

Theater review: 'Dracula' at Blackfriars

By Leah Stacy @leahstacy

Although Christmas decorations quickly replaced any remnants of Halloween in stores, a large harvest moon hangs low in the sky and the weather has just begun the transition from temperate to bone chilling. With the opening of its second 2017-18 season production, "Dracula," on Halloween, Blackfriars Theatre isn't in a rush to move past the season.

"Dracula," which runs through November 12, is a collaboration between Blackfriars and PUSH Physical Theatre, an award-winning troupe that mixes dance with movement and mime to create performance art. Blackfriars Artistic Director Danny Hoskins has created a few other shows with PUSH over the last decade, including a retelling of "Jekyll and Hyde" during the 2015-16 season. "Dracula" is a reprisal of an adaptation performed at Geva Theatre Center in 2009 (then, Hoskins played Renfield).

The two-hour show, written for the stage by Hoskins, completely reimagines Bram Stoker's classic 1897 novel in ways countless past film and stage adaptations have not. In addition to making more of Renfield's and Dracula's backstories and changing all the other character names to vague monikers -- such as "The Man," "The Maiden," and "The Chosen One" -- the entire narrative in this version is told with voiceover and movement. Because there's still a lot of plot to get through even with these simplifications, video projections and an elaborate web of sound and music cues help drive the narrative forward.

Interestingly, the PUSH founders -- and husband and wife team -- Darren and Heather Stevenson co-direct the production with both Hoskins and Virginia Monte of WallByrd Theatre Co. Monte was brought in both for fresh perspective and for her design chops, specifically when it comes to costumes and props. (It's worth noting that she also worked on a different workshop version of "Dracula" during the 2016 Rochester Fringe Festival.) And while four co-directors may seem like overkill, there was no sense of micromanagement at any point during "Dracula."

The six-person PUSH team is a wonder. Not only is each member a stunning mime, dancer, and performer, but each one has a firm grasp on stage presence. PUSH recently finished touring a version of "Dracula" throughout the United States over the last month, and their deep connection to the production is apparent. There is no low energy, no weakest link, and no lack of passion; rather, PUSH moves as one pulsing unit, supporting and spotlighting one another throughout the performance.

Rick Staropoli, who previously appeared in "Death of a Salesman" (as Howard) and "Annapurna" (Ulysses), plays the manic Renfield to perfection, showing each step of the professor's rapid unraveling into madness. He is the only non-PUSHer in the show, and consequently, the only actor onstage who has a speaking role. Staropoli makes a valiant effort with movement, but he's not a dancer -- the most impressive part about his role is that much of it feels like a one-man show (and not in a scene-stealing fashion, but in a strong-enough-to-carry-it way).



PHOTO BY ANGELA JOHNSON
Darren Stevenson as the terrifying Dracula in a collaborative production between PUSH Physical Theatre and Blackfriars.

"Dracula"

Reviewed Thursday,
November 2

Continues Wednesday,
November 8, through
Sunday, November 12

Blackfriars Theatre, 795
East Main Street

7:30 p.m. Wednesday and
Thursday; 8 p.m. Friday
and Saturday; 2 p.m.
Sunday

\$39.50 general; \$36.50
seniors; \$20 students |
blackfriars.org

The other characters are portrayed through movement and voiceover only, which means some of the greatest roles in the show are those the audience never sees. This is especially true of the Voice of Dracula, played by Jonathan Ntheketha, a local actor and Rochester Institute of Technology staffer. Ntheketha's command of Dracula's authority and menacing timbre are truly chilling, and in turn empower Darren Stevenson's intensity and stage presence in the physical role.

The staging, costumes, and technical aspects of the show are all tailored to an experience that's non-traditional for most theatregoers; this is a show that concentrates on physical artists rather than actors and a minimal set design bursting with video clips, sound effects, and lighting cues. Sound, especially, is crucial to the production's success, and designer Dan Roach -- who also designed the projections -- has done a spectacular job creating the world of "Dracula." In the booth, DJ Stevenson has the important task of hitting every video and sound cue, and he does so without a hitch. But over and over again, the audience will have to suspend expectation and give in to imagination. The dancers become desks, coat hooks, and armchairs. Windows are magically created from shadow and light. Blood is intimated through sound effects.

The only odd moment in the show was during a dance between The Man (Avi Pryntz-Nadworthy) and The Maiden (Heather Stevenson) set to "Can't Help Falling in Love" in the first act. Most of the other songs aren't recognizable and don't have lyrics, so the song seemed out of place and the scene clunky, overall. In act two, a similar scene -- this time between Dracula and The Maiden -- takes place, but this time the music is more thematic, and the scene between the two, who have such a powerful chemistry, is gripping.

Since the administration of Hoskins and Development Manager Mary Tiballi Hoffman began at Blackfriars Theatre, there has been a noticeable turn in the type of theater performed at the space - under Hoskins, the seasons have felt more cutting edge. "Dracula," with all its experimentation, collaboration, and technical bells and whistles, is a testament to that turn.

Tags: Theater, Theater Review, Rochester Theater, Dracula, PUSH Physical Theatre, Blackfriars Theatre, Darren Stevenson, Heather Stevenson, Rick Staropoli

SPEAKING OF...



Katie reviews 'Heathers,' 'Come As You Are,' and PUSH

by Katie Libby



New movement

Rochester's 2017-18 dance season will blend favorites with the unfamiliar.

by Daniel J. Kushner



Waiting in the wings

Stand-out options for the 2017-18 theatrical season.

by Leah Stacy

[More Theater »](#)

[More »](#)

COMMENTS

Subscribe to this thread: By Email With RSS

Subscribe to this thread

Post Comment

LATEST IN THEATER



'The Agitators' explores the friendship of Fred and Sue

by Leah Stacy



Theater review: 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame'

The reinstated Greece Theatre Company stages a next-level production of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" at the Lyric Theatre

by Leah Stacy



Theater review: 'Smart People' at Geva

by Leah Stacy

[More »](#)

MORE BY LEAH STACY



'The Agitators' explores the friendship of Fred and Sue

by Leah Stacy



Theater review: 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame'

The reinstated Greece Theatre Company stages a next-level production of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" at the Lyric Theatre

by Leah Stacy

THEATER | 'The Agitators'

by Leah Stacy

[More »](#)

READERS ALSO LIKED...

Theater review: 'The Devil, The Witch, and The Blacksmith'

by Daniel J. Kushner

WallByrd flies the coop

Virginia Monte and her theater company, WallByrd, have produced successful, unique interpretations of classic theater works. The group is now preparing for an exciting 2017

by Leah Stacy

LATEST IN THEATER



'The Agitators' explores the friendship of Fred and Sue

by Leah Stacy



Theater review: 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame'

The reinstated Greece Theatre Company stages a next-level production of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" at the Lyric Theatre

by Leah Stacy



Theater review: 'Smart People' at Geva

by Leah Stacy

[More »](#)

MORE BY LEAH STACY

'The Agitators' explores the friendship of Fred and Sue



by Leah Stacy



Theater review: 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame'

The reinstated Greece Theatre Company stages a next-level production of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" at the Lyric Theatre

by Leah Stacy

THEATER | 'The Agitators'

by Leah Stacy

[More »](#)

BROWSE LISTINGS

Events Music

Tuesday, November 7

-All Categories-

-All Neighborhoods-

go

Submit an event

TWEETS @ROCCITYNEWS