



This was only the second theatrical performance of *Dracula* I've seen, the other being TR Warszawa's *Nosferatu* at the Barbican last year. I know, I know it's disgraceful, call myself a member of the Dracula Society – look I've been busy alright – well sort of. The point is, it was good! Not completely good, but nearly. It also raised a lot of questions about the issue of trying to adapt *Dracula* for theatre, film and television.

Once seated, we were met with a fairly sparse set constructed from scaffolding, which reminded me of the visual style of the film *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. The look of it was sort of, building site meets German expressionism. A sparse set can work well if the performance is good enough, leaving more room for the imagination. My heart sank slightly when Jonathan Harker and Mina began explaining themselves and I thought this was going to be a humorous, slightly cartoonish adaptation of the book. It would be a lot of work to do a completely serious version of *Dracula* in this day and age (although well worth trying) when many of the characters' emotional lives and attitudes can at times seem absurd to the modern reader. I was reminded of Francis Ford Coppola's film version of *Dracula* in which he chose a humorous, cartoon-like hyper-real aesthetic. In fact film hung heavily over this particular production – there were references to it throughout the evening. Look, I'll level with you, there are a lot of people a lot better and more succinct at writing theatre reviews than I am. What I wanted to do with this article is expand my review into a wider discussion about the issue of interpretations of *Dracula*!

The two things that stood out most for me were John Ginman's adaptation – a skilful and thoughtful one that stuck closely to the original book – and the central performance by Paul Kevin-Taylor as the Count and Van Helsing. Kevin-Taylor's performance seemed to take in the best elements from the major film versions and other visual references, combining them into something very effective. His cloak appeared to be a combination of Murnau's *Nosferatu*



and something more traditional. There were moments when his performance reminded me of Klaus Kinski in Werner Herzog's remake of *Nosferatu* with a hint of the sexual predator in relation to Harker. In an intensely physical performance he moved at times as if he were a puppet in some German expressionist nightmare in choreographed positions, hunched with long extending fingernails. At other times he was more reminiscent of Bela Lugosi, his posture very upright and with a hint of the cold ancient Transylvanian nobleman. In the middle of the set was a white angled screen that the Count could disappear behind creating some nice shadow theatre effects. This again reminded me of Murnau's *Nosferatu* which used shadows and theatrical techniques extensively, and also of Gary Oldman's shadow in Coppola's version that seemed to be able to move independently of his physical presence.

Each cast member played more than one character but the problematic issue for me was Dracula also doubling as Van Helsing. Van Helsing is Dracula's nemesis and vice versa, so they have to confront each other. The fact that they did not, missed one of the great character dynamics of the original book. It has always seemed to me that the most interesting characters that have the greatest scope for interpretation, are Dracula, Renfield and Van Helsing, whose psychology and motives you are compelled to question and examine. I enjoyed Will Bryant as Renfield and his performance brought to mind Dwight Frye in the 1931 Universal Films version, manic and comically extreme. Paul Kevin-Taylor's portrayal of Van Helsing was again very interesting. He played it quite straight in contrast to the comedic angle of the other characters. Many of his scenes elevated the Victorian melodrama to heightened levels of claustrophobic intensity. It was nice to see a straightforward version of Van Helsing, in contrast to some recent portrayals, for example Anthony Hopkins' wildly over the top performance in the Coppola film (to be honest, I found that whole film very disappointing).

Moving on, this adaptation did seem self-aware and thought through. In choosing to interpret Stoker's novel you have to take into consideration that whether you like it or not, you are dealing with more than just the book. *Dracula* is a massive reference point in western popular culture largely due to film and television. There are many who have not read the book, but most have seen a film or TV version of some sort and it is here that *Dracula* has been extended and expanded for a mass audience in a myriad of very different ways. Interpreting *Dracula* can be a complicated task. The last time I re-read the original book I did wonder if this wasn't just a good versus evil Christian morality tale – Dracula is an evil bloodsucking vampire and he gets his comeuppance, end of story! And perhaps all the stuff that seethes beneath this Christian morality tale was not intentional but subconscious. Stoker was a man of his time, there were many issues in the air. It was the height of the industrial revolution, a time of huge social change, displacement and alienation. It is possible to interpret *Dracula* as being a book filled with anxiety about a world in the midst of a massive structural shift. In this production Harker makes an explicit reference to this when arriving in Romania. He says, "I'm at the edge of the world I know. This place feels frighteningly strange." Dracula has often been seen as representing "The Other", a figure onto which we can project our fears, anxieties and fantasies. "The Other" has to come from somewhere unknown, far away or that we know very little about to be effective as a foil for white western European fantasies. Asia was fetishised in this way in mainstream Hollywood films throughout the 1970s and 80s stereotyping Eastern mysticism, martial arts and so on. In fact, in recent times Eastern Europe has been revisited as a place of terror. In the film *Hostel* young American



