

Reviews

Erasmus Montanus

Ludvig Holberg

Greenwich Studio Theatre

4th November 1994 – 28th November 1994

31st March 1994 – 30th April 1994

Greenwich Studio Theatre in Exile

30th January 1986 – 18th February 1986

Translated by Julian Forsyth

Directed by Julian Forsyth

Independent

27th October 1993

INDEPENDENT

27.10.93

Sarah Hemming on
MINNA von
BARNHELM

Fringe and touring companies have done a lot over the last decade to expand British theatre-goers' familiarity with European classics. Latest to join them is Greenwich Studio Theatre, launching its new resident company with Lessing's 18th-century German comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*. It's a bold choice, and one that pays off.

Lessing offers us a neat moral comedy: at the end of the Seven Years' War, the wealthy Minna hunts out her beloved Prussian officer in a Berlin inn. But Tellheim, penniless and discharged, now considers himself unworthy of the match — and won't be persuaded otherwise. "Equality is always the strongest bond of love," he spouts, refusing the help of his friends. Minna has

to resort to female cunning to make him face the deeper meaning of his words.

The play shares some traits with our own, earlier, Restoration comedies — the quest for love, the social critique, the cheeky servants and spirited ladies who negotiate their way round social restrictions. But here serious moral issues underpin the process: Tellheim's weakness is too much honour, rather than too little, which allows Lessing to explore Minna's more progressive understanding of the virtue and to posit the notion of equality of the sexes.

Margarete Forsyth's polished, enjoyable production handles the tone of the comedy with great assurance, pays detailed attention to characterisation and conveys the sense of society in turmoil. There are strong performances all round, led by Sally Cassin's luminous Minna and Julian Forsyth's ramrod Tellheim, in a show that augurs well for the company's residency.

What's On

6th October 1993

Soldier of fortune

MINNA VON BARNHELM
Greenwich Studio

In his controversial writings of 1768 the German playwright Gotthold Lessing explained: "The burlesque only aims to provoke laughter, the tragi-comedy only to move; true comedy aims to do both." And his charming and profound comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*, written just the year before, proves he was capable of creating the true stuff.

Widely regarded as the first major comedy in the German language, it broke new ground by daring to poke fun at the bourgeoisie at the same time as taking them seriously. Now, naturally, some of its themes seem a tad dated, but many more are relevant today, making it an accessible and enjoyable play.

OCT 6 1993

And thanks to the new resident Greenwich Studio Theatre Company's enthusiastic production, we have here a little German gem.

The Seven Years' War between Prussia and Saxony has just ended, leaving righteous Prussian Major von Tellheim wrongfully accused of taking bribes from the Saxon government. Awaiting his discharge, he becomes a martyr to misfortune, refusing offers of much-needed money from desperate friends and believing himself to be unworthy of his heiress fiancée, Minna von Barnhelm, now that he is a social outcast. Meanwhile, the plucky heiress, all sparkling wit, bright intelligence and feminine finesse, has followed him to Prussia to take him back, determined to prove to him that their love is beyond such man-made social constraints.

The plot is simplicity itself: the complexities are in the personalities and their dealings with the strict social conduct of the time. And if you miss any such complexities, there is an informative programme to guide you. The cast is a strong team, with an impressively wide age range, unusual for fringe companies. All are engaging, noticeably Bernard Kay's Paul Werner and Donna Wilson's Franziska, and there is not a weak link in this rather delightful chain.

Margarete Forsyth's direction is slick and pacy, with some inspiring little touches - her elegantly simple set is neatly constructed throughout the play, an exact mirror of the plot, and the deft and witty choreography of each set change is a miniature masterpiece. Dramatic lighting and sound effects give a final professional touch to this lovely little piece and I defy you not to leave feeling good about life in general. (See Fringe)

MELISSA MICHAEL

Time Out

6th October 1993

'Minna von Barnhelm'

GREENWICH STUDIO

An obscure European comedy with sizable cast, stylish set, sharply incised direction, high production values: Greenwich Studio is under new management with a new resident company, and looks set to become (fingers crossed) south London's answer to The Gate. Quality of performances and sets have made a quantum leap, making this odd eighteenth-century play by German dramatist Lessing a real treat.

