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Classical Acts at the 2010 Edinburgh Festival Fringe

Matthew Somerville

Decision-making is not my forte, so the 2,453 or so productions taking place over the four weeks of the 2010 Fringe certainly had the potential to lead me into a choice catatonia. Somehow – through indecision or fate – I managed to see 136 productions in my 27 days spent in Edinburgh last August.¹ Classical references were dotted throughout the Fringe productions that I saw, whether it was *A Slacker's Guide to Western Theatre* – a frenetic charting of the art from the Greeks to *In Your Face* via Chekov and Shakespeare – or Simon Munnery's stand-up on such topics as Icarus and Sisyphus, but there were five productions that stood out from a Classical perspective.

Obstacle Productions brought *Legend* to the stage: a 'brand new Greek legend' following Demophon, son of Theseus, shipwrecked on an island and attempting to find glory in a world where all the monsters have already been killed. The Prologue and Chorus were treated quite inventively, arguing silently with each other on stage and being responsible also for the intricacies of scenery moving. The story felt appropriately mythic, and the whole affair was quite winsome, deserving more than the six of us watching.

Ovid's Metamorphoses by Pants on Fire was a sell-out production that set the famous mythical stories in the Second World War. This was inspired in a number of places, with sirens replacing Sirens, Narcissus and Echo recast as silent film star and cinema usherette, Daedalus being a war planner and Icarus an RAF pilot. There were some very inventive use of flats and costume, and my only disappointment was the very ending – an attempt to make the theme of metamorphosis both universal and tied in to humanity's own current transformation of the world – which seemed slightly tacked on. Overall, this was a wonderful retelling of the myths with excellent acting, music, and staging, and fully deserved to win the Carol Tambor Best Of

¹ For reviews of all the 136 productions see <http://fringe2010.dracos.co.uk/>

Edinburgh Award, which sent it for an all-expenses paid run at a theatre in New York.

Odyssey was a one-man production by Theatre Ad Infinitum placed under 'dance and physical theatre' in the Fringe programme. Granted, it did have lots of physical actions – reinterpreting Homeric stock phrases into a series of repeated gestures – but would perhaps have been better served simply under 'theatre'. Despite one review commenting on a 'literal flooding of the stage with everything from wild ocean storms, cyclops, Gods, temptresses, castles and fortresses',² there were in fact no set or special effects at all to support George Mann's act, under Nir Paldi's direction. Instead the audience were treated to a lovely piece of storytelling, which managed the impressive feat of summing up the whole of Homer's *Odyssey* (bar book 24, the political aftermath of Odysseus' return and the descent of the suitors' ghosts to the underworld; wisely this adaptation stopped where many do, with the reuniting of Odysseus and Penelope) in just over an hour, with appropriate actions and accompanying vocal sounds both for each character and each event.

Cambridge Fools' musical *When in Rome...* was, as billed, *Glee* in togas, with love triangles, teens undergoing rites of passage, and musical numbers sparked by the slightest of emotional events. The music choices seemed a little odd in places, but they were all performed with gusto, although the band did drown out the voices during the loud numbers. The activity going on in the background of various scenes was clearly well thought out and executed, and at times gave the audience something to focus on other than the unfortunate tunic length of some of the cast. With writer-director Rob Thorman being a Classics undergraduate, the script tipped a sly wink at the Classicists in the audience, with characters named after those in the Cambridge Latin Course (and the use of '*Caecilius est in horto*' as a punchline), Ovid characterised as a bling-encrusted rapper-poet, and having the Plautian crafty slave character note that the references to Christianity in the time of Augustus were deliberate anachronisms, rather than unfortunate gaffes.

² <http://www.edinburghguide.com/festival/2010/edinburghfringe/odysseyreview-5902>

In contrast to the large audiences for *When in Rome...*, *Persephone: The Musical* (by the aptly-titled Pomegranate Productions) had the smallest audience I experienced, showing yet again as Stewart Lee said in his Edinburgh production, people want what they are familiar with rather than what is new. *Persephone* was just as, if not more, enjoyable, with excellent singing and music telling the story of Hades, Persephone, and Demeter. A slightly incongruous note was struck by the introduction of a hero named 'Trip' as Persephone's beau. I later learnt from writer Claire McNicholl that Trip was short for Triptolemus ('As a name it doesn't roll easily off even the most malleable musical tongues so I shortened it to Trip'³) – a minor mythical character who occasionally appears in variations of the myth as a swineherd; he was introduced into *Persephone* as a love-interest in an attempt to lessen the Stockholm Syndrome inherent in the more traditional versions of the story. The music brought to mind Ludovico Einaudi in places (the lyrics were occasionally more Andrew Lloyd-Webber), and was played by the composer Fabio D'Andrea on stage. All the singers brought appropriate energy to their parts, and this certainly deserved to have been seen by more people.

The Fringe leads a dream-like existence in a world of its own; one day seems pretty much like another, and often it is only the fact that your bus does not turn up that indicates it is a Sunday. These stories have been told for thousands of years, or at least feel like they have, and will continue to do so in new and inventive ways.

³ <http://fringe2010.dracos.co.uk/25/classics/#comments>