**Dracula Showcases Manassas Ballet Theatre's Strength in the Darkness**

The Manassas Ballet Theatre's production of "Dracula" brought the 1897 Bram Stoker novel's dark, shadowy tale into an eerie light on the Hylton Performing Arts Center's Merchant Hall stage a fortnight before all hallows eve, just before the Hunter's full moon- fitting for the bats, dogs, and wolves in the woods, and of course, villainous Dracula.

With the score composed by area musician Kim Reynolds, he and his eclectic bandmates brought live performance back to the orchestra pit for MBT since the shutdown months after their legendary Nutcracker in December of 2019. The determination of the company advanced "the show must go on!" to bring masked dancers recording two productions from their studio in the spring of 2020, into the fall with streaming tickets, social distancing, and an abbreviated audience to Merchant Hall and virtual options for "Peter & the Wolf", and a third of the house audience for "Giselle" in May of 2021, under George Mason University's adherence to safety protocols.

Directed and conceived by artistic director, Amy Grant Wolfe, and choreographed by ballet master, Vadim Slavitskiy, the 2021 performance was a blend of innovative choreography and new pieces composed for this production by Kim Reynolds. A new cast of dancers from the Dracula in 2018; leading roles were given to recent company hires and seasoned dancers advancing to prominence. The students of the Manassas Ballet Academy were excellent in the ensembles, their performance encouraged by a few professional dancers intermingling; prompting a quick check of the printed program to confirm the dancers' roles in MBT.

The dancers had two parts to perform- dancing and dramatic acting. Both were skillfully done, rising above the expertise required to just dance- resulting in an embrace of dance and theater. Also, the audience members who were new to ballet felt comfortable in the hall, while being educated in the amazing genre of classical ballet performance.

The duets- pas de deux- briefer than traditional ones, added to the suspense and audience's edginess; there was a wishing for more because of the beauty and edginess of the two dancers' partnerships. The death drop moves of the bats as they tormented Jonathan, the fight scene appearance of flirtatious and naïve Lucy and her equally character-sporting suitors looking to propose, the frenetic pace of the asylum's residents, and the full-stage cast for the graveyard terror- all demonstrated the skill and dexterity of the dancers.

The staging of the vampire wives first appearance, as if by sorcery from behind the sofa, and similar evaporating disappearance when shooed by Dracula for his intended prey and the deftness of Vadim Slavitskii as Dracula seeming to beam across the stage were mesmerizing actions, prompting awe from the audience. Vadim and Joshua Burnham executed amazing choreography; applause gave recognition many times.

The lighting design created the spot-on ambience for romantic, playful, and foreboding scenes, almost as if another character in the story. Sound effects and the musicians' skilled mimicry combined with the visual effects brought shivers and anticipation to the audience. The minimalist staging and props encouraged the cast's freedom to enrich the whole stage, especially when two scenes were intriguingly intertwined- Jonathan and Mina longing to be together yet in separate locations, the asylum's tragic setting with Mina and the "good guys" teaming up to plan the capture of Lucy's murderer.

Each costume was intricately designed- from the specter, ephemeral vampire wives to the glowing bats' eyes in their hoods. The colorful, many layered attire for the gypsies and the little girls' elaborate play clothes gave an interlude of relief, sandwiched by intense dramatic scenes. With vintage and period attire arranged for dancers to still leap and lift, there was a modern dance flair to the classical ballet choreography.

The music and its musicians' playing enriched the production with motifs and melodies, suspense, sound effects, rock band nostalgia, children's nursery rhymes, and original genre-crossing pieces. Both as an underpinning and a role in the production, the live music was necessary and worth the wait for the dancers and the audience to have musicians in the house. Rehearsals are underway for Manassas Ballet Theatre's annual Nutcracker production- the superb quality of Dracula achieved under COVID protocols portends more excellence is in store for December.