

Review of Dracula from PUSH Physical Theatre

Halloween for the Thinking Teen

Dracula

A review of PUSH Physical Theatre's adaptation of the Bram Stoker Classic
Rochester, NY, October 2009

By Debra Ross

I remember Halloween as a traditional rite-of-passage opportunity for teenagers, and from what I observe from my friends' teenaged kids, that hasn't changed. Who can walk through a graveyard on Halloween night? Watch *Night of the Living Dead* without screaming? Take a date to the local haunted hayride? These Halloween traditions let maturing kids test their boundaries safely, proving to their friends—and themselves—that they can take it.

Halloween “scary” activities tend to fall into three main categories: gory, startling, and eerie. Most of the haunted hayrides and houses fall squarely into the “startling” category: Their aim is to frighten you by jumping out at you and yelling the equivalent of “boo.” The problem is, you get to expect that someone is going to jump at you from behind the next corner, and such experiences tend to get predictable. Those that aim to be truly horrifying to the thrill-seeker tend to shade off into gore, to disgust us, rather than attempting to reach deeper—to jangle our nerves, to disquiet our very souls.

The PUSH Physical Theatre adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* juxtaposes the beauty of the best within human beings with our profound fear that we will succumb to the temptation of evil. In so doing, it creates an audience experience quite unlike anything you have probably seen before.

I sometimes describe PUSH performances as intensely controlled ballet that is designed to illustrate core human experiences. This is part of the reason PUSH's *Draculas* is so provoking: The performers conflate the profoundly beautiful control they exert over their own bodies with the profoundly terrifying concepts of control lurking beneath the surface of *Dracula*, with psychologically jarring results.

I suspect that the reason few performers attempt the task of being truly terrifying in this way is that it requires an enormous amount of thought...on the part of the performers, sure, but on the part of the audience, too. We Americans in the 21st century seem to be more inclined to sit back passively and “be entertained” than to invest our minds in the experience. Watching *Dracula* is demanding, but for those who are willing to think about what they are watching, it is intensely rewarding.

The producers of *Dracula* warn that it is not appropriate for young children. This is true, and there are several reasons for this, though not the reasons we've come to expect--there is no “adult” language, or gore, or violence, or nudity. But *Dracula* demands a level of processing and reflection about issues that people younger than about 13 or so have not yet encountered, or are only beginning to encounter: issues of devotion to good and the temptation of evil, of faith and reason, of sexuality and, mostly, of death, death of the body and of the soul. I determined in advance that my own kids (girls, ages 8 and 10) were probably too young to see *Dracula*, so I borrowed another family with an 11-year-old boy and a 15-year-old girl, so I could see what their reactions were.

The 11-year-old found it very frightening, because he is a smart kid who paid attention and thought hard about what he was seeing. On the other hand, I know ‘tweens for whom this would zoom right over their heads, and they wouldn't be at

all disturbed. What would have worried my own kids most would have been seeing the very convincingly-conveyed horror experienced by the main character, Renfield.

For teens who think, especially for those who are starting to grapple with the themes portrayed in *Dracula*, this is the perfect Halloween experience. Make sure you read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, or a summary of the book, beforehand; it will definitely enhance the experience.

Though the show is really designed for adults, parents who take their teens will have fascinating dinner table discussions for some time afterward. And you'll have proved to them that you, too, are old enough to see it.

Dracula is playing at Geva Theatre Center until November 8, 2009. For a video preview of the show, [click here](#).

Tickets are \$20. Seating is General Admission, so get there at least 15 minutes before show time.

Show times:

Wednesdays through Fridays at 7pm; Saturdays at 4pm and 8pm; Sundays at 1:30pm

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