

Elizabeth Rex brings amazing, direction, set and performances to stage

East York Mirror

East Side Players are ending their theatre season with a unique and ambitious show.

Elizabeth Rex by Timothy Findley takes the effort of a 19-member cast to pull off, with the theatre transformed into a realistic version of Queen's barn that you have to see to believe.

The plot almost seems like one of those bar jokes: What happens when William Shakespeare (Chris Irving), Queen Elizabeth I (Lydia Kiselyk) a bear (Adam Conner) and some actors who play women, (as they did in the 1601) are stuck in a barn for an evening?

In this production, it's a thought-provoking, intriguing, and at times unbelievable snapshot into the real people behind the stereotypical personas of these historical figures.

Unbelievable because in some scenes, words are slung at the Queen that you'd think werr not allowed, especially by Ned (Michael Harvey), except in this unique circumstance.

It's like any other evening after a performance in the palace, and Shakespeare and his actors are settling into the barn. This is because there's a curfew and no-one can leave until two executions are completed in the morning.

The men behave as you'd imagine; they drink ale, speak of their conquests and eccentrically behave as actors do, some still dressed as the women they play. That's until an unexpected guest arrives – the Queen herself, accompanied by Lady Mary (Jessica Quartel) and Anne, Countess of Henslowe (Catherine Lenihan).

The Queen has decided to take comfort in the company of the men who performed the play she watched earlier. It seems an odd choice until we realize one of the men to be executed, Essex, is her ex-lover.

And here is where the show becomes interesting. It portrays the conflict, the façade and the roles these people play in their lives – and what they hide and deny. Through witty and harsh repartee, the characters peel away at each other's layers to eventually reveal their true selves.

Most of the verbal sparring is done by Ned and the Queen, who have challenged the other to behave more like their own gender. The Queen feels she must be hard and unemotional while Ned is accused of being too feminine. And with one another's help, they are determined to unravel the other.

To try and explain this plot further does it no justice. It's a complex and interesting play that you'll either be totally enthralled with or not.

What is indisputable, though, is the amazing, direction, set and performances given by this ensemble cast.

Kiselyk gives an amazing performance as the Queen. She is stern and powerful, but she plays her emotional unravelling bravely and believably.

Not to be outdone is Harvey, who plays Ned with wit and compassion. He is raw in his emotional journey, and scenes between these two performers are some of the best in the show.

Irving gives a fantastic portrayal of Shakespeare, and his versatility as a performer is evident as he embodies the role of the infamous bard. Other notable performances include Conner as the Bear, Jack (Edward Karek), Kate (Malorie Mandolidis), and many more.

Historical dramas can be hard to swallow, but if you like to see how people tick and unravel, while being entertained, this show is for you.

Elizabeth Rex runs until June 7, 8 p.m. at the Papermill Theatre, 67 Pottery Rd. Tickets are \$22. Call 416-425-0917 or visit www.eastsideplayers.ca/tickets/tickets.html for tickets.