

# British Theatre Guide

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## I Killed Rasputin

Richard Herring

Avalon Promotions Ltd

Assembly George Square Theatre

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Prolific writer-comedian Richard Herring has penned a fascinating, serious cum tongue-in-cheek take on the killing of charlatan mystic Rasputin by a conspiracy of aristocrats in prince Yusupov's palace in St Petersburg as imperial Russia is sliding down the pan towards revolution.

A comical-historical-tragical farce, a sketch in the *Blackadder* vein, a bit of Spike Milligan absurdism and pithy insight—*I Killed Rasputin* held my undivided attention throughout its pacy eighty minutes, and tickled my fancy.

As did Nichola McAuliffe's cross between Robert Helpmann and Quentin Crisp, eccentric Yusupov, Eileen Nicholas playing it beautifully straight ('it is important to keep one's muff in good condition') as his wife princess Irina, Justin Edwards's burly Rasputin, Joseph Chance's American Doubting Thomas journalist EM Halliday and servants Stephen Leask and Joanna Griffin more bonkers than their masters. Oh, and we mustn't forget the 'savage' puppet dog.

Funny and clever—what more do you want? The truth? Ah, well, that's another story. As my dear ma, raised in the former Soviet Union, always says, "if it weren't all lies it would be the truth."

And what is the truth about the killing of Rasputin? A legend has grown of his invincibility, his hypnotic powers, his mystical hold on the Russian royal family, his priapism and lechery.

What really happened in prince Yusupov's palace in December 1916? Who really did away with Rasputin? Was it effete Yusupov, as he claims and has written in several tomes? Was it his Oxford chum Oswald Rayner? Was it good shot Grand Duke Dmitry?

In 1967, Halliday ('Vietnam will be over in a week or two') interviews 80-year-old Felix Yusupov, formerly the richest man in all of Russia—richer than the Romanovs, 'assassin' of the 'Mad Monk'—in the hope of filling in a story pitted with more holes than a colander.

Two different cultures meet, and this is where many of the irresistible jokes lie: 'we were living the American dream', says impish Yusupov when questioned about his obscene wealth.

How can you trust an oddball bisexual Russian, who is plastered in make-up and likes to dress in women's clothes? Or says he used to dress as a Gorky tramp to see what life was like for the down and outs. How do you check out oral history?

Halliday has come prepared, and Herring has done his homework—you'll learn some interesting facts along the way. Stalin and Hitler tried to tempt Yusupov into their spheres (lots of dumb show

and prancing behind gauze panels).

Haunted by Grishka Rasputin ("why won't you die" bookends the play), Yusupov is sticking to his story, but what if there is more than meets the eye? Was the prince under Grishka's sexual spell, as were the tsarina and the ladies of the royal court? Was he the bait? After all, Edward VII once gave him the once over.

A film is to open in Cannes—this is true—*I Killed Rasputin (J'ai tué Raspoutine)*, a French-Italian film directed by Robert Hossein, script approved by Yusupov himself, did open the 1967 Cannes Film Festival.

But, a 1932 MGM film, *Rasputin and The Empress*, starring the three Barrymore siblings, prompted a historical lawsuit by Felix and Irina Yusupov for defamation, and the now familiar disclaimer "Any similarity to persons dead or living is entirely coincidental" is entirely due to their successful challenge. Not many people know that.

Will Yusupov in his dotage give up the secret or take it to his grave? There are hints and winks and nudges, but we're none the wiser. "I don't know of an instant in modern history where so many reputable as well as disreputable historians have solemnly repeated such a patently improbable story as if it were gospel" (EM Halliday).

It is always in these interstices that comedy germinates and grows, and Herring can't resist them, filling them with quick throwaway lines—without detracting from the essential story.

And if you're laughing you're listening, and remembering. A bit of wisecracking humour sure does help the history lesson go down—the end of Rasputin and the end of the three-hundred-year Romanov dynasty.

Production values are high for a fringe show—the acting is deadpan good, Stephanie Williams's set design is elegant and neat with several doors for quick costume change exits, some of the cast multi-tasking, and Hannah Banister directs at a jaunty tempo.

And Lermontov's Romantic poem *Alone I Go Out On The Road* set to guitar music establishes the nostalgic tone. Ah, that guitar that Yusupov brought all the way from Russia, the same guitar that charmed Rasputin. Hmm.

**Reviewer:** [Vera Liber](#)