

Alton Fringe Theatre takes *Salome* to Edinburgh

'Mesmerising' was just one of the many glowing adjectives offered by members of a rapt audience in the short question-and-answer seminar which followed the Alton Fringe Theatre's production of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. The Fringe played in front of a packed Maltings Centre, not surprising considering the controversy the production has already sparked in the Scottish press ahead of its showing at this year's Edinburgh Festival. Once banned by the Lord Chamberlain for its supposed blasphemous overtones, Wilde's take on the biblical story of Herod, his step-daughter Salome and the soon-to-be decapitated John the Baptist (known as Iokanaan in the production), the Fringe will be playing in a Catholic Church already embroiled in an argument for allowing non-Catholics into confession at last year's festival. This in itself is an edgy and exciting prospect, but beyond this is the quality of the production which is well worth the value of a return train-ticket to the Scottish capital, assuming there are still seats available. Aside from 'mesmerising', I felt that one adjective missing from the audience's post-performance critique, but spoken by Herod himself to his stepdaughter whom he lusted after, was 'monstrous'. This label has nothing to do with the performances, which were all convincing and sensitive, but with the story itself which takes on incest, necrophilia, power, religion, class and perhaps at its base, greed. Wilde has taken a short excerpt from the Bible and mangled it lyrically into a very uncomfortable play. In turn, the Fringe, rather than dispensing with this discomfort, instead upped the ante and throughout the production, ratcheted the performances with an almost unbearable intensity to its climax whereby Herod submits to Salome's demand for Iokanaan's head on a silver platter. Performed in one act, *Salome* demands a lot from both actors and audience alike, but you get the feeling that Wilde would be taking pleasure at our mutual sense of unease.

The production is carried by strong performances across the board. Steve Rowland as Iokanaan is excellent and gives a more agitating edge to his Biblical alias; Jo Foulkes puts in a conniving performance as protagonist Salome and dominates mid-act with her dance of the seven-veils (the music and choreography arranged by Foulkes). The dance is sure to raise a few eyebrows when it arrives in Edinburgh, but it could perhaps be even raunchier to match the grunginess and intensity of the music. The best performance of the night belonged to Tim Guilding's lecherous Herod. Guilding is carving out a niche for 'baddy' performances in Fringe productions and in *Salome* it is clear that he has a considered appreciation for the inner contradictions of Herod and his paralysing superstition. This was suitably accompanied by Chris Chappell's vindictive Herodius, beleaguered wife of Herod; their bile-fuelled, poisonous marriage the backdrop to Herod and Salome's ambiguous relationship. Elsewhere, with nearly all the actors on the stage for about ninety-minutes, all the performances displayed a high level of stamina and endurance, direction was concise (Lesley Willis and Michael McGreevy) and lighting on the money; the production, in a word, flawless. Even now, some hours after the Fringe's production, I still don't really know what Wilde was trying to say or suggest in *Salome*; it seems he was taking on the establishment writ-large and to cause a sense of discomfort. Now it is the Fringe taking Wilde's provocation forward and hopefully causing a stir north of the border. Uncomfortable and intense, the Fringe's *Salome* is a triumph of art over logic.

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