

# British Theatre Guide

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## The Spanish Tragedy

Thomas Kyd, adapted by Adrian Brown  
Planet Theatre Productions Ltd  
Rose Theatre, Bankside  
(2010)

Over 400 years have passed since *The Spanish Tragedy* was first performed at the Rose Theatre and rumour has it that a young William Shakespeare himself was a member of the cast. Back in Elizabethan England, however, Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* did exactly what it said on the tin - it was a tragedy set in Spain. Fast forward to 2010 and Planet Theatre's production appears to have reinterpreted the title somewhat and although the action still takes place in Spain, this production can hardly be described as a dramatic tragedy.

When a narrative, as Kyd's does, includes plotting, revenge and multiple deaths, the dictionary definition of tragedy as 'any dramatic or literary composition dealing with serious or sombre themes and ending with disaster' fits the play perfectly. Why then, in this production, must *The Spanish Tragedy* be reduced to parody, as it becomes a camp romp in which tragedy gives way to overblown Victorian melodrama?

In any production the overall concept is almost always decided by the director. Why then did Adrian Brown feel the need to construct over-the-top caricatures and dispense with the dramatic aspects of the plot completely? Knock-about comedy has its time and place, but not during Horatio's death. For this is where the problem ultimately lies: when comedy abounds, we feel no sorrow for the characters.

The cast act their outlandish characters well, with superb diction and the production flows at a steady pace. Nic Choulman turns Balthazar into a wimpish fop, Raymond Daniel-Davies's King of Spain is merrier than Old King Cole himself and Clive Greenwood's henchman to Lorenzo, Pedringano, is a right old cockney geezer straight out of EastEnders.

Shakespeare is said to have been heavily influenced by *The Spanish Tragedy* and in this streamlined production this becomes even more apparent. In fact, *Hamlet* and *The Spanish Tragedy* are so alike that Kyd's play is often accredited as the ur-*Hamlet*, with many of Shakespeare's other works also appearing to have their roots in the piece.

Just like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Kyd's play concludes not with *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, but the tragic tale of Solimon and Perseda. Brown makes this even cornier than Nick Bottom's Pyramus and, due to the slapstick and tomfoolery, the murderous and suicidal stabbings appear just as ludicrous as Pyramus' final words: 'Now die, die, die, die, die.' The most dramatic and harrowing part of the play is reduced to mere pantomime.

The Rose does not allow for large sets due to its tiny performance area, but this focuses the attention on the actors and reminds us that, to make theatre, all that is needed is an actor and an

audience. It is a shame then, that a few times during the performance almost entire scenes are invisible to audience members not seated in the front row as the action takes place on the ground.

Becky Gunstone's costumes gloriously adorn the actors, although the masked Spanish courtiers' capes would make Zorro, let alone Batman envious. Gunstone also designed the minimal set comprising of a tree and throne in the first act with the addition of a wheelable proscenium arch complete with curtain in the second. Perhaps the proscenium is a little too superfluous, but then a curtain is mentioned in the text. Any more scenery would clutter the already tiny acting area and in such a small performance space any production must be stripped back to its bare bones. Of course one way around this is to utilise technology, but the projection used is not needed and does not contribute anything to the piece; the audience can easily differentiate between scenes without needing the prompt of a royal crest or moon to help them.

It is wonderful that Kyd's play has had another outing, but unfortunately Planet Theatre's *Spanish Tragedy* is more Kyd 4 Kidz than revenge tragedy.

*Playing until 26th September 2010*

**Reviewer:** [Simon Sladen](#)