

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Moot Virginity of Catherine of Aragon

Conor Mitchell

The Belfast Ensemble

Sherman Theatre, Cardiff

24–28 January 2017

I suspect that I wasn't the only audience-member who did a little research prior to attending this production, based on the life of King Henry VIII's first and most long-standing wife (Julie Wheeler's *History In An Hour* guide being especially helpful). *The Moot Virginity of Catherine of Aragon*, by Conor Mitchell, one of the Sherman's associate artists, is a fascinatingly idiosyncratic take on the story.

The programme notes describe the piece in terms of a song cycle, although with the words spoken rather than sung. What we effectively get is a fancifully autobiographical poetic recitation with prominent musical accompaniment and bold experimental flourishes (we are warned about the pig's head prior to entry).

This is the tale of a Spanish princess who, in an attempt to unite two great kingdoms, is married, in mid-adolescence, to an English prince—the even younger Arthur. When he dies five months later, apparently of natural causes (a death which, quite literally, changes the course of history), she is married to his younger brother, Henry, the match approved by the Church and royal officials because it is determined that the first marriage was not consummated (although the unfortunate Arthur claimed, in colourful terms, that it had been).

This marriage lasts for several years, producing a number of children, only one of whom survives past early childhood. Eventually, King Henry casts Catholic Catherine aside in favour of a younger model, Anne Boleyn (whom Catherine terms a “Lutheran slut”), an act whose consequences continue to be felt worldwide.

The piece is presented in-the-round, with the audience mostly denied chairs (for no good reason, unless we're meant to share in the abandoned Queen's discomfiture). Abigail McGibbon (last seen here as Elsa Lanchester in *Mr and Mrs Laughton*) plays Catherine in a white trouser-suit, on a low platform, illuminated by multiple spotlights (lighting design by Simon Bird).

There are a few props: a golden goblet, representing the regal lifestyle to which she was accustomed from birth; a 1970s-style telephone via which unwelcome news arrives; a microphone which is lowered from the ceiling. We are in an abstract, timeless space.

Mitchell's elliptical text takes us from Catherine's magical childhood in Spain to a bitter adulthood, largely passed in unloved Ludlow, shifting back and forth in time, often drifting into reverie.

McGibbon is compelling as a Catherine who, for the most part, maintains her queenly equilibrium, only giving way to fury and despair at certain crucial moments. The retention of her Northern Irish accent is a reminder of how the repercussions of her story echo down the ages.

Mitchell, as well as writing and directing, is also responsible for the sparse but powerful score, which is delivered onstage with the help of a small ensemble, and is firmly in the contemporary (rather than contemporaneous) classical mould. Some recorded sound is also played in, which is a little distracting; at least until the closing moments, when it seems to hint at the Queen's growing interest in the religion of her Moorish compatriots.

While the production's avant-garde elements are well executed, one suspects that *The Moot Virginity...* would have been equally intriguing if presented "straight", the story hardly needing embellishment, such is its inherent drama and import.

This is an accomplished fifty-minute insight into an unhappy and accidentally momentous life. Its very cleverness, however, tends to obscure any broader points which might be being made about the intersection of the personal and the political.

Reviewer: [Othniel Smith](#)