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Billy Budd Sailor

Adapted by Martin Lewton from the novel by Herman Melville

Theatre North

Tara Arts Theatre

31 October–2 November 2012

As staged by director Andrew McKinnon, this idiosyncratic storytelling of Melville's tale of topman Budd, "the Handsome Sailor", is performed by Martin Lewton, naked and sitting in a bath.

When presented last year during the 2011 Brighton Fringe Festival, it was performed in the bathroom of a private house with an audience of half a dozen. Here it is a bath set in the centre of the small studio theatre with the audience in its usual seating, close but not quite so intimate, which perhaps changes the dynamic.

The bath, water already run, is surrounded by a litter of plastic ducks and children's toys. Music is playing that sometimes suggests the hooting of ships horns and the surges of the sea.

When Lawson appears, a towel wrapped around his waist, he begins to clear away the litter leaving out a Lego sailing ship that he puts aside (he will use it later) and for a while a plastic whale lies solitary on the bath mat, a reminder of that other well-known Melville saga. Candles are placed at the corners of the bath and lit, a toilet bag set out, a transistor radio switched on, a glass of wine is poured, the towel shed and Lawson lowers himself gingerly into the water.

Settled, he turns off the radio, thinks a moment and then begins to talk us, as Melville does, about the days before steamships when mariners would be seen on shore clustered around some "superior figure of their own class"—the "Handsome Sailor". He launches into Melville's tale of the innocent who stammered under stress, who, press-ganged into the Navy, serves under Captain Vere. He tells of Claggart, the Master at Arms, who falsely accuses him of conspiracy to mutiny and the tragedy that then ensues.

It is an intense and forceful telling. There are long pauses as the teller shaves himself, not just his beard but his scalp and then his scrotum. Music fits comfortably in these pauses, time for rumination over what has been said so far, to make one's own interpretation of the forces driving this story which the adaptation pares down to its essentials.

The nakedness and the razor emphasise this getting down to essentials and also seem to be a kind of ritual. When Lewton puts on a cock ring and unfolds a soft-core magazine of gay pinups from his wash bag, one senses what this preparation may be for, but he goes on with the story.

Fixing a metal studded leather collar around his neck as he proceeds with its later stages symbolically parallels the story. Does the teller identify with Billy's innocence, Taggart's strange desire to undo him or with the Captain's unknown communication, shut in his cabin with the prisoner? His behaviour is as ambiguous as Melville's intentions.

Like others before it this presentation suggests a homoerotic interpretation for the story. In a real bathroom this may have felt like an unburdening, a confiding; given a formal theatrical context it becomes more like a declaration—but of what? The private fears of an older, then-illegal generation of homosexuals, being arraigned by others for actions never committed? Or is the nakedness and self-exposure simply a metaphor for Billy's innocence and vulnerability?

The telling is beautifully done and perhaps there is no absolution intention in the manner of its delivery. It is enough that it makes the audience think about all sorts of possible reasons concerned with the way in which the world treats not just gay men but any outsider or person whose innocence or whose personal qualities of body or nature make them feel inadequate or awaken strong feelings they cannot handle.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)