



BY Cheryl Binning

Images courtesy of Von Helmsolt Film Productions; photo credit: Bruce Monk

GUY MADDIN'S DRACULA

Pages from a Virgin's Diary

Guy Maddin was a horror-movie buff as a kid. But *Dracula* was his least favourite of all the classics. In fact, he still finds most film versions of *Dracula* "boring." And as for filmed dance, well, he was clearly of the opinion that once dancers were reduced to eight centimetres in height on a television screen, this was just plain dull.

So what possessed the acclaimed Manitoba filmmaker to take the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's (RWB) version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and shoot it for broadcast on the CBC? Well, no doubt the director of such experimental and surreal films as *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*, *Archangel* and *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* would never turn down a challenge. And as Maddin relates the journey to bring *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin's Diary* to the screen, it becomes clear that what the director relished most was the experimentation the project afforded him. Mark

Godden's *Dracula* is a complex, three-act ballet, exploring the range of emotions of *Dracula*'s victims and the dichotomy of good and evil through dance. Faced with the challenge of bringing ballet to the small screen, Maddin tested out different shooting techniques and styles to accentuate the plot elements for television audiences, and learned to incorporate movement into his filmmaking in ways he had never done before.

Directing a dance film was never in Maddin's plans. It all began with a phone call from Winnipeg producer Vonnie Von Helmsolt, asking him to see RWB's version of Bram Stoker's famous tale of the undead. She was convinced that the vibrant colours of *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs* and the gothic sensibility found in Maddin's previous work made him the perfect choice for the project. "On first viewing, I found the

narrative slipping away from my rapt attention at times and I remember thinking, even then, that if I ever made a dance movie I would have to approach it differently than a choreographer would," recalls Maddin. "Choreographers have a captive audience in theatre seats, while on television you are dealing with itchy trigger fingers on the remote control."

This concerned Maddin, despite the fact that in his own work he has never tried to court a general audience with mainstream fare. "I am an old war veteran of alienating audiences with opaque plots. I have sprung many out of their seats in the past and I don't really want to do that anymore," he says. "I kept telling myself I better not do this film because I don't know anything about dance - I wouldn't even know how to jazz this up for television viewers." To legitimize his concerns, Maddin spoke to several dancers and choreographers about filmed dance, and they all echoed the same response: they did not like it at all. "So many people agreed that on television, something is lost, it's arid," he says. Convinced that dance did not translate to television, Maddin turned the project down.

Von Helmlolt persisted. She set up a meeting between Maddin and Godden, the ballet's choreographer. The dancers then performed the ballet in its entirety for Maddin and fellow filmmaker and collaborator deco dawson, who partnered with Maddin on the award-winning short *The Heart of the World*. They recorded the performance, with dawson on Super 8 and Maddin with a video camera. "Suddenly, I understood the motivation behind their performance because I had to move with them," recalls Maddin. "I recognized that deeply buried - and at times right there as plain as the nose on my face - were plot elements of Bram Stoker's story that I had been unaware of. Suddenly the narrative came to life for me."

Maddin was hooked. But in true Maddinesque form, it would not be a mere televised replication of a ballet danced on the stage. It would bear the artistic stamp of its director, with distinctive, beautifully bold cinematography, strong visuals, a signature "primitive," hallucinogenic style, fragmented cutting and a dark thematic tone.

While he did watch all the classic film adaptations of *Dracula*, Maddin claims they were of no significant influence, beyond re-introducing the character of Renfield to the ballet after watching Todd Browning's 1931 version with Bela Lugosi and Dwight Fry as Renfield. "I love the way the character was played - it was the most over the top performance," says Maddin. "So I stuck Renfield back into the story, gave a VHS of the *Dracula* to the dancer playing Renfield, and got him to watch it."

"My biggest influence was the work I did with deco on *The Heart of the World*," he says. Chosen in 2000 as the U.S. Society of Film Critics' top experimental film, *The Heart of the World*

harkens back to the early black-and-white Russian style, telling the story of two brothers in love with a female scientist who predicts the world is about to suffer a fatal heart attack. The story is compressed in a lightning-paced six minutes, and brimming with bold imagery. "It was the first movie I made with a lot of energy in it and I wanted to capture the same kind of kinetic 'omph' factor on this one," explains Maddin. The style and tone of *The Heart of the World* makes an indelible print on *Dracula*, also shot on black and white to achieve a rich, dark feel; with stark, primal imagery and a fast-paced intensity set against the strains of the music of Gustav Mahler. The style of *Dracula* is reminiscent of a 1920s silent movie, with an eerie modern touch achieved by computer-enhanced graphics tinting certain elements, such as *Dracula's* eyes, the inside of his cape, and a vampiress during her death throes, in vivid red.