German aristocrat Minna (Sally Cassin) arrives at a Berlin inn and unknowingly gazumps out of his room the very officer she has come to woo, the now impoverished but honourable Major von Tellheim (Julian Forsyth). He has cast her aside, too proud to take advantage of

her money, or that of his friend, the gruff old soldier Werner (Bernard Kay, splendid). Minna and her delightfully pert maid Franziska (Donna Wilson) start plotting to outwit the Major's preposterous scruples, aided (and thwarted) by Tellheim's sharp but honest servant (excellent Eddie Marsan) and the unctuous landlord, Angus Deayton-lookalike Tim Swinton. And don't miss Stephane Cornicard's hysterical cameo as the skint, swindling French officer Riccaut de la Marliniere. By this time (1763) honour feels like an anachronism, and witty throwaway lines open out the drama and hint at political upheavals outside this little room. Meanwhile, inside, the first trumpet blast of sexual equality is sounded. It's a slight tale, and a rather static play, but directed with real charm and a delicate touch. A splendid opener.

Suzi Feay

April 1994

Fringe Theatre/Alastair Macaulay

Discovering Holberg

Roll up, roll up, for London's Holberg revival. The *what? Who?* Well... Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754), known as the Molière of the North, wrote 28 or more comedies for the Danish theatre, which opened in 1722. In both Denmark and Norway, he is called "Father Holberg"; statues of him stand beside the National Theatre of Oslo and the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen; his plays, Ibsen wrote, were "almost the only book I never tire of reading". Oliver Goldsmith knew his work - but few London theatre-goers today do.

Now, however, the London fringe has two different Holberg comedies. Watching both in quick succession has made me curious to know more of his work, and to investigate his importance in the Danish-Norwegian theatrical tradition. The Gate Theatre - the venue celebrated for introducing foreign classics to London - has produced his *Jeppes of the Hill* (1722). Meanwhile the much less well known Greenwich Studio Theatre (which has started to follow a similar repertory - of unknown European classics in translation) has revived its 1993 staging of his *Erasmus Montanus* (probably 1723).

The difference between the two stagings is instructive. The Gate actors perform *Jeppes of the Hill* with panache and sophistication, but often as if condescending to the old play and indeed as if amused by the 18th century. The Greenwich Studio actors are, by comparison, earnestish; but they absorb themselves in *Erasmus* so that it becomes far the more stirring and touching of the two.

The title character of *Jeppes* is a bespeckled peasant who escapes his shrewish wife only to drink himself silly. Baron Nilus, coming across his dead-drunk body, has the whim of (a) putting him to bed in the castle and having the castle staff treating him as a lord - for a day; and then (b) returning him (drunk again) to the dung-heap and having him arrested for assaulting the castle staff. There are moments when Jeppe, as alcohol colours his world-view rosy, sounds like Falstaff. More often he resembles Bottom, never quite understanding his visit to "paradise" and never capable of explaining it.

The play becomes more arresting the more you can believe in poor, passive, all too human Jeppe. If the play is to have any heart, he must be its most intensely human character. Jonathan Coyne is pleasant but lightweight. Like his colleagues, he wastes too much time addressing the audience, panto-style. Bernadette Roberts has provided an admirable single set that, with various props, becomes four different locations. Kenneth McLeish, the translator, has written that Holberg's script was intended as "a skeleton, a template for performances... to be filled out and expanded by the company in characteristic *commedia dell'arte* style". OK; true, although everyone in Ben Crocker's direction is charming, nobody seems really to believe that Jeppe's world could ever be three-dimensional. Or that Holberg might be worth serious attention.

The title *Erasmus Montanus* sounds rather learned - but actually is a joke. Rasmus Berg is a farmer's son who goes to university and comes back so disgustingly learned that he insists on being called "Erasmus Montanus". So far, the sympathy is all against him. But he also insists that the earth is round and that it rotates around the sun - which the farm-folk regard as repulsive heresy. Rasmus Berg is vilified, and finally has, at recent length, for a while, the Mettle of the North seems to have prefigured Brecht's *Gallileo*; and I watched with tears as well as laughter.

Both these Holberg plays have a highly conservative sting in their tails. Jeppe ends with the moral that peasants are best in their place, for, if allowed to rule, they behave all too boorishly. *Erasmus Montanus* winds up more subtly, with the university-educated lieutenant telling Rasmus that true learning teaches tact, proportion, good manners. What makes Holberg an artist larger than these conclusions is his humanity, and I loved Julian Bury's staging of *Erasmus Montanus* far more than Jeppe because it did more to bring to life its characters.

Jeppes is at the Gate Theatre, W6, until May 21; *Erasmus* at the Greenwich Studio Theatre until April 30.

News Shopper

April 1994

Erasmus story is a comic hit

Rasmus Berg, a nice young peasant given to northern vowel sounds and chasing his fiancée round the barn, is sent to university. Three years later he reappears as Erasmus Montanus, with cut-glass accent and an indefatigable sense of his own superiority.

