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ASSEMBLY ROXY | REVIEWS

The Satyricon

October 7, 2022 | By Thom Dibdin | Reply

★★★★☆ Smutty

Assembly Roxy: Tue 4 – Sat 8 Oct 2022
Review by Thom Dibdin

Martin Foreman's new adaptation of Petronius's first century bawdy comic romp *The Satyricon* is at Assembly Roxy until Saturday, in an initially awkward staging that eventually finds its pace and pomp.

This co-production between Arbery Productions and EGTG uses the stage of the Roxy's main theatre, but most of the action takes place on a thrust stage, as large a one as can be created, placing just one row of seats around three sides of the playing area. This makes for an intimacy between cast and audience which can be unsettling. At least everyone has a front-row seat, ensuring good sight lines are secured for all.



Joseph Cathal and Scott Adair. Pic: Gordon Hughes

Foreman has sensibly decided to use those fragments of Gaius Petronius's text which remain extant, and a few which might, or might not, have been by him (if indeed, any were). He has then embedded in the production the editorialising figure of Petronius himself, played by Stephen Corral, and a troupe of modern day actors who are staging the play for him.

As a device this editorialising can address several problems inherent in the text, from structural ones such as its lack of character development and its fragmentary nature, to more philosophical ones, such as its first century Roman attitudes to gender, sex and slave ownership.

The structural problems are addressed well enough, up to a point, introducing the three main protagonists: the scholarly Encolpius (Joseph Cathal) who has pretensions to being a gladiator, his old pal the imposing ex-gliadiator Ascylos (Ben Blow) and Encolpius's young boyfriend, Giton (Scott Adair); setting up the scenes, moving the narrative (if you might call it that) forward and generally allowing it to breathe.

montage sequence

The difficulty is in a staging that sometimes feels cut together as if it were the montage sequence of a TV drama, with a narrative voice between patches of dialogue. This doesn't always work, despite the best efforts of all the thirteen-strong cast, as it dawdles when it needs to fizz along.

When scenes are allowed to breathe and the actors to find their voices, it can become hugely effective and at times very funny indeed.

Robert Wylie is quite hilarious as poet and tutor Eumolpus, reciting his doggerel and boring Encolpius with tales of debauching his students, as they wander an art gallery where other members of the cast are living statues and tableaux. Both art and comedy are well-conceived and delivered.



Ben Blow and Stephan Corral. Pic: Gordon Hughes

The issue of gender falls flat from the beginning, when Petronius forgets to include the words "non-binary" in his introduction to the ladies and gentlemen of the audience. You get the point that Foreman is making about changing times and changing attitudes, but it feels contrived.

Equally contrived is an editorialising coda that seeks to put everything in modern context, which simply doesn't work.

Better and more chilling points are made during a big orgy scene, when the lads fall in with the richest man in the Empire, Trimalchio, who Alastair Lawless plays with a suitably offhand self-absorption.

It's one of the best realised scenes, with the visual touch of quite revoltingly detailed Zodiac-themed dishes made by Ben Wilson. But it is the reality of a slave-owning society that hits hardest, without ever trying. Human slaves are guard dogs (they are cheaper to feed). And when one of the slaves, played by Rhona O'Donnell, drops a plate, Trimalchio goes off the scale. She is sent to be crucified and her baby is sent to help cut down on guard dog feeding costs.

It is the one time that the production makes a real point. It does so far better than any text book of Roman history could, giving the slaves a humanity and presence. The editorialising works fine here, too, as the actors later reflect on the difficulty of playing the scene.

There are no such reflections on the difficulty or otherwise of the sex scenes which run through the whole piece. Those seeking Fellini-esque levels of debauchery should look elsewhere: copulations exist more as background to other events. Even when Encolpius discovers Ascylos and Giton in flagrante, it is more about the two friends' relationship than the act itself.

hilariously engorged exception

The hilariously engorged exception is a hugely entertaining scene when Encolpius sneaks into a women-only ritual and festival to Bacchus and Priapus, gods of wine and, well, fertility. Led by Wendy McEwan, the cultists ensure that Encolpius will remember the event. But not in the way he might have wanted.

The high points don't mask the bitty nature of the whole piece, which Foreman – who also directs – never succeeds in overcoming. Which is not to say that there are not strong performances and ideas all round.

When Cathal, Blow and Adair are given space, the central trio of friends are well-balanced creations. Trev Lord pops up all over the place in a series of irritatingly disruptive roles; Lachlan Robertson's hard-faced Lichas and Lois Williams as his inebriated wife Trypaena have the sheen of villainy to them.

Kelly Louise Edie, who as an actor is constantly questioning her lack of a name, and Karolina Oleskiewicz in various background roles, fill out a hard working cast. Gordon Hughes succeeds in lighting a tricky space and Richard Graveling provides suitable sound cues, even though there might have been some issues on the night.

This is a massive undertaking and one which Foreman should be commended for seeing through to this point. With any luck, it is still only a staging post to future refinements of his ideas.

Running time: Two hours and 45 minutes (including one interval)

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](#).



The cast of The Satyricon.

Back row: Kelly Louise Edie, Lois Williams, Wendy McEwan, Rhona O'Donnell, Ben Blow, Joseph Cathal, Lachlan Robertson, Scott Adair, Steven Corral & Alastair Lawless.

Front row: Robert Wylie, Karolina Oleskiewicz & Trev Lord.

Pic: Gordon Hughes

ENDS

Tags: Alastair Lawless, Arbery Productions, Assembly Roxy, Ben Blow, EGTG, Gordon Hughes, Joseph Cathal, Karolina Oleskiewicz, Kelly Louise Edie, Lachlan Robertson, Lois Williams, Martin Foreman, Rhona O'Donnell, Richard Graveling, Robert Wylie, Scott Adair, Steven Corral, The Grads, The Satyricon, Trev Lord, Wendy McEwan

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M	T	W	T	F	S	S
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

« Sep

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