

Guild's Elizabeth Rex is fit for a queen

Strong performances, staging cap award-winning Timothy Findley play

By Adrian Chamberlain, Times Colonist June 12, 2011

What: Elizabeth Rex Where: Langham Court Theatre

When: To June 25

Rating: 4 (out of five)

The Victoria Theatre Guild has staged unusually impressive work this season. The Laramie Project, about the murder of Matthew Shepard, was terrific. And now the Guild has done it again with Elizabeth Rex.

Elizabeth Rex is a Governor General's Award-winning play by Timothy Findley, about an imagined meeting between Queen Elizabeth I and William Shakespeare and his acting troupe. This rendezvous takes place in 1601 on the eve of the Earl of Essex's execution.

The queen has ordered the treasonous Essex's death, however, she's emotionally devastated because she still harbours feelings for her former lover. In order to take her mind off the execution, scheduled for the following morning, she has ordered Shakespeare's players to keep her company for the night at the barn where they're staying.

This play, confidently directed by Judy Treloar, is challenging. Findley's ambitious drama is dense and multi-layered, with allusions to Shakespeare's plays, British history, politics (sexual and otherwise).

In many ways Elizabeth Rex is rather over the top. For example, Ned - a gay actor who specializes in women's roles - is incredibly rude to the Queen. He makes lewd sex jokes and at one point even brandishes a sword at her(!). Yes, the play is a fantasy; yes, our belief must be suspended. Yet the indecorous manner with which the Queen is treated is so far-fetched as to verge on the ludicrous.

Still, no one would deny this is intelligent, literate theatre with heart.

There are some notably strong performers in this production. Jean Topham, garbed in an elaborate dress and bejewelled wig (the costumes are fantastic in this show) makes a regal Queen Elizabeth. On Friday night, she was able to capture the mix of imperiousness and humanity essential to the character.

Her dilemma is summed up with the line: "I killed the woman in my heart so that England might prevail." Topham's finest moments were when Elizabeth breaks down upon realizing it is too late for her to visit Essex before he dies. A potent, moving sequence, nicely acted.

No one tops Kyle Kushnir as Ned. Afflicted with the "pox" (syphilis), Ned is tormented by the prospect of certain death. Kushnir captured all the character's diverse elements - his campy theatricality, his anguish and passion, his obvious intelligence. This was acting imbued with great passion and humanity.

Paul Terry also brings humanity to his skilled portrayal of Shakespeare. Terry's delivery is so mellifluous, it's as though his words become music. Equally as impressive was Jennifer Ciceri Doyle, who plays Tardy, a behind-the-scenes assistant with the troupe. Doyle caught beautifully this earthy character's salt-of-the-earth compassion - again, a highly accomplished performance.

Bill Adams consistently creates professional-level sets for the Guild. Occasionally, though, he knocks one out of the park. Such is the case with his set of a Tudorstyle barn. The skill and attention to detail is wonderful. The top of the proscenium arch has straw poking out, as a barn's loft might. The space is equipped with vintage scythes, barrels and a horse collar. It creates a powerful atmosphere.

Findley's play is not flawless. But his unorthodox examination of capital-letter subjects - sex, mortality, forgiveness - is clever, brave and thought-provoking. This is a production worth seeking out.

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