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To Wit: To Woo - Lessons in Love from William Shakespeare

Linked extracts from Shakespeare, devised and directed by Peter Lathan
Jazz Cafe, Newcastle
(2011)

Shakespeare's language is like crack cocaine to me, so I had to see *To Wit: To Woo*. It turned out to be a truly enjoyable romp through some classic Shakespeare scenes performed with energy, comedy and serious commitment. I'd only seen it publicised on Facebook so didn't know who was involved apart from Will-i-am himself, Peter Lathan of KG Productions, director and deviser, and Jessica Johnson of Pink Lane's spoken word and music nights, here wearing her acting cap. Those two names were more than enough to give me confidence that the Bard would emerge unscathed.

The reality passed all expectation, as I realised it would when I saw that reliably fab performers Christina Dawson, Neil Armstrong, Jill Dellow and Alex Kinsey were in the 'Loyal Shakespeare Company', and all on cracking, versatile form too. I hadn't seen Rachel Teate and Steven Stobbs act before, nor the hyperactive Robbie Lee Hurst, but they ably completed a terrific line-up.

The venue, the upstairs Jazz Cafe, has more dark oak beams in one small bar than all of Stratford, and its small central stage area made it a suitably authentic setting. The intimate atmosphere was further established by large roses (real) on each table, candles, and torn-out copies of the Sonnets stuck all over the place. The authenticity was only enhanced by the sound of Saturday neet doon the Toon from outside, as fights, raucous singing, and drunken revelry accompanied the play as they surely did in Will's time. Ditto, the casual sauntering across the stage of an audience member returning from bar or bog, while the cast were in full flow, none of which distractions phased them one bit.

The extracts were well chosen, scenes illustrating differing slants on romantic relationships, linked by either a sonnet, or some modern byplay between members of the cast, who sometimes played it 'straight' and sometimes added extra layers by being actors acting Shakespeare.

In all, the cast took on eighteen roles and fully stretched their acting muscles. They were admirably unterrified by Shakespeare's massive reputation but interpreted his work with verve and zest, in a way which made him real and accessible yet allowed the rich complexity of his peerless language to come through.

The heartbreaking optimism of the very young Romeo and Juliet, the sparring of Shrew and would-be Tamer, Hamlet's sudden verbal savaging of a bewildered Ophelia, the cross-dressed confusion of *Twelfth Night*, and the sleazy corruption and hypocrisy of *Measure for Measure* seamlessly paraded before us.

The final scene, the 'rude mechanicals' of *Midsummer Night's Dream* attempting *Pyramus and Thisbe*, ended the night in comedy mayhem which fully got across how much Shakespeare must have relished writing and mocking the alliterative bombast he must have heard so much at the

time. Yet the nervousness, good intentions, unfounded egotism and sheer effort of the various hapless blue collar thespians came over too.

Credit to all concerned, including sultry-voiced singer Grace Ellen, for giving us a Shakespeare anthology with such aplomb. Just a two night run at Jazz Cafe, but I hear there are some more lined up at arts centres and the like. This production deserves to be picked up by many more venues, it's both 'small' in the best indie way and also potentially commercially successful in these difficult times.

And who knew the Bard would sound so good in Geordie?

Reviewer: [Valerie Laws](#)