

The Vampire's Dance

Roman Polanski enters the world of mega-musicals with *Dance of the Vampire*.

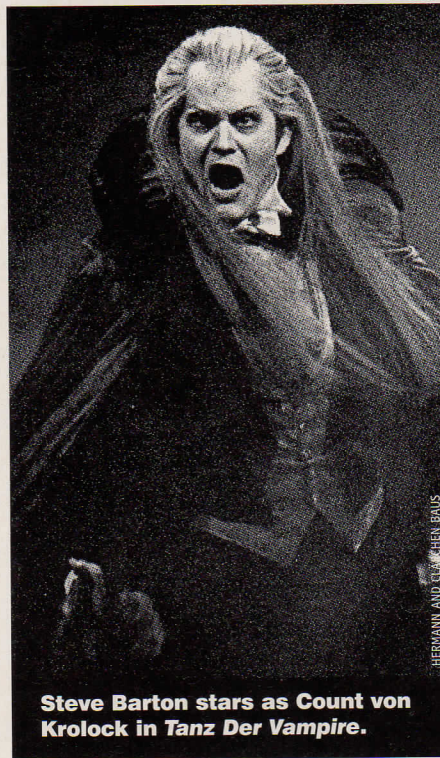
By Gerard Raymond

VIENNA — A vampire musical directed by Roman Polanski, the masterly director of such wickedly twisted movies as *Rosemary's Baby* and *Chinatown*, is indeed a delicious prospect. What's more, the source for the show — *The Fearless Vampire Killers, Or Pardon Me But Your Teeth Are in My Neck* — is one of his own movies, a wacky 1967 spoof which introduced into the genre a Jewish and a gay vampire. But alas, all hopes for an evening of perverse fun are quickly dashed at Vienna's Raimund Theater, where the new musical, *Tanz der Vampire* (*Dance of the Vampire*) received its world premiere in October. (The show is scheduled to run at least through Dec. 31.) Instead of rethinking the movie, the creators have opted to merely present the film, scene by scene, on stage. But where the movie is playful and cheeky, the musical, with a score by Jim Steinman and a German language libretto by Michael Kunze, vacillates between broad schtick and over-earnestness, and is more interested in becoming a Broadway mega-musical clone than in finding its own voice.

With weekend orchestra seats priced in the region of \$118 (astronomical even by Broadway standards) and merchandising strategies worthy of Disney, the producers of *Dance of the Vampire* are no slouches when it comes to marketing. Pre-show audiences at the Raimund, the theater that recently housed the Viennese edition of *Beauty and the Beast*, are encouraged to buy "The Drink of the Vampire" — crimson-colored sweetened vodka shots in test tubes — in addition to the standard glossy programs, T-shirts, mugs, and baseball caps, all emblazoned with a cheesy vam-

pire denture logo.

Hewing closely to the plot of the film, *Tanz der Vampire* begins with the arrival at a Transylvanian inn of the daffy Professor Abronsius (Gernot Kranner), frozen stiff from a sleigh ride in a snowstorm, and his fresh-faced assistant, Alfred (Aris Sas), a part played by Polanski himself in the movie. Playing the vampire Count von Krolock, Steve



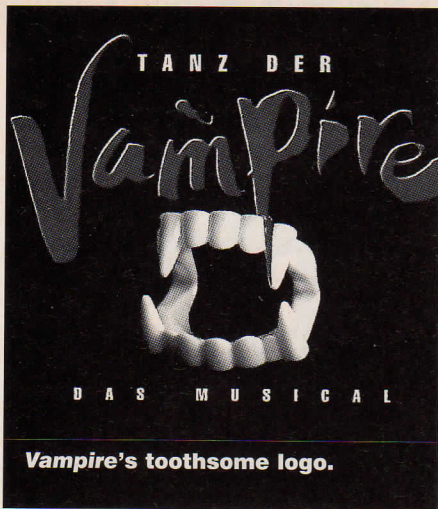
Steve Barton stars as Count von Krolock in *Tanz Der Vampire*.

Barton (the original Raoul in *The Phantom of the Opera*) hits notes of genuine pathos when contemplating the graves of his lovers through the centuries ("The Insatiable Appetite"), but for the most part postures and swishes his cape dramatically. Von Krolock has set his sights on Sarah (Cornelia Zenz), the daughter of the Jewish innkeeper Chagall (James Sbano). Young Alfred, too, is

smitten with Sarah, a bored young woman with a provocative penchant for taking baths. In short order, our heroine is spirited off to the vampire's castle and her father becomes a victim of the Count's fangs. The ever inquisitive Professor and his lovelorn assistant follow in hot pursuit. In the much livelier second act, in which Alfred must also escape the advances of von Krolock's vampire son, the professor and his assistant attempt to frustrate the Count in his plan for serving Sarah up as a treat at his annual vampire ball.

Previous stage work by *Vampire's* American composer include the 1971 musical *The Dream Engine* (which was optioned by Joe Papp but was scrapped because it was considered too erotic and too violent to be staged in Central Park) and *More Than You Deserve*, with a book by Michael Weller, which was staged at the Public in 1972. Steinman wrote the lyrics for Andrew Lloyd Webber's latest musical, *Whistle Down the Wind*, but he is best known in this country for the rock music he wrote with Meatloaf ("I'd Do Anything for Love" and "Paradise by the Dashboard Light"). For his *Vampire* score he even recycles his big hit, "Total Eclipse of the Heart." However, despite the pleasant melodies and lush orchestrations, the score suffers from the overall lack of consistency about this musical: What is it supposed to be — spoof, Gothic romance, or horror story?

The top notch team of British designers assembled for *Vampire* — William Dudley for sets, Hugh Vanstone for lighting, and Sue Blaine (London's *Guys and Dolls*) for costumes — have all done better work in London. Dudley's first-act set for the inn is particularly tacky, but his castle in the sec-



Vampire's toothsome logo.

ond act has character. In one of the best scenes in the show, he transposes an overhead shot from the Polanski movie and creates an effect whereby the Professor and Alfred can look down from the battlements of the castle and witness the vampires rising out of their graves to attend the annual ball.

Polanski is no stage novice, but you wouldn't know it from this clumsy production. He previously directed the Warsaw and Paris productions of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* (in which he also played the lead) and, most recently, the Paris production of Terrence McNally's *Master Class*. All through the plodding first act of *Vampire*, he stages innumerable scenes in front of a curtain. Actors scurry through the aisles so often that one wonders if there's no other way out from the stage. And after the first surprise, no one really cares when the vampires keep materializing in the balconies of the auditorium. He also botches the climactic scene at the vampire ball (a highlight in the movie), in which the Professor and Alfred, mingling among the vampires in disguise, are discovered only when their reflections are seen in a large mirror. Trouble is, Polanski has already staged a much better mirror effect in a scene with Alfred and the Count's son, so the big climax is a letdown. Who can tell why Polanski undertook to revisit his 30 year-old movie? The life blood seems to have been sucked out of this project long before it reached the stage. ■

GERARD RAYMOND is a New York-based freelance writer specializing in theater and film.

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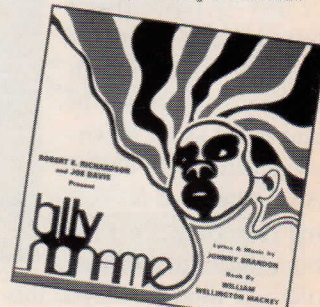
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