

Director Ulrike Ottinger on Turning Isabelle Huppert Into a Baroque Vampire in 'The Blood Countess': 'She Is Despotic'

'The Blood Countess' world premieres at the Berlin Film Festival and is represented internationally by Magnify.

By Elsa Keslassy ▾



Courtesy of Amour Fou Vienna, Amour Fou Luxembourg, Heimatfilm/P. Domenigg

Premiering in the Berlinale’s Special Gala section, “The Blood Countess” is a baroque vampire mystery starring [Isabelle Huppert](#) as Countess Elizabeth Báthory, the 16th century Hungarian aristocrat branded a serial killer and immortalized in gothic lore.

Inspired by the life and legend of Báthory, the film was written by Ottinger alongside Elfriede Jelinek, the Nobel laureate in literature and author of “The Piano Teacher.” In an interview with *Variety*, Ottinger – whose body of work includes “Madame X – An Absolute Ruler,” “Ticket of No Return” and “Freak Orlando” – reveals that she first conceived the daring project more than 25 years ago.

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“I wrote the screenplay in 1998, in the last century, which sounds crazy now,” the filmmaker says with a laugh. “I have wanted to make this film for a very long time.”

had Huppert in mind for the starring role from the very start. “I have been discussion with Isabelle for nearly 20 years. Several times we thought it could

In Ottinger's reimagining, the countess awakens from a centuries-long beauty sleep and rises from the underworld, embarking on a stylized odyssey through Vienna in search for blood. Accompanied by her devoted maid (played by Birgit Minichmayr), she must protect a mysterious book whose discovery could threaten the vampire species. On her trail are a Báthory relative who is vegetarian (Thomas Schubert), his psychotherapist (Lars Eidinger), two vampirologists, a police inspector and a gallery of eccentrics.

These colorful characters bring some burlesque comic relief to the film. "Everything is built in pairs" in "The Blood Countess," Ottinger says. "The countess and her maid. The young Báthory family rebel, a vegetarian who wants nothing to do with blood, and his terrible therapist, played by Lars. Two pseudo-scientific vampire experts function as a comic duo," she says. The director says she sees humor everywhere in daily life but it "cannot remain naturalistic" in her films. "It has to be structured carefully," she says.

The role offered Huppert is something radically different from her previous films. "What is interesting with Isabelle is that she is usually associated with very psychological, carefully constructed roles. Here, the countess is iconic. It is not a psychological role," Ottinger says. "She is despotic and completely in control of her surroundings," adding that Huppert "brought glamour and elegance to that authority."

Huppert, who has worked in many different languages including English, Italian and Russian, speaks in both French and German in the film. "Huppert worked on her German, while Minichmayr learned French. Their dialogue moves naturally between German and French, as people do when they live between
ures."

more time,” Ottinger admits. “We rehearsed at night and worked constantly when we were not shooting. Everyone was very committed.”

Vienna is also a character in the film, says Ottinger, who explains that the idea for setting the vampire myth there dates back to a trip she took in 1998. Driving from Prague through Bohemia to Vienna, she visited cities that sparked her imagination. “That journey inspired the vampire genre in my mind,” she says. “Vienna’s history is layered and often grotesque. This depth of history was extremely inspiring for writing.”

Like many genre films, the film has a contemporary political resonance. “When I look at today’s world, I see extremely wealthy people investing enormous sums to live forever,” Ottinger says. “It feels vampiric — refusing to accept human destiny. We are born and we die. To deny that is hubris.”

Despite the resurgence of vampire movies and TV series in recent years, Ottinger says she did not attempt to update her script to fit the trend. “I did not follow genre norms. I used the vampire genre freely and artistically, not in a conventional way,” she says of the movie which Magnify is representing internationally at the European Film Market.

As for what comes next, the director is already looking ahead with an “ambitious and expensive” project set in the diamond business for which she’s been in talks with Anjelica Huston, among others.

