

# Blood, Camp, and Chaos: "Blood for Dracula" director Sarah Jacklin on meticulously messy theater



Mike Smith, Marian Keramati, and Danni Tsuboi in "Blood for Dracula" at Psychic Readings

(Dave Iden)

## **Charlie Jay**

Dying for the blood of fresh virgins, Dracula makes for the Italian countryside in hopes of seducing the daughters of a religious genteel family. The hunt for untouched flesh proves elusive for the ghastly Count who, in a desperate moment, sucks on a blood-soaked loaf of bread.

So begins the 1974 cult classic "Blood for Dracula," produced by Andy Warhol and directed by Paul Morrissey. Baldly pornographic and hammy as hell, the film is a fitting choice for the Psychic Readings Company's "Late Night Theatre" series finale, a stage adaptation written and directed by Sarah Jacklin.

A company member of [Annex Theater](#), Jacklin first joined Psychic Readings as an actor in their production of "Garbage, Death, and the City of Baltimore," which won City Paper's [2015 award](#) for Best Play. She went on to co-direct "The Maids," and has starred in several of their productions.

In Jacklin's adaptation of "Blood for Dracula," the title character (played by Ishai Barnoy) journeys with his servant, Mario (Mike Smith), to a rural Airbnb where sisters Amelia (Nina Kearin), Ruby (Danni Tsuboi), and Rose (Mariam Keramati) reside. As Amelia confronts her younger sisters over their sexcapades with estate worker Anton (Jacob Zabawa), Dracula plots his next virgin victim.

We sat down with Jacklin to discuss delicious obscenity, her directorial process, and how she embraces the chaos of theater.

**City Paper: Of the Morrissey and Warhol collaborations, what were your motivations for picking "Blood for Dracula"?**

Sarah Jacklin: The only other contender was "Heat," from the early '70s, starring Andrea Feldman. I feel that movie was at least partly written around her improvisational dialogue, so casting would have been so dependent on [finding someone like that actor]. She threw herself out of a window because she had trouble contending with her minor success. She was sort of the "Cash Me Outside" girl of her time.

But I really love "Blood for Dracula." Much like in "Suspiria," Udo Kier brings his own mood and way of talking to [his scenes as Dracula]. You don't cast him as a malleable actor who

can play anyone and have any accent; you cast him because of his expression of personality and feeling.

I like Grand Guignol theater. In Charles Ludlam's manifesto for the theater of the ridiculous he talks about bathos and pathos. Through extremity, sorrow becomes comic, and comedy becomes sorrowful. Horror is a good genre for that, and [for] heightened expressivity that is palatable and enjoyable, even when cut up or abstracted. People allow for more strangeness in horror.

**CP: [Psychic Readings founder and artistic director] Ric Royer said in his introduction that "Blood for Dracula" was possibly the best and worst film ever made. Where do you fall on that spectrum?**

SJ: Every time I've watched it, I've enjoyed it. The father character obsesses over how the name Dracula sounds for a solid minute: "Dracula. Drah-cue-lah! I love that name!" He lectures his daughters about how they should marry [Dracula] just because he loves the name.

**CP: Do you find that comedy deliberate or unintentional?**

SJ: I think there are different kinds of intentionality. When I direct, there are tightly choreographed moments, and other moments where more naturalistic decisions are made by the actors. With naturalism, [it's as if] you're growing different [strains] of bacteria to create the right substrate, when performers can then go for the jugular. I relate to the sumptuous enjoyment of ridiculousness that [Paul Morrissey got] out of his actors. He had to really love and encourage them to get them to [perform how] they did. What's not good about that? I like actors that have something uncanny in them.

**CP: In an interview with New Miami Times in 2012, Paul Morrissey said that he was ridiculing all of the stuff that was supposed to be sacred, which aligns with camp as a style and ethos. What makes camp so viable to you?**

SJ: Paul Morrissey was a devout Catholic who, in the '70s, cast transsexual people as their chosen gender without batting an eye. He was courageous and ahead of the curve, but he often conflicted himself, ridiculing sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Yet he loved it, and loved making horror of it. There's something liberating about mocking your own ideals.

**CP: Psychic Readings favors "aliveness," and laying bare the human qualities of theater. How do you feel about human vulnerability in theater?**

SJ: In Baltimore theater, I either don't see a show, or I see it three times. You see the human quality of time-based work that way. As a director, I like embedding a degree of chaos and randomness into my work, where something can branch off and go wrong. It wakes people up, and keeps the actors on their toes. There's a scene in my play where a character throws a tennis ball at the wall, and it bounces differently every night, sometimes hitting an actor. There's something exciting about failure, and setting up an experiment that may possibly fail in front of people.

This is a quick play, yet it was a 60-hour project. You try to control everything, but often something unexpected happens that excites you. Maybe it's not preconceived, but it's what you love, and want more of. You start to get a sentimental and aesthetic education about what actually appeals to you, which might not be what you thought.