The villagers are at first amused by his feats of reasoning – “proving” that his mother is a stone and to be drunk is to be virtuous – but his assertion that the earth is round is, for them, the final straw.

His subsequent humiliation at the hands of the villagers is the basis of the comedy Erasmus Montanus, at the Greenwich Studio Theatre until April 30.

The Norwegian classic, adapted and translated by director Julian Forsythe, recieved rave reviews when it first appeared at Greenwich last year. This year's revival is as sharp and funny as ever.

The staging is breathtaking. Clever lighting gives the atmosphere of a dusty barn, with sun drifting down through the rafters onto the small stage, complete with apple cart and hay loft.

The production makes the most of the intimate feel of the studio theatre – the audience feels drawn into the circle of villagers who crowd into the barn to wonder at the newly arrived scholar.

Mark Peakins demonstrates remarkable comic talent as the pedantic

Rasmus, dusting off a stool before he can bear to sit on it, unable to restrain his mirth at his brother's halting poetry and suffering the jests of the villagers with a martyred look.

Eddie Marsan's sympathetic portrayal of Rasmus' brother Jacob brings out the good sense and humanity of the character.

But Jacob is the exception. The laughter of the villagers at Rasmus' pretension is far from affectionate – mob feeling is led by the bullying troublemaker Niels, played by Michael Burgess, and raucous Gudrun, played by Sarah Ford.

Sonia Abercrombie, playing Rasmus' fiancée Lisbeth, is touching and comic as she pleads with Rasmus to go back on his assertions – “Say it's flat, Rasmus. Say it for me.”

Kate Crutchley is brisk and down to earth as Magdelone, Lisbeth's mother, who is more concerned with making sure the match goes ahead than with Rasmus' quarrel.

It is difficult in an age which values knowledge to accept the conclusion of the play, where Rasmus is forced to recant his belief that the earth is round. But Jacob's quiet aside is a reminder of the need to live in harmony: “I think you're right, brother. I think the earth is round. But if someone offered me a pickled herring to say it was flat, I'd say it.” .AS

Times

6th February 1996

Sharp points unhappily blunted by a dull cast

YOU might call this the return of the pedantic son. Rasmus Berg is back from college and insisting that everybody calls him Erasmus Montanus. Returning to the family farm, he addresses the farm hands in Latin, syllogistically proves that his mother is a stone, and pushes his luck by announcing the world is round.

The 18th-century playwright and Latin professor Ludvig Holberg, hailed in his native Norway and Denmark as their Molière, is worth unearthing. The Gate recently brought us *Jeppe of the Hill*. Now BAC gives a second lease of life to this Greenwich Studio Theatre production about young Master Berg enraging the yokels.

Holberg's play is more than an historic comedy of manners. For all the satire of dead languages, there is a startling timelessness in this portrait of a youth pushing away his family, fixing on a new identity and fighting for his radical opinions. Holberg beat Dennis Potter to the post by a couple of centuries in depicting a college boy dropped back into his rural community.

Moreover, *Erasmus Montanus* proves to be a polemical play of ideas and a drama of rising tensions as the snubbed

peasants (led by thickset David Peacock) turn the tables and bully the swot. With a hint of *The Crucible*, the superstitious villagers cry heresy on Erasmus's Copernican science. The Deacon, beaten in Latin disputation, tries to label Erasmus as demonically possessed. Holberg flicks between perspectives, ridiculing the

Polemics come up fresh from the 18th century in a revival of Holberg's *Erasmus Montanus*

vainglorious student, making him a mobbed missionary of the Enlightenment, or suggesting a devilish amorality in his educated arguments.

Greenwich Studio Theatre is a commendable fringe company, translating and staging little-known classics on a small budget. The downside is that the cast is not top-notch. Andrew Muir's Erasmus has the condescending preciousness of the scholar, but is too cold. There is no struggle in him when his sweetheart

urges him to sacrifice his school of thought. The set, with sawdust, timbers and the odd cartwheel, has a DIY "olde worlde" look. Find a designer.

Julian Forsyth's adaptation wisely replaces the Deacon's desperate out-takes of now-obscure grammar-book Latin with common phrases: *dulce et decorum* et al. Elsewhere, however, the contrasting speeches of pedant and peasant might be more idiomatically colourful. His joint direction with Margarete Forsyth could also be sharper. Ultimately, while the Earth may not be flat, one cannot say the same of the production. Still, this play is a discovery.

