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TIGER PRODUCTIONS

BILL & BEN by Richard James

WELWYN DRAMA FESTIVAL MAY 2015

This two-hander is the story of Shakespeare and Johnson and set in a cell in Newgate Prison in 1598.

In reality Johnson did kill Spencer in a duel and was reprieved because he quoted a “neck-verse” but James has introduced this marvellous theatrical device of having Shakespeare arrive to suggest it and thereby save his friend and rival playwright.

PRESENTATION: Starting with a song was a good idea and the lady (wench) sang well but perhaps the costumes could have been more period. The tabs open to the cell - A really good presentation as we felt we had been transported. The wall with a window made a good backdrop. Bench, chair, table, candles and other props all looked pretty authentic. Perhaps the chamber pot should have been tin or wood - it looked a little Victorian but the use of the white floor was a very good addition to suggest stone or straw and it helped lift the lighting which was very good giving a dimness yet a texture and mood to the overall look. The whole set was atmospheric and gave us a sense of a real location. Costumes were very appropriate: Johnson suitably scruffy and rough. Shakespeare had a brilliant appearance and the black velvet tunic looked very period.

DIRECTION: Good shaping - the blocking was good, creating levels from bench and chair. The script is a gift with its brilliant lines - lots of wry, ironic humour but also some beautiful quotes which give pathos and a richness of language. The pace was always good. There was some nice “business” with the water bucket and chamber pot. The actors, obviously used to acting with each other, had a good dynamic and knew how to balance each other well. Although they were different, they complimented each other. Be careful there is not too much looking

down. We sometimes lost the expression in the eyes because they were looking at the floor too much.

Johnson

Good strong voice and accent. We got his roughness. Delivered all the lines well with an honesty. He was believable as the soldier, bricklayer and yet also the scholar who was happy in his life as the "London playwright" amongst the ale house of the city. In his description the colourful London streets came alive. We felt the panache of his movement through the city streets. We also felt his solemnness when delivering the "neck-verse" and his dramatic outburst "I am not worthy". The depth of his grief at losing a daughter. Most of all it was the sharp witty one-liners which gave us Johnson's character as James has written him.

Shakespeare

A great look and he comes over as the sensible straight one with a natural delivery - understated and calm but a good opposite to Ben. He takes all the jibes Johnson delivers but he does have an "agenda" of why he has come to save his friend. From "my audience" we start to see more how he feels inside - his relationship with Kemp. The introduction of Kemp's Jig is very cleverly done and Bill really told the story well. But when he finally breaks into "O for a muse of fire!" we suddenly see him come alive in the joy of his words. Showing the genius of the man (even if according to this script he either borrowed, copied or was inspired by others) He was very believable and gained our empathy well.

Dramatic Achievement

This clever script showed us the relationship between two great writers, two friends but also each man's vulnerability and sensibilities. We also got an insight into the business of Elizabethan Theatre. Both characters were believable and engaging. The presentation was atmospheric in creating the cell. Direction showed good control of the piece but possibly the star is the script itself: The details and inventiveness of Richard James triumphing again - giving us a funny yet sensitive play.

Thank you Tiger Productions.

Bev Clark GoDA