

King Arthur (2010)

Friday, 03 September 2010



The secluded gardens of Craigcrook Castle, Blackhall's best-kept secret, prove a fine setting for this promenade depiction of the final months of Arthur's reign. It takes a brave writer to tackle this most well-known of tales; the narrative is written into our island's very heritage, and we all know exactly how the story ends. So I'm pleased to report that Siege Perilous' classically-inspired re-telling, while true to the ancient legends, still finds many fresh insights to share.

Most intriguing, perhaps, is the re-invention of Mordred. Far from the ambitious traitor of mediaeval tomes, playwright Lucy Nordberg imagines him as an insecure and sadly-exploited son – caught in complex machinations between Arthur and his abandoned mistress, Morgan le Fay. The young Andrew Hainey impressed me in this difficult role; cruelly used and betrayed by those who profess to love him, he's sulky and impetuous, sometimes eager and sometimes broken. Neil Thomas also caught my eye as Gawain, filled with anguish as Arthur's human imperfections replace his chivalrous dreams of Camelot with a devastatingly meaningless void.

And what of Arthur himself? As one of the cast's more experienced actors, Ian Sexon occasionally stole the scene from his younger peers – and, in delivering a tour-de-force fit for the stage of the Playhouse, came dangerously close to overwhelming the more intimate surrounds of the Craigcrook garden. That aside, it was a compelling portrayal of self-awareness and self-doubt, as the ageing king fights to ensure his place in history by abolishing the very mandate under which he has ruled. There's no shortage of modern parallel for his constitutional dilemma; the dialogue cleverly touches on many themes relevant to our own days, though it doesn't have time to delve into many of them.

And that, to be honest, was a recurring problem: I'm just not sure there's room in this script for both Mordred's personal story and Arthur's political crusade. Connected though the two plot-lines are, each is meaty enough to warrant its own play, and squeezing both into a single work left me feeling less than sated by either. Yet paradoxically, I also came away

SIEGE PERILOUS

with a vague sense that the script was over-long – not that whole scenes or characters should be cut, but simply that it would benefit from pruning here and there.

Still, I can understand a reluctance to trim any of Norberg's words. Her elegantly-crafted poetry has the gravitas of the Arthurian age, yet stays accessible to the modern ear. The verbal imagery is subtle and clever, and it's matched by simple effectiveness in both set and dress; dinner jackets stand in for suits of armour, while Mordred, the outcast, is shamed by his business suit and poorly-fastened tie. Director Andy Corelli also makes fine use of the garden itself, conjuring the darkness of a dungeon or the intimacy of a boudoir through nothing more than an inspired choice of spot.

The final word, though, must go to the students of Stewart's Melville and Mary Erskine Schools, who entertain us with readings while we're waiting for the play to start and enthusiastically marshal us from scene to scene. They have their own moment in the limelight, too, as they play the parts at a Feast of Fools (humourlessly broken up by the earnest Arthur). It's wonderful to see such young and local talent invited onto the stage – and treated, not as hangers-on, but as full-blown members of the company. They can't quite match the adult actors, of course, but if this is the future of Edinburgh theatre... it's clearly in safe hands.

Richard Stamp, "Fringe Guru"