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Dark passion of a vampire

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"VAMPIRES seem to be the 'in' thing these days," said Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir in jest at a pre-performance media briefing of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's (RWB) production of Dracula in Kuala Lumpur recently.

With television shows such as Buffy The Vampire Slayer and Angel becoming increasingly popular, a real life 'invasion' of the blood-thirsty 'vampires' here would be well-received.

The Canadian troupe's performance of Bram Stoker's classic about a Rumanian tale will even have the increasingly popular East-meets-West concept as it features Canadian Tara Britwhistle as Lucy and Johnny Chang (of Chinese descent) as Dracula.

The dance troupe is set to mesmerise Malaysians tonight and tomorrow at Istana Budaya Kuala Lumpur.

They are currently on an eight-week tour of Asia - their first since performing in Japan in 1996. Thirty per cent of the proceeds from the performances will be donated to the Malaysian Aids Foundation (MAF), chaired by Datin Paduka Marina.

A tale that many are familiar with, Dracula is about a Transylvanian vampire - who doubles as a smooth and irresistible count - who can't seem to get enough of fresh human blood in his quest for immortality.

This production promises a winning combination of the best theatrical entertainment - world class choreography showcasing graceful ballet with a contemporary twist created by Mark Godden; spectacular costumes and hair-raising set design by Paul Daigle enhanced by the magical illusions of light by David Morrison; magnificent, mysterious and macabre music from three Mahler symphonies - brought to life by a 25-member cast of the highly-acclaimed RWB.

Three years since its world premiere in Winnipeg, the talented Britwhistle said that a lot of changes had taken place within the production.

"This production has evolved enormously, from just a ballet performance to a theatrical piece. Each dancer has grown with his or her character which makes everything even more real. And Johnny's excellent portrayal of Dracula brings out the human in the vampire," said the 29 year-old who finds dramatic roles extremely challenging.

Chang's effective portrayal of Dracula is said to be so moving that young boys, particularly, have been reported to have waved banners that say, "I love Dracula" during the troupe's performances.

Divided into three acts, Dracula opens with a narrative that introduces the bloodthirsty count's arrival to England in the late 1800s. His character reaches out to the dark side in each of us - the passionate and sensual, morbid and forbidden.

The first and third acts are reminiscent of the cinematic suspense of the tale, while the second is the choreographer's interpretation of the story, featuring a pantomime portion that serves as a breather from what could be heavy terror and suspense.

Also present at the media briefing were acting High Commissioner of the Canadian High Commission, Otch Von Finckestein, Istana Budaya's public relations officer Zaiton Mohd Desa, artistic director Andre Lewis and Colin McIntyre of McIntyre International Management, the group responsible of organising the RWB's Asia Tour.

Reportedly the longest, largest tour in their much-travelled history,

the RWB's Asia Tour this time involves 35 performances in seven countries including the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and Macau before hitting mainland China for dates in several cities including Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai.

Tickets, priced at RM100, RM180 and RM250, are reported to be selling fast.

Get them at Istana Budaya, Bon Ton Restaurant, The Actors Studio Bangsar and Dataran Merdeka, and MPH Bookstores in Bangsar, Bukit Bintang, Subang Parade, Section 14 and Mid Valley MegaMall.

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