

Fringe 2024: Polishing Shakespeare

Janet is a writer with student debts. Miss Branch directs a theatre that's struggling for funds.

Enter Grant, e-commerce billionaire and the friendly face of capitalism. Or is he?

Grant wants the plays of Shakespeare 'translated' into modern English. And Janet is his translator of choice.

In **Brian Dykstra's** clever play *Polishing Shakespeare*, directed by Margaret Perry, we are asked to consider the thorny issue of arts funding. As traditional sources of money – the government, charitable foundations, trust funds – dry up, how far should organisations compromise their principles to shore up their battered bank accounts? As pressure grows to avoid offers from not only (eg) fossil fuel behemoths but any company with links to them, what are theatres, opera houses, concert halls, festivals, galleries and arts centres to do? And even if a potential funder doesn't have obvious connections to questionable sources, what, exactly, is their agenda? Just what return are they expecting on their investment?

To illustrate this problem, three characters engage in a battle of wits and wills. Grant is determined to have his way (but why?), Miss Branch is determined to save her theatre, and Janet wants to hang on to her artistic integrity...but there's still the small matter of those student debts.

Written entirely in iambic pentameter, *Polishing Shakespeare* is hugely entertaining, with some visual jokes and a great

many more hidden in the text (just like Shakespeare's originals in fact.) All three actors inhabit their parts; **Kate Siahann-Rigg's** Janet is smart and feisty, **Kate Levy's** Miss Branch conflicted and desperate, and Brian Dykstra's fabulously villainous Grant a sexist slimeball who's so used to getting his own way that he simply cannot believe anyone can stop him. (Sound familiar?) These actors ping pong words about with an expertise that only the truly adept can pull off; they manage to act – and act well – while remembering complicated verse and long soliloquies. And yes, I know Shakespearean actors do this all the time, but they're not often working in a portacabin in George Street.

Grant says his argument is this: Shakespeare's language is HARD, no-one understands it. Audiences get frustrated and leave, never to return. Isn't everyone entitled to be entertained? Going to the theatre shouldn't feel like work.

Janet counters this by blaming directors, especially those who put the plays into bizarre modern settings and corrupt the plots to 'make them relevant.' It's the words, the poetry, she says, that count,

*'Let's do **the play!**'*

Grant and Miss Branch appear at first to be in cahoots. They exchange knowing looks, they patronise Janet, they tell her they're not criticising Shakespeare, oh no – it's the audiences who are stupid! And they somehow work their argument round to conclude that it's only fair to Shakespeare himself to create an 'accessible' version of his works. After all, nobody thinks it's wrong to translate Moliere or Chekhov, do they?

'The writer doesn't rate if no one in the audience relates!'

But Janet is suspicious. Why is Miss Branch so in favour of

taking Grant's money? Does she really think he'll fund more than a couple of her highbrow productions, or the plays by new writers that she wants to support, before he turns her programme into a string of anodyne Broadway musicals?

Grant offers Janet more and more money to do as he asks,

'That's the TRUMP card...I will pay to get what I want.'

(Sound familiar now?)

As the penny finally drops for poor Miss Branch, Janet considers whether selling out just this once will leave an indelible stain on her career. After a few choice comments about the widespread tick-box casting of a person of colour and/or a woman to 'create balance' aka secure funding, she eventually comes up with something that might just beat Grant at his own game – but will it work? As the play reaches its climax, Grant shows his true colours, the real motivation behind his so-called philanthropy,

'There's danger in poetry'

Miss Branch rediscovers her bottle, Janet hoists Grant by his own petard, and all's well that ends well. Or is it? Like a certain politician of orange hue, we can't help but fear that there'll be a Part Two to Grant's story. But as another woman of colour charms a nation on the other side of the Atlantic, so we feel that Janet will welcome further debate with her nemesis. In fact she'll enjoy it. For as Miss Branch concludes,

'The most powerful weapon in the arsenal (is) WORDS.'

Polishing Shakespeare is a fast-paced, skilful piece of theatre. Dykstra and Perry's writing is as sharp as a knife; their wordplays are brilliant (it was a touch of genius to

call Grant Grant, and what a lot of hilarious tongue twisters that little word provides.) To enjoy the very funny jokes I do think some familiarity with Shakespeare's style is essential, though you certainly don't need to know any particular work in depth. Towards the very end of the play, I did feel that points were perhaps made just a little too heavy handedly, but for the most part *Polishing Shakespeare* is an exhilarating, entertaining rollercoaster of a ride through a very topical and challenging issue.

And here's the final twist. It's based on a true story.

Polishing Shakespeare is a Twilight Theatre Company production. It is at Venue 20, Assembly Rooms (Front Room) at 15.30 every day until 25th August. Please note that there is **no** performance on Monday 19th August. Tickets [here](#).

Twilight Theatre Company is based in New York. It is a non-profit, no-overhead operation and all money raised goes into the work itself. It is also working with UK artists to bring their work to the United States.