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Blood Privilege

Don Fried

Second Skin Theatre

White Rabbit Theatre

27 March–14 April 2013

This is a play about the Countess Elizabeth Bathory, the Transylvanian aristocrat who legend says bathed in the blood of virgins as a way of preserving her beauty. While not rejecting that accusation, it attempts to paint a more complex picture of a woman who has been called “The Blood Countess”.

I don't know how closely it sticks to known historical fact and surviving documentary evidence and how much is the writer's invention, but Don Fried gives us a clever and intelligent woman, an efficient operator and a prototype feminist battling against male and royal control.

He begins and ends with the aged countess still applying unguents to preserve her beauty but starts his story proper with the teenage Elizabeth greeting the cousin whom from childhood she planned to marry. Her young passion and plans are thwarted by royal intervention from King Mathias, future Holy Roman Emperor. Here there is a little tinkering with history in that her forced marriage at fourteen years old to Ferenc Nadasny actually took place before Matthias was king.

This mixture of legend and politics is designed as a piece of theatre rather than historical reportage. A red-draped set with a throne that looks made of cast concrete flanked with full-length mirrors by Ana Ines Jabares and costumes by Sarah Cogan that suggest the King and his courtiers may have joined Hell's Angels, with the women in Edwardian velvets reflecting character rather than the end of the sixteenth century and there is an air of Dungeons and Dragons about the production.

Following his treatment of Edgar Allan Poe's tales and *Quills*, it is clear director Andy McQuade has a taste for the macabre but there is more to this than sadism, mental and physical, lesbian eroticism and hints of things much more perverted. This is a picture of the way someone can be schooled into transgression, of how the law can be followed and yet manipulated, and how power can be concentrated in an elite, none of which has been limited to sixteenth-century Transylvania.

Mia Zara's Countess Elizabeth goes from oestrogen-driven girl to manipulative woman, when she is on stage things revolve around her. She may give medical attention to her peasants, letting blood being one of her skills, but her privileged status could not be better illustrated than in a scene where she stands, almost motionless, while her maids put rings on her upheld fingers, place a necklace round her neck and slip shoes on her feet.

There is a strong performance from Janet Horn as Szilva, Elizabeth's accomplice and lover, and an elegantly-spoken King Mathias from Ross Mullan, mellifluously sardonic. Ash Merat as Elizabeth's Bathory cousin Cuyorgy is less aristocratic in voice, though more conventionally costumed, but his character is a hard-headed pragmatist. As Nadasdy, bare-chested under a pelt jerkin, Dan Shelton

is even more common, but fastidiously camp when he doubles as Elizabeth's cosmetician-doctor. There is a layer of ironic humour that lies beneath much of McQuade's production and Fried's writing.

As lawyer Lorend Sigray, George Collie has problems in coping with his initial appearance as a rather stupid suitor but gains command in his official capacity, while Eloise Black has her moment as one of Elizabeth's women when it is revealed that she has been forced to betray her.

Fried does not really attempt to tackle why Elizabeth murdered so many women, if indeed she did. In his presentation of her trial perhaps he intends to leave the question open, but I wanted to know much more than he is able to tell us. That doesn't stop this from being an intriguing evening of somewhat self-indulgent theatricality.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)