

PHAEDRA'S LOVE PREVIEW/REVIEWS – Edinburgh Festival Fringe, August 2004

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The List

5th – 12th August 2004

HEADLINE: Head & Phaedra's Love

BYLINE: Acclaimed young company from Fringe 2003 returns with more Sarah Kane and a new play.

BODY:

Fail Better returns to the Fringe with two shows, following its highly acclaimed and sell-out production of Sarah Kane's *Crave* in 2002. *Phaedra's Love*, also by Kane, is a brooding family tragedy drawing on classical Greek myth, and centering on one woman's obsession with her stepson. The second production is *Head*, a new play by Fail Better's associate artist Zoë Simon. It's a ferocious and emotive love story set in a filthy London housing estate, exploring the unusual places in which love can thrive.

Director Jonathan Heron comments: 'We felt it was logical to follow our previous Kane play with another and I think that there are definite parallels running through our work.'

'I've always been very influenced by Beckett, as was Kane, as is Zoë, another young, female playwright who wrote *Head*. Thematically and stylistically, *Head* shares elements that also concerned Kane – brutality and love, theatre in relation to depression – so there are definitely real connections between the work of the company.'

(Gareth Davies)

Head: Underbelly 5-29 Aug (not 16), 6:15pm; Phaedra's Love: Underbelly, Thu 5-Sun 29 Aug (not 16), £8.50-£7.50 (£7.50-£6.50) 9pm.

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12th August 2004

HEADLINE: PHAEDRA'S LOVE

BYLINE: It's a family affair ****

BODY:

The Greeks certainly knew how to push family dysfunctionality to its extreme. Phaedra, Theseus and their respective offspring Strophe and Hippolytus were certainly in keeping with this classical tradition. Incest, murder, infanticide and suicide for good

measure. Not even a few stern words from Trisha could have helped this lot. Sarah Kane's revision of Phaedra and her love that tore a family limb from limb is delivered with all the passion it deserves. Her lines crackle and spit from the actors' mouths from start to bloody end.

(Corrie Mills)

Smirnoff Underbelly, 0870 745 3083, until 29 Aug (not 16), 9pm, £7.50-£8.50 (£6.50-£7.50)

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13th August 2004

HEADLINE: Phaedra's Love

BYLINE: By Sarah Kane. Underbelly. ****

BODY:

Sarah Kane's early, short play Phaedra's Love is probably her least performed. It updates the world of the classical Greeks to that of Britain.

This powerful production, directed by Jonathan Heron for Fail Better Productions, does the play justice as it condenses a tale told by Sophocles, Euripides and Racine into minimalist modernity.

The cleverly designed set, courtesy of Nomi Everall, has a throne at one end of a red carpet and a Tracy Emin bed and stained glass window at the other. The bed is littered with fast food, underwear and the grimy Hippolytus, gorging himself and masturbating in front of the TV.

The opening scene as the desperate Phaedra declares her anguished love for her indolent stepson is given real feeling and intensity by an excellent performance from the quivering Steph Pötschke. Her passion contrasts with her stepson's lack of life. He has everything that a man can want including the devotions of stepmother and stepsister, Strophe (Helen Bradbury) but wants more.

Ultimately, the tragedy is played out in little more than three-quarters of an hour, as death piles on death so that by the end, all of the major characters are laid out on the stage as the city burns.

Philip Fisher

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Three Weeks

17th August 2004

HEADLINE: Phaedra's Love by Sarah Kane

BYLINE: Fail Better Productions

BODY:

I never thought I'd say this about a production at the Fringe, but this show seemed tame. I could have taken my mother to see it without so much as a blush, and when you consider Kane's disturbing script about the destructive, fatal power of love and sex, I'm pretty sure this was not the intended reaction, but the production was all the better for it. The acting was compelling, as was the sense of an unalterable tragic fate for each member of the royal family. All the characters seemed to be both pitiable and punchable, self-obsessed to an almost painful intensity. You'll want to scream at Hippolytus for his rich-boy boredom. Get there early. With the audience lined up facing each other, getting a good view is challenging, but ultimately worthwhile.

Underbelly, 7-29 Aug (not 16), 9:00pm (10:00pm), prices vary, fpp 174

tw rating 4/5

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20th August 2004

HEADLINE: Phaedra's Love (Page 174)

BODY:

Drams #####

Venue The Underbelly (Venue 61)

Address The Cowgate

Reviewer Alex Eades

A couple of years back, I saw a production of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, which has remained with me to this very day. Not because it was especially good or that it shocked in any way, but because it brought to my attention how incredibly difficult it is to transfer the power of her work onto stage credibly. Two years on, I came to her least performed play, *Phaedra's Love*, in search of that long overdue punch that, on the page, Kane's voice so effectively delivers. Sadly, I came out unscathed.

The cast are, all in all, impressive. Ben Lambert is especially good as Hippolytus, easily dropping the temperature with his ice cold stare and effortlessly delivers his lines in the same vein. Even then, however he does not seem ugly enough. A slim and handsome actor does not seem to fit in this vile world. Lambert is appallingly miscast, but puts across the impression that he could quite easily be Hippolytus's unidentical twin. The only performance that really spoils the trend is Steph Pötschke as Phaedra,

whose overacting sometimes comes across as belonging in a pantomime and completely out of place on this stage.

The scenes of violence are all done as well as can be expected and I think that here is where a significant problem is apparent. The violence is not believable or, therefore powerful. The play is a violent play and in performance it should be approached in one of two ways – extreme violence, or no violence. The violence is, whether people like it or not, a key factor in the work. They are made in that way, yet it seems only to be glanced at. Therefore, all we get is another half boiled production that should never have seen the light of day.

