

## The Man Who Was Hamlet

Reviewed by Robin T. Barton, August 23, 2010



### Great Dane

For centuries scholars have disagreed about the authorship of the most famous plays in the world. It's argued by some that these masterpieces couldn't possibly be the work of a poorly educated, non-cosmopolitan Warwickshire lad called Will Shakespeare. Many have been thought to be the 'real' writer - Christopher Marlowe, Francis Bacon, William Stanley, even teams or groups of writers. Perhaps the strongest 'candidate' is Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford.

George Dillon takes this as his premise for this excellent one-man show. His twist on the myriad theories is that not only was de Vere Shakespeare, but his own life was a model for the most famous character in the canon, Hamlet. Hence we begin with Dillon is full Hamletian garb fencing to an atmospheric soundscape. I have to confess that my heart sank a bit at this stage - the show is an hour and twenty five minutes and I thought it was going to be a hard old stint of versifying and posturing. How wrong I was.

Dillon is a consummate performer. He takes us through the entirety of his subject's life, from his first entrancement at theatre and players, through the death of his father, through being taken on as a ward by the most powerful man in England, William Cecil. Indeed, compared with Shakespeare's life, of which we know very little, The Earl of Oxford was an extraordinary public superstar. He went on to murder a spy, fall in love with several women and father many children illegitimate and legitimate (mostly by women called Anne - why are all femmes fatales of this period called Anne?). He fought in the Armada, had an affair with Queen Elizabeth (allegedly) but disappeared from public life not long after.

The premise that he wrote the Bard's plays is not really explained here. There are (fictitious) scenes where he meets the young Will as a boy and later as a 'bumpkin' adult. But we never hear of him having meetings about plays, or attending rehearsals or even going to the theatre to see them performed. What we do get is wonderful acting from Dillon, who didn't fluff a single line. Most importantly in a one-man show (when you know no one else is going to come on to liven things up) there is also great wit and wonderful gags. Just when you think he's going into full, overblown 'Shakespearean' mode he pricks the bubble perfectly with a laugh. He plays, of course, all the other characters, and manages some moving and funny dialogue beautifully, no mean feat when you're the only actor in the scene!

Directed imaginatively by Denise Evans, with original music by Charlotte Glasson, this is worth seeing both as education and entertainment. As to the contention about authorship of the plays, I remain unconvinced. There seems to be only conjecture here. It is remarkable that we know so little about the man from Warwickshire, given he was recently voted the second most famous person ever. In the end, though, does it really matter? We have those thirty plus plays, all good, some great and a few utterly unchallenged by any writing, in any language, ever. As my old English teacher used to say when we brought up the question:

'Shakespeare didn't write the plays. It was another man called Shakespeare.'