

The Curious Lives of Shakespeare and Cervantes

Reviews

Edinburgh Evening News

Colin Blyth

**** (four stars)

Billed as an energetic romp through the lives of two of history's greatest writers, this Edinburgh Theatre Company production manages to achieve just that, but perhaps fails to shed any new light on the well known stories of these two literary legends.

As the cast of six march onto the stage in their elegant period costumes, engaged in a graceful ballroom dance before each settling on their stools, few could be blamed for wondering just how these two very separate stories could possibly translate into a meaningful depiction on stage. For all their supposed similarities in their work, nothing is known of whether the two actually met, or indeed whether they were even aware of each others existence.

However, as the opening scene - which captures a hypothetical meeting between Scott J Gordon's bubbly, carefree Shakespeare and David Dawkins' brooding, irritable Miguel de Cervantes - reveals, there is a chemistry at work which transcends expectation and signals the beginning of an engaging and hilarious 90-minute performance.

Scott J Gordon's confident characterisation of the English bard begins with his pursuit of Ann Hathaway, their swift leap into parenthood, and the death of their only son. David Dawkins' equally commanding performance depicts the author of Don Quixote's during his early flirtations with local women, his move to Italy, and his capture in the Battle of Lepanto which resulted in his enslavement in an Algerian prison.

To the credit of writer and director Asa Palomera, this well charted account of key events in each of their lives moves at a relentless pace without ever feeling stilted or overly meticulous. The dynamic narration cleverly utilises each member of the cast as the focus shifts from Cervantes to Shakespeare, ensuring the audience never loses touch.

At various points an almost farcical, adversarial relationship between the two central characters emerges. Shakespeare's encounter with chamber-pot emptying on the streets of London prompt derision from Cervantes, whose bullish pride in the Spanish sewer system leads into a hilarious bout of petty squabbling, revealing his frustrations at playing second fiddle to success of nemesis Lope de Vega the sneering, condescending playwright charismatically portrayed here by Paul Comrie.

But while Shakespeare's comparatively speedy rise to fame contrasts with the struggles Cervantes endures whether it be the loss of a hand at the Battle of Lepanto or his perpetual struggle with poverty which would later lead to his imprisonment their

relationships with women offer some similarities. The philandering of their early years provides numerous slapstick moments and innuendos, while their mutual love of writing and travelling see their wives' frustration and resentment finally boil over into hilarious contemporary Scottish tirades which further lighten the mood.

The live Spanish guitar and cello accompaniment - courtesy of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama - is an excellent touch and really brings the performance to life, whether in supporting the dance and song interludes which signal a shift from one character to the other, or providing comic effects at well chosen moments.

But ultimately it is the collective performance of the cast which makes this work. They pull together what might have otherwise been a tenuous account of two discreet characters' lives with their charm and charisma, making this witty and accessible production a must see.

Craig Reynolds, 28, Student, Leith: I really enjoyed the show. The live music was great and really generated a sense of involvement in the story which was important given the lack of props on stage. I thought all the cast were absolutely superb but for me Lope de Vega was the standout character. For such a short piece there was actually a lot of factual stuff squeezed in, but it was good to see there was still room for a bit of comedy as well.

Lucy Mackie, 34, Art teacher, Morningside: I already know a fair bit about both Shakespeare and Cervantes but what was great about this is that you could turn up having never heard of either of them and still have a fun night. The performances were all fantastic and they really engaged the audience from start to finish.

Tomasz Kwiatkowski, 30, Research assistant, Portobello: I really enjoyed the show. Just how they could manage to depict the lives of two completely separate characters was interesting to me. It really felt like a coherent story even though for me there was little common ground to work with. You have to put that down to the writing but saying that, the cast were all really good too. Definitely a thumbs up from me.

The Herald

Neil Cooper

*** (three stars)

The private lives of creative geniuses have long fascinated literary groupies in search of clues about where inspiration comes from.

The lack of hard facts about both England's favourite bard and Spain's late-blooming maestro has subsequently allowed plenty of scope for salacious speculation. Shakespeare In Love and a 1978 television series featuring a post Rocky Horror Tim Curry in singlet

and hose spring to mind for the former, as does Edward Bond's brooding 1973 play, *Bingo*. The author of *Don Quixote*, however, has received considerably less attention.

