<u>Dramaturgical Program Note</u>
American University Department of Performing Arts
Dracula, adapted by William McNulty
Directed by Carl Menninger
Written by Elizabeth Morton

Vampires

Examples of vampires can be found in nearly every culture (including non-Western societies), the modern charismatic vampire was born in 18th century horror novels. Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* is widely considered the last great gothic horror novel, and popularized the vampire myth for the modern age. Stoker worked for the Lyceum Theatre in London, which produced stories known as "invasion literature," that reflected the xenophobia and anxiety of Britain's period of rapid colonization. *Dracula* was not popular during Stoker's life, but its successful film adaptation in the 1920s launched the modern vampire genre. Vampirism is often used as a heavy-handed metaphor for draining power, life, and purity from victims. The popularity of vampires in the 19th century and beyond represents the deep-seated fear of the unknown, and more importantly, of that unknown seizing power from those who had maintained it for so long. *Carmilla* was an 1870 vampire novella about female vampire who had a romantic affair with her victim Laura. While this novel was written in the spirit of homophobia and misogyny, the story is groundbreakingly compelling for its depiction of a woman in power and a lesbian relationship. Over the last century of vampire stories, women have been depicted in power. In examples such as *True Blood*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and older movies like *The Hunger*, women are capable of being dominant vampiric figures. William McNulty's *Dracula*, adapted in 2008, takes us back to the weak waifish damsel trope, for all three of its female characters. How can we bring the vampire story back to a place of the powerful female vampire as depicted in *Carmilla* in 1870?

Performing Gender

According to theorists like Judith Butler, gender is a mere performance. Gender is a social construct that is not inherent to biology, forced upon its performers by the societal norms they grow up with. As Simone de Beauvoir states, "One is not born woman, one becomes woman." Gender is carefully choreographed, rehearsed, and presented like any theatrical performance. We are trained to recognize certain behaviors as belonging to one of the two binary genders, and will do so. Often, the same behavior will be considered masculine or feminine based on the assumed gender of the performer. For example, if a man refuses to ask for directions, he is lbeing stubborn and masculine. If a woman refuses to ask for directions, she is being shortsighted and flighty. McNulty's *Dracula* contains many examples of gendered behavior. This production's unique casting will play on traditional perceptions of gender norms.

Genderbent Casting

The casting of this production of *Dracula* creates distinct images of a society flipped. The society presented onstage subverts what we think to be true about gender. We will see women in full Victorian dresses battle demons and gallantly protect their (male) lovers. We will see men victimized and tossed around like rag dolls, waiting for their women to save them. The cognitive dissonance of these images throughout the performance can and should make you

uncomfortable. Pronouns for characters remain unchanged from the original script. In our world, Dracula and his enemies are still "male," holding the political and social power of men in the 1890s. Watch as these young women actors perform roles of traditional male power and dominance. What does it mean for a female-appearing person to inflict that kind of violence on a male-appearing person? Why does it cause such a unique level of discomfort, when everyday on television (not to mention the news), we see these same acts against women normalized?