

Elizabeth Rex – High Class Genderbending! Just Like Shakespeare Used to Do!

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Shakespeare's excellence, if a 20-something upstart like me can get away with commenting on it, lays in offering something for every height of brow. A work of Shakespeare offers political intrigue, mistaken identities and lovers crossed by other lovers and by the stars themselves. He also offers sex jokes. So, too, does Timothy Findley's *Elizabeth Rex*, and so, too, do director Judy Treloar and her merry band of ambisexual period players.

It's 1601. London's night watch confines William Shakespeare (Paul Terry) and his troupe of actors to the royal barn. An execution's scheduled for tomorrow and the Crown has a few worries about rebels and rabble-rousers. Nonplussed, the troupe has nothing needing to be done aside from drinking, dancing and sneaking out for quickies with courtly ladies. In true Shakespearean fashion, even relatively minor characters and clowns get their moments centre stage, whether it's Luddy (Kevin Stinson) yukking about using his Friar's costume to seduce innocent maidens or has-been Percy (Michael King) longing for his days crossdressing onstage. The ensemble is luxuriously interwoven and it never feels as though the cast is simply standing around.

The first big entrance of the night comes courtesy of Ned (Kyle Kushnir), the bepoxed and flamingly gay jewel of Will Shakespeare's troupe who bursts onstage in drag, hurling "bloody"s and "rutting"s and threatening to pass his sores on to his belligerent castmates. The centrepiece of the show, of course, is the imperious Queen Elizabeth I (Jean Topham), stopping by to lift the weight of her lover's execution from her royal shoulders. Topham's entrance alone echoes every imposing figure you can imagine from Winston Churchill to Emperor Palpatine (possibly because of the ominous hood) and the attention she commands never evaporates. Even Ned's cavorting pet bear (Michelle Mitchell) can't steal the show from Elizabeth for long. In fact, Ned alone seems mighty enough to compete with Elizabeth. Treloar understandably had the cast break out the flamboyant, capital-A cting which a good Shakespeare needs, and the joust between Ned and his Queen swells their personalities to near-cosmic scale.

Ned and Elizabeth are mirrors to one another: he is a man whose only solace from disease is playing as women onstage; she is a woman forced to act in the most cold, stone-faced and grimly masculine ways to protect her crown, torn between the desperation with which she loves the traitorous Earl of Essex and the relish with which she crushes him. Ned snaps at the queen for suffocating her compassion while the Queen snarls at him to face death like a man. Ned's comrades and the Queen's attendants orbit the unlikely pair as they share wine, the tragedies of their lovers and lines from Will's new play about Cleopatra.

While the script has a loose, slightly chaotic direction, the impending death of Essex keeps its beat, so to speak, and the cast's playfulness makes both acts feel short. Puns and witticisms abound, as do pratfalls and little ironies – often courtesy of Tardy (Jennifer Ciceri Doyle), the

troupe's curmudgeony, Magoo-ly nearsighted seamstress and team mom. As the execution approaches, light moments feel increasingly like the necessary distractions they are from Elizabeth's bloody order – an excellent lesson in putting comedy to tragic work. Despite everyone feeling so theatrical, the realism of the situation ultimately shines through. You feel it and you love it. If you're lucky enough to land some good seats (thanks, Denise!) you can even catch a whiff of straw. Dead serious.

Langham Court Theatre just seems to have everything going right for it with Elizabeth Rex. It's a very archetypal-feeling production – if you thought charitably of "theatre!" then something very much like this would coalesce in your mind. As peals of applause thundered down on the cast at the end of the night, I was just a little surprised not to see anyone get to their feet for it. I definitely saw people thinking they ought to. Maybe it's reserved for the Bard himself? Let's be honest: Elizabeth Rex is damn close to Shakes (if a 20-something upstart like myself can give a pet name to the greatest playwright in his language) himself. Go see for yourself and decide if Topham and company will lift you to your feet.

-Chris Felling