

"THE TAMING OF THE SHREW" - Eveoke Dance Theatre 82-5400

"EDWARD II" at UCSD

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If you like your theater brash and sexy, have I got a couple of shows for you. Eveoke Dance Theatre is gender-shifting Shakespeare's comedy, "The Taming of the Shrew," and UCSD is tackling Bertolt Brecht's rarely performed tragedy, "Edward II." Both productions fly in the face of tradition and timeframes. Eveoke's raunchy romp, with its symbolic dance interludes, shifts all expectations; men play the women's roles -- as men -- and women play the men's parts as women -- all without any changes to the text. Brecht's 1924 drama, set in 14th century England, here features an army equipped with heavy weapons as well as laptops, cellphones and PDAs.

Both directors -- Delicia Turner Sonnenberg and Bill Fennelly -- have a lot on their minds. And they're making some powerful statements. But the results vary wildly; one seems sophomoric; the other, though cast with students, is a thoroughly professional and satisfying evening of heart-thumping theater.

Like many feminists, Sonnenberg and Eveoke's artistic director Gina Angelique are troubled by the misogyny of "Shrew." The two powerhouses have collaborated on this bawdy, brassy production that makes a salacious switch from machismo to feminism. Here, a lusty, gold-digging female Petruchio "tames" an angry, aggressive, martial-arts male Kate. Liv Kellgren and Tim Wild are effective in the leads, as is Patricia Elmore Costa as the 'father' of the bartered brides. The piece fares best with the bawd of the Bard, but somehow, the woman still comes off like a harridan and a shrew, regardless of her power position. Some of the directing is inspired, some of the acting convincing and some of the dancing delightful, but there's a sameness to the tone which is often loud and shrill, both literally and philosophically.

In Fennelly's jaw-dropping production, every moment is stunning and unpredictable. The direction is crisp and crystalline, endlessly imaginative. The spectacular sound design, composed by Stephanie Robinson, is complemented by Jason Thompson's eye-popping lighting. This tale of Edward II, the king whose openly admitted homosexuality led to his own torture, his lover's execution and his country's civil war, evokes modern-day images of an intolerant military and homophobic violence. It says a lot about politics and power-plays, and the vanities and caprices of past and present arbiters of society's destiny. The performances are variable, but potent at the center, with Corey Brill a credibly ineffectual but ultimately majestic monarch and Alex Smith ruthless as his adversary. Here's a classic conflict between the scheming rationalist and the emotional impulsive, a dramatic treatise on the bloody farce of history. It's a cautionary tale, brilliantly, gorgeously told.

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