

**CROWN CITY THEATER'S "NOSFERATU":
A NEW CHORD FOR A CLASSIC "SYMPHONY OF HORROR"**

by
Steve Vertlieb

Every generation has its incarnation of the grand and glorious vampire mythos – the TWILIGHT and UNDERWORLD film series, THE VAMPIRE DIARIES, HBO's ever popular TRUE BLOOD, the Gen X'er's fondly remembered THE LOST BOYS, my own generation's DARK SHADOWS (not be confused with the rather loopy Tim Burton theatrical redo of a couple of years back!), and even the legendary X-FILES, THE NIGHT STALKER and TALES FROM THE DARKSIDE have more than once dipped their creative talons into that blood-soaked thematic well. But, for all intents and purposes, it all began with the most grand filmic guignol of all - F.W. Murnau's 1922's silent movie masterpiece NOSFERATU. Now, ninety-four years after its historic cinematic inception, a small theatre company in Los Angeles, California has commenced upon a most ambitious and provocative undertaking.

The Crown City Theater in North Hollywood, under the direction and inspiration of writer/director William A. Reilly, has unleashed an astonishingly bizarre live stage presentation of Murnau's silent vampire classic. Entitled NOSFERATU: A SYMPHONY IN TERROR it is at once both a unique and surreal homage to the nearly one hundred year old German film magically unveiled before our very eyes.

Utilizing few props, other than a bench or an occasional chair, blackened curtains, period historical film projected onto a tiny screen, and off stage narration, NOSFERATU weaves an uneasy tapestry of mounting dread and near balletic poetry. A claustrophobic net, a calculating spider's web, of necessity - drawing a comparatively tiny yet anxious audience ever more closely into its intimate spell and tendrils. It weaves a suffocating sense of palpable fear and apprehension - extending uncomfortably beyond the proverbial "footlights" of the frighteningly intimate stage. We that audience are lured, inescapably, into a dark nightmare from which we cannot awaken. We can only scream.

Huh? "*What's NOSFERATU?*", you say? Why, Sookie, Selene, Bella, Barnabas, and 'ol Vlad himself would all lodge petitions to have your vampire membership materials rescinded for asking such a question. But in the interest of full disclosure ...

"NOSFERATU," F.W. Murnau's 1922 silent film masterpiece for Germany's UFA Studios, was the first motion picture version of Bram Stoker's classic 1897 novel of vampire eroticism, DRACULA. It was, in the strictest definition of legality and copyright laws, an illicit representation of Stoker's acclaimed book in that the producers failed to secure permission to film the story. Nevertheless, this illegal bastardization of the globally popular British novel by an Irish author has never been eclipsed for its ferocity of brooding visual terror and Wagnerian Grand Guignol "opera."

The film is, at its heart, a ballet of horrific imagery dancing across an outrageous palette of lyrical "grandiosity". Murnau's nightmarish vision of stalking corpses which preyed upon the

innocent inflamed the already lurid imagination of the German populace in the Weimar Republic during the years leading up to the Second World War. Stoker's novel had merely hinted at the erotic undertones of sexual repression in Victorian England by suggesting that Count Dracula, who had abandoned mortal existence for a world owing no allegiance to morality, might arouse sensual inhibition in his victims beyond the veil of death. Once free of the bondage of intellectual mores, might not the dead rise once more, free of conscience or societal obligation, to devour both the desires and life's blood from the living? In many ways, Stoker's work of horror fiction had become an allegorical fantasy for freedom from repression in much the same fashion as Robert Louis Stevenson's DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE.

HYDE (published 11 years prior in 1886) dealt with a potion which might release the inner soul, or baser instincts of, "polite society", while DRACULA envisioned a restricted environment in which the darker desires of an "enlightened" community might willingly succumb to the forbidden allure of sexual debasement and surrender. German cinema in the 1920s had become a veritable expressionistic laboratory for groundbreaking filmmakers and artists who shed their accoutrements of civility. Strangers in a stranger land they were; a land where experimentation would reach new heights of breath consuming design, rebellion, and artistic realization.

