

How Does Mark Godden's Dracula Dance?

by Kaija Pepper

Vampires in the nineties are not straightforwardly evil. In fact, they're less the embodiment of evil than a blood-deficient minority who deserve the caring individual's respect. Anne Rice's Pandora, for instance, is not only beautiful and sensitive, she's also wise. In Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's *Writ in Blood*, the urbane, centuries old vampire, Count Saint-Germain, is a patron of the ballet whose concern to fulfill sexually the women he loves suggests depths of passion. Even television's action-packed Buffy, the Vampire Slayer has a tall, dark and handsome vampire-with-a-conscience, Angel, who loves the teenage slayer. Buffy loves Angel, too, although in order to save the world she had to send him to Hell in one episode. Angel, thank goodness, escaped and now moodily haunts the slayer's show. It was hard not to be worried about him down in Hell, especially since we'd got to know him quite well over the weeks. Typically, today's stories make sure we hear the vampire's point of view. Rice's Pandora, created in 1997, has the whole novel (titled after its vampire heroine) in which to tell her story, sweeping us into her brave, feminist psyche and her doomed love for the unhappy vampire, Marius.

After so many years' worth of tales about vampires and related undead, there's a surfeit of interpretations found in literature, television, film and dance. Perhaps that's why Mark Godden's three act ballet version of *Dracula* for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, created with set and costume designer Paul Daigle, is safely based on the classic B-grade Bram Stoker novel, published in 1897, although it goes for the traditional jugular only in Acts One and Three. These two acts unfold in the expected chilling manner, with a severed head, a bat flying across the stage, and numerous stakings. Act Two undermines the horror of the main story by offering us first a slapstick précis on the novel, and then an abstract bacchanal, complete with lascivious wolf, reflecting "different aspects of *Dracula* and his world" (program notes). This ironic deconstruction is contained within the confines of the middle section; the beginning and end are seriously gruesome. Thus, even as we cringe in happy, old-fashioned horror, by the end we've satisfied our cool, postmodern side as well. Godden lets us enjoy our cake and think about it, too.

Surprisingly, we don't "hear" Dracula in Godden's late nineties version, which I saw at Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Theatre in February 1999, a few months after its October '98 premiere. This is not because Dracula dances and doesn't speak. Nor is it because Godden gives us Stoker's fiend, who, being pure evil and wholly terrifying, is undeserving of a voice. (One of Stoker's character's describes Dracula's evil plans as coming from an undeveloped "child-brain" and that's it for empathy with the vampire.) Godden puts at the centre of his telling a Dracula who is not only very quiet, but is also understated: his vampire is not fiend-like but of relatively human proportions. One result of this strategy is that the evil or dark forces become much more familiar. In Godden's creation, evil is not easily separated from good, making evil itself a less than straightforward proposition.

In Stoker's version, now over a hundred years old, the good hunters and the evil hunted are distinctly different beings. His Count Dracula, though aristocratically distinguished, is physically unappealing, with hairy palms that repel the solicitor/hero. In a nineties world struggling with far more serious kinds of difference, hairy palms are pretty minor and, in any case, easily treated. Godden dispenses with hairy palms and even pointed teeth: the vampire's trademark neck-biting is all in the movement, in the way his head plunges swiftly to the neck, and lingers there for a few breathless moments. In the two performances I saw, both Zhang Wei-Qiang (on whom the role was created) and Jesús Corrales as Dracula played these moments to a satisfying hilt.

Besides choosing to create a restrained and gentlemanly (at first) Dracula, Godden also chooses to feature the novel's two female leads, who in the book supply the rather over-sweet feminine voices in a chorus of manly hunters. Randal McIlroy reports that for Godden, Lucy Westenra, who succumbs to the vampire's lust, "is an anachronism, a symbol of the Victorian lady without the skills to cope," while her friend Mina Murray, who escapes by bravery and cleverness, "anticipates the stronger woman of the 20th Century" (from an article in the program). On both nights I attended, Tara Birtwhistle danced Lucy and CindyMarie Small, Mina (roles created on them). The first act is Lucy's. The ballet opens with surtitles giving us the story up to the point where Dracula has arrived in London by ship from Transylvania and

bitten the young woman; “Lucy,” we read, “has taken a turn for the worse.” As the titles are projected, Lucy stands downstage centre, her taupe chiffon dress and long scarf billowing as a dry ice fog rolls forward on the stage. Dracula appears from out of the gloom, in a well-cut black suit and white shirt, with a red satin-lined cape; he walks forward to stand behind Lucy, and the first satisfying chill runs through the audience as the dark, mysterious, and very handsome fiend has his vampire way with the fragile, beautiful woman. After this prologue, Godden pits Lucy’s three suitors and Dr. Abraham Van Helsing (Jordan Morris), plus her four maids, against the unpredictable heroine. The men are in wool suits, complete with hats, and the maids wear matching black and white uniforms, while Lucy is in a flimsy gown; all the women are in pointe shoes. Inside Lucy’s boudoir, with a view of the wild and stormy sea, the four men and four maids often dance together, with a classical vocabulary loosened up in the torso and arms, or in the angle of the hands. One recurring movement is a second position plié, with a restless, searching shift of the torso to the left and right.

Lucy, alone even when the stage is filled, ranges from slow, sleepwalking arabesques to desperately flinging herself to the ground. At one point, beside herself and suddenly uncontrollably vicious, she bites Arthur Holmwood, her fiancé (Stéphane Léonard). The moment of stunned, horrified stillness that follows is marvelous: it’s as if the very air cracks. There is a direct, sexual energy in her attack, and a voluptuous freedom when she thrusts herself towards him that is riveting. I’m no fan of horror; far from it. But here, in the dance, Birtwhistle’s performance is so convincing that the senses thrill in tandem with her character. In fact, I was very much with Lucy every moment and when the men try to hold her down, I almost wanted them to fail.

