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'Equivocation'

An extraordinary cast takes on a challenging play

DATE POSTED: Thursday, November 6, 2014 4:29 PM EST

By Stuart Duncan

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Dale Simon (left) and George Hartpence in Equivocation.

EQUIVOCATION may be a terrible title for a play, but the work, by playwright Bill Cain, was called "cerebrally pyrotechnic" by the Los Angeles Times, and is getting a sparkling production by an extraordinarily talented company by Actors' NET of Bucks County at the Heritage Center Theatre in Morrisville, Pennsylvania.

The premise is tantalizing: King James I, who has just come to the throne and as one of his first mandates has commissioned 47 of Britain's finest scholars to write his version of the Bible, also commissions William Shakespeare (here called Shagspeare so that we can refer to him as "Shag") to write a play based on the recent Guy Fawkes Gunpowder Plot.

"We don't do current events," Shag explains fervently, but the King's mentor, Sir Robert Cecil, insists, and even threatens various reprisals. He even adds: "The King likes witches." But the problem still remains: How do you write a play that involves a King in nasty events when that same King is sitting in the audience?

The pyrotechnics are aplenty and a terrific cast make the most of them. Dale Simon plays Shakespeare (I'm sorry, Shagspeare) with authority and humility (not an easy combination.) Four of the area's finest character actors take on the large number of additional male roles: Barry Abramowitz is a sensational slimy Sir Robert Cecil; John Bergeron handles everything from A to Z — King James to Thomas Wintour — but is especially effective as Sharpe. Andrew James Gordon plays the roles of Armin, Robert Catesby and Sir Edward Coke as well as assorted henchmen and guards; and George Hartpence is a superb Richard Burbage (the leading actor of the King's Men, Shakespeare's troupe.

The sole female role, that of Shag's disillusioned daughter, Judith, is played with great style and often compassion, by Morgan Petronis. It's a long evening — three hours plus — and the more you know about Shakespeare and his plays, the more fun you will have in remembering all the references and clever bon mots.

Mr. Hartpence has done double duty as set designer, and his set is beautifully lit by Andrena Wishnie. More than anything, however, it is a joy to watch and listen to such experienced and talented actors batting clever dialogue as if it were so many pinpong balls in play.

Equivocation continues at The Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pennsylvania, through Nov. 16. (NOTE: There is no performance Nov. 15). Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$20, \$17 seniors. This show is not recommended for children. For tickets and information, go to www.actorsnetbucks.org or call 215-295-3694.

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