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saints and sinners of the stage and screen

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Tadzio Speaks
Theatre Collection
13th July 2013

★★★★★

Although Thomas Mann's 1912 novella *Death in Venice* was given a wider audience by the 1971 and 1972 film and opera adaptations, it's not as widely known as it could be. Never let it be said that writer Martin Foreman is beholden to the tides of popularity, he clearly writes about what interests him - and he does do with a great elegance, his words always deeply poetic. *Tadzio Speaks* is his latest piece, a monologue written in response to Mann's book. While it stands on its own and out of context, when you watch it in the knowledge of what has sparked the plot, it gives a deeper understanding and weight to the performance.



Photography provided by Arbery Productions

In *Death in Venice*, a famous German author, Gustav von Aschenbach, checks into a hotel and spots a beautiful young Polish boy there, the Tadzio of Foreman's play. The boy is staying abroad with his family, whilst he recovers from ill health, and although von Aschenbach never once talks to him, he develops a silent obsession with the youth which ends in regret. It's a tale ripe with Freudian and Nietzschean influences, as well as paying homage to Greek philosophers such as Plato and the myths of restrained god Apollo and indulgent, liberated Dionysus - the precursor, if you like, to the devil and the angel on each shoulder. For a book that is about nothing, it's actually about everything.

Foreman's response, *Tadzio Speaks*, retells the same story but from the boy's perspective. He imagines Tadzio's side and reveals how the fascination was mirrored to the point where 40 years on, it still haunts the boy, now fully grown.

Christopher Peacock takes on the role of Tadzio, in his mid-50s, remembering that all-important summer. There is a deckchair, with a linen blazer draped over it and a panama hat resting on its corner. Tadzio himself is dressed in a

similarly light-coloured suit, his clothes and age reminiscent of that man from his past, a subtle suggestion as to the long-lasting impact the encounter has had.

Von Aschenbach's inner turmoil that finally consumes him in the form of cholera is mirrored here by Tadzio's long-lasting regret of an opportunity missed. Although, in a volte-face from the original, he is not obsessed with the Platonic ideal he represented, and that von Aschenbach tried to replicate in the novel. It serves as a bittersweet epilogue, but one that largely reinforces the idea that the study of form is all well and good, but desires left unacted upon will damn you. To that end, it is well written, but we question quite how necessary it is - after all, it enhances the original rather than bringing anything wildly new, insightful or analytical to the table.

Sometimes Tadzio talks to that space on the deckchair, where we imagine von Aschenbach might have sat, but never once does he address the audience or meet our gaze. Peacock's eyes are slightly glazed over, looking firmly into the distance - Tadzio is remembering his story for himself, for von Aschenbach - no one else except maybe the Gods of Olympus. It's a deeply personal remembrance and once we're privileged to overhear.

Before becoming an actor, Peacock was a newsreader for some 10 years, and there's an echo of that experience in his ability to speak almost flawlessly for 45 minutes, with a honeyed and soothing voice that you want to listen to. *Tadzio Speaks* is a slightly unusual piece, but it's cast well - Peacock takes the material and owns it on stage. But there is a more fundamental issue of the running time - with the best writing and acting in the world, it'd very difficult to actually connect to someone in such a short space of time, especially if there's an overtone of (albeit justified) self-pity. Set within a larger piece, this may have been more successful.

The lighting is merely perfunctory for the most part, changing abruptly as Peacock moves around the room and begins a new chapter. But the blocking itself is good, with Peacock physically acting out each memory vividly, his mannerisms all well-considered.

With only six performances over the entire run, and the Lord Stanley an intimately sized theatre pub, few people will have the opportunity to hear Tadzio's account of what really happened in Venice that summer. But if you can make it to Camden for one of the final shows, it is worth seeing. *Tadzio Speaks* isn't wildly experimental, but it is somewhat of a niche production that fits perfectly into the category of good fringe theatre.

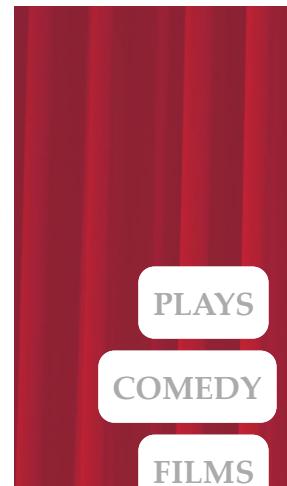
Tadzio Speaks ran from 6th to 21st July 2013 at Theatre Collection, as part of the Camden Fringe.

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