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# DRACULA

**A COMEDY OF TERRORS**

by Gordon Greenberg & Steve Rosen



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# ***Dracula, A Comedy of Terrors***

By Gordon Greenberg and Steve Rosen

From the novel by  
Bram Stoker

**Produced at The Public Theatre  
October 11-27, 2024**

**A Study Guide  
by Caroline Judd**

## THE AUTHORS

*Dracula: A Comedy of Terrors* is a modern play (published in 2023) written by two contemporary playwrights, Gordon Greenberg and Steve Rosen. Much of the inspiration and material, including character names and plot, comes from Bram Stoker's 1897 novel titled *Dracula*, the quintessential vampire story. Though the play differs greatly from the original work, it follows the same basic plot and setting and deals with some of the same themes.

**Bram Stoker** was born on November 8<sup>th</sup> of 1847 in Dublin, Ireland. He suffered childhood illness and could not stand or walk until the age of seven, but recovered from his mysterious ailment around the time he entered school. He eventually became an exceptional athlete and a football player in college. He attended Trinity College in Dublin from 1864-70 and earned a degree in mathematics. He also earned a master's degree in 1875.

For ten years, he worked as a civil servant at Dublin Castle and as an unpaid drama critic at the *Dublin Evening Mail*. He eventually befriended the actor Sir Henry Irving and worked as his manager from 1878 till Irving's death in 1905, accompanying Irving on tour and assisting him in letter writing and other tasks. Stoker published his first book, *The Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions in Ireland*, in 1879. He turned to fiction over a decade later, publishing his first novel, *The Snake's Pass*, in 1890. He then published his most famous novel, *Dracula*, in 1897. Stoker died in London, England, in April of 1912. Two years after his death, his widow Florence Stoker published a posthumous collection of short stories titled *Dracula's Guest*.

**Gordon Greenberg** was born in Texas in 1969 and raised in New York, performing in his first Broadway show at 12 years old. He attended Stanford University and New York University Film School, which led to a robust career writing and directing on Broadway, Off-Broadway, on the West End, and on television. Some of his most notable projects include directing *The Heart of Rock and Roll* on Broadway and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* at the Geffen Playhouse. He was the director and co-writer for *Dracula, A Comedy of Terrors* along with Steve Rosen. Greenberg and Rosen also collaborated on *Crime and Punishment, A Comedy* and *Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Christmas Show*. Greenberg is still writing and directing, as well as being involved in arts education programs and teaching master classes.

**Steve Rosen** is an actor, writer, composer, and lyricist based out of New York City. He worked in film and television as an actor and has recurring roles in series like *Law and Order: SVU*, *The Resident*, and *The Bite*. He appeared on Broadway in *Spamalot*, *The Farnsworth Invention*, and *Guys and Dolls*. As co-composer, lyricist, and book writer with David Rossmer, he co-wrote the musicals *The Griswolds' Broadway Vacation* and *The Other Josh Cohen*. He is still an active writer and actor and has worked with Gordon Greenberg on several projects, listed above.

## THE SETTING

Bram Stoker's novel is set in two main locations, Transylvania and London. The novel portrays Transylvania as a dark and mysterious place, where the locals carve out life in a bleak, wolf-infested landscape. Dracula's castle is the center of all things dark, evil, and mysterious, and the place where the

book both begins and ends. London is not necessarily perfectly good, but the novel does present it positively and in contrast to the darkness of Transylvania. This is part of the reason Dracula's arrival there is so wrong: it brings evil to a refuge and a safe haven.

In true comedic fashion, the play represents the same settings as the novel in a lighthearted and farcical way. It also embraces the reality that it is a theatrical performance by using minimal sets and props to create the setting and frequently breaking the fourth wall. The actors set the scene with their bodies and movements, most comically when they are pursuing Dracula and mimic walking down several flights of stairs into his basement. Rather than create hyper-realistic sets, the play uses a stripped-down approach that communicates the necessary information while keeping the fourth wall thin, the mood light, and the comedic energy high. The characters make occasional references to being in a play and sometimes interact with the audience, which keeps the audience from real suspense or fear.

Like the novel, the play represents Transylvania as a place of fear and confusion. Rather than inspiring a genuine feeling of fear, as the novel seeks to do, it has a cartoon feeling of suspense, such as might be invoked at a kitschy Halloween party. The wolves are played by actors with light-up eyes, and the scene is over-dramatized with fog and spooky music. The characters spend very little time there at the beginning, and never visit or mention the area again.

