



Christian rock'n'roller

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Count Dracula takes on a woman this time

Cynthia Blaise is strong and sure in role of Professor Van Helsing

Count Dracula.

He has haunted generations and still strikes a nerve in today's most sophisticated and logical audiences. His solemn demeanor and captivating dark looks first seduce and then entangle us, drawing us face-to-face with the terror of corruption present in the world.

His grip is loosened, however, by the power of good. Like Dracula's gentle victim Lucy, the audience is saved by the strong, masculine hands of Professor Van Helsing.

Better change that to feminine hands. In the University Theatre's current production of "Dracula," Van Helsing is a woman.

"I wanted the strongest possible actor — male or female — to play the part," says Grant McKernie, co-director of "Dracula." "With a professional actor (Dennis Smith) in the role of Dracula, I needed an actor with spiritual strength as Van Helsing to balance the two characters."

To insure finding the best person for the part, McKernie invited female students 24-years-old and older to read for the part. Cynthia Blaise, a University theatre student, took the challenge and was cast as the severe, determined Professor.

McKernie says this role-reversal solved a second problem inherent in the language of the play.

"I wanted to modify the Victorian sexuality — chauvinism — of the script without disturbing the fabric of the play," McKernie said. "As soon as a woman read for the part, the problem was solved. Now a woman saves society; a woman is the strongest figure of the play."

Blaise agreed, adding that most nineteenth-century plays lacked opportunities for women to play strong, in-

Story by Brenda Thornton
Photo by Brian Erb

intelligent characters. However, when first cast in the part, she wondered if the sexual turnabout would work.

"I kept thinking 'we'll talk about this,' but we never did," Blaise said. "The other characters just kept responding to Van Helsing as Van Helsing, whether he or she."

The character of Van Helsing proved to be the key to the successful casting move. According to Blaise, Van Helsing is just a strong human being in a serious situation.

"I keep reminding myself that she is a strong individual, not a strong woman in a man's society," Blaise said. "But she'd make a wonderful modern woman."

Indeed, McKernie calls Van Helsing "a woman of the future." According to McKernie, Van Helsing personifies our age of relative thought, where absolutes rarely exist. However, Dr. Seward, Van Helsing's friend and Lucy's father, represents the logic and deductive reasoning of the nineteenth century, where explanations could only be found in cold, hard facts.

"Van Helsing is a woman of the future; there is room for mystery and myth in her world," McKernie said. "Dr. Seward is a man of the past. He is the rationalist, always believing in the logical explanation."

From the beginning, Van Helsing's world-view guides her in defeating Dracula. She moves in immediately to stop the evil Count, leaving no room for social pleasantries or feminine wiles.

"She has a softer side, but there's little opportunity to let that side come through," Blaise said. "We see the action moving along. There's no time for softies."

According to McKernie, this aspect of the character adds to the believability of the adaptation.

"Van Helsing is apart from society, not connected with the social fabric," McKernie said. "There is no social intercourse to reflect the traditional male attitudes."

McKernie added that the casting of a female hasn't affected the play and posed no problems. However, McKernie said, Dracula's tactics in attempting to defeat Van Helsing have taken on subtleties.

"A faint hint of seduction can be sensed," McKernie said. "But it only adds to the fun of the play."

In all, he finds that this switch works.

"You have to be careful flipping sex roles," McKernie said. "So many plays deal with relationships, and once you change a character's sex, you have to change others, or deal with peculiar emotional situations that don't have anything to do with the play. If you don't have a reason for the change, don't do it."

"I needed to solve the problem of the Victorian attitudes present in 'Dracula,'" McKernie said. "And this does it."