**CP: So often I think of meticulousness as looking for errors to iron them out. You're meticulous in finding error for the sake of loving the error, and seeing its human qualities.**

SJ: "Videodrome" by David Cronenberg was playing at the Charles this week. There's that scene where Debbie Harry and James Woods are sitting on a bed, and the camera gradually pulls up, the frame broadening until you realize they're in a huge, dark warehouse. Without a set change, you've transitioned to a strange place. Even if just a small lighting or sound change, I like creating moments where the audience loses their bearings, and has to find them again.

**CP: I like the choice of Dracula visiting a bed and breakfast. Is a B&B the modern estate?**

SJ: It's really any place of the upper-middle class. It could be a McMansion in a subdivision that they bought when they were [wealthier], and now it's rented out to college kids. Or maybe it's a rotting Reservoir Hill mansion they bought thinking they'd fix it up, and never did. Either way, it's in schadenfreude anticipation of total collapse.

**CP: It's funny, the class antagonism from the very Marxist character, Anton.**

SJ: He's such a Marxist in film. [When] initially outlining the [play], I thought, I want to have a scene where Anton monologues about race and class politics, and masturbates while the [two younger sisters] eat strawberries. There's something great about a character who monologues in ways that are true, and you feel it, yet the action itself is masturbatory.

**CP: I liked when the middle sister Ruby considers whether she's kink-shaming Dracula. What sexual taboos do you consider worth challenging with histrionics and camp?**

SJ: There's a [power] inversion in having [sexual] experiences on your own terms. If you haven't explored yourself, and someone comes along who is toxic, they can wreck you.

I really liked the trope of [Dracula as a] city-slicker from say, Albany, who goes south and ends up in "provincial" Baltimore. The [two younger sisters] that he tries to fuck with are actually far more savvy and experienced than him. Their prior experiences have inoculated them to his abuse, and keep them safe, as opposed to the older sister Amelia, who has not had those experiences.

**CP: I thought the modernizing of Ruby was hilarious, with her aspirations of YouTube fame and a makeup line.**

SJ: It was a fun monologue to write. For both Danni Tsuboi and Mike Smith, [once I cast those actors] I started to write their characters for them. I thought that Danni would be good saying that, and she is.

What is luxury now? It's definitely not, like, trying to become a countess. What is the shortest pathway for a young, cute person to try to make it? I loved that all of her aspirations were childish and gross. In the scene with Dracula where he asks where she'd like to go, she's like "...Dollywood? Disneyland? Can we go to L.A.?"

Just... ugh, you know! The world is out there. But she really wants to go to "the Hard Rock Cafe!" She's trying to assume a class position that she doesn't have [in order] to look down on people. So it's exciting to see her lose it all.

**CP: Could you explain how you melded Amelia with the parents of the Marchese di Fiore estate from the film, and what new opportunities that presented?**

SJ: It was ideal, because I knew we were only going to have a month to rehearse the play. I also removed the youngest sister, [which meant] no scene where Dracula sucks the blood off the floor from her hymen. Unfortunately, I had to kill that darling.

I originally intended to play Amelia, and because I envisioned myself in that role, it allowed me to be way meaner to her. I was much more comfortable calling her this over-the-hill, asexual person who sucks the joy out of every scene (laughs). Maybe that's just internalized self-hatred.

As a director, I realized that while she was a smaller character, all of the major tableaux involved Amelia, so I just could not choreograph those pieces if I was in them. I should have realized that earlier. It was a lesson in using empathy for characters to dig in and figure out what will hurt them the most.

**CP: You knowing yourself most, and having the best critique.**

SJ: I starting directing in the past two years, but I've acted much more than I've directed. So, when writing, I think I have a way of inhabiting characters to realize what is most [similar] to and different from you builds dynamic tension. The more you give a character autonomy, the more rich possibilities write themselves. You start hearing characters talk to each other instead of consciously writing it for them.

I don't know if you ever feel this way, but... sometimes, at the beginning of the day, I wake up with a coda in my head, the last sentence that was in my dreams. I repeat it to myself a few times, and wonder, "What did it mean?" When I woke up this morning, there was some uncertain object made of plastic. And I'm like, cool, that's mumbo jumbo, that means absolutely nothing.

**CP: Yet it came from you. Interesting, finding something foreign from what we assume to be familiar.**

SJ: [An actor] inhabiting [a role] expands their mind. [Even though] they direct attention, the actor isn't front and center. We as humans are familiar with many archetypes and people, and can take those personalities on. It's thrilling to see someone successfully play against type, where they have tapped into what they don't normally identify with. It doesn't help us as people to identify too much with ourselves.

[Beyond ourselves] is where there's mystery. It's not just memorizing lines and where to stand. There has to be—

**CP: A mysterious in-between.**

SJ: A mysterious in-between. That's where the art is.

*“Blood for Dracula” starts at 10 p.m. on May 5, 6, and 7 at Psychic Readings (219 Park Ave.). For more information, visit [psychicreadings.church](http://psychicreadings.church).*