I wasn’t with Lucy when I read the novel. Stoker, by making the evil completely inhuman - Lucy is eventually literally not her self, and Dracula is an out-and-out monster—keeps evil out of the reach of any normal person, or individual reader. The reader’s sympathy must be with the hunters, on the side of God and all humanity: by the time Lucy is a full vampire, we know they have to drive a stake through her heart, and then cut off her head and stuff her mouth with garlic, in order to save the real Lucy’s soul. The descriptions of the wanton vampire are played against the men’s continual invocation of the poor,

sweet innocent who they desperately want to restore; thus Stoker keeps the consequences, and the horror, uppermost in our minds. In the ballet, however, the issue isn't as clear cut, and the vampire Lucy's desperate passion has a power and beauty of its own. When the ballet Lucy is decapitated, it's shocking: rather than the relief I felt when reading the novel, I was horror-struck. Apparently, on opening night in Vancouver, two audience members fainted at this unexpected event: I mean, heads rolling at the ballet?! The lengths men will go to restore their women's purity! There was laughter, too; I know my companion and I were quite delighted at ballet's descent into blood and gore and special effects. It was another great moment.

One of the more tedious themes of the novel is the manly men/saintly women, with the men putting those women on that pedestal we now believe is bad news for women in terms of their erotic satisfaction. In the ballet, it's with Dracula that both Lucy and Mina enjoy sensual pas de deux, not with their fiancés. After Lucy drinks Dracula's blood, they perform an ecstatic duet in the crypt where she is entombed. The ghoulish setting provides the same contrast that it does for Romeo and Juliet: love and death, again, but with such different implications.

Mina, in Act Three, is also able to express her sensuality in a pas de deux with Dracula, a physicality she has been denied by fiancé Jonathan Harker (Johnny Wright). While Lucy's sensuality occurs in her hypnotised states, when she is "not herself," Mina's desire is a conscious, intellectual choice. Mina has read Harker's diary, where she learns of the three vampire women who attracted him against his will. (You need to read the program notes in this ballet!) Mina, intrigued, decides to try seduction, and places Harker's hands on her waist, then on her breast; his hand quivers in revulsion and he snatches it back. I don't know about the rest of the audience - people were pretty quiet at this point - but I thought Harker a fool.

The nuns from the convent in Budapest who are looking after Harker-there's eight of them in brown gowns and black wimples-seem to take Mina's side as they hurry on to the triumphal strains of Gustav Mahler and mass protectively behind her. (Played live by the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, the surprisingly varied musical score was comprised of sections from Mahler's

Symphonies No. 1, 2 and 9.) Later, they hide Dracula in their midst, then roll up into little balls like clods of clay as he approaches Mina. Here, in this ballet where evil has no clear boundaries, even the nuns seem as close to earth as to spirit. Mina, rejected by Harker, is all the more touching in her womanly duet with Dracula, full of long abandon as her torso stretches up and back, supported by the vampire. Mature in her upswept hair and white, turn-of-the-(last)century gown, she clearly wants him just before he bites her.

Mina changes her mind as the scene progresses and the Count shows the extent of his cruelty, particularly when she witnesses his terrible humiliation of Harker. In the novel, her good, sweet courage spurs the men on to heights of gory glory, but in Godden's ballet her steadfastness and quick-thinking are more than just helpful: Mina masterminds his defeat. Retribution comes when Dracula is impaled and left hanging on the top of a long spike, before an opening in the castle wall that lets in the light. This is the final moment of absolute chill in the ballet: the forces of light and good do win, but who will now dance with Mina?

It's not a trivial question. The Act Two bacchanal, or Red Scene, with its throngs of men and women in stylish *déshabille*, reminds us of our vital, animal natures. In this more abstract, less story-based scene, Godden is not concerned with advancing the plot, but with creating fast, seductive dance; this is probably why it is the most dynamic section in pure dance terms of the whole ballet. The 17 dancers are in various shades of red, including red pointe shoes for the women, and there's a bare-chested wolf with tufts of blue fur (Corrales on opening night, then Arionel P. Vargas). Toronto critic Michael Crabb writes that the scene asks us "to contemplate Dracula as a dark, visceral, seductive force, a metaphor for irrationality and animal passion" (Dance International, Winter 98/99). That, succinctly, is Godden's take on the Dracula myth, which must underlie our impressions of the work as a whole.

The choreographer has, after all, done his homework: he knows what flights of fancy are possible. Godden has apparently read all the Anne Rice novels and, in the program notes, a number of non-fiction writers are mentioned: Nina Auerbach, for one. Auerbach's *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995) alone opens

up a rich array of possibilities, connecting Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 *Carmilla*, whose female vampire "feeds only on women with a hunger inseparable from erotic sympathy" (p. 41), to Stoker's sadistic spectacle. Nor does she forget the heterosexual "erotic virtuoso" (p. 149) Count Saint-Germain. It's like being a kid in a candy store: which one do you pick? The interpretation, Auerbach might answer, that you need.

Godden creates a Dracula that is a gentleman, and dead sexy: an elusive, shadowy force upon which the heroines can satisfy erotic longings stifled elsewhere, and with whom they can dance in a way they cannot with their straitlaced Victorian men. In the final scene, however, Godden puts Dracula's cruelty centre stage and a choice becomes necessary as evil is now set clearly before us. Naturally, we're glad Mina—Godden's strong, 20th Century woman—renounces Dracula and saves the good men. The question, though, remains: who will dance with Mina and go with her to those dark, passionate places now? Perhaps a 21st Century answer is around the corner.