

King Arthur, Craiggrook Castle ***

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Brought into modern dress and dropped into the gardens surrounding Edinburgh's distinctive Craiggrook Castle, Lucy Nordberg's version of the Arthurian legend has the feel of a Shakespearian tragedy.

King Arthur, approaching the end of his reign, plans to rehabilitate his son Mordred, born out of wedlock to Morgana le Fay, and impose both him, as a king figure, and democracy on the kingdom which the Knights of the Round Table regard as their playground.

The Knights, as you might suspect, are a tad miffed. The existing factions immediately seize the opportunity to weaken Arthur's powers while extending those of the state - under the guise of fulfilling the will of the church.

The reaction is recognisable from countless real life power-struggles and Siege Perilous's production succeeds in making that link between the real world and Arthurian legend. Importantly, the crux falls on moral hypocrisy over Queen Guinevere's affair with Arthur's favourite knight, Lancelot.

If the intrigue is all there, Nordberg's characters are not hugely complex. Which is a relief as the promenade production powers round the grounds, allowing the performers to ensure that every word is clearly heard. There are more intimate moments, for which director Andy Corelli uses the garden's hidden nooks to ensure that nothing is lost.

The really fascinating element of the whole show is the use of a lively crew of young actors. They perform readings from literary figures who have stayed in Craiggrook as you wander about before the show, usher the audience around during it and act out a mummer's play for King Arthur's benefit as part of it.

They need to improve their passive audience direction skills but, dressed as if they were extras for an Alice In Wonderland adventure, they do provide a colourful balance to the formality of the knights in black evening dress.

King Arthur is not an unqualified success. It lags at times and the acting is uneven, but it certainly makes great use of the surroundings as dusk falls. It's worth arriving in plenty of time for the 6pm start, just to sample the readings, and a precautionary application of midge repellent is highly advisable.

THOM DIBDIN, "Edinburgh Evening News"