



Inland Pacific Ballet opens a strong 10th Anniversary season with "Dracula"

REVIEW

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Inland Pacific Ballet's opening season production of "Dracula" at Bridges Auditorium in Claremont this weekend was a beautiful, wonderfully dark, pre-Halloween treat good enough to sink your teeth into.

A compelling storyline (loosely based on the original classic by Bram Stoker), intricate choreography, gorgeous costumes, strong technical direction and a memorable cast of characters – including festive gypsies, a haunting group of undead spirits and a mysterious vampire - made for an enjoyable evening of entertainment.

"Dracula" begins with a group of gypsies mourning the loss of one of their own. They gather around a freshly dug grave and bury a small body wrapped in cloth. The group sits behind a scrim (a wonderful, effective use of the stage) while an old man pulls Dracula's coffin across stage.

Realizing they must dance through the night to ward off the evil spirits, the gypsies move furiously through the forest – twirling, spinning and leaping, revealing gorgeous layers of design in their costumes. Costumes designers Jeanne Nolden and Lisa Davis' use of colors – pinks, blues, golds, greens, oranges and ambers – created a nice contrast between the gypsies' lively spirit and the dark world they live in.

We are introduced to the main characters – Mina Murray (Stephanie Orza), Jonathan Harker (Bryan Ketron), Dr. Van Helsing (Michael Kruzich) and Lucy Westerna (Jennifer Friel). The chemistry between the dancers, especially between Ketron's "Harker" and Orza's "Mina," translated nicely on stage. The fast, detailed choreography was executed cleanly by Ketron and Orza. They worked well off each other's strengths – Orza's technical finesse and Ketron's grace.

We are supposed to believe these four characters are the best of friends. The acting between Orza and Friel and Ketron and Kruzich was believable, convincing and at times, touching.

Dracula's vampire brides (perfectly cast with Kelly Lamoureux, Genevieve Custer and Rachael Quinn) prey on the unsuspecting Renfield (Carlos Venturo) as he makes his way to the Masquerade Ball. Lamoureux's eerie bride takes a bite out of Venturo and he is overtaken by their dark power.

Venturo's portrayal as Renfield is one of the strongest performances in "Dracula." He makes a convincing (and humorous) transformation from innocent townsman to Dracula's odd, pathetic servant. The choreography reflects to chaos of his transformation – quick, frantic

movements intertwined with slow gestures, symbolizing Renfield's fight between his true self and Dracula's overpowering allure.

We finally meet Dracula (Steven Voznick), a tall mysterious person who – thanks to a long, velvety cape – seems to glide across the ballroom floor. An innocent Mina comes under Dracula's spell and later finds herself in his castle.

The set design of Dracula's castle contributed to the dark, gothic mood of Act II. A large moon hangs in the background. Eerie windows, black walls and a long staircase add a mysterious feel. A layer of smoke hovered just above the floor as more than a dozen ghostly women performed a "dance of the undead." The dancers wore white, flowy dresses that moved like wisps of tissue paper. Their long hair was crimped and frizzy. On their faces, they wore white make-up and red lipstick. A scary yet sensual bunch.

Mina is overcome by Dracula's power and the townspeople storm Dracula's castle to rescue her. There is a nice transition between what is happening inside the castle and the townspeople who rush through the streets to stop Dracula. Like in the beginning of Act I, a scrim is used to separate both settings. The final scene culminates with the defeat of Dracula.

The ballet ends with a sweet pas de deux between Mina and Harker, symbolizing good has triumphed over evil and light has overcome darkness.

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