The filmic pinnacle of the era was Fritz Lang's METROPOLIS in 1927. A monumental cinematic conception of science and technology, it teetered on the brink of mad genius in its vision of a futuristic society of uniformity and totalitarian repression ultimately consumed by the catastrophic conflict between "good" and "evil". Actress Brigitte Helm in the dual roles of "Maria" - the virginal product of intellectual and emotional docility, and as the artificial Robotrix brought to fiery life by mad inventor Rotwang, conveyed both innocence and erotic passion in her psychologically charged performances of conflicted identity. While Maria was the idealized vision of feminine purity and intellectual constraint, her artificially conceptualized doppelganger was a manipulative whore luring simple, hard working men to depravity and doom.

Conversely, Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll was a thoughtful practitioner of science, a dedicated physician searching for humane passages for the downtrodden to rid themselves of the polarizing illnesses of both physical and emotional oppression. In both instances audiences (then and now) were / are left to ponder the irony of whether or not the releasing the baser, conceptually more "vile" instincts and desires of humanity might indeed free individuals to live and enjoy less complicated, tension laden lives. Or might it not? Might it have the opposite effect?

Count Orlok, the title character of Murnau's NOSFERATU, had of course long since succumbed to his own baser desires and predatory instincts. Shedding any semblance of humanity, he was a conniving creature of the night searching only to satiate his blood lust in order to attain physical immortality. A denizen of the dust, he the vampire would drain the life from his victims by sucking their blood in order to conjoin with his own. Yet, as reprehensible and disgusting as his practice was, women in particular were irretrievably drawn to his unfathomable power and dominance. Through an infinite number of published stories and motion pictures from the inception of Stoker's novel to the present, vampire lore would grow in

its often Freudian interpretations and implications, perpetuating the romantic prose relating to sexual domination of women by a power beyond their will or desire to resist.

England's Hammer Films brought the legend to its logical "climactic" conclusion in their 1958 screen production of DRACULA when Mina, portrayed by actress Melissa Stribling, smiles in nervous sexual anticipation, stimulation and ultimate surrender, as DRACULA, enacted by the remarkable Christopher Lee, sinks his fangs greedily into her eagerly inviting flesh. The symbolism is unmistakable.

But arguably it is the savagely frightening features of Orlok in Murnau's 1922 film which, even now, remains the most shocking of all incarnations, as he resembled a walking rodent or upright Doberman Pinscher bleached white. Klaus Kinski, in director Werner Herzog's well intentioned 1979 remake, attempted to emulate Schreck's makeup design in somewhat more muted tones, but the later version recreated little of the compelling, hellish horror of the UFA original. Schreck's was an otherworldly creature, neither human nor animal. His feline mannerisms, gestures, and movements suggested a bizarre bestiality, while his startling appearance commanded a demented invitation and descent into madness, and to Hell.

The Orlok embodiment of the vampire would forever enter history (as well as contemporary global pop culture) thanks largely to his realization in the personage of actor Max Schreck. Known "pre NOSFERATU" mainly for his work on the German stage with the Max Reinhardt theatrical company, Schreck would make the leap to the screen at a time when most of the Reinhardt company was doing the same. A time when German cinema of the period reflected a surrealistic landscape of malformed and ravenous malcontents who emerged from the shadows to devour unsuspecting humanity in a nightmarish blitz of rapturous depravity.

American cinema at the time by comparison had largely become saccharine and blandly polite in its artistic ambition, fearful of the hunger and power emanating from across the sea. Devoid of conviction or passion, and fearful of its own burgeoning sexuality, domestic film production rebelliously fought against its own darker nature by proclaiming a wholly insincere innocence that was both vapid and anemic. While some courageous American filmmakers experimented with more provocative thematic materials, the coming of sound brought with it an ocean of innocuous releases bound and determined to offend no one. Consequently, when Universal Pictures released the first official, legally sanctioned film version of Bram Stoker's DRACULA in 1931, it was a bland, colorless visualization devoid of power or soul.

Bela Lugosi was undeniably magnetic in the title role, particularly in the early Transylvanian passages of Todd Browning's film. But by the time the undead Count insinuated his presence in modern London, any resemblance to Stoker's original literary conception had been corrupted and sanitized beyond recognition. A Spanish language production of DRACULA was simultaneously produced by Universal for ethnic release overseas. Directed by George Melford, and starring Carlos Villarais & Lupita Tovar, it utilized the identical sets constructed for the more prestigious Browning production, and filmed on the lot in the evening hours after the American crew had departed. Astonishingly, although its lead performance contained little of the magic inspired by Lugosi in his signature role, this presumably low rent imitation of the now

classic vampire tale was far more adventurous, even lurid, in its depiction of the very same story, and (lost for many years until recently) remains the superior film.

