



The Man Who Was Hamlet



Once, years ago, a friend of a friend asked me if I wanted to come and see George Dillon perform a one man show. ("He gets naked," she said.) I didn't know who George Dillon was, but, for some reason, I eagerly agreed. I loved the show for the same reason George Dillon has been wowing audiences ever since: his performances are transporting, subtle, spellbinding and human. I had been meaning to see George Dillon again ever since... and finally, last night, I did.

The Man Who Was Hamlet is about the life and rakish times of Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford. He's man whose early life has a little of the Dane in it, with his father dying, his mother's hasty, unseemly remarriage and an incident where he accidentally stabs a servant - hidden, spying behind a hedge. When, later, the well educated, worldly de Vere meets an illiterate William Shakespeare, the parallels start to make sense.

Did de Vere - a patron of the arts, player and playwright - write the plays we now attribute to Shakespeare? Unlike Shakespeare, he had the necessary education, means and motivation. In addition to those facts of circumstance, the play makes a strong case, peopling de Vere's life with characters and dilemmas that echo familiar Shakespearean themes. It's very cleverly done. Nothing is decided, just suggested.

The more Shakespeare you know the more allusions and references you will get, but as a piece of historical fiction *a la* Phillippa Gregory it's still captivating and fascinating. In the strange, distant world of Elizabethan England, complex mores could lead two men of differing rank to duel to the death over who got to play tennis on a particular court. Even without the Shakespeare question hanging over the life of Edward de Vere, it would still be a fascinating play. Dillon shows us the man as a noble, captive, soldier, lover and favourite of the Virgin Queen - with many salacious nod to just how much of a favourite de Vere may have been.

And Dillon tells us this story with nothing but himself and a couple of props - including a skull which he never touches. His performance is all you need to transport you back 500 years. He is compelling, charismatic, wry and moving, showing us every side of this man who is a little bit Lord Byron, a little bit Errol Flynn and maybe more than a little bit William Shakespeare.

At the end of the play, Dillon shushes the audience and steps out of character to give his own recommendations for a range of other fringe shows he has enjoyed. It's a sweet and generous gesture, and I am delighted to wholeheartedly recommend his show in return.

Reviewed by Mathilda Gregory

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