

Edinburgh Festival Fringe – Mata Hari and 8 Bullets



David Rhymer questioned a book written about convicted World War 1 spy Mata Hari by a leading British policeman and began probing the life of the mother of modern burlesque.

He believes that Ms Hari – who was executed by firing squad in France in 1917 – was “a scapegoat for the ineptitude of the war”.

And that inspired him to create a stage show which recently premiered off Broadway to rave reviews and comes to the AMC @ St Bride’s on the Edinburgh Festival Fringe for an extended run from 6 August 2014.

Rhymer, a multi award-winning writer and composer, said: “My first introduction to Mata Hari was a rather lurid and frankly nasty book written by Major Thomas Coulson called Mata Hari: Courtesan and Spy.

“Coulson was head of Scotland Yard at the time of her arrest. In his mind there was no doubt about her guilt as a spy.

“There was something about his account that rang false. He appeared to me to have been infected with a vicious misogyny toward the so called new woman.

“Mata Hari was an independent and powerful personality. She was the mother of modern burlesque, the first woman to take her clothes off in polite society.

“She danced nude in the Salons of the Aristocracy and what came across in his book was that he clearly disapproved of her on moral grounds and so, in his mind, if she was a girl of so-called loose morals then she must certainly also be a spy.

“I started doing research on her and discovered that her trail for espionage was a real sham, more like a lynching.

“It appears she was set up to be a scapegoat for the ineptitude of the war. Something was going terribly wrong at the front. Thousands of soldiers were being slaughtered daily. Someone had to be responsible. So let’s blame the burlesque dancer.”

David said that the show began as a song cycle performed in Montreal in the mid 1980’s followed by a brief flirtation as a rock opera.

In 1997 some of the songs were retooled into an award-winning dance musical produced by the internationally-acclaimed One Yellow Rabbit Performance Theatre. But this material (like the woman herself) was restless and has refused to stay put.

Two years ago he was invited by the Calgary International Theatre Festival to do a retrospective of his 30-year career in music/theatre.

He was joined on stage by singer Onalea Gilbertson. He added: “The evening featured not only a number of songs from my theatre repertoire but also a suite I had prepared from my Mata Hari material.

“The Mata Hari suite proved to be the musical highlight of the evening and inspired me develop this suite further as a one-woman tour de force. I submitted a proposal to New York Musical Theatre Festival, the largest annual musical theatre event in America.

Mata Hari in 8 Bullets premiered at the New York Musical Theatre Festival to standing ovations and tremendous critical response earning for Onalea the coveted 2013 NYMF Outstanding Individual Performance Award.”

So, what makes Mata Hari different from traditional musicals?

David said: "Mata Hari in 8 Bullets straddles the grey zone between recital and theatre. Not quite a concert and yet not what you might expect from a musical. It is cutting edge performance theatre.

"It is divided into eight movements. Each movement begins with her facing the onrush of an executioners bullet.

"Rather than a straight narrative of her life, what emerges is an imagistic, impressionistic musical suite unfolding through a series of emotive moments- sonic photographs if you will- that transport us back to a paranoid war crazed time when society, incapable of recognizing its own misogyny and sadism, projected its darkest impulses onto a woman who had come to symbolize, not only the decadence of the Fin de siècle, but something far more dangerous, an emancipated woman."

Mata Hari in 8 bullets. [Tickets here.](#)