There are many psychological interpretations of Stoker's famous 1897 novel about the blood-sucking Transylvanian count. "I had a rigid single interpretation of *Dracula*," Maddin says. "I am most comfortable looking at *Dracula* as a male possessiveness story." In Maddin's film, *Dracula* is not a literal figure. Rather, he is an external objectification of heterosexual male jealousy. "As soon as women acknowledge lust, the men who care for, admire and desire them can't deal with this, and have to track down and expunge the source of this lust somehow, meanwhile hurting the women who have created the jealousy in them," he says. In Maddin's retelling, *Dracula* is an archetype of the sexual rival. He points out that movie versions of *Dracula* all stylize the destruction of the undead women with a stake driven through the heart. In Stoker's novel the women were not only stabbed, but also had their hearts removed and heads cut off. "So she can no longer think about the other person, and her heart can no longer feel for him."

Maddin was also influenced by the xenophobia that he saw in Stoker's novel. "Dracula comes from Eastern Europe, where mysterious Slavic, capitalistic people come from, and the men that set out to capture him are concerned he might have stolen English money, as well as their women's hymens. It sure sounds to me like good old-fashioned Victorian England anti-Semitism," he says. *Dracula*, in effect, then, in Maddin's version is "the other," which our human nature both draws us to and repels us, at the same time.

To capture the dance from different angles and perspectives and ensure more set-up shots, Maddin used three camera operators - cinematographer Paul Suderman (*Hey, Happy!*) shooting on Super 16, with himself and dawson switching between Super 16 and Super 8. Maddin also bent some union rules and created the position of associate director for dawson. Envisioning a film that was "quick and primitive and fragmented in style," the cinematography team managed 100 set-ups a day throughout the shoot. Instead of cumbersome dollies and tracks to move the cameras around the dancers,

GUY MADDIN'S

D R A C U L A

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they reworked a high chair with a food tray, pushing Dawson around the dancers to shoot among them, capturing their movements from various angles and perspectives. While the Super 16 was setting up, they would shoot close-ups of the dancers using the Super 8 camera, lit only by a 60-watt bulb illuminated against a corkboard, creating dark pools of light against a shadowy background.

To clarify the narrative, Maddin added pantomime scenes not in the original ballet, most notably in the opening, to set up the story. Intertitles, as well as pantomimed preludes and interludes, reminiscent of silent films, provide plot details and dialogue. To keep viewers on their toes, he switches between intertitles, subtitles and surtitles. "It's not quite *Pop-Up Video*, but they are packaged to be interesting," he laughs.

To ensure that viewers were held captive by the emotions of the characters and drawn to the momentum of the narrative, Maddin looked for opportunities to focus the camera on the dancers' faces, rather than their feet. When the music swelled and the choreography peaked, Maddin moved the camera in tightly on their faces as opposed to the intricate dance moves. "The dancers were great melodramatic facial performers, and by closing in I was trying to keep viewers in touch with their personalities," he says. Maddin admits that he did not always do honour to the choreography of the ballet, particularly in the editing room. "When it came down to what was best for the movie, that sometimes meant removing dance sections or showing them from the less flattering angle," he explains.

Despite a dubious beginning, Maddin remains enthusiastic about *Dracula*. "I love this experience," he says. "I knew from the beginning that because I would learn a lot from doing this picture, which I did." Most importantly, working with dancers taught him about the importance of movement, and that will inform his future projects, he says. "I was always scared of movement in my films. I wasn't that experienced with blocking and I tended to get uncomfortable performances from actors when they had to mill about." He would also consider working with a choreographer on his next film - which won't be a dance film, by the way - to work with the actors in the blocking of the film to add a grace of movement to scenes. "When talkies first came about, there were movie and dialogue directors, so I might be a director with a blocking director - I'm not ashamed to hire people," he says. Maddin also plans to return to the three-camera shoot in future projects, not only for additional coverage but to offer up different perspectives on a scene, as if various eyes are viewing the same event.

Would he ever direct a dance film again? Maddin hasn't ruled it out. "But next time I would like to choreograph from scratch, directly for film, as opposed to taking a dance from the stage and then hacking at it with a razor-sharp camera."

TAKE ONE

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