee-trembler, we'd called it in my day, when the body's passion is too great to be contained. And all the time the moaning increasing in pitch, until it rose just a little above the whirring of the projector where it aimed its white, flickering curtain of beams at the screen to form the moving pictures.

It dawned on me that I was a voyeur. Without even looking at them I was party to their every action. But an unwilling party... wasn't I? I had come here to watch a film, not to be caught up in the animal excitement of lusting lovers. And yet I was caught up in it!

They'd aroused me—me, an old man. With their panting and moaning and slobbering. I was sweating with their sweat and shaking with their vibrations; and all I could do was sit there, stricken and trembling like a man immobilized as by the touch of some strange female's hand in his most private place; yes, actually feeling as if some unknown woman had taken the seat next to mine and started to fondle me! That's how engrossed I had become with what was happening behind me, there in the back row.

Suddenly I was startled to realize that we were into the last reel. My God!—but what had happened here? Where had my film and my memories gone? A little bit of nostalgia was all I had wanted. And I'd missed it all, everything, because of them.

Them...

Why, I could even smell them now! Musty, sweet, sweaty, sexual, biological! I could smell sex! And a mouth gobbling away at flesh only inches from my ears! And a frantic gasping coming faster and faster, bringing pictures of some half-exhausted dog steaming away on a bitch!

Lovers? Animal excitement? They were animals! Young animals—and right now they were feasting on each other like... like vampires! Oh, I suppose you could call it petting, kissing, „canoodling“—but it wasn't the kind I used to do.

Not the kind me and my lass had indulged in, all those years ago. Kissing? I could hear them sucking at each other, foaming away like hard acid eating into soft wood. And suddenly I was angry.

Angry with myself, with them, with everything. The film had only fifteen minutes to run and everything felt... ruined. Well, now I'd ruin it for them. For him, anyway. You won't come, you young bugger! I thought. You've denied me my pleasure, and now I'll deny you yours.

Abruptly I turned the top half of my body, my head, and spat out: „Now listen, you two—“

They were like one person, fused together, almost prone on their long seat. The hoods of their macs were up and crushed together, and I swear that I saw steam—the smoke of their sex—escaping from the darkness where their faces were locked like tightly-clasped hands. The slobbering stopped on the instant, and a moment later... I heard a growl!

No, a snarl! A warning not to interfere.

Oh, pale and sickly he might have seemed, but he was young and I was old. His bones would bend where mine would break like twigs. I could feel his contempt like a physical thing; I had been feeling it for the last ninety minutes. Of course, for who else but a contemptuous lout would have dared all of this with me sitting there right in front of him? And the girl was just as bad if not worse!

„I... I... I'm disgusted!“ I mumbled. And then I quickly turned my face back to the screen, and watched the rest of the film through a wash of hot, shameful tears.

Just before the lights went up I thought I heard them leave. At least I heard light footsteps treading the carpet along the back row, receding. Of course it could be the girl, on her own, going to „tidy herself up“ in the Ladies. And because he might still be there behind me, sneering at me, I didn't look to see.

Then the film was over, and as the people down front began filing out, still I sat there. Because I could still feel someone behind me, hot and salty. Because it might be him and he'd look at me, fishy-eyed and threatening, through those steamed-up glasses of his.

Eventually I had to make a move. Maybe they'd both gone after all and I was just an old coward. I stood up, glanced into the back row, and saw-God! What had he done to her?

The rain mac was open top to bottom. She—what was left of her—was slumped down inside it.

There was very little flesh on her face, just raw red. Breasts had gone, right down to steaming ribs. The belly was open, eviscerated, a laid back gash that opened right down to the spread thighs. There were no innards, no sexual parts left at all down there. If I hadn't seen her before, I couldn't even have said it was a girl at all.

These were my thoughts before I noticed the true colour of the mac. I had only thought it was red at first glance, because my mind hadn't been able to accept so much red that wasn't plastic. And I saw his specs, crushed and broken on the blackened, blood-soaked baize of the double seat...

That's my statement, Sergeant, and there's nothing else I can tell you—except that there's something terrible loose in this town that eats living guts and looks like a pretty girl.