KATE BASSETT

Evening Standard

1st February 1996

IT may be that this 18th century comedy from the "Danish Molière" Ludvig Holberg has lost something in translation, but I doubt it.

Time has not dimmed its satirical edge either: Holberg's twin targets of intellectual arrogance and foolish superstition are still firmly with us, 250 years on.

It's more a matter of style: such humour as can be had at the expense of these traits is overextended, even in Julian and Margarete Forsyth's brisk, abbreviated production for the Greenwich Studio Theatre. Today, Erasmus Montanus looks rather slender.

The story is simple. After three years of university education in Copenhagen, young Rasmus Berg returns to his farming community with a new, Latinised name and an elevated sense of his own cleverness. He's so skilled at meaningless metaphysical disputation (in Latin, yet) that he can now suppose himself into a suppository. The simple, rural folk back home don't take kindly to this. They react even less well to Erasmus's insistence that the world is round, not flat.

Alongside this savage but

Erasmus Montanus

BAC Studio 1

NICK CURTIS

coarse lampoon of academic elitism and rural idiocy, Holberg makes a more interesting point about personal integrity. Unwilling to deny his beliefs for the sake of his fiancée or his mother, Erasmus is finally forced to recant by that great persuader, fear. Even this third theme, though, fails to stop Erasmus Montanus from looking like a three-joke play painted in broad, repetitive strokes.

This revived production by husband-and-wife team Julian and Margarete Forsyth is involving enough to make you regret that the Greenwich Studio Theatre has been turfed out of its south London pub home. Julian adds a prologue, condenses the action and modernises Holberg's historical argot. He even makes the Latin disputes between callow Erasmus and the craven local Deacon amusing to modern ears, which is no mean feat. Margarete's detailed, dirty

barnyard set is impressive. Between them, these two directors end the production with a nice, optimistic flourish.

Still, Erasmus Montanus replays its three basic gags ad nauseam. Andrew Muir as Erasmus has the right air of etiolated, ascetic disdain, but there's rather too much broad, yokelish vocalising among the rural folk. Catherine Harvey and Tony Kirwood turn in

nice cameos as Erasmus's betrothed and the dodgy Deacon. But good casting and some nice work on lines and scenes do not a successful production make. You can't help feeling that the considerable talent and effort lavished on this production might have been better spent on a more substantial play.

BAC (BATTERSEA ARTS CENTRE)

Sparkling adaptation

THERE may be those who doubt that a social comedy from the 1720s would still bubble with exuberant zest in the 1990s, but *Erasmus Montanus*, by Ludvig Holberg, would prove them comprehensively wrong.

The Greenwich Studio Theatre production of the Danish playwright's masterpiece, running at BAC until February 18th, presents a sparkling adaptation of this sharply funny play.

It tells the story of farmer's son Rasmus Berg who leaves the village in which he has lived all his life to study for three years at university in Copenhagen. Afterwards, he is so utterly changed that he is unable to tolerate the people he has grown up with.

The opening scenes of the play - which is set in the farm where he and his family live - show the carefree, pre-university Rasmus enjoying life with fiancée Lisbeth, family and friends.

Three years later, it is all rather different. A strutting, aloof character has returned to the village, speaking - as Kenneth Williams's affectation-loathing father might have put it - with a plum in his mouth, insisting to the horror of all around him that the earth is not flat and swiftly antagonising the old companions who have suddenly become humble to him.

The first hint that Rasmus has gained ideas above his station comes with the pretension-laden insistence that everyone calls him Erasmus Montanus, reflecting his new obsession with Latin.

His slavish devotion to arguing futile points to prove his scholarliness quickly becomes tiresome, and both his shocked family and the villagers come down firmly on the side of the Deacon (Tony Kirkwood) when the former scholar is wheeled out to trade intellectual punches with the cocksure young student.

This is an inspired moment; the Deacon may have forgotten all the Latin he ever studied, but there is no way he is going to let Erasmus know that. Radiating moth-eaten authority, he lets rip with a fine array of cod Latin phrases, quoting Caesar, Horace and Juvenal as the smirking scholar fires weighty questions at him.

The high-flown Mr Montanus can't last like this, thankfully, and Andrew Muir's high-quality portrayal serves to engender a feeling of delight at his eventual humbling. He is humiliated as realisation dawns that his education has in fact left him foolish; a miserable pedant who has lost touch with the things that should be truly important to him.

The direction and lighting, like the acting, is outstanding, and everybody involved deserves the utmost credit for this warm and witty evening. Make sure you see it.

Chris Borg