

FRINGE REVIEW: RENFIELD – IN THE SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE AT THE BAKEHOUSE THEATRE, 2020



English theatrical company Grist To The Mill Productions have a number of shows running throughout this year's Adelaide Fringe. *Renfield: In The Shadow Of The Vampire*, is the newest addition to their repertoire and it had its world premiere at the Bakehouse Theatre on Thursday night.

Written and performed by British actor, Ross Ericson, and directed by Michelle Yim, the play is a harrowing exploration of an individual's descent into madness, presented through the experiences of the delusional character, Renfield, who featured in Bram Stoker's classic gothic horror

novel, *Dracula*.

The action is set in the Carfax lunatic asylum run by Dr. John Seward as described in the original source text.

Renfield, in this production, is first seen fronting a panel of medical experts and influential dignitaries, including Dr. Abraham Van Helsing and Quincy Adams, and British nobles. They are gathered together to assess whether Renfield can be considered as being cured and declared sane, so that he can subsequently be tried in court for his crimes against society.

It's a solo piece for Ericson. He plays the role of 'narrator', who cleverly contextualises events for the audience in extended rhyming verse, as well as assuming the part of Renfield, both in the present, as he argues his case to the panel, and in the past, as he relates his journey to self-understanding in a series of vivid flashbacks.

Addressing the audience briefly after the show, Ericson suggested that the work is, to some degree, still in progress; and at times during the performance, the flow of dialogue in the frequent shifts between his character's internal perspectives, did come across as tentative and the changes were not always clearly defined. This suggested that the writer/performer is still experimenting with the piece and is, as yet, undecided about how best to deliver the material he has written to achieve its optimal effect.

The idea is undoubtedly a morbidly fascinating and engaging one. The conflicted Renfield character has been a compelling psychological study for mental health professionals, as well as literary analysts, for well over a century.

Ericson, to his credit, doesn't stick slavishly to Stoker's original story line, but still works much of the character's 'zoophagous' behaviour, and his insistence that he can hear voices that urge him to seek out and dine upon other living things as a path to enhancing his own life force, into this new version of the narrative, whilst not specifically mentioning the controlling vampiric force of Dracula as directly as was the case in the novel.

The set design for this show is a study in minimalism, and the use of recorded soundscapes to enhance action is also infrequent, but effective.

Therefore, Ericsson, who looks like a cross between Tim Robbins and Martin Clunes, and has a visually compelling stage presence, has put himself under pressure as the success of the production hinges solely upon him maintaining the psychological intensity of his character throughout the entire show. This imposing presence is a key asset, as he invariably looks believably 'in the moment', even when his vocal delivery, on occasion, loses full conviction.

Overall, this show is interesting and generally well-conceived, and suggests that Ericson's other shows at this year's Fringe clearly warrant further investigation too.

By: Ken Grady- Upside News

Rating: 4 stars