GLT's 'Dracula Bites' is a delicious morsel

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THEATER REVIEW

Greenville Little Theatre opened its spirited new comedy "Dracula Bites" to a packed house on Friday night.

The crisply and cleverly staged "play-within-a-play" by Duke Ernsberger and Virginia Cate follows ambitious New York writer/director Gregory Pastel, played with relish by Peter Lupu, and the residents of the small town of Valley Dale, N.C., as they struggle to stage Pastel's dismal adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula."

The play pits Pastel, a man whose ego far outstrips his abilities, against the theater's artistic director Nattie Sills (Catherine Christophillis). Though she blithely asks, "How can it possibly go wrong?" she quickly finds herself watching with dismay as Pastel's grandiose ideas undermine both the small-town appeal of the show and her budget.

Pastel must also direct the inept local townsfolk who have been cast in his production.

"Dracula Bites" is directed by Allen McCalla, and is infused with his characteristic zest. Scene changes are frequent and swift, and dialogue is snappily delivered.

The show's highlights are the many hilarious physical comedy gags: bungling actors trying to hold too many props at once, unpredictable costume and prop malfunctions, and, of course, "the big swing," wherein Dracula is meant to fly over the stage and audience like an enormous bat. Each is staged for maximum comedic impact and many earned spontaneous applause from the boisterous audience.

As Pastel, Peter Lupu has innumerable fine moments, though his best may be his rapid-fire summary of the entire plot of Stoker's novel with the aid of increasingly complex and indecipherable flowcharts that had the audience in stitches.

The ensemble cast is uniformly strong, with each member commanding both the stage and the laughter in turns.

Todd Janssen, playing the overzealous Gus Timberlake, shines particularly in his physical routines.

Cory Granner as Stewart Minor — the young man tasked with portraying Dracula in the town's production — never misses an opportunity to use his ridiculously awful costume and Pastel's increasingly bizarre demands for comic effect.

Jeremiah Dew plays the earnest undertaker Mike Morehead, whose deadpan delivery provides an amusing contrast to the antics of the other characters.

Jessie Cann portrays Joyce Fickle, who really delivers in a riotous scene in which she attempts to avoid being sick whilst being strung in garlands of garlic.

Stephanie Underwood as the sage if ditzy Mora Pastel, Shea Bahnsen as the harried actress Sara Jenkins, and Sara Kosmer as the put-upon managing director Flora Robinson are also highly entertaining in their respective scenes.

"I hope we can bring theater to the people, whether they want it or not," quips Pastel early in the show. For better or for worse, that's just what he does, and that's Greenville's good fortune.

"Dracula Bites" continues through Nov. 10. For tickets, call 864-233-6238 or go to www.greenvillelittletheatre.org.