

Dracula

Ballet Magdeburg,
Theater Magdeburg –
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I CONFESS TO BEING

apprehensive about seeing a ballet company for the first time performing a work like *Dracula*, which could be a canvas for all kinds of clichés. To my surprise, all worries disappeared as soon as the blue curtains of the Theater Magdeburg opened to reveal Ballet Magdeburg, a young ensemble of artistic, technically strong dancers, in a two-act romantic ballet full of action, and conceived and choreographed with good taste by Gonzalo Galguera, the company's director and chief choreographer. I was immediately entrapped.

The ballet tells of Bram Stoker's blood-sucking count, the undead Dracula, who falls for Mina, the wife of his lawyer, Jonathan Harker, and the complex struggles Harker and Professor Van Helsing undergo to save her and her friend, Lucy, from the vampire and vanquish the prince of darkness. It was never going to be easy, but Galguera develops the plot intelligently through six scenes with the help of the dramaturgs Ulrike Schröder and Hannes Föst.

Galguera took two years to find the right musical collage to serve him for the score. It includes music by Sibelius, Rachmaninov, Elizabeth Maconchy, Schreker, Vaughan Williams, George Lloyd and Elgar, as well as newly-written pieces by Leon Gurvitch, but the result felt homogeneous, and was vibrantly played by the Magdeburg Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Svetoslav Borisov.

The Bulgarian dancer Mihael Belilove was a convincing Dracula,

commanding, troubled and manipulative, and he shone in his controlled adagios, beautiful lines and extensions, jumps and endless turns. His pas de deux with Mina were seductive, but Dracula's duets with Harker, danced by Adrián Román Ventura, where they mirrored and lifted each other, were full of tension.

Grettel Morejón's Mina changed her moods with ease: demure and naïve with her husband; out of her senses with the Count. Morejón, who also dances with the National Ballet of Cuba, has a secure

technique that allows her to relish all the intricacies of her character, and she was particularly intense in the only bloody scene in the ballet when Dracula finally possesses her – a moment charged with lust and submission.

The svelte and refined Anastasia Gavrilenkova brought dramatic flair to the role of Lucy, and Andreas Loos was highly effective as Professor Van Helsing. The excellent Raúl Pita Caballero was pivotal in the role of Dracula's loyal coachman, and three expressive and versatile vampire women appeared throughout the ballet as reminders of a ghostly underworld.

Galguera's dances for all of these characters

conveyed powerful images and symbolism, while at the same time challenged the dancers with unusual promenades and lifts. His group numbers served to define the story in each scene, and his dance vocabulary recalled classical and contemporary techniques, with neoclassical speed and a pinch of athleticism – he knows his dancers' capabilities well.

The magnificent settings by Darko Petrovic, a frequent collaborator with the company, transports the audience from Transylvania to London; through dark graveyards and on to streets and ballrooms. Petrovic chose to work in a restricted palette of white, black and grey, with subtle dashes of gold and red, and his costumes were reminiscent of the 1890s, although it was strange to see tutus incorporated into one scene. The designs were well complemented by the lighting, which allowed for clarity despite the dark atmosphere, and there was clever use of film by Jacopo Castellano. Never overwhelming, rather the films gave transitional pauses between each of the scenes or accompanied dramatic moments, such as when Harker writes a letter to Mina.

A long, moving table was also deployed in the ballet, and used to high dramatic impact, especially when Harker and Van Helsing fight with Dracula in a scene that made one feel sympathy for the vampire. It was this capacity to move the audience that made one think Galguera got things right with his *Dracula*. This was a premiere good enough to make one realise it is well worth venturing farther east from Berlin in search of gems like Magdeburg Ballet. ■

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Below: Mihael Belilove as Count Dracula and Adrián Román Ventura as Jonathan Harker in Ballet Magdeburg's *Dracula*.

