By Gary D. Rhodes

It was as if the passage of ten years became a circle, rather than a straight line. In 1936, Bela Lugosi’s piercing eyes stared at a change in the film industry. He appeared in only one new horror movie that year, The Prince of Dark (1936), which premiered in January. He also portrayed criminals in one feature, Invisible Ray (1936), which premiered in January, and the was grateful for a change in the film industry. He appeared as the Hollywood studios let the genre grind to a halt. It would be another two years before Lugosi worked in the non-scream Universal horror film with Son of Frankenstein (1939), relying in the interim on the movie serial (500 Coast Guard in 1937) and on the stage (Tovarich, also in 1937) for work.

One decade later, Lugosi experienced a similar situation. He starred in only one horror film in 1946, Sacred to Death, which would not be released until the following year. He also played a criminal in Genius at Work (1946). Once again, the Hollywood horror film temporarily came to an end, at least as far as Lugosi was concerned. Two years would pass before he would return to the Universal horror film genre, and even then it would be in a horror-comedy (Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein in 1948). In the meantime, Lugosi once again turned to the stage.

Despite the apparent repetitions, however, the post-war period was different for Lugosi than the late thirties. His appearance in Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein did not reinvigorate his film career, as had Son of Frankenstein. That meant Lugosi was particularly dependent on other, non-cinematic work. Despite his small number of television appearances in the late forties, Lugosi did not find a lasting home in the medium, no more than he had ever found on radio.

While it is tempting to focus on Lugosi’s poor decisions and bad luck, it is easy to overlook those moments when fortune smiled at him. His lack of film work post-war was a problem, no doubt, but it coincided with a rise in the number and profile of American summer stock performances, allowing him to find more work than he had in, say, 1937 and 1938. For Lugosi, summer stock meant the opportunity to earn $500 or more per week with not one, but two, different plays. Dracula and Arsenic and Old Lace. More than any other kind of work, summer stock served him quite well from 1947 to 1950. In addition to a good salary, Lugosi received respect from most audiences, from many critics, and from his fellow performers. His productions often followed or preceded those of other stars appearing in stock performances at the same theater, ranging from Paul Lukas to Sylvia Sydney.

Those were generally happy experiences for Lugosi, financially and otherwise. But his era in stock performances—except for a brief return in a 1954 version of Arsenic and Old Lace—to an end during 1958. The reasons were many, perhaps. Certainly, his departure for England that year caused an interruption in his summer stock career. By the time he returned to America, his age and declining health had taken a toll. And—though he seems to have appeared at only a small number of the many summer (and winter) stock venues in the United States—the fact that Lugosi had already spent three years playing in repeat performances of the same two plays may have made him less exciting to book.

How many summer stock performances did Lugosi do? Surely, this is in question, as no catalogue of all American summer (or winter) stock performances exists. Many attempts to tell Lugosi’s life story hardly mention his work in this arena, if at all. One key to unlocking this period of Lugosi’s career came, thanks to the published memories of a few persons who knew him: Richard Gordon, for example, who saw him in a version of Arsenic and Old Lace, and Simon Oakland, who performed in stock with Lugosi in Norwich, Connecticut.

Those examples led me to investigate Lugosi’s summer stock career in some detail in the early 1990s, squinting page by page at the New Yorker and the New York Times, both of which listed New England-area summer stock performances. That meant reading about hundreds of plays, my eyes going blurred until those rare moments of success, stumbling across information about previously unknown Draculas, previously unknown versions of “I killed him because he said I looked like Bela Lugosi.” The process uncovered many “new” Lugosi credits, along with a number of happy accidents, as when David Burston (whom I interviewed because of his father’s connection to Lugosi) revealed that he had himself appeared with Lugosi in summer stock in Denver, Colorado.

Denver, Colorado: the city underscored an important problem. The New Yorker and New York Times did not usually cover Lugosi’s summer stock performances outside of New England (and in fact did not always mention some of his appearances in that region). Trade publications like Variety did not report on most of them, either. What all of this means is that those of us who study Lugosi’s history have realized that he likely did more work—perhaps much more—than we have found. Buried somewhere in yellowing newspaper pages are more treasures waiting to be discovered.

But the digital age means that some of those newspapers—another increasing number of them as each week passes—are being digitally scanned such that they are keyword searchable. The Internet has become the newest tool for those of us who dig in the graveyard of history. While finishing my latest book on Lugosi (Bela Lugosi: Dreams and Nightmares), the online archives of various newspapers helped me to add more summer stock credits to the list. Such findings can then lead to more discoveries. After learning that Lugosi appeared in a 1947 version of Dracula in Litchfield, Connecticut, for example, I was able to locate interviews with a woman who had been present in the audience; her husband had taken the official photographs of the play, which she still possessed.

These kinds of discoveries continue for me, one of the most exciting is a 1950 summer stock version of Dracula that my longtime friend Bill Kaffenberger—the man who originally unearthed the fact that Bela Lugosi had appeared in newspapers covering the San Diego Exposition (1933) and the filming of Black Friday (1940)—recently made by searching an online archive of Florida newspapers. When he contacted me, my mind immediately went to an old clipping I have in which Lugosi claimed to have worked in a nightclub in Miami. On at least three occasions, I searched through microfilms of newspapers, week by week, finding nothing. I