Most of the action of the play takes place in Whitby, a homey and comfortable place where Lucy, Mina, their father, and his mental patients live. The haunted house in town adds an air of mystery, but the Westfeldt house still feels like a safe haven for the characters throughout the piece. Though Whitby is their home, because of the lighter mood and feel of the entire piece, Dracula's intrusion is not nearly as offensive or abominable as it is in the novel.

The last location is London, where only a small portion of the final comedic montage takes place. Because the play is much shorter than the novel, it does not lean into the thematic elements of the different locations in the book, nor does it make commentary on those locations. It portrays each location but does not spend time exploring what those locations mean to the characters or what they represent.

## **THE PLOT**

The play generally follows the structure of the novel, though it leaves out many minor plot points and takes several artistic liberties, most of which have to do with the length of the play and the artistic switch from drama to comedy.

The play begins with a comedic prologue that breaks the fourth wall, interacting directly with the audience and preparing them for the adaptation they're about to see. It also incorporates the necessary theatrical information about silencing cell phones and unwrapping candy right into the piece. Throughout the play, characters occasionally read from letters or dairies, which alludes to the fact that the novel is told almost entirely through the characters' writings, but most of the play is enacted live and in the moment by the actors.

The main plot of the play begins with Harker's journey to Dracula's castle. Harker converses at length with his carriage driver, who drops comedically exaggerated hints about who Dracula is, including giving Harker a braid of garlic. Other actors play wolves with light up eyes and spoof the drama of the novel with spray fog. Dracula's entrance is also comedically showy and rock-star-esque, featuring loud music and more spray fog. Harker's stay at the castle is greatly shortened, making up one scene between him and Dracula. They discuss Dracula's new properties and Harker talks about his fiancée Lucy, who Dracula becomes infatuated with. Harker also tells Dracula about Lucy's father, Dr. Westfeldt, who runs an insane asylum, and the local haunted house in Whitby, which Dracula promptly purchases. Dracula comes across as a rather goofy and stuck-up character designed more to make people chuckle than cause fear.

The play then jumps from Harker's stay in the castle to the shipwreck of a foreign vessel carrying mysterious cargo. The audience sees the captain and the bosun trying to steer through a storm and talking about how the whole crew has died except their mysterious passenger. The captain records some of these events in his ship's log, and the next scene cuts to Lucy and Mina reading this log as they prepare for Lucy and Jonathan's engagement party. They are enraptured by the drama of a shipwreck and eventually realize that Jonathan's Transylvanian client was on board, hoping he collected payment from his client before the wreck. Jonathan arrives and he and Lucy share a romantic moment that displays their differences: she is the spirit of adventure, while he is extremely cautious and a rule follower.

The engagement party introduces a variety of suitors of Lucy, all played by puppets operated by the same actor. The suitors are quite arrogant, pursuing Lucy even though she is engaged and ignoring everyone else entirely. Dracula appears into the engagement party with his usual self-absorbed flair and Mina is immediately smitten, but he ignores her and bestows all his attentions on an intrigued Lucy. Dracula also meets Renfield and begins to win him over with talk of delicious bugs for him to eat, encouraging him to come be his servant at Withering Manor. Dracula flirts with Mina and selects her as the easiest victim, bringing her home with him.

The fifth scene begins with Dr. Westfeldt reading a letter he wrote to a medical expert, echoing the consistent use of letters and journal entries in the novel. The letter tells of Mina's recent illness, which began after the engagement party, and her father's concerns for her health. The other characters tend Mina on her sickbed. Dr. Van Helsing, Dr. Westfeldt's German medical colleague, arrives to care for Mina and identifies bite marks on her neck. After this, Renfield tells them he saw Mina leave the party with a gentleman and then runs away, escaping the asylum. This leads them to suspect Renfield as the culprit.

Van Helsing immediately guesses that Mina's illness was caused by a vampire, identity unknown, and they continue to care for Mina as she slowly succumbs to fits. Lucy gives her sister blood transfusions, and Lucy and Jonathan fight over the fact that Jonathan is a germaphobe and unwilling to help care for Mina.

Dracula arrives under the pretense of caring for Mina, but no one guesses that he is the vampire, still suspecting Renfield. He seduces Lucy and drinks Lucy's blood from Mina's veins, then kidnapping

Mina and framing Renfield. Once again, no one suspects Dracula. This pokes fun at the characters in the novel, who are slow to come to conclusions that seem obvious to the reader. On a later visit, Dracula coaches Harker in how to be courageous and adventurous. The two characters are often contrasted as men and love interests, especially as they both have romantic interest in Lucy.

