



The Man Who Was Hamlet



The better the performance, the harder to review. Why? Perhaps because of the daunting responsibility on the reviewer to match up to the standard set. This is the case with George Dillon's solo piece *The Man Who Was Hamlet*, and if you haven't time to read any further, let me say unequivocally that if you take a trip to the Hill Street Theatre at 19.10 any evening you will be rewarded with a 5 Star performance. This is acting as it should be – so you don't notice it.

Who was Shakespeare? Argument has, is and always will, rage, and one such claimant is Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. Here in Edinburgh during the Festival the naughty, noble Earl will nightly, and in the most subtle, extremely well-informed and convincing way, tell you – no he won't, he will allow you - to deduce that it was he who was really Him. Well it could have been – after all he was highly literate and articulate, had two theatre companies himself, had frequently entertained the Virgin Queen, was a considerable favourite with her – and at the end of his life as courtier/soldier was given no less than £1000 per annum by Elizabeth to do with as he wished.....and as he had so frequently been asked to perform for her or arrange entertainments, that could well have been to pen *Hamlet* et al. It could also of course have been to spy for her: that was the anonymous way things were done in that egg-shell age.

Dillon's performance is truly masterly: no actorish egotism, nor meaningless, self-indulgent vocal mannerism, no "I am a star, worship me" here: from the moment this amazing monologue began the actor disappeared in humble subservience to the character, his subject. When I walked into the theatre and saw a bare black stage with just two simple props, a book and a skull – I knew we were going to get to the economic heart of the matter. The book was used once and the skull not at all – a witty neglect in itself.

The House lights fade to black: a spot comes up on an Elizabethan performing a silent sequence of rapier thrusts and parries – elegant, balletic but no mere courtly waffing, but essential knowledge and practice which could be used as well to kill as to charm. Dillon has researched his piece with great thoroughness and intelligence going back to original sources: he resists the temptation to be didactic: like a detective approaching a murder scene.

Dillon simply puts before us the key questions.... who had the motivation to write 'the Works'? Who had the opportunity and who had the ability? – and lets the conundrum rest with us. I may be shot for saying this, but I don't find the quality of Dillon's voice remarkable – but the important thing is he uses it remarkably well. Not only his range, but also the split-second switch from one character to another is electrifying. He truly embodies in this performance the full spirit of Elizabethan adventure whether the scene is Courtly, piratical or poetic, womanising, wilfully adventurous or literary, we get a real feel of the first Elizabethan age.....and *Our Will* is politely, kindly patronised as an 'egg-headed wight' – write *Hamlet*? No! Not even his own name! Wicked!

Reviewed by Richard Franklin
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