



# Ambassador's Activities

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Speech by *HE* Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the ceremony to award the insignia of  
*Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*  
to Sir Christopher Lee, CBE, CStJ,

French Residence, 16 December 2011

*Cher* Sir Christopher,

Or should I say, *cher* Count Dracula, Count Dooku, Scaramanga and Saruman?

*Cher* Tim Burton,

Dear friends,

It's a huge pleasure and a great honour for me to confer on Sir Christopher Lee today the insignia of *Commandeur* of the *Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.

This is the highest grade of insignia in this ministerial order of the French Republic, awarded to those people who have distinguished themselves through their artistic or literary output or the contribution they have made to promoting the arts and literature in France and worldwide. It's an order which, in the words of General de Gaulle's great Minister of Culture, André Malraux, is "respected and coveted by artists, writers and all creative professionals".

Today France honours a towering artist, an exceptional actor who has brought a multitude of characters to life on the screen, many of them the "villains" of the story – but distinguished villains, elegant embodiments of Evil.

To see all the films you've played in would take over a year. The number is so high it varies according to the source: 240? 275? more than 300? I'm not sure even you can keep an accurate count of them. In any case, I wish you many more, for the enjoyment of the French public, who respect and adore you.

*Cher* Sir Christopher, you were born in London in 1922, the son of a lieutenant colonel in the 60<sup>th</sup> King's Royal Rifle Corps and Contessa Estelle Marie Carandini di Sarzano. After an education that took you from Switzerland to London, but also to Eton College and the University of Oxford, you went to serve as a volunteer in Finland in 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War. You then joined the Royal Air Force, taking part in special forces operations with the very famous SOE (Special Operations Executive). When the war ended your rank was flight lieutenant.

You always speak of this period with great modesty and discretion, admitting only to the fact that you served in the special forces. You sometimes add that, during the war, you saw enough horror to last you the rest of your life – a remark full of black humour when one considers your future repertoire, but which also says a great deal about your humanity, realism and modesty.

Freed from your military obligations, you began your acting career and landed your first role in 1947, in Terence Young's film "Corridor of Mirrors". You've said that in the course of the following years, directors hesitated to give you roles because of your height, which made the other male actors seem too small alongside you. It was doubtless an absurd reason, but for the next 10 years it meant you weren't really given a chance to display your full talent. You had the determination to persevere and the intelligence to put that period to good use to learn your trade as an actor. You said you did what was important: looked, listened and learned. So much so that you were ready when your turn came.

When your turn did come, 10 years later, you yourself noted ironically that it was to play a character who didn't get a single line! Terence gave you the monster's role in "Frankenstein" in 1957. You later worked with him in "The Mummy" in 1959 and, before that, "Dracula" in 1958, which turned you into a

global star and fantasy film icon. As Hammer Studios' headline act, you played characters previously brought to life by other giants like Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff. You were Dracula 10 times, but also Fu Manchu and Rasputin. And you brought a really unique aura to those characters: what one of your biographers has called the elegance of the shadows. You managed to embody Evil with such distinction that for a long time you found it difficult to escape the repertoire you excelled in: you were constantly blackmailed by your producers, who predicted the studio would go bust the day you hung up the Carpathian monster's cloak.

Fortunately, you didn't remain a prisoner of that success, and your filmography boasts an impressive variety of roles. For example, you were, in turn, Sherlock Holmes's brother in Billy Wilder's film ("The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes") and Scaramanga, the fearsome enemy of James Bond, in "The Man with the Golden Gun". You're also the step-cousin of Ian Fleming, creator of Her Majesty's most famous agent, played in "The Man with the Golden Gun" by your colleague Sir Roger Moore, who, like you now, ranks among the select group of your great fellow countrymen who have been awarded the insignia of *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres*.

But you've said your favourite role was that of the founder of Pakistan, Jinnah, whom you played in Jamil Dehlavi's film, alongside James Fox, who took the part of Lord Mountbatten. The choice testifies to your interest in complex historical figures and situations, far from the supposed Manichaeism of the roles in which people have sometimes sought to typecast you.

Since the 1990s, a new generation of film-makers has put your talent in the service of globally successful productions. George Lucas gave you the role of Count Dooku in the second and third episodes of the "Star Wars" saga. You were Saruman in another worldwide hit, "The Lord of the Rings", becoming an

icon for the children of those who had loved you as Dracula. And since “Sleepy Hollow” you’ve become one of the favourite actors of our friend Tim Burton, a director beloved of the French and whom I’d like to thank for being with us. In particular, he gave you roles in “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” and “Alice in Wonderland”. You who have known many giants of Hollywood regard him as an exceptional director.

In the course of this career, you’ve had various opportunities to express on screen your taste for French culture and the French language, which you speak marvellously. As early as 1952 you appeared in John Huston’s classic film about the life of Toulouse-Lautrec, “Moulin Rouge”. In the 1970s you enabled a global audience to discover or rediscover the story of The Three Musketeers, in Richard Lester’s version and then in “The Return of the Musketeers” by Jean-Pierre Cassel. You were in a Dracula spoof (“Dracula père et fils”) by Edouard Molinaro and then in “La Révolution française” by Robert Enrico, a film in which you were kind enough to play the executioner Sanson, who put to death Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and so many others! Finally, very recently, Martin Scorsese sought you out for his latest film, “Hugo”, currently showing on London’s screens, partly shot in Paris and inspired by the life of the great French director Georges Méliès; the Institut français in the UK has just celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Méliès’ birth. In it you play M. Labisse, an amiable Paris bookseller – far removed from the terrifying characters who previously made you famous.

*Cher* Sir Christopher, a few months ago the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, the BAFTA – whose Chief Executive, Amanda Berry, I welcome here today – awarded you an Academy Fellowship, the most prestigious distinction in British cinema, previously received by the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock and Elizabeth Taylor. France today awards

you the insignia of *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres* as a tribute to your huge talent, your great charm, your role in our cultural relations, your remarkable mastery of French and your towering life's work.

Finally, this high distinction is testimony to the admiration and gratitude that a film-loving people like the French people feel for a legend of world cinema and a very dear friend.

*Sir Christopher Frank Carandini Lee, au nom du ministre de la Culture et de la Communication de la République française, Frédéric Mitterrand, et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres./.*