

Press reviews of Alton Fringe Theatre's Don Carlos

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Fringe theatre reach the heights with excellent Don Carlos

THERE is a saying in theatre which says there are no small parts only small actors.

In Alton Fringe's production of Don Carlos there were small parts but certainly no small actors. With simple but clever staging, effective lighting and music this production reached the professional standard one has come to expect from this company.

Tim Guilding as Domingo was excellent as was Jo Cody as Rodrigo and Richard Fowler as The Duke of Alva. I particularly liked Catherine Rushton (Marchioness of Mondecar). This was her first role with Alton Fringe, and I am sure we will see more of her.

Emma Matthews Princess Ekoli was making her acting debut - very successfully so, with a sweet singing voice and good stage presence and strong acting she will be an asset.

Ann Scott (Duchess of Olivares) stood out with her characterisation and superb voice, she certainly made her presence felt.

Steve Marsden, Morris Hopkins, James Willis and John Clegg all superb characters and a joy to watch. I am sure the company will forgive me for giving a special mention to the following; Hannah Frost (Queen Elizabeth), this was her first performance with the Fringe and it certainly worked - with her beautiful looks and regal bearing. Like every other member of the cast she never came out of character. Once or twice I felt she needed a little more voice, even so a strong actress.

Michael McGreevy. A superb performance from this very experienced actor. King Philip II. of Spain a very difficult part - full of conflicting emotions and moods. - he had at times the audience in the palm of his hands but not once did he upstage any of his fellow actors.

Last but not least, Don Carlos the Crown Prince, Mat Robinson, to me felt the most difficult part in the whole play. With a few nerves to start with he soon settled down to a stunning performance - a very emotional part he could have gone over the top and lost it - but I suspect with some superb direction he found the level needed. I felt at times he needed a little help with his hands, it stronger gestures, even so a memorable performance.

'Summing up - a three-hour play with many scene changes, exits and entrances all done to professional standard. Congratulations to the ladies who changed the scenes and props, Yvonne Samuel and Hilary Fowler.

A very difficult and strong play, challenging to the company and audience. This play needed strong direction which it received from Lesley Willis assisted by Chris Chappell. Congratulations Alton Fringe for an enjoyable evening.

Dawn Groves.

Fringe benefits from sparkling debuts

The Alton Fringe Theatre's recent production of *Don Carlos*, played to full houses at the Amery Hill School Studio. Those who went along certainly got their money's worth,

Mary Cody's exquisitely detailed costumes were a joy to behold, seamlessly helping to transport the audience more than 400 years back in time to the court of King Philip II of Spain. This attention to authenticity is enhanced through Richard Fowler's co-ordination of 15th and 16th century, Spanish music.

The drama studio's limited space was exploited intelligently by director Lesley Willis, with the sets themselves being all the more convincing for their minimalism.

Making her debut, with the fringe, Hannah Frost took on the role of Queen Elizabeth, and proceeded to show that she clearly has a bright future ahead of her, both with the fringe and beyond. Her unhurried, clear delivery commanded the audience's attention as only a queen should, whilst her anguish at having to choose between warm blooded passion and cold blooded responsibility was more than adequately portrayed.

Also making her acting' debut was Emma Matthews, playing Princess Eboli, who added a warm sense of humanity to the coldly calculating atmosphere of Philip's conniving court.

This air of contrivance was best captured by Richard Fowler, who oozed menace and sinister subterfuge as the battle-hardened Duke of Alva. This was a perfect piece of casting for the role of Philip's strong right-hand man, who knew only too well what it would mean to crush the revolt in the Netherlands.

Philip himself was played by fringe stalwart Michael McGreevy, who succeeded most spectacularly when portraying a suspicion ridden king, desperate for an honest soul in the vipers' nest that is his court. The scenes where the sleep deprived Philip torments himself over the possibility of Don Carlos stealing the affections of his queen are truly memorable.

The demanding role of Don Carlos was tackled with admirable energy by Mat Robinson. Playwright Schiller's occupation with the opposition between personal freedom and the power of the state was borne out through Robinson's thoughtful performance and troubled soliloquies.

At around three hours, *Don Carlos* may be a little too long for everyone's taste, but those who made the effort were rewarded by some of the finest acting talent that Alton has to offer.

Matthew Sotherton