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Chris Noth Is a Weak Dr. Faustus; Guards Rule

David Sheward · Wednesday, June 24th, 2015

The devils have all the fun and the angels are pretty dull in Andrei Belgrader's production of *Doctor Faustus*, adapted by Belgrader and David Bridel from Christopher Marlowe's play, now at Classic Stage Company. Derived from a German legend, this late 16th century morality tale concerns the bargain the titular scholar strikes with Mephistopheles, first lieutenant of Lucifer. Faustus gets infinite power and wisdom while he is alive, but after death Satan gets his soul and he's condemned to eternal damnation. Chris Noth, star of TV's *Law & Order, Sex & the City*, and *The Good Wife,* cuts a handsome figure as Faustus, with a dark beard and somber Renaissance togs by costume designers Rita Ryack and Martin Schnellinger, but he fails to summon up the necessary dramatic intensity to make the hero's inner conflict between faith and self-obsession absorbing. He's so quiet and subdued, it's difficult to hear him even in the intimate CSC Off-Broadway theater as he rejects conventional knowledge and thirsts for supernatural learning.

Zach Grenier in *Doctor Faustus*
Credit: Joan Marcus

Then Zach Grenier, Noth's *Good Wife* castmate, enters as Mephistopheles and things begin to pick up. His demon is a bored, seen-it-all snitch ready to manipulate the emotions of others to gain his own ends–every workplace has one. He slyly seduces Faustus like a skilled con man, making the sins of the flesh and the god-like abilities at his command sound so tempting it's no wonder his mark gives in. The imbalance continues with the appearance of Faustus' clownish servants Wagner, Robin and Dick (goofy Walker Jones, Lucas Caleb Rooney and Ken Cheeseman), who get a hold of their master's spell book and plan mischief of their own, usually involving audience participation. At the performance attended, a woman willingly was drawn from her front-row seat into the action. The bit stretched out uncomfortably when she didn't know what was expected of her, but she gamely played along.

These interludes are staged by Belgrader with Marx Brothers-level zaniness and are quite funny at times, but they detract from Faustus' central dilemma and turn the show into a 16th century version of *Saturday Night Live*. It gets really weird when the Seven Deadly Sins break into a Bob Fosse-type dance routine and sing "Welcome to Hell." This is my kind of party, but it's not Marlowe's examination of the human soul.

Arian Moayed and Omar Metwally in *Guards at the Taj*

Credit: Doug Hamilton

Rajiv Joseph's new play *Guards at the Taj*, at Atlantic Theatre Company, takes place in roughly the same era as *Faustus* and also has similar anachronisms. But unlike Belgrader's production, it offers a thoughtful and complex take on man's relationship to power, art, and beauty. The only two characters are imperial guards stationed to protect the newly built Taj Mahal in 1648 Agra, India. Without giving away too much of the brief plot—the show runs only 80 fascinating minutes—they must carry out a brutal decree by the tyrannical emperor. How they react to their nightmarish orders forms the meat of this compelling two-hander. Dreamy Babur imagines futuristic inventions like airplanes complete with seat belts and is crushed by the acts he must commit in the name of duty, while the more practical Humayun has pangs of conscience but still carries the royal dictates out.

Like Indian versions of the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, the duo debate their powerlessness and their place in an uncaring universe with humor and pathos. Amy Morton delivers a tight, sparse staging with marvelously specific performances by Arian Moayed as Babur and Omar Metwally as Humayun.

Doctor Faustus: June 18—July 12. Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 7 p.m.; Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. $71—$126; (212) 352-3101 or www.ovationtix.com.

Guards at the Taj: June 11—July 12. Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue., 7 p.m.; Wed.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: 80 minutes with no intermission. $20—$65; (866) 811-4111 or www.atlantictheatre.org.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, June 24th, 2015 at 5:00 pm and is filed under Theatre
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