

The New York International Fringe Festival: Part 4



The cast of *Veritas*

Veritas tells the gripping story of the 1920s gay witch hunt at Harvard University.

The show provided lively social commentary by placing modernity under the microscope lens, directed with an eye for the parallels between the past and our present condition.

Veritas

by Stan Richardson, directed by Ryan J. Davis

HERE Mainstage

Veritas, made headlines earlier in the week for being the first show at this year's Fringe to sell out its entire run prior to the commencement of performances. Focusing on the gay witch hunt at Harvard during the 1920s (when terms of endearment like "my sweet" and "dearie" were all the rage with the queers on campus), the play mostly lives up to its hype despite a rather conventional script from playwright Stan Richardson.

The play begins with the death of Cyril, a homosexual student at Harvard whose untimely death provides the evening's inciting incident. After Cyril's brother Lester finds some of his classmates' rather explicit letters to his younger brother, he confronts the University, demanding an inquisition be held into the presence of homosexuality at Harvard.

Richardson economically introduces us to the young Harvard men involved in the witch hunt in question; we find out more about them through a series of brisk, funny scenes in which we watch them relate in their natural habitat. They practice lines from Shakespeare and Aeschylus and hold soirées - racier, queerer versions of Parisian salons, full of bitchy talk and lurid behavior.

The mood soon darkens as Cyril's death is revealed to the young characters and the implications of Lester's accusations begin to sink in. A series of interrogations are staged with a high level of theatricality; as each student takes his turn speaking, the others - in unison - speak as the inquisitor. Their questions are mostly the