

This Dracula won't scare you

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Review

With all those scary goings-on onstage, you wouldn't think your mind would wander. Yet I found my thoughts drifting off, from time to time, during the opening night of "The Passion of Dracula" at the Birmingham Theatre.

The show has to be scary but not so frightening that adults will leave the theater feeling depressed, or that children will have nightmares later. The terrors depicted in "Dracula" have to be on a comic plane, not hitting at gut level.

Putting together a "Gothic entertainment," as the show is billed, means laughs supersede reactions of fear.

You don't for a minute believe any of that stuff about vampires, the undead who sleep through the day and get through the night by draining the blood from living victims.

IT WAS DIFFICULT for the cast to hold my attention, despite the generally high quality of the acting. Comic lines are not especially witty, and the

melodrama often is heavy handed.

Josef Greco, the great Spanish dancer, is an evil-looking Count Dracula, the Transylvanian nobleman who has come to England to study the (silly) English folklore.

Dracula has a heavy accent and a rough voice. He has a mop of oily black hair with not-to-be-believed sideburns. Naturally, he's dressed entirely in black, with a cape.

Our first sight of Dracula is the shadow of his bat wings outside the terrace doors adjoining a doctor's study. When Dracula enters to greet the assembled doctors and their patient, Wilhelmina, he is in human form.

During the play, Greco flourishes his cape a few times but gets to dance rarely a step. It's too bad. The script is so far-out a scene where Dracula dances solo or with his prospective bride-to-be could have been fun. Why limit the talents of the star?

GRECO is deservedly frightful as Count Dracula. Dark-haired Lynn Watson, with a Gibson-girl hairdo and Victorian draped garments, looks the part of the now-anemic heroine Wilhelmina whom Dracula has selected as his bride.

This Mina asks her new friend, a London newspaper reporter Jonathan Harker, to call her Willie. She is a spirited young lady, not the remembered image of Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula."

She has a liberated quality that probably was given her by the playwrights, Bob Hall and David Richmond, who wrote "The Passion of Dracula."

Ms. Watson meets the challenges of her role, which call for her repeatedly to range from wan to wanton. A classic heroine, the actress plumps up the characterization.

By far the most terrifying individual in the play is not Dracula but Renfield, the madman from the nearby sanitarium who eats flies and other live, small creatures. Kevin McClarnon, with his black-rimmed eyes, controls

the stage in his scenes. Renfield calls Dracula "master."

PETER MURPHY, trim of mustache, is the English Lord Godalming who is in love with the Austrian shrink, Dr. Helga Van Zandt. He has an especially well-done scene mourning his temporarily lost lady love (a victim of the count).

The rest of the good cast includes K. Lyne O'Dell as Dr. Cedric Seward, I. M. Hobson as Professor Van Helsing, Jim Stubbs as journalist Jonathan Harker, Victoria Boothby as Dr. Helga Van Zandt and William Buell as Jenson.

One of the funniest bits didn't get a laugh but comes when the professor, urgency in his voice, tells the butler to get all the spreaded garlic and survivor's stakes—the vampire-fighting equipment—"And hurry! Everyone's standing around, while the servant does the important stuff."

"The Passion of Dracula" continues at the Birmingham Theatre through Saturday, Nov. 18.

Dracula stalks fun in students' show

By CRAIG REYNOLDS

It surfaces annually in the harvest season, rising from an unnamed bog of old legends and stale ideas.

It is Ted Tiller's play of "Dracula" and it is most recently resurrected by the Student Enterprise Theatre of Oakland University. And it is sort of fun, even if it is a poorly structured and written work.

What Tiller's characters lack in—you should excuse the phrase—flesh and blood, the author attempts to make up in a string of limp double entendres and hackneyed speeches from the dawn of recorded drama—around 1930 with "Helen Trent."

Thomas A. Aston has placed "Dracula" on the cozy Barn Theatre Stage with much attention to character and none at all to pace, mystery or suspense. The Halloween night opening performance plodded determinedly toward midnight with few lights but plenty of words and evasive non-action on the compact two-story-high set.

IN THE TITLE ROLE, David Kelm appeared properly skeletal in pearl-gray tux with de rigeur black cape, but he used his hands far better than his voice.

Jane Schulte enjoyed a few good turns—and near collapses and a shriek or two—in the comic character of Sybil Seward.

David Nelson's stiffness as Jonathan Harker was more of his own doing than that of the character's proper upbringing, and John Cowan was sufficiently squirrely but not nearly lunatic enough as Renfield, the man who eats flies and talks to the empty (?) air.

On opening night, Gary DeVear appeared as a properly reserved and distinguished Dr. Arthur Seward, though his absence from the control booth as sound designer may have had something to do with the all-but-inaudible effects from that area.

Two standout performances were given by Gerald Back as Heinrich Van Helsing and Maureen McDewitt as Mina, object of Dracula's pointed affections. Back transformed Van Helsing into a Palafat who cares, a man of great appetite for living, learning, and most of all—eating. He also has marvelous control over what promises to be an excellent voice.

IN TILLER'S WRITING, Mina must flip-flop between being an adoring simp and prowling vamp, transformations which Ms. McDewitt effectively made with smoothness and clarity. Indeed, grasping after Jonathan as either bewildered innocent or hungering wanton, Ms. McDewitt brought a full measure of womanly reality to a very badly written part.

Gerald Back also furnished the set design, artfully manipulating two levels of scenery into the Barn Theatre. Painting and construction were executed in the summer stock slapdash method.

Thomas Harsen had some fun with nicely toned lighting and requisite special effects, including a few well-directed bats.

The costuming was comfortable, but designer Sony Keller-Briskin should know that long ties do not go with tuxedo jackets.

"Dracula" continues Friday-Sunday, Nov. 10-12, and Thursday-Sunday, Nov. 16-19, at the Barn Theatre on the OU campus near Rochester.

Contest offers musical comedy award

Applicants are being sought throughout the nation for entries in the 1978-79 competition for the David B. Marshall Award in Musical Theatre, announced by Roland Wilson, general manager of the Professional Theatre Program (PTP) at the University of Michigan.

Named for U-M alumnus David B. Marshall and established by a gift from the Contempo Communications Foundation for the Arts, Inc., the award offers a stipend of up to \$2,000, one of the largest monetary awards available for gifted young playwrights, lyricists and composers.

The David B. Marshall Award, established two years ago, has

received much national attention and has been cited by Variety, Back Stage, Show Business and several other national theater publications.

In establishing this award for new musical plays in American theater, Marshall has said: "American musical theater needs new vision. It needs to dare, to take risks, if it is once again to take hold of our imagination. The musical theater is a powerful medium with which to create joy, to celebrate life. Our hope is that we are on the threshold of a great creative adventure. We welcome all who wish to lead the way."

Three honorable mentions were named in the 1977-78 competition.

Those awarded honorable mentions were Kelly Hamilton, Albert Reid and Harry Haldaire.

The application deadline for this season's award is Jan. 31, 1979. In accordance with seeking high quality work, if no manuscript is considered worthy of

an award, no award will be made.

For application forms and more information for the 1978-79 award, write Marshall Award, PTP Office, Michigan League Building, 227 S. Ingalls, Ann Arbor 48109, or call 763-3213.

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