backpackers are seduced by exotic young women, drugged and then tortured in a post-soviet concrete warehouse, manned by shaven headed thugs confirming many stereotypical fears about former Eastern Bloc countries.

There are of course many more ways to interpret *Dracula*. It can be seen in Freudian terms as a story of repressed Victorian sexuality or with a feminist or gender bias where Lucy is essentially punished for being an erotic, sexual woman, where there is an undertone of homoeroticism – Dracula can be gay or straight or both, he sucks blood out of both men and women. Alternatively it can be seen as a deeply conflicted cry of angst about the new modern era. Van Helsing claims to be a man of science and the book uses blood transfusions, a revolutionary medical technique at the time, but they don't work! Dracula in the end is defeated by good old fashioned methods—the stake, the crucifix and the Bible. This idea is then turned on its head by the idea that Dracula is undone by the train and the modern machine as he is chased back across Europe, outrun and then ambushed. Dracula becomes a symbol of nature about to be tamed by man's industrial might, Quincy Morris, an American, a symbol of modernism and the new world.

There is the Marxist approach where Dracula is a figure of an old ruling class, an autocratic repressor of the Romanian peasants or workers sucking the blood out of them and exploiting them. There's xenophobia, where Dracula is basically Johnny foreigner coming over here and polluting everything with his nasty foreign ways.

To round all this up I will end with an anecdote. On a recent trip to Whitby I made my way up to the ruined abbey after midnight and initially had difficulty convincing those with me to climb the wall and enter the grounds. So at first, I had to do it alone. It was a long walk to the abbey from my chosen entry point. When I got there and stood alone, surrounded by the enormous Gothic ruin long after midnight I thought of the Count and wondered whether Stoker didn't accidentally or unintentionally tap into something deeper still. There were shadows everywhere, reflected by the lights placed intermittently along the ground, shining up into the darkness above me illuminating different sections of the abbey. It seemed there were shadows going back a long way deep into the turbulent history of that place.

The shadow was something I couldn't stop thinking about on the return trip to London. I began to do some research remembering fragments of things I had read many years ago and eventually found what I was looking for. The Freudian definition of the shadow is an unconscious aspect of the human psyche containing characteristics an individual is unable to acknowledge or deal with. They are then repressed and in the unconscious. Carl Jung offered a different interpretation. The Jungian shadow can include everything outside of the light of consciousness. Much of human ingenuity, creativity, imagination and innovation comes from unconscious processes. Jung wrote, "everyone carries a shadow, it may in part be a link to one's more primitive and animal instincts, in spite of its function as a reservoir for human darkness – or perhaps because of this – the shadow is the seat of creativity." so that for some, or many, it maybe "the dark side of his being, his siniste shadow represents the true spirit of life."

This may seem like quite a dark idea, but the idea that confronting the darkest aspects of the human soul may reveal its polar opposite – a positive potential, runs through many stories, poems, myths and human dramas. It could also be seen as an overly optimistic or romantic view, but



romance is after all at the heart of the Gothic tradition.

Dracula haunts the borderlands between dream and reality and for many is a way into the imagination. In a world of empty consumerism, narcissism and a life cut off from deeper meaning, we need the imagination. Make of this what you will, it is ultimately just another interpretation.

At the end of John Ginman's adaptation, after Dracula has been killed, the houselights came up and the Count stepped forward into the front row of the audience. Addressing us directly he explained, "I am not dead, I will live on for as long as you need me." (I'm paraphrasing, I can't remember exactly what he said.) "For as long as you need my kisses, for me to live out your secret hidden desires." Then with one final hiss and snarl, the lights were suddenly cut! In answer to whether we need him to live on or not I think I can probably speak for a great many in the Dracula Society and many more besides by responding with a resounding 'yes!'

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