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Tadzio Speaks – Etcetera Theatre, London

Posted by: The Reviews Hub in Drama 08/11/2013 Comments Off on Tadzio Speaks – Etcetera Theatre, London

Writer and Director: Martin Foreman
Reviewer: Stephen Bates
[rating:3]


Thomas Mann's 1912 novella *Death in Venice* is perhaps best known because of Luchino Visconti's 1971 film adaptation, which is regarded by many as a masterpiece of European cinema. It also inspired a Benjamin Britten opera, first performed in 1973. The story was set at Venice Lido where an ageing writer (composer in the film) Gustav von Aschenbach was convalescing after illness and became obsessed with a teenage boy called Tadzio, while cholera raged in the city across the water.

The soundtrack of the film featured prominently the mournful *Adagietto* from Mahler's Fifth Symphony, leading to the supposition that Aschenbach was based on Mahler. In fact, the basis for the story was a real life encounter between Mann himself and an aristocratic Polish boy at the Lido in 1911. Mahler's music plays as we enter the theatre, but Martin Foreman's monologue draws less from the film than from Mann's original novella.

The old man and the boy did not speak to each other, leaving unanswered questions as to how the boy perceived his admirer. Foreman expands upon Mann's work by telling the story from the viewpoint of Tadzio, as remembered 40 years later. Played by Christopher Peacock, Tadzio is dressed in a crumpled cream linen suit, still blond and handsome in middle age, but slightly world weary.

Aschenbach regarded the boy as the epitome of youthful beauty, but Tadzio describes himself as a capricious adolescent, at one moment having adult thoughts that he was not yet ready to embrace, then, at the next, boyishly building sand castles. At first, he saw amazement and fear in the old man's expressions, but, as his understanding grew, he recognised excitement behind the "quieter gaze" of his eyes.

He tells us that he began to see Aschenbach as the "gatekeeper" to an adult world full of limitless possibilities and he even describes sexual fantasies involving him. Sadly, we learn that the intervening 40 years have been ones of disappointment and disillusionment and that he now thinks of the old man as his "jailer", having been unable to fulfil expectations inspired by him or to escape memories left by him.

It seems somewhat inconsistent with Mann's story that the passive intrusion into the boy's life described therein should have had such a profound affect on the man that he became. As we are offered very little specific detail of Tadzio's adult life or the exact nature of his failures, it is difficult to understand why he shows bitterness towards Aschenbach, so that, in rounding off the original work, this play is not completely satisfying. Nonetheless, hearing Foreman's eloquent and descriptive prose, here done full justice by Peacock's performance, must be worth 45 minutes of anyone's time.

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