With all due respects to both versions (as well as to Universal's marketing of the Lugosi image over the last near century), it is Murnau and Schreck's "pale rodent"-like personage of Orlock which has sunk its teeth into the pop culture mainstream like no other. In addition to 1979's Klaus Kinski / Werner Herzog version of NOSFERATU (it incidentally released the same year as Universal's big budget DRACULA starring Frank Langella and Sir Laurence Olivier), Thanksgiving week of that same year gave TV audiences a very good reason to cow, shudder and leave the lights on with CBS's terrifying mini-series rendition of Stephen King's SALEM'S LOT.

Co-produced by the legendary Stirling Silliphant, and directed by TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE / future POLTERGEIST director Tobe Hooper, it is still regarded to this day by many as the scariest program ever broadcast on a commercial network – thanks not only due to Hooper's atmospheric direction, but also to a stunning trio of stars including James Mason, David Soul, and especially Reggie Nalder as the hell-spawn vampire "Mr. Barlow". With both King and Hooper being great fans of Murnau's film, "Mr. Barlow" is a deliberate dead-ringer (pun entirely intended) modern day version of Schreck's Orlock.

Director Tim Burton (EDWARD SCISSORHANDS, BEETLEJUICE) – he also a huge fan of NOSFERATU, would pay pop-culture homage to the 1922 film in his own 1992 film sequel, BATMAN RETURNS, by patterning two of the film's trio of villains after the famous Orlock visage: Danny DeVito visually cast in the Orlock mode as The Penguin, and Christopher Walken's "ethically challenged" retail magnate being named (what else?) "Max Schreck". Then in 2000, NOSFERATU fan Nicolas Cage's Saturn Films shingle produced the critically acclaimed SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE. A "metafiction" (self referentially blending fact, fiction and speculation) POV on the filming of Murnau's 1922 silent classic, SHADOW humorously (and at the same time terrifyingly) posits that actor Max Schreck (portrayed in the film by an Oscar nominated Willem Dafoe) was actually a real vampire hired by director Murnau (John Malkovich) to be in his film; and as such was by definition the first true method actor. Now comes 2016's Crown City Theater's stage production of NOSFERATU: A SYMPHONY IN TERROR.

Utilizing classical music and tantalizingly rhythmic ballet, while fabricating its chilling other-worldly descent, NOSFERATU, under the direction of William A. Reilly, aspires to an ethereal, if deadly mood and atmosphere. Mist consumes the theater, as we join cast members on their precarious journey to the Transylvanian mountains, and the wild, disturbingly unnatural terrain surrounding the vampire's castle. We, together with the play's tragic protagonist, surrender and succumb to the brooding horror eradicating reason and prayer; mournful strangers in a deranged, haunted landscape. It is in the very simplicity of performance and sparse set decoration that our vulnerability, as characters and participants in this journey of despair, becomes somehow heightened with mounting alarm and insistent, crawling apprehension.

The casting of professional, if unsung, actors and actresses in this remarkable equity production is quietly impressive. With strong yet understated performances by each of the character leads, there exists an expressive eloquence of soul, reflecting the subtle tradition and

historic nobility of mime. And in the notable absence of spoken dialogue, great performance truly emanates from the purity of articulate faith.

Michael J. Marchak portrays Thomas Hutter, an unfortunate newlywed chosen by his unscrupulous employer to undertake the perilous journey to Castle Orlok in order to have their mysterious client sign the papers of real estate purchase. Hutter's disquieting transition from traditional home and hearth in England, his reason savagely torn from him as sanity trembles upon the brink of madness, is disturbingly conveyed by Marchak as anxiety insidiously consumes him.

