

# She-Wolf

Reviews, articles and musings from a pop culture scholar. Female werewolves, speculative fiction, creative writing, medieval culture... and anywhere else my mind takes me.

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Friday, 29 July 2022

## Review: Willy's Lil Virgin Queen (Terra Taylor Knudson)

July 2022

Digital Event

The **Greater Manchester Fringe** runs throughout July, with performances at various venues around Greater Manchester and online. Once again, I'm going to be reviewing a selection of the productions on offer for this blog, and also for **The Festival Show on North Manchester FM**.

The next show I saw this year was a digital production, and it was part of the **C ARTS** strand on this year's Fringe programme. C ARTS is a curated independent arts programme that delivers work for the Edinburgh Fringe, which is then made available online via streaming throughout the year. Although produced for the Edinburgh Fringe, C ARTS productions are now included on the programmes of other fringe festivals, including the Greater Manchester Fringe.

The production I'm going to be reviewing now is available to stream with a ticket purchase from the Greater Manchester Fringe website throughout the month of July. I'm reviewing **Willy's Lil Virgin Queen**, a performance by **Terra Taylor Knudson**. The radio version of this review will be broadcast on The Festival Show on **Friday 29th July**, but here's the blog version...



In a couple of my previous reviews (for Eliane Morel's *Disenchanted* and *Hear. Speak. See.* by Expial *Atrocious*), I mentioned the variety of techniques and approaches used to create the pieces on the digital theatre strands of this year's GM Fringe programme. *Willy's Lil Virgin Queen* is yet another type of digital theatre – it's a recording of a live stage version of the show in front of an audience. Quite a different experience to the 'lockdown theatre' faux video calls of *Disenchanted* or the immersive film experience of *Hear. Speak. See.*, but it's definitely an approach that works for Knudson's show.

*Willy's Lil Virgin Queen* is a one-woman show that charts Knudson's relationship to William Shakespeare. And, just to say, it is always figured as a *relationship*: the title should give you a hint as to the casual familiarity with which Knudson treats the Bard and his work.

The play begins with Knudson performing Mistress Page's monologue from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It's a good performance, capturing the warmth and humour of Shakespeare's character (as well as her acerbic tongue and assertiveness), and it makes for a compelling opener. Here is an actor who knows how to do Shakespeare, we think. Here is someone who knows what the words mean and can convey the sentiment behind them.

But *Willy's Lil Virgin Queen* isn't simply a chance to watch Knudson perform a series of Shakespeare's monologues – though I have to admit that the opening scene suggests that *would* be a fun thing to watch. This is a much more personal journey, and Mistress Page's words soon give way to a reminiscence about watching the play for the first time as a child.

Knudson's story moves from her early introduction to the work of William Shakespeare, when she tentatively accepted that this might be something she could enjoy, to the beginning of the real 'relationship' in her high school years. Her narration is full of humour – sometimes at her own expense, sometimes at the expense of those around her, and often at the expense of Shakespeare himself. She speaks of teenage relationships and reimagines a scene of young heartbreak with herself as Ophelia and her no-good musician boyfriend as Hamlet, explaining that she was 'living the great Shakespearean soap opera that we all live in high school'.

As Knudson's personal narrative continues there are detours into the biography of the writer himself (told with an utterly irreverent humour that really reminds you that there are some weird gaps in Willy's life story), and into the historical circumstances that informed much of his writing (including the Hundred Years War, the Wars of the Roses and the birth of the Tudor Dynasty). I was a bit surprised to find – given the show's title – that Knudson didn't linger particularly on Elizabeth I and Shakespeare's position as a specifically Elizabethan writer, but there is still a lot to enjoy about Knudson's frenetic and funny take on over five centuries of English history, which singles out Elizabeth Woodville as a 'Disney Princess' and lingers on Joan of Arc's betrayal by the Dauphin (almost as though this might be relevant later in the show). Obviously, as a Brit, I felt a moment of trepidation when the American on stage announced she was going to 'explain' a few centuries of our history, but all credit to Knudson – it's a fun and affectionate take that will win over even the most patriotic audience member on this side of the pond.

At almost breakneck pace, Knudson takes the audience through this background material, which she explains she read about to better understand Shakespeare's writing and its effect on her, and to her university years. Desperate to be an actor ever since that first experience of watching *The Merry*

*Wives of Windsor*, Knudson explores the moment she was accepted into a performing arts college (though on a Production Management major rather than an acting course), and the trepidation she felt on moving away from home to a completely different state.

As the monologue moves into its second half – almost a second act – things take a darker turn, and we move from the rollicking ride through English history and Shakespeare’s life story into a much more serious narrative.

Knudson’s account of her time at college is a painful one, and while it begins by framing the experiences in terms of Shakespearean drama (including a disturbing reimagining of her college roommate and ‘torturer’ as a particularly unsettling version of Lady Macbeth), the story moves away from Shakespearean characters and into a nightmarishly personal narrative. This section of the show is heart-breaking to watch, and Knudson’s performance is captivating (in a chilling way), as she recreates or recaptures incredibly raw emotions. While there was a jokey reference to the ‘To be, or not to be’ speech earlier in the show, when this soliloquy eventually reappears, it carries so much more weight and is downright agonizing to watch.

Fortunately – and I don’t think this is a spoiler – Shakespeare saves the day in the end. Or rather, Knudson, supported by the love of the theatre that Shakespeare’s writing has given her, saves her own day. The play ends with jubilation and triumph, which feels like an apt testament to the writer-performer’s resilience, and to the near-magical way in which Shakespeare’s plays have continued to resonate and stay relevant through the centuries.

*Willy’s Lil Virgin Queen* is a joy to watch. Knudson is a talented and creative performer, and there’s something so natural in her delivery that it’s easy to forget this is a scripted show. The experience of watching a recording of a live performance was very enjoyable, but I must admit it made me a little jealous of the audience for that show. *Willy’s Lil Virgin Queen* is a very intimate show, and Knudson’s performance style is so charismatic and familiar, that I feel like seeing the show live would be a really satisfying experience. Maybe one day I’ll get to find out...

Despite my pang of jealousy towards the live show’s audience, I’m very pleased to discover that the Greater Manchester Fringe is actually the show’s international debut (because what finer Fringe is there to host this debut?). If you get chance to stream the show before the end of the GM Fringe, I recommend you do so. If not, it is going to be available to stream as part of the Edinburgh Fringe programme in August, and then the Sydney and Melbourne Fringes later in the year. And it’s definitely worth a watch.

*Willy’s Lil Virgin Queen* is available to stream throughout the month of July, as part of the C ARTS strand on this year’s Greater Manchester Fringe programme. For the full programme of Greater Manchester Fringe shows on this year, please visit [the festival website](#).

