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Now We Are Pope: Frederick Rolfe in Venice

1739

PAGE VIEWS



by Richard Beck (</reviewer/Richard+Beck>) on 31st August 2014

Frederick William Rolfe (1860-1913) was a minor English writer, artist and photographer and serious eccentric. Not satisfied with just converting to Roman Catholicism, he also felt destined to be a priest. The ecclesiastical powers of the day prevented that dream from ever becoming a reality, largely as result of his own instability. Rejected by Rome, he relied on many people to provide for him, including an aristocratic Italian benefactress who allowed him to be called Baron Corvo. His disposition was such, however, that ultimately he fell out with all them. He died in poverty and isolation, but not before he had written his most - and maybe only - celebrated work, Hadrian VII, in which an unordained Englishman is elected pope. This fantasy work, his worthless title and disturbed mind were later combined to describe the rare condition of Corvo's Syndrome: "a quasi-delusional state in which an individual sees himself, not the incumbent, as the Pope of Rome" (James Murray).



Christopher Annus rants with powerful bitterness in a performance that captures the miserable circumstances in which Rolfe found himself at the end of an unfulfilled life.

In this state we find Rolfe alone in his room. A homoerotic painting of St Sebastian hangs on the wall above his desk some distance apart from a crucifix: the two images reveal much about the man. The sparse set captures both his religious fervour and his penury. As he wakes from slumber, he prays in Latin, calls his house-boy - who fails to appear - and ponders over his manuscripts. The house-boy, either real or a fantasy, is a reminder of his predilection for late adolescent boys, many of whom he recalls and others he longs for in his ramblings. "Women," he declares, "are for the dull and mindless ... I want a young man ready to share life's adventures." In his deranged state Rolfe relives scenes from his most famous novel, berates those who abandoned him, reviles his enemies and laments his failures.

Christopher Annus rants with powerful bitterness in a performance that captures the miserable circumstances in which Rolfe found himself at the end of an unfulfilled life. The "arrows of outrageous fortune" seem to hurt as much as those in St Sebastian's body. The rasping timbre of his voice has appropriately death-rattling qualities and is sustained throughout the play. At times, however, some words are lost, the sound becomes irritating and his delivery could do with more variety.

The play is an interesting study of an extraordinary man. The script is well constructed in relation to the key issues and phases of Rolfe's life, but the extended melancholic moaning can at times become tiresome, perhaps not surprising in a portrayal of a man described by Martin Seymour-Smith as "a bore" and a "pseudo-Borgian freak."



By Richard Beck (</reviewer/Richard+Beck>)

Richard is a retired teacher with extensive experience of drama, dance and music in secondary schools. Based in London he spends much of his time travelling around the world but makes sure he is back every year for the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

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The Blurb

Eccentric, cantankerous writer Frederick Rolfe (1860-1913) ended his days in self-imposed exile in Venice, eschewing all friends except handsome young gondoliers. This one-man play finds Rolfe alone in his room, reliving his most famous novel Hadrian VII, in which an Englishman, denied the priesthood for most of his life, is suddenly elected Pope. 'Proved exactly why one-man plays retain their place in the dramatic repertoire: effective characterisation' (Everything-Theatre.co.uk). 'Annus performed with real warmth and humour' **** (What'sPeenSeen.co.uk). 'Strong performance' (TheGayUK.com).

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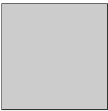
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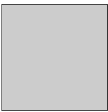
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