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October 4, 2022 | By Thom Dibdin | Reply

Arbery and EGTG stage The Satyricon

A new adaptation of *The Satyricon* is being staged this week at the Assembly Roxy in a co-production between Arbery Productions and EGTG. We spoke to adaptor and director Martin Foreman about his project.

Like many people, he first saw *The Satyricon* in Fellini's 1969 movie, itself a loose adaptation of Petronius's classical Roman satire which was written during the reign of Nero and set in the first century AD. It is one of the earliest stories portraying the lives of ordinary people, from sailors and slaves to poets and prostitutes.



An Old Woman (Robert Wylie) accosts Encolpius (Joseph Cathal) in the street. *The Satyricon* in rehearsal. Pic Arbery.

Fellini's episodic barrage of sexual licentiousness, godless violence, and eye-catching grotesquerie caught the imagination of the late-Sixties cineaste, winning best Italian movie at the Venice festival and Fellini his third nomination for a Best Director Oscar.

Much of the plot is driven by sex – between men, between women and men, between young and old. Throughout the story sex is sought, offered, denied, suffered and imposed.

Like many, Foreman wasn't there for the cinematography. "I admit that my initial interest was in the two handsome leads," he says, "but over the years the more I looked at the story and read the different translations and interpretations, the more I wanted to bring it to life."

Beyond the excesses that Fellini dwelled upon, Foreman sees a story which is ripe for our times and which he has his own ideas about presenting.

picaresque tale

"It's a picaresque tale about a three ne'er-do-wells who get into scrapes as they wander through the Roman Empire," he says. "It is also a satire and bursts with youth and adventure and life. It's the Odyssey without heroes, monsters or gods – and because it's so realistic it affects us much more deeply."

Foreman has taken a multi-layered approach to Petronius. The story may take place in the first century, but the play starts very clearly in a twenty-first century theatre and is introduced by Petronius himself, who reveals he was Nero's Arbiter, or judge, of elegance 2,000 years ago.

In addition to the central trio of characters, Encolpius, Ascylltos and Giton, Foreman uses a group of twenty-first century actors who portray all the characters the three meet. As the play progresses it occasionally dips back into the present as the actors check on what scenes are coming.



Ascylltos, Giton and Encolpius (Ben Blow, Scott Adair and Joseph Cathal) are prepared for whatever life may throw at them. Pic: Arbery.

The new adaptation does not reach Fellini's level of on-screen depravity, but Petronius's tale is very much of its times and Foreman's challenge has been to present the Roman perspective on sexual behaviour without condoning or criticising it.

"Given how rapidly attitudes towards gender and sexuality are changing today," he says, "it's foolish of us to condemn the past for not adhering to our standards. After all, we can be certain that future generations will look back at our behaviour with an equally critical eye."

"There's no nudity but there's a lot of sex represented and it isn't always pleasant. People have different levels of comfort and we expect there to be some nervous reactions."

"There are incidents in the play that we are not highlighting in advance apart from the warning that some may find some scenes unpleasant, painful or offensive. That's not a reason not to come to the show. We want the audience to be challenged as much as entertained."

co-production

This production has been a long time in the making. The original intention for was a semi-professional production crowd-funded and produced by Arbery. Covid put an end to that and the crowd-funding didn't yield as much as Foreman had hoped.

Instead, Foreman decided to stage the work as a co-production, choosing EGTG partly for the practical reason that he is on their committee and directed *Hay Fever* for the company earlier this year.

Arbery brought in the play and the casting and EGTG offered use of rehearsal rooms, props, costumes and publicity. Most of the cast are new to both EGTG and Arbery but some of them, including Joseph Cathal who plays the lead Encolpius, have performed with EGTG before.

Foreman adds: "Many of the cast are recent graduates and we hope that this production not only gives them a chance to develop their acting skills but to meet industry professionals who will see what great talent we have brought together."

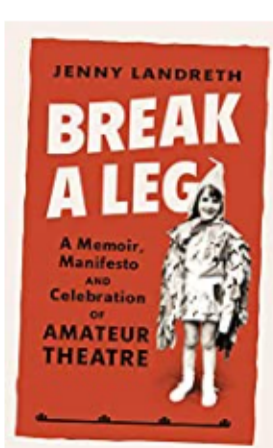
"All the actors have plenty of scope to portray their characters – and the fact there is tragedy as well as comedy, scenes that make the audience uncomfortable as well as make them laugh – all come together to make great theatre."

The Satyricon

Assembly Roxy, 2 Roxburgh Place, EH8 9SU. Phone booking: 0131 623 3030
Tuesday 4 – Saturday 8 October 2022
(Preview Tuesday)
Daily: 7.30pm; Sat mat: 2.30pm.
Tickets and details: [Book here](#).

ENDS

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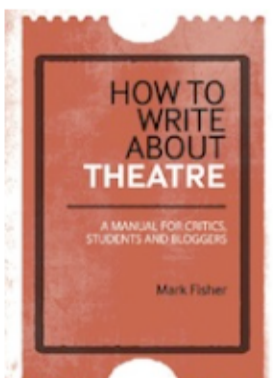
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