At last, Van Helsing and Lucy guess that Dracula is the vampire. Lucy's father tells her to stay home while they search for him and Jonathan volunteers to go with the party, displaying rare courage and initiative. On the hunt for Dracula, Lucy's father and Van Helsing flirt relentlessly, including while investigating a nearby graveyard.

Shortly after, Dracula approaches Lucy and asks to marry her but she refuses, now knowing who he is. She then agrees to the marriage in order to buy them time to deal with him. Mina bites Harker and he becomes like Dracula, including his confident demeanor and bold fashion choices. Lucy likes this version of him even better, but Van Helsing says they must kill Dracula to free Mina and Harker. They head to London and search for him at his first property with no success. This leads to a farcical montage of the characters searching all Dracula's properties for the coffin where he sleeps, which makes fun of how long it takes them to find him in the book. As they arrive, Dracula wakes up. Lucy convinces Dracula to be selfless and he allows himself to be killed to save the others, though Harker does the actual killing out of jealousy over Dracula's advances toward Lucy.

In the epilogue, Dr. Westfeldt and Dr. Van Helsing are romantic partners, Lucy has a career, she and Jonathan are married, and they are expecting a baby. The final scene shows their wedding day, in which Lucy's baby bump begins to glow red and the officiant of the wedding reveals himself as Dracula. With this dramatic cliffhanger, the curtain falls.

## THE CHARACTERS

**Dracula:** He is portrayed as a very sexually attractive and alluring man with a magnetic personality. Partly because of this, he is extremely self-centered. Women tend to be naturally drawn to him as a romantic partner and men, especially Jonathan, are drawn to him as an exemplification of masculinity, boldness, and self-confidence. In the end, he sacrifices himself to save Mina and Jonathan, which displays a degree of courage and nobility completely absent in the novel.

**Jonathan Harker:** He is engaged to Lucy and is an extremely timid germaphobe. He is cautious about what he eats, takes no risks, and allows other characters to push him around. His fiancée Lucy is the clear leader in their relationship and he is controlled almost entirely by what she and other characters want. He demonstrates no nobility until the end, after he has been bitten and changed by Dracula to become much bolder and more outgoing. In the end, he reverts back to his usual cowardly self.

**Lucy Westfeldt:** She is one of the heroes and plays an active role in getting rid of Dracula. She is engaged to Jonathan, usually takes the lead in their relationship, and often uses her cunning and her problem-solving skills. She is intelligent and heroic, figures out that Dracula is the vampire, and leads the charge to find and kill him. In the end, she uses persuasion and logic to help Dracula see the error of his ways and becomes the hero of the story by helping to get rid of the antagonist.

**Mina Westfeldt:** She is a rather foolish sidekick of her sister Lucy, uncared for by her father and without any suitors. While close to Lucy, she often feels inadequate and in her sister's shadow. She is desperate to be in a relationship, naïve, and easily taken in. An easy victim of Dracula, she spends most of the show incapacitated.

**Dr. Van Helsing:** She is a German woman who speaks with a comically thick accent. She is also the brains of the operation in tandem with Lucy and provides much of the know-how about vampires. She is relatively similar to the Van Helsing of the novel and models much of his wise, strategic, and knowledgeable spirit. In the play, Lucy shares the role of solving the mystery and caring for Dracula's victims, which makes Van Helsing's role in the drama slightly smaller. Van Helsing also eventually becomes a romantic interest of Dr. Westfeldt.

**Dr. Westfeldt:** He is Lucy and Mina's father. He also runs the insane asylum and cares for Renfield and Kitty but does so in a flippant and dehumanizing manner. He is emotionally unaware and misogynistic and favors Lucy over Mina, frequently pushing Mina to the side or ignoring her completely. He is arrogant and unwilling to believe he is wrong, which blinds him to many of the problems in the piece. He eventually develops a romantic relationship with Dr. Van Helsing.

**Renfield:** He is a resident of the asylum and assists Dracula in his nefarious plans after being taken in by the offer of delicious insects. He is primarily motivated by his desire to eat other creatures and by personal gain. The other characters believe him guilty of the attacks for a time, but his name is eventually cleared.

**Kitty:** She is a maid in the insane asylum and a chronic kleptomaniac. Her character does not grow or change much throughout the piece and she mostly exists to provide comedic relief.

**Lord Windsor/Lord Cavendish/Lord Havemercy:** These three are all arrogant suitors of Lucy who arrive at her engagement party to offer their counterproposals of marriage. They are all played by puppets in the hands of one actor.

