

## Review Alton Fringe Theatre: Luther by John Osborne

With its latest production, *Luther* by John Osborne (Wessex Arts Theatre, 28-30 November), Alton Fringe Theatre lives up to its well-deserved reputation for giving us stimulating, powerful and thought-provoking drama. This historical work about Martin Luther and the birth of the Protestant Reformation hits hardest by confronting us with current concerns; the nature of truth, personal identity, the abuse of power and populism. In an age when all arguments are reduced to 140 characters on Twitter, this is theatre for grown-ups demanding from its audience sustained concentration to work through complex ideas. The 12 scenes covering 24 years centre around Luther and his internal struggle with himself and his God and externally his lengthy disputations with the authorities of church and state. The play has its limitations, namely its episodic structure and long ranting speeches, judiciously cut for this production. However, debut director Steve Gerlach's intelligent and inventive interpretation overcomes these weaknesses to give us a memorable theatrical experience.

Steve Gerlach's first stroke of brilliance was to engage the highly gifted composer and member of the Froxfield Choir, Mike Orchard. His music, specially composed for this production, was exquisitely sung by the chamber choir of 9 voices. It mitigated some of the dense wordiness of Osborne's play heightening emotional intensity and creating a sense of foreboding. The music took us into the mind of Luther with his doubts and fears.

Secondly, Steve drew on Chris Lang's technical skills creating the backdrop of slides, graphic novel style, juxtaposing and commenting on the foregrounded action, adding pathos, wit and satire.

Thirdly, Steve's gender-blind casting gave us Louise Dilloway's Luther. Her performance was compelling, riveting our attention as this tortured soul's life and destiny unfolded. At one point the Knight puzzles: 'He baffles me, I just can't make him out.' Luther is a puzzle to himself and the contradictions of his personality were powerfully realised by Ms Dilloway. What was most impressive was her range; from nervous frailty to unflinching certainty. By the end, her portrayal of this difficult and in many ways unlikable man, evoked deep pathos and sympathy.

The high standard of acting was sustained by the supporting cast. Rod Sharp as Luther's father gave a totally believable portrayal of a man who just doesn't understand his son or the choices he makes. The painful gap of understanding between father and son, was highlighted by their different accents and way of speaking; the father's Northern bluntness and the son's educated lyricism. Yes, Luther is coarse (he is his father's son) and described by Cardinal Cajetan as 'the foul-mouthed monk', but Louise Dilloway's portrayal accentuated Luther's sensitivity drawing attention to the poetic aspects of Osborne's writing.

Joseph de Peyrecave's Tetzl, the seller of indulgences, blazed onto the stage, a mixture of Telly-Evangelist and Donald Trump, adoring followers holding 'Make the Vatican Great Again' placards. His energy and magnetism won over the audience who played along with this snake-oil salesman.

Simon Brencher's Cajetan was an understated but powerful portrayal of the sophisticated cardinal with his sense of entitlement and belief in the status quo. Mike Biddiss was delightfully urbane but utterly ruthless as Pope Leo X illustrating the moral bankruptcy of power that Luther was protesting against.

Tim Guilding's Knight poses some of the most interesting questions of the play. Representing the 'common man' the Knight confronts us with the aftermath; who pays the price for revolutionary idealism and empty promises of a better future? His is the bitter voice of the people who are betrayed and pay with their lives. Tim Guilding acts with his whole being. His unsettling performance rammed home the bitterness and disgust, but also captured the yearning for a better world.

Gender-blind casting can be risky, but here it added depth to characterisation rather than reducing it to pantomime. This was beautifully realised in the final scene between Luther, Catherine his wife (Sarah Castle-Smith) and Staupitz, (Christine Chappell) former Prior and Luther's mentor. The exchange between Staupitz and Luther brought out the sense of loss as well as hope for the future. Staupitz is the father-figure Luther has longed for and failed to find in both his actual father and God; someone who can accept him for who he is and to whom he can admit his doubts.

Finally, mention must be made of the ingenious multi-purpose prop designed and constructed by Steve Sargent; in one scene a table and benches, then a pulpit, next the dock and even a coffin. As for the dead body in the coffin, you know you are seeing amateur theatre of the highest standard when a live actor (Alison de Ledesma) plays a dead body without moving a muscle.

Jo Hopkins