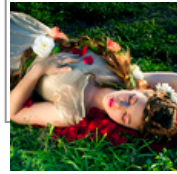


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Review: *Murder Ballad Murder Mystery* at the Vortex Theatre

Remember that part in *Jurassic Park* when Ian What's-His-Fuck says something along the lines of, "They were so busy thinking about whether they could. No one stopped to think whether or not they *should*"? *Murder Ballad Murder Mystery* is like *Jurassic Park* sans dinosaurs and coherent narrative (right down to the theme of dead things being resurrected). Oh, it's visually stunning, resourceful, raucous, and joyous theatre-making, but there are clearly ill-conceived aspects to the whole affair. While fresh, the piece is unripe and therefore minimally nutritious.



First of all, the program contains a supposedly preparatory blurb that seemed more like a caveat, tacitly saying "If you're expecting shit to make sense, don't worry about it. It doesn't have to. Anyway, we know what we're talking about." If a play depends on a nebulous paragraph in the program to impart coherence to the audience, that's problematic. There were no character bios or lists of source material. Why bother talking about something esoteric if you're not going to give the audience necessary information to help them keep up?

Speaking of being dragged along, Elizabeth Doss' script races desultorily, distracted by synaptic misfire. The thematic elements just garble over, contradict, and shoot past one another with little to no connection. Any knowledge of the nature of the piece is masked with a frantic zeal. Dustin Wills (*Black Snow*, *Ophelia*) imbues the script with vivacity the way murder ballads do for the dead, encouraging the beast to scramble and wreak havoc. It might have succeeded if not for an ill-administered and confounding injection of something like a narrative in to the 2nd act that stopped the animal in its tracks. It is unclear whether it had a destination in the first place.

If one's piece is securely rooted neither in cohesive storyline nor conversational theme, it should be studded with believable characters. Those that populate Wills' other productions are studded with high theatricality, but possess an undercurrent of sincerity. This is largely not the case with "Murder Ballad". Be hyperbolic all you want, but make sure that truth is at the root, lest it seem a lie. The performances were not in accord; some ostensibly strove for honesty and some disregarded the notion wholly. We're dealing with legends that used to be people, with the idea that murder ballads immortalize and instill their subjects with glinting humanity. These dichotomies should be reflected in the characterizations, but instead we're left with satirical, farcical performances that seem to dissuade an audience attempting to take seriously and engage with the work and instead endorse a passive willingness to be washed over.

The utilization of the space was evocative. The lighting, sound, and music constructive and intriguing. The striking and consuming set endorsed the frenetic nature of the piece, allowing Will's hallmark strengths of utilization and getting his money's worth to gleam. The dynamic staging had characters scrambling behind and above the audience, splashing them with water and crawling over them across the risers. However, with audience engagement so clearly the focus, and no real reward offered at the end, the entire piece almost feels like a self-serving, flashy ruse.

By [Bastion Carboni](#) in [Arts and Entertainment](#) on October 29, 2009 2:27 PM [6 Comments](#) [10 Likes](#)

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