**Driver:** He takes Harker to Dracula's castle. He speaks with a comically thick Transylvanian accent and is a caricature of the superstitious and overly cautious local.

**Captain:** He is the man in charge of the ship doomed to wreck in England carrying Dracula and his belongings.

**Bosun:** another member of the crew of the doomed shipwreck.

**Gravedigger:** a mysterious and creepy character who points them along the way in their hunt for Dracula.

## THE THEMES

The play is primarily a farcical comedy designed to make audiences laugh rather than ask deep moral questions. Partly because the novel asks such questions, however, elements of these themes are still present in the play and worth considering. One of the biggest questions the play examines is

whether or not Dracula is a good character. This primarily comes up through his final sacrifice. Through Dracula's final actions in allowing himself to be killed, the play explores the idea of what it means to be selfless and sacrificial. It also brings up the question of whether such sacrifice is heroic when it is not entirely voluntary, as Dracula's is. Though he does choose the right thing, which is to sacrifice himself for the sake of others, he does it only by being persuaded and eventually forced. This leaves the audience wondering whether he is a hero or a pushover at the mercy of the other characters.

Because the play deals with topics like harm to others for selfish gain, it also raises questions of good and evil. The line between the two is not particularly clear, as Dracula is portrayed as funny, attractive, and sympathetic despite being the antagonist. The other characters, while still heroic, boast many flaws. Most obvious is Dr. Westfeldt's prejudice against women, particularly his daughter Mina. He still assists in the fight against Dracula and contributes, so he is not outright evil, but his arrogance and prejudice keep him from being completely good either. Thus, the play allows some moral ambiguity and structures the characters and their interactions to have the greatest comedic effect rather than offer a robust commentary on good and evil.

Third, the play explores the idea of heroism and what it means to do the right thing. The play mostly examines heroism through Jonathan and Dracula, frequently comparing them. Dracula is portrayed as partly heroic in the end because he is willing to die for the good of others, while Jonathan is not heroic because he is not courageous or bold enough to care for others well or give Lucy the support she needs. Interestingly, Jonathan only becomes heroic while under Dracula's influence, and reverts back to his cowardly self after Dracula's death. By contrasting these characters, the play also looks at themes of masculinity and what it means to be a good man and a supportive partner in a relationship.

## **THE COMEDIC STYLE**

The play is written primarily in a satirical style. The Oxford English Dictionary defines satire as a work of art "which uses humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness, especially as a form of social or political commentary." The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines satire more simply as "a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn." In this case, the play is satirical because it pokes fun at the self-seriousness and drama of the novel. For instance, the dramatic rising action of the novel takes place as the characters painstakingly search London for Dracula's lairs. In the play, this becomes a slapstick montage with the characters leaping from location to location in seconds and miming their movements for comedic effect. In all things, the play takes the atmosphere of the novel, which is meant to invoke terror and deep moral questioning, and makes it light and funny, poking fun at the fear audiences tend to feel from vampire stories.

The play is also written in a vaudeville style. Vaudeville began in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century in France as a form of light musical drama incorporating pantomime. In America, it began primarily as an obscene form of comedy for male audiences. By the late 1800s, it evolved into a respectable style of entertainment and appropriate for families. Vaudeville generally featured a variety of different acts, eventually including feature films in between performance acts. In this play, the vaudeville style reveals



itself in the fact that a handful of actors play all the roles, often switching between them onstage by taking a wig on and off. This is meant to be purely comedic and entertain the audience, reminding them that they are watching a performance and not seeking to maintain a fourth wall. Additionally, the characters of Lucy's suitors are played by puppets, and Mina during her illness is portrayed by stuffed arms and legs that stick off her bed and are moved by other actors. All of this combines to create a light, upbeat mood designed to keep the audience engaged and laughing rather than inspiring deep moral thinking.

Other works in the same comedic style include *Monty Python*, *Young Frankenstein*, and *The Princess Bride*, as well as the popular style of Mel Brooks.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think the authors chose to make the play a comedy when the original novel is so dark?
2. What is the purpose of having a few actors play all the roles? What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of doing it this way?
3. Why do you think the authors chose to make the setting of the play so minimal when it is thematically important in the book? How does such a minimal setting affect the story and how might it be easier or harder for actors and production teams?
4. Why do you think men play women and vice versa in the play? What questions does this bring up about gender roles?
5. Which is your favorite character in the play and why?
6. What parts of the play do you think are the most comedically effective (funny)? Why?