

Interview With a Vampyre's Dentist

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Anyone who has ever wanted to be a vampire for Halloween has probably bought cheap plastic fangs at the drugstore. Those one-size-fits-all cheapies cut your gums and force you spend the entire night wincing and slurping. Instead of looking like the Prince or Princess of Darkness, you look like an orthodontist's cruel joke. Not scary. Not hot.

Enter Father Sebastiaan van Houten, "fangsmith" extraordinaire and, according to his website, an impresario, author, and "central person in the vampire subculture." For the past 18 years, he has been creating custom-made fangs for his "fang club." (He calls his minions "Sabretooths.")

The grandson of an orthodontist and nephew of a dentist, van Houten picked up his grandfather's dental tools and made his first fangs in 1994 for his mother, after getting his first fangs made by a special-effects makeup artist. He has been molding, sculpting, and fitting custom-made vampire fangs made of dental acrylics ever since - in New York City, Amsterdam, Berlin, Prague, Barcelona, London, and in Paris, where he now lives.

Van Houten's fangs start at around \$100 for a pair in the Lilith (fitted on incisors) or Classics (fitted on canines). If you don't eat or sleep with the fangs on and you store them properly, they can last three years. Not only are they suitable to wear for "absinthe and sex," according to van Houten's website, he reminds me - more than once - that they're also great sex toys. I don't ask him to elaborate.

He serves both the novelty-seeker looking to up his game for Halloween, and the Vampyre lifestyle entranced by the vampire archetype, complete with its occasionally cheesy spiritual beliefs. (As for blood-drinking vampires - the Sanguines, as they're known in the vampire community - van Houten wants it on the record that he does not condone blood drinking.)

It's Vampire Season, and van Houten is about to host the Endless Night Vampire Ball the weekend before Halloween in New Orleans at the House of Blues, where the Fang Van, his converted ambulance, will be parked outside like a tour bus. (FangVan will also be the name of a new web series of 10 short episodes that van Houten is producing to air starting in February. It will be about people who love fangs, and it will document the ambulance-turned-Fang-Van road trip that a few hard-core fang aficionados will take from New York City to New Orleans for the Endless Night Vampire Ball. "Vampires going to New Orleans," van Houten says, "are like Jews going to Israel.")

On Halloween night, he'll host the New York City version of the Endless Night ball. But until then, he will be hanging out in the back of the Fang Van a few hours a day, with the back doors open, answering the questions of curious passersby, trying to watch for meter maids, and meeting with potential clients.

Tonight, he's parked outside the Costume Shop on Fourth Avenue and 11th Street in New York's East Village. Debbie, a professional-looking woman in her mid-30s in a chic orange shift dress, designer shoes, and with a Michael Kors bag, hangs out in the converted ambulance chatting with van Houten. A repeat customer, she has just gotten a replacement pair of fangs and is debating whether or not to go to the Endless Night ball. "I usually go with friends," she says, "but now the friends who used to go with me are at home with their kids, and I'm not sure I want to go alone."

The first step in getting a pair of fangs made is the least glamorous part - van Houten makes a dental impression of the soon-to-be-fanged tooth with a gooey dental acrylic paste he has mixed himself. He asks the client to make a V rock-and-roll sign with each hand. Using their thumbs to lift up the top lip on either side of their mouths (pinkies out) helps the paste to dry and harden around each tooth, which takes about 10 minutes. Then, he pulls off the impression and sculpts it with a dental rotary tool into a fang. The fang is fitted directly over the tooth like a cap. "You might lisp when you first get your fangs put on," Debbie says, "but you get used to it." The entire fang-making process takes about an hour.

After fangs are made and the person looks at herself in the mirror for the first time, van Houten says you can see a "shift in consciousness." Some people growl and stare at themselves for hours. What he doesn't say, because it's probably too obvious, is that fangs are kind of sexy. Movies such as the Twilight series, The Lost Boys, and Interview With a Vampire have cemented our view of vampires as the seducers of the monster world.

I watch van Houten make a pair of Lilith fangs from scratch for Ariel, a beautiful woman in her 20s. The former ballet dancer and singer is wearing an outfit that pays homage to Downton Abbey, the popular British television drama set in the early 20th century. She's wearing a long, crimson-colored skirt, a white silk, tie-neck blouse, and a cloche, which covers a charming 1920s bob hairstyle. She has just come from teaching safe sword-fighting techniques to a New York University theater class. The right side of her head is shaved, Skrillex-style, and a bullwhip sticks out of her purse, a remnant of the theater rehearsal she has come from. I hope.

This is Ariel's second set of fangs. She first heard about van Houten a year ago, and she flew to Paris to get a pair made. They've been friends ever since. "Vampires are primal, animalistic, and beautiful," she says, admiring her new fangs in a hand mirror, turning this way and that, baring her teeth - vamping, as they say.

A few minutes later, Dragata joins us in the Fang Van. By day, she's a patent prosecution specialist for an international law firm in New York. By night, she often dances traditional Roma-style folk dances and is part of the local vampire community. Dragata has been getting fangs from van Houten for seven years, and tonight she comes bearing a gift: a decorated, coffin-shaped box she made that contains vampire wine from Romania. She wears her outlandish, pointy-shouldered, bejeweled and bosom-bearing costume with chains draping her face as naturally and as comfortably as Debbie before her wore her orange shift dress.

The Fang Van is getting full. Victor Magnus, van Houten's laconic mentor and advisor, has climbed on board as well. As Dragata moves to the fang-fitting chair, Ariel gathers her things and looks around,

about to leave. "I'm going to Trader Joe's," she says, four gleaming fangs visible as she speaks. "Anyone want anything?"

by Barbara Herman

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