

FYI



Zach Andrews portrays 10 characters in the one-man show, "Dracula: The Journal of Jonathan Harker" at the Coterie. He uses rock climbing techniques to stay safe on a giant set of monkey bars. See the review on D3.

THEATER | Actor sinks his teeth into a challenge

DARING DRACULA

The Coterie's energetic one-man show has Zach Andrews hanging from the rafters.

By LISA GUTIERREZ
The Kansas City Star

We've never thought of Count Dracula as a hard body. How much muscle power does it take to sink two pointy cuspids into the thin, soft, yielding flesh of a neck?

No sweat, right?

You would think so if you'd never seen Zach Andrews wearing Dracula's shoes.

Andrews plays the Famous Fanged One and nine other characters in "Dracula: The Journal of Jonathan Harker," playing at the Coterie through Oct. 27.

The script for the one-man show rises straight off the pages of Bram Stoker's 1897 horror novel, thick with the heavy, heady, gothic language of yore.

To make things more dynamic for the Coterie's young Twitter-versed patrons, director Jeff Church added action, lots of it, taking advantage of his physically fit leading man, a 6-foot-3, 200-pound conflation of lean, rippling muscles and fetching visage.

"I thought for our audiences it would be dull to just stand and talk a lot," Church says. "I liked the idea of putting that classical language with a physical performance that has some daring to it. I think it adds

SEE DRACULA | D3



Andrews' Dracula is a muscular, physical "supervillain."

PHOTOS BY JOHN SLEEZER | THE KANSAS CITY STAR

DRACULA: Every show is a workout

FROM D1 some shock and awe."

Hence, at various points during the play Andrews swings from, hangs from and crawls across the main set piece — a giant set of monkey bars. Dracula gives three speeches perched upside down like a bat.

At one point, the actor hangs like an Olympic gymnast, arms outstretched in Iron Cross fashion, from rings dangling from the ceiling.

He moves from one side of the stage to other by scampering along a ledge a little wider than a balance beam, hoping all the while that he doesn't fall on the kids in the front rows.

The talking and moving is non-stop except for 30 seconds of pre-recorded narration midway that let Andrews take a quick sip of water. He burns through 908 calories each show, the kind of energy he'd use running 8 miles.

"It became this movement piece, this piece about strength, and it's such a neat concept. He is so strong and with all of these moves they just started feeling superhuman," says Andrews, who has come to refer to Dracula as "the original supervillain."

He performed for his first audience last week. Five minutes into the 70-minute performance, his face and hair glistened with sweat.

"Twilight" vampires aren't the only ones who sparkle.

Students from Odessa High School sat in front-row seats.

Sophomore Jacob Pabst, 15, a budding actor himself, was impressed that Andrews remembered all those lines and that he could move around so much without breathing hard.

Said buddy Kane Wolkey, 16: "You could definitely see gallons of sweat coming off his face ... no way could I ever do that. It looked insane."

Church handpicked Andrews for the play after working with the Denver actor in the Coterie's production of "The Outsiders" in the fall of 2011. Andrews was a theater graduate student at the University of Missouri-Kansas City at the time.

In June, Andrews came to Kansas City for three days to talk Dracula with Church and the production crew.

The play originally came with a four-page props list that included a live rat. As narrator Jonathan Harker described how he and a small band of men and women hunted Dracula from Transylvania through the streets of London, the action mostly took place in the ghost-story setting of an old attic.

"We looked at it and all we could think of was, I walk over here and I talk, talk, talk. Then I walk over here and talk, talk, talk. Then I pick up a lamp," Andrews says. "That's every one-man show I've ever seen."

Church was the first to imagine the specter of Dracula on a trapeze — the cape, swooping and all that.

The next day set designer Jor-

HE WANTS YOUR BLOOD

The Coterie and the Community Blood Center will co-host a blood drive from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday in the Coterie Lab, next to the theater's box office on the lower level of Crown Center. Participants will receive a coupon good for one free admission to the play. Make an appointment online at esavealifenow.org using the sponsor code "Coterie" or call 816-474-6785, ext. 221.

dan Janota offered his scheme: a stage designed around what Andrews calls a "weird, steampunk set of monkey bars."

Andrews went home to Denver to perform in another play and to train for "Dracula."

He ran, boosting his 2 daily miles to 10. He went rock climbing to learn how to safely clamber and strengthened his fingers using hand grips and little exercise balls.

He took trapeze lessons to get the hang of hanging. He installed a pull-up bar — "definitely one of the most bachelor-y things I own" — over a doorway in his home. Twenty pull-ups during TV commercials became habit.

He learned his lines, too, all of them, which impressed Church when Andrews came back to Kan-

sas City in late September to start the 2½ weeks of rehearsals.

Andrews kind of freaked out when the first saw the monkey bars — 9 feet tall, 20 feet long, bars akimbo set at irregular distances.

His first thought: "I'm going to die."

His second: "I've just gotten us into this huge mess because I'm never going to be able to work on this thing."

But he was stronger than he thought. He jumped up and grabbed the bars, relieved that he could do it without breaking his neck.

Also challenging is making sure all that adrenaline doesn't kill the clarity of his speaking as he's bounding about. He rips through accent after accent, from formal British to the drawls of Transylvania and Texas. He's a man one minute, a woman the next.

"Everything in my body wants to be moving this fast," he says, "so the act of slowing down requires conscious (thought) ... breathe, get yourself back under control."

His first performance left him plenty of breath and energy to carry on a conversation.

Blessedly, no blood transfusion needed.

"I feel as though I've had a thorough workout," said the actor, brow freshly mopped. "I bought a gym membership when I got here, which was just a waste."

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