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Musically undead

Theatre, Drakula - The Rock Opera, St James Cavalier

by Louise Ghirlando

Musicals have come to signify luscious artistry over and above the music that defines them. This performance was a sensual feast for the eyes and even more so for the ears.

Visually it was stunning. Rather than stemming from the rich costumes and make-up and extensive set-design, the roots of this lay in the company's extreme exploitation of the spatial dynamics of the theatre. All sides, angles and levels were used. The stage set, for most of the time representing Dracula's castle, encompassed all sides of the theatre. Actors emerged and disappeared from anywhere and everywhere and even dared to perch from the balcony. The band music drifted down from the balcony and music echoed all around as actors carried their voices through different pathways and from various corners.

Musically, this production was beautifully executed. Don Linke's script and score were worked upon for this European premiere by artistic director Patrick Vella and bandleader Abigail Brown. The band members were Eric Camilleri, Jonathan (Jimmy) Grima, Patrick Camilleri and Trevor Abela Fiorentino. The singing was brought to a harmonious whole by all members of the cast. The standard was set with Neville Gatt, as Jonathan Harker, who had the first notes to sing. The cast supported each other to create the balance necessary for such a production. No hierarchy was created in terms of vocal aptitude.

This production, however, did not dive deeply enough into the whole context of Dracula as created by Bram Stoker. With musicals, key points are picked from a story and drawn out for the length of a song. Events between these points are filled in using a variety of techniques, including, as in the case of Drakula, narration (Graziella Galea Pirotta).

The relationship between Count Dracula (Patrick Vella) and Mina Murray (Tiziana Calleja) was underplayed. The special quality of their relationship was not brought out so that it was not evident that Mina had any hold on Dracula's heart in a way that none of the other women he preyed on had. Originally, the difference was in exactly this: Dracula did not prey on Mina. In this production, while the bestiality of Dracula's preying on Mina's friend Lucy Westerna (Ruth Farrugia) was brought out intensely, the equal weight of respect and tenderness he had for Mina was undetectable. The complexity of Dracula's character, capable of both extreme love and ferocity, was overridden by evil.

The primary quality of musicals will always be their entertaining value. In this respect, this production was an enjoyable experience, most of all because the music, and especially the singing, was exciting.