Asa Gim Palomera's restless piece of imagined history aims to redress the balance by treating the two writers as equals with an awful lot in common, despite the age gap that nevertheless saw both men shuffle off this mortal coil within 11 days of each other.

A team of six actors romp through the highs and lows of these impossible dreamers in a cheekily playful array of impressionistic styles that make up a picaresque piece of posh-frock froth. Throw in some dramatic license in terms of history and a *West Side Story* medley, and Palomera's own production, featuring a bright young cast in her newly constituted Edinburgh Theatre Company, is the jolliest of small-scale conceits.

David Dawkins makes for a rum Cervantes, while Scott J Gordon plays Shakespeare as a gormless streak of uselessness resembling Baldrick from *Blackadder*.

There is much bosom-heaving carry-on to be had too from Louise Brady, Ericka Rowan and Hanna Stanbridge's assortment of writers molls.

Paul Comrie's comic foil, meanwhile, is an amiable bridge between two very different men of letters whose parallel lives are treated with abandon.

The Scotsman

Joyce McMillan

** (two stars)

IF SHAKESPEARE and Cervantes still matter, it's surely because of their work, rather than the detail of their lives. That's the paradox at the heart of Asa Gim Palomera's homage to these two great writers, which played briefly in Edinburgh last week.

Like most shows of its kind, it takes for granted our interest in the artists; and that presumption seals it off into a world of bourgeois tribute drama, a little arch and knowing, very prettily costumed, and largely inconsequential.

Palomera's interest in these two great lives was triggered by the fact that although Cervantes was 17 years older than Shakespeare, both apparently died on the same date, 23 April 1616. Otherwise, though, they had little in common; and the resonances between their lives are unlikely to be much illuminated by a script that mashes up selected details of their biographies, and quotations from their works, with the odd lurch into incongruous modern street-speak, and sudden bursts of music from 20th century shows based on their work – *Kiss Me Kate*, *West Side Story* and *Man of La Mancha*.

David Dawkins turns in an attractive performance as the stoical Cervantes, while for some reason Scott J Gordon plays Shakespeare as a flouncing upper-class twit. But if the

overall effect is often embarrassing, there is some pleasant music for guitar and cello to while away the time and the three young women playing assorted wives, mothers and mistresses wear their 17th century costumes with enough style to keep the audience happy for 80 minutes or so.

Comments

Kathryn MacAlister, Paola Sollini, Edinburgh 25/01/2010 12:08:06

In response to the review given for "The curious lives of Shakespeare and Cervantes" we feel compelled to comment on Joyce McMillans own "arch and knowing" failings in her observation of the play.

The details of the lives of these two authors took on a valid narrative for spectators such as ourselves with no little passion or huge interest in shakespearean dramas.

The play enjoyably put into some historical context the cultural input of the two writers, and maintained a gentle and humorous pace, especially well represented by the earthy "Spanish" humour and "come ahead" Scottish input.

The young actors effused vitality and the choreography was in our opinion an intelligent and beautiful use of the space and resources. Precisely how small theatres should be used the world over.

Robert Clay, Edinburgh 26/01/2010 23:57:50

The review makes no sense whatsoever. Surely the works of these two great artists - of any artist - is an extension of their lives. None more so than Cervantes, whose struggles, participation in great historical battles and travels to all corners of Spain are surely everything about his work, in his work and informing every aspect of his work. I saw the review in the Evening News and came to the play with no understanding, or real interest, in either author. I left with a much greater understanding of the times and the immense influence the details of their lives had on their work, as the lives of any artist greatly inform their work. Why the reviewer used the word bourgeois in the context of this play has the unfortunate effect of revealing more about the reviewer's prejudices than it does about the relative merits of the play. For something billed as a witty and energetic romp, it had surprising depth, layers and generated a greater interest in some very important work, which deserves greater exposure. As much as a film about Alice in Wonderland can be enjoyable, nothing can beat the experience of reading the actual works of Lewis Carroll. Any encouragement towards reading the works of Cervantes should be applauded.