

views from the gods

saints and sinners of the stage and screen

PLAYS

COMEDY

FILMS

MUSICALS

FEATURES

OTHER

CONTACT

Desire and Pursuit Etcetera Theatre 10th July 2014

★★★★☆

Given that Martin Foreman has a tendency to pen monologues about love and sexuality, it was only a matter of time before he staged something that also throws religion into the mix. *Desire and Pursuit* combines three distinct plays; *Angel*, *Now We Are Pope* and *Tadzio Speaks*, the latter having run on its own last year as part of the 2013 Camden Fringe. Arbery Productions have their sights on Edinburgh this year, and although the three plays are running together at the Etcetera Theatre, tickets will be sold separately when the company venture up to Scotland in August.



Photography © Christopher Peacock

The first two plays take men of faith in moments of crisis. In *Angel*, a priest (Christopher Peacock) interrupts his prayers to answer the door and invite inside a familiar face. With a bottle of wine opened, it's clearly a social visit, but the dialogue that follows is perhaps more confessional and intimate than you would expect to hear from a man of the cloth.

Foreman, who directs all three pieces, doesn't seem to have decided whether he wants the priest to commit to the unseen visitor or to the audience, with Peacock's gaze sometimes fixated on Michael's chair, and at other points, looking directly at us, as if he has forgotten that his character is addressing another. Peacock's smooth voice is perforated by moments of torture, the priest desperately trying to reconcile his homosexuality with his calling. As provoking as this conflict is, *Angel* just isn't written as well as the other two monologues and feels at times like a two-hander missing a co-star.

Now We Are Pope segues nicely from *Angel*. Based on a historical figure, the Frederick Rolfe (Christopher Annus) we see before us is a self-pitying rogue, who has fallen on hard

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times and won't accept any responsibility for this. He shuffles around the stage in a pair of socks with obvious holes in them, bemoaning his circumstances thus far, rolling cigarettes which he never manages to smoke. The tobacco and matches tumble to the floor, seemingly unnoticed by Frederick, who is too busy ranting and raving to see. This act underlines his wretchedness and his apparent impotence in doing anything by himself.

PLAYS

COMEDY

FILMS

MUSICALS

FEATURES

OTHER

CONTACT

Annus's performance elicits sympathy, the sadness behind his angry words making the unnaturalistic dialogue work within the context of his character. As Frederick shouts for his servant, we're never completely sure whether the boy is in the room, picking things up and fussing around him, or if he's elsewhere. This ambiguity works well and further underlines Frederick's loneliness. He has a good patter and interesting stories - possibly invented fantasies - to share, but ultimately, he's more vulnerable than he would admit.

Although *Tadzio Speaks* shares common themes with the first two plays, namely the struggle to come to terms with your own sexuality, it stands on its own. *Angel and Now We Are Pope* are the tormented ramblings of two men of faith, whereas *Tadzio Speaks* feels more like a traditional piece of storytelling. Written in response to an early 20th century novella, *Tadzio* (Peacock again) recalls a fateful summer from his childhood, now that he's a grown up. It's a far more polished piece of writing, and here the descriptive language works beautifully.

Little has changed since *Tadzio Speaks* was staged at Theatre Collection last year, **OUR PREVIOUS REVIEW** still rings true. Perhaps the delivery is that little bit more assured, with Peacock having had another year to connect with *Tadzio*, but he was engaging the first time round anyway. In *Angel*, Peacock's interactions with an invisible guest feel awkward, but here the empty chair with a linen jacket and hat resting on it seems rather more meaningful and poignant. The difference perhaps is that *Tadzio* is chasing a ghost rather than flesh and blood.

Desire and Pursuit is a challenging collection of plays which explores faith, love and desire. As usual, it's a shame that we don't have more time to spend with each character of Foreman's creation - it would be interesting to see him write a full length production next rather than a series of short pieces.

Desire and Pursuit ran from 8th to 13th July 2014 at the Etcetera Theatre. The three plays will transfer separately to *TheSpace* on North Bridge from 18th to 23rd August 2014 as part of the Edinburgh Fringe.

Nearest tube station: Camden Town (**Northern**)