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THE SATYRICON – ASSEMBLY ROXY

October 7, 2022



Written & Directed by Martin Foreman



Who owns a story these days? Particularly a tale in which we know not the beginning, nor the end, or even most of the middle.

For two millennia, *The Satyricon* has been picked at, adapted, added to, twisted and perverted more so than any contemporary text can fear. And it may not have been two millennia for the joint production by Arbery and our old friends at EGTG, but it may as well have been for writer and director Martin Foreman. Delayed by Covid – *The Satyricon* sat stewing in its juices, festering and becoming more and more potent as the days went on. Now, at the Assembly Roxy until October 8th, this 2,000-year-old comedy of outrage and hedonism is unleashed. And chances are, you're not ready for it.

So, for those keen to indulge in the historical exploits of three men, you have been warned. Though we may not be entirely sure of origin or place, the likeliest writer of these initial exploits is Gaius/Titus Petronius, Roman courtier and writer in the time of Nero. He is often credited for the creation of the novel and creating our protagonists Ascylos, Encolpius and Giton. A trio of lads, diverse in ages and shape, standing as blank templates for the ordinary man of Ancient Rome – neither moral nor immoral, selfish nor selfless, Machiavellian nor naive. They are but human.

Any familiar with Stephen Corral's stage and screen work will comprehend the validity and refinement which their performance carries as narrator and author Petronius. It's a pleasure to watch, quite often lifting a perhaps unruly or complex scene at the tail end once Corral returns a sense of order to the situation. It's the main structure of Foreman's production, almost a series of skits stitched together by Corral's musings, offering a whirlwind venture through *The Satyricon*, and in moments reflecting on how our attitudes towards Women, Trans, Consent, and Class have changed. And how they haven't.

Educated but short on street sense, Encolpius is a general 'everybody' placement for *The Satyricon*, the shape of a protagonist everyone can get behind. Well, every man. Joseph Cathal undertakes a lot through the production, having to characterise a generic first-century man living day to day with his best friend/rival Ascylos and lover/servant Giton, a sixteen-year-old (we did warn aspects of *The Satyricon* were unsightly). Alongside Cathal, Adair's Giton is understandably petulant, though also engaging and lively. Adair plays an innocent role, with a lustre and bounce that only a teen in Ancient Rome could possess.



Elements of sweeping over casual sexism, assault and consent come to a head, though maybe a touch too late for some audiences. It comes to a shift with Trimalchio's dinner. One which initially does stretch the is pacing, indeed living up to the never-ending feast concept, it's a pivotal turn for the production – and enables Alastair Lawless to flex those thespian muscles and submerge himself in all the grotesque and meanspirited nature Trimalchio encompasses. And it's here where Foreman takes the story by the unmentionables, steering it away from Petronius' initial incarnation, and pushes the envelope of the audience's comfort.



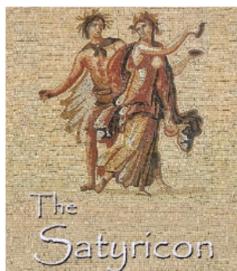
To reinforce this, Rhona O'Donnell carries the closing scene in Act One and silences the Assembly Roxy central hall in a way few manage. Through the preceding smut and scatological gags, it would be easy to become lost or distracted – but O'Donnell takes on the role of Daphne, one of few slaves who is deserving of a name in this tale. It's quite a simple set-up – Daphne breaks one of Trimalchio's plates at the feast and as a result is to be executed, crucified no less. The visceral agony in O'Donnell's voice is discernible, to the extent it's difficult to even look at them, and for just a moment, centuries of slaughter and persecution manifest in a choice performance.

These moments where the tone is broken particularly as we return to Act Two with the 21st-century cast comforting O'Donnell all sit as highlights of the production. Even the more comedic moments, as the paintings and sculptures, join the audience in begging Eumolpus, played by a marvellously sharp and comedically timed Robert Wylie, to 'shut it' and get back to the story. Indeed, many of the supporting cast like Wylie are deserving of tremendous praise – such as the dedicated and accented variety of Lachlan Robertson, or Lois William's physical and expressional humour.

These breaks from the story are excellent, nowhere more so than a tender and quiet moment between Petronius and a firm favourite character who merely vanishes off in the original, Ascylos. Audiences are elated with how rich a credit Ben Blow is to the production – turning the oft-written dough-headed giant into an engaging and intriguing character. It's a role which is underwritten, by Petronius' own admission, and one Foreman and Blow work together to turn into something brilliantly amusing.

Life is difficult. Life is upsetting. Life is disturbing. *The Satyricon* is about just that; life. Through the eyes of mortal beings rather than that of heroes and beasts or deities. And in this respect, there are audiences who will struggle with the subtexts and more fragrant usage of language and exploitations of a sexual nature. The result hasn't quite brought the intention to fruition. It is no doubt a challenging piece, one which deserves merit to the entire team.

The Satyricon is a breed of a show which rarely pushes its head above the parapet, one which some would write off or decree to be left to history. But what Arbery Theatre and EGTG have concocted here is a fine demonstration of storytelling distinction with superb performances and attempts to handle first-century exploits with a contemporary view. And if you can't raise a Posca to this, well, Bacchus help you.



A Fine Demonstration of Storytelling

The Satyricon runs at the Assembly Roxy until October 8th.

Tickets for which may be obtained [here](#).

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