



A scene from PUSH Physical Theatre's "Dracula," on stage now at Geva. PHOTO PROVIDED

Bleeding love

Dracula

BY PUSH PHYSICAL THEATRE
THROUGH NOVEMBER 8
GEVA THEATRE CENTER,
75 WOODBURY BLVD.
\$20 | 232-4382, GEVATHEATRE.ORG

[REVIEW] BY CASEY CARLSEN

Look out Lestat. Beware Edward Cullen and Bill Compton. A vampire rival has emerged, and he's gliding across the floorboards of Geva Theatre, fanged bared.

As *Dracula*, the prototype for all of today's young vampiric upstarts, Darren Stevenson of PUSH Physical Theatre bestows his considerable gift for movement upon Vlad, imbuing him with a mesmerizingly seductive grace. Long fingers trail slowly down a bare arm, edged closely by searing ferocity — the classic lunge and plunge (complete with mashing, crushing sounds by Dan Roach, whose sound design talents heighten the show's cringe factor).

I've seen *Dracula's* story done as pure ballet, and the form serves the legend well. But PUSH combines dance with theater in its production, supplementing the gorgeous visuals (where does Stevenson get his chest waxed?) with a spoken narrative that pulls the audience more deeply

into the story, although not without some confusion. Less might have been more.

Local actor and playwright Danny Hoskins scripted the dialogue, and gives a solid performance as the tortured Renfield, mainly ranting in his downstage "cell," cleverly construed with bars of shadow falling across the floor in a square. Hoskins's script helps set a Gothic mood with the flowery pronouncements we hear as voiceover ("In the chill of the night, the dead travel fast"), and charts Renfield's progression into madness with his paranoid babble ("Red rover, red rover, send the promised food over"). It was a delight to watch Hoskins pluck fiery, red-lit, buzzing flies from the air and see their light doused as he seemingly, through a bit of theatrical magic, popped them furtively into his mouth.

But the antics of the children of the night were even greater eye candy. To watch them writhe in a squirming mass to the eerie music of *Dead Can Dance* rendered the orgy scenes in HBO's popular "True Blood" squalid and uninspired in comparison.

Stevenson gives us an unorthodox and highly finessed interpretation of the title character. From his first appearance, hanging curled from a ring suspended above the stage, bathed in a sinister red light, he commands our attention. He unfurls upside down, bat-like, then arches his rippling torso up and

outwards toward the audience, snarling and grimacing, and we are immediately convinced of his otherworldliness.

PUSH is at its best delivering such spectacle. More gasps came later when Stevenson rises, magnificent cape spread wide, from the writhing heap of his consorts as a clock chimes offstage. Fangs bared menacingly, he nearly floats towards the audience, utilizing a seamless, slow-motion glide before veering sharply sideways.

Lucy is portrayed by Stevenson's wife and PUSH partner, Heather Stevenson, who adeptly expresses both the initial innocence of her character and her frenzied loss of self as she falls victim to *Dracula's* lustful thirst. The Stevensons move together with an easy familiarity, which gives their work a supreme confidence, yet works somewhat against them by leaching some of the dramatic tension from their characters' interchanges.

Additionally, I sometimes struggled to discern Lucy from the others onstage; Johanna Bystrom's costuming could have been more inspired. While *Dracula's* stature alone rendered him unmistakable, he also had *The Cape*. Lucy's pale gauzy skirt did not readily distinguish her from the other vampiric women (played by Bystrom and Christine Prewitt). I wanted to take Lucy by the hand and lead her down to Godiva's to pluck through the racks of Gothic attire and unearth a striking gown. Perhaps a scarlet, crushed velvet dress with the plunging neckline? Necessary freedom of movement and cost restrictions may have been overriding factors in the costume choices, but still, a girl wants to look, well, irresistible.

The lighting, however, was brilliant. Besides the devilish sheen of pinkish-red transporting us to the realm of the vampire, I particularly liked the sickly yellow-greenish hue cast over Lucy as she struggled for life on her sick bed, and over Renfield as he succumbed to insanity in his cell. Excellent use was made of shadow, too, as silhouettes lengthened threateningly along the wall or across the floor.

Speaking of beds, no props were needed for furniture since beds, desks, and chairs were skillfully formed by the bodies of the performers themselves. This added nuance to the set, especially sinister touches like a desk lamp (a.k.a. the arm of *Dracula*) transforming into a grasping claw.

Isaac Carter and Jonathan Lowery round out the cast of "*Dracula*," which is actually only the second half of PUSH's current production. The first half gives the audience the chance to see some of PUSH's trademark pieces such as "*Galileo*" and "*The Visit*," neither of which should be missed. Heather Stevenson's amazing portrayal of a Parkinson's patient in "*The Visit*" gave me the shivers, and drew sad sniffs from my neighbor. These are powerful performers.