Is it a problem with the play itself? Does it belong on screen rather than stage? If you're going to do Sarah Kane, do it properly. Otherwise stick to Shakespeare.

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Runs until 29th August – 21:00
Company: Fail Better

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24th August 2004

HEADLINE: THEATRE REVIEW

BYLINE: Phaedra's Love ***

BODY:

It's a brave move on the part of Fail Better Productions to present Sarah Kane's contemporary retelling of the Phaedra myth on a thin traverse stage with the audience positioned inches away from the action on either side.

With its graphic scenes of rape, fellatio and murder, such an intimate performance could easily fall flat on its face if the representations of these actions were anything less than wholly convincing.

But it is a risk which, for the most part, pays off. Jonathan Heron's claustrophobic production successfully pulls you into Kane's unforgiving world of unrequited love and bloody revenge. Although far too slim and handsome for the part, Ben Lambert gives a wonderfully impassive performance as Hippolytus, the 'fat' and 'ugly' prince bent on a path of self-destruction. Living in self-created squalour, he masturbates into a sock without a flicker of emotion and nonchalantly eats Jelly Babies while being fellated. The only time he really seems alive is when he is confronted by the prospect of death. In contrast, his stepmother, Phaedra, feverishly portrayed by Steph Pötschke, is a hysterical mess, consumed by an unquenchable desire to 'climb inside' Hippolytus.

Besides a few untidy scene changes, the production's only real shortcoming is that its tragic climax, signaled by the late arrival of the cuckolded king Theseus, is rather hurried and, as a result loses some of its impact.

Nevertheless, the closing image of the slaughtered royals coupled with the chilling screeches of circling vultures above is a moment of pure theatrical gold.

Chris Collett

Until Sun, Smirnoff Underbelly (V61), Cowgate, 21:00 to 22:00, £7.50 and £8.50, £6.50 and £7.50 concs.

Tel 0870 745 3083.

www.failbetter.co.uk

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HEADLINE: Phaedra's Love by Sarah Kane

BYLINE: Verdict: Fatal illicit love

BODY:

Edinburgh 04 – Underbelly – 21:00 (1hr)

Fail Better Productions

Hippolytus (Ben Lambert) lies glued to his bed by the snot and semen in his socks, and the TV porn channel. Surrounded by the detritus of half-eaten fast-food, unwashed underwear and decay, he masturbates.

At the other end of a red carpet is regally-enthroned Phaedra (Steph Pötschke), declaring desperate love for her dissolute stepson.

This ancient Greek myth is played out in the present – exposing the passion, lust and corruption of a rotten monarchy.

Hippolytus seems to get more satisfaction from playing with himself, and with the bright-red remote-control car he has bought himself for his birthday, than from any of the possibilities of his position. With all his wealth and women, he remains inwardly unsatisfied.

Phaedra quivers with desire for Hippolytus. Her husband Theseus (Gary Adams) is safely still away at war. She declares her love for Hippolytus – a blow-job for his birthday.

But Hippolytus has also had sex with his stepsister Strophe (Helen Bradbury), and dark possibilities are set in motion.

Revolution festers beyond the palace walls. The royal family faces humiliation and death. Neither Doctor (Gary Adams) nor Priest (Matthew Landers) can save Hippolytus.

The young company conveys the inevitable outcome well – a tragedy for monarchy, state and people.

Cast Credits (alpha order): Gary Adams – Doctor, Theseus. Helen Bradbury – Strophe. Jonathan Heron – Policeman. Ben Lambert – Hippolytus. Matthew Landers – Priest, Man. Steph Pötschke – Phaedra, Woman 2. Zoë Simon – Woman 1.

Company Credits: Director/Producer – Jonathan Heron. Designer/Stage Manager – Nomi Everall. Press Officer – Claire Hilton. Technician – Giles Burden. Company – Fail Better.

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HEADLINE: Phaedra's Love. Smirnoff Underbelly

BYLINE: Munira Mirza

BODY:

Sarah Kane's reworking of this classic tragedy is a powerful and disturbing piece of theatre, not unlike self-mutilation on stage.

From the beginning, we are struck with the contrast between numb disinterest and heightened sensory pain. The opening image is of staid decadence, where the protagonist, Hippolytus eats, sleeps and masturbates in his own dirty, sweat-ridden, corner. His casual disinterest in sex, relationships and family is well conveyed as he sits watching television and eating junk food. His face bares no expression or emotion. He is blindly adored by his people yet returns no feeling. Contrasted with him is his stepmother, Phaedra, consumed with passion and burning desire for him. She experiences extreme pain and sensuality, whereas he cannot. His disconnection compels her even more to reach out to him, as she finds his rejection adds to her pain and then her desire.

When the two have their 'liaison', the audience is left feeling as disgusted as Phaedra with her stepson's indifference. It seems nothing can reach him. Phaedra casts revenge by accusing him of rape, punishable by death.

And here Kane presents us with the interesting paradox - that only in pain and self-negation does this individual feel alive. It is only in the hatred of the raving mob that Hippolytus can see the possibility of his salvation. In passively accepting the fate of death, he revels in pain and self-loathing. In this sense, Hippolytus is the ultimate self-harmer, whose numb disconnection from people can only be resolved in self-indulgent sensory experience (pleasure or pain). He is essentially a noble character trapped by status and stifled by the love of those around him.

Kane's play hints at the reasons for such a devastating approach to life, the royal status of Hippolytus and the decadent, incestuous relations within the family. Yet her piece is more remarkable for expressing the emotions of the moment, rather than explaining the context. With this understanding, Kane's intense script is intelligently brought to life on stage with strong acting and minimal stage direction.
