

'The Blood Countess' review: Isabelle Huppert sinks her teeth into Ulrike Ottinger's lavish vampire spoof

BY **JONATHAN ROMNEY** | 16 FEBRUARY 2026

Ottinger's extravagant Berlin Special Gala is pitched for cult and crossover appeal



**SOURCE: BERLIN INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
'THE BLOOD COUNTESS'**

Dir. Ulrike Ottinger. Austria/Luxembourg/Germany. 2026. 119mins

In a vaulted subterranean lake, a scarlet-cloaked Isabelle Huppert floats regally into view on a blood-
eral barge – just before a boatload of tourists comes drifting around the corner. It's a typically
ng touch in the genially farcical *The Blood Countess*, an extravagant horror spoof from German

counterculture doyenne Ulrike Ottinger.

Huppert lets rip, but with characteristic poise

This Berlinale Special Gala is Ottinger's first film in six years, following her 2020 documentary *Paris Calligrammes*. With Huppert leading a high-profile cast, the film offers a chance at relatively mainstream crossover success for a legendary film-maker and long-term Berlinale favourite (*Freak Orlando, Joan of Arc of Mongolia*) whose devoted following has always been very much in the queer/alternative bracket. Mischievously but lovingly sending up vampire lore, as well as Huppert's lofty image, it's a slight but highly marketable treat.

Improbably, the film is co-written with Nobel Prize-winning Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek, author of *The Piano Teacher* – although she and Ottinger have previously collaborated for the stage. The setting is Vienna, supposedly in the present, although the costumes, décor and elements such as Huppert's *Nosferatu*-style horse-drawn coach create a pantomime collision of eras.

Huppert plays the notorious Hungarian countess Erszebet Báthory, the alleged blood-drinking aristocrat whose legend has frequently resurfaced on screen (played by, among others, Delphine Seyrig, Paloma Picasso and Julie Delpy in her 2009 *The Countess*). Here Báthory, pausing only to fang a maidenly victim in a U-Bahn toilet, checks into her favourite hotel, where she is reunited with faithful minion Hermine – played with kohl'd eyes and a severe Weimar-era bob by a glowering, scene-stealing Birgit Minichmayr.

The duo set out to find and destroy a McGuffin of a grimoire – an ancient book that can de-vampirise bloodsuckers. As they follow a trail of clues above and below ground, others joining the hunt include two pompous vampirologists, sporting quasi-Victorian garb and preposterous whiskers; the time-honoured tweedy copper (Karl Markovics); and the Countess's gauche, pastry-loving nephew Baron Rudi Bubi von Strudl, 'Bubi' for short, who fends off his own vampiric tendencies by staying vegetarian.

Bubi is played by Thomas Schubert, from Christian Petzold's *Afire*, here wearing contact lenses that match his ludicrous lime-green suits. This long-suffering nebbish is bullied on one hand by his cousin, a cadet devoted to the tradition of duelling, and on the other by his therapist Theobald Tandem (ubiquitous Euro-stalwart Lars Eidinger), who's determined to help Bubi overcome his phobias, even if the lad.

Genre subversion and visual extravagance have always been Ottinger specialities, and here she combines the flamboyant creations of production designer Christina Schaffer and costumier Katarina Forcher with the historic richness of Vienna itself, its Baroque-era glory and grimness – skull-stacked catacombs and all – given a magnificently artificial quality by DoP Martin Gschlacht. Other play on Viennese lore includes a very edible effigy of revered 19th-century Empress Sissi and a culminating showdown on the Prater ferris wheel.

Although it's a less familiar aspect of her career, Huppert has often exulted in broad comic playing, and here she lets rip, but with characteristic poise. Sporting an outrageous collection of gowns and headdresses, and acting in French and German, with occasional Russian and Hungarian ("Fantasztikus!"), she plays the grande dame to the fanciful hilt, albeit in a slightly one-note performance not that different from her silent-era diva in François Ozon's recent *The Crime is Mine*.

Still, she proves a generous team player in an ensemble romp built around various larky set-pieces. They include a brief hammam interlude – Ingres's *Turkish Bath* is just one of many painting references on show - and the indispensable Vampires' Ball. Also featured is a cheeky CGI bat, and Conchita Wurst, the flamboyantly bearded drag artist, singer and Eurovision sensation, raising the crypt roof with her signature power ballad *'Rise Like a Phoenix'*.

As so often happens with spoofs, there are occasional significant lapses in energy, while the knowing wordplay in character names often falls flat in translation. Still, it's a jovial confection that plays both as an ironic compendium of Austro-Hungarian history and as a sort of hyper-refined *Carry On Screaming!*

Production companies: Amour Fou, Heimatfilm, Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion

International sales: Magnify, international@magpictures.com

Producers: Alexander Dumreicher-Ivanceanu, Bady Minck, Bettina Brokemper

Screenplay: Ulrike Ottinger, Elfriede Jelinek

Cinematography: Martin Gschlacht

Production design: Christina Schaffer

ng: Pia Dumont

Music: Wolfgang Mitterer

Main cast: Isabelle Huppert, Birgit Minichmayr, Thomas Schubert, Lars Eidinger