Alina Bolshakova, a strikingly beautiful Latvian actress and accomplished ballerina, portrays Ellen Hutter, the innocent young bride left behind with her fantasies, who slowly comes to realize the horrific demonic plague preying upon her husband and, ultimately, the once comforting world of her birth. As Ellen, Bolshakova brings an earnest, touching sadness to her characterization. She is a simple, fragile creature who must fight desperately in order to preserve the last remnants of goodness and purity in her life, finding salvation from depravity and despair. Her lithe movements and poetic features signify a tragic remembrance of simplicity as it was, a dramatic counterpoint symbolizing the eternal battle between goodness and inherent evil.

However, the most profoundly astounding, and original aspect of Reilly's casting of his principle actors is in his choice of performer to play the dreaded Count Orlok. With aquiline features, somnambulistic majesty, and disturbingly feline affectation, the lifeless symmetry of Orlok's imperial dominance is here enacted with unsettling command. The anxiety perpetuated by his appearance on stage is nearly unfathomable. There is something wrong, terribly wrong, with this terrible visage. And it is only some time that the mind numbing realization of his identity becomes bone chillingly apparent. Orlok, like PETER PAN before him, among the greatest of theatrical traditions, is portrayed by a woman ... an actress named Michelle Holmes, slight of build, and yet evocatively creepy beyond rational descriptiveness. The startling revelation devours your senses, rendering one's other worldly perception of the production and its intoxicating atmosphere irrevocable and all consuming. It is genius at the summit of its inspired artistry.

Nominated for an Ovation Award for her portrayal of Frau Blucher in the Doma Theater Company's production of YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN, Ms. Holmes also portrayed Elizabeth Procter in the International City Theater City's staging of ABAGAIL/1720, and can currently be seen as "Angela" in Oleg Larin's upcoming short film IMPASSE OF LIGHT.

All aspects of this unique stage production are uniformly excellent, including the sober narration performed by actress Saige Spinney, the deliberately understated choreography by Lisaun Whittingham, and the minimalist set and light design by Zad Potter. It is William A. Reilly's enthusiastic vision and direction however, as well as strong, poignant performances by leads Alina Bolshakova and Michael J. Marchak, which heightens the levels of creativity and brilliance necessary to surrender both a willing suspension of disbelief and decidedly uncomfortable intimacy to the presentation.

While most creators would find the phrase “triple threat” to be an impressive compliment, remember the name “William A. Reilly”, for he is a verifiable “quadruple threat”. For not only is he NOSFEATU’s director and playwright, but (as co-founder of the Crown City Theater) he’s also one of the play’s producers. As a composer he’s written numerous scores for a variety of film and television programs, and is responsible for the music to Crown City’s own stage production of FION THE FAIR, as well as THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME, OBSESSION and more.

Among the most unforgettable set pieces created for the original 1922 UFA motion picture was the astonishing sequence aboard the schooner “Empusa”, it churning in calamitous seas when Count Orlok rises from his coffin like a phoenix from the ashes of Valhalla to feed upon the terrified crew. His startling ascension from the crate in which he sleeps, arising stiffly like an inanimate wooden plank, remains an incomparable visual achievement. And that classic unforgettable moment is astonishingly recreated live on stage: a brazen display of theatrical “smoke and mirrors” which nearly brings the audience to its feet in awe struck appreciation.

Intimacy in a theatrical setting is usually most effective when used in a small, dialogue driven play, economically limited in its scope and pretension. In this claustrophobic environment, however, the terror of vampires and impending doom becomes somehow smothering, and undeniably personal; compelling audience members to become immersed in its singular reality. The concept of producing a nearly one hundred year old German silent film classic as a live stage presentation in Los Angeles, California in 2016 is understandably a provocative choice for a small equity theater. And the fact that it has reached fruition in such a dramatically realized, artistically compelling production as NOSFERATU is nothing short of astounding. Director William A. Reilly and his talented troupe of actors and technicians have created a work of power and poetic beauty, having risen above nearly a century of respectful thematic “reprise” to contribute a genuinely new and significant new chord to an iconic “Symphony in Terror.”

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Happy Halloween, 2016

*** The Crown City Theater production of “Nosferatu: A Symphony in Terror” continues through Halloween with scheduled performances Friday and Saturday evenings at 8 pm, and Sundays at 3 pm. The venue is located at 11031 Camarillo Street – North Hollywood, California 91602. For additional information, contact Crowncitytheater.com or call 1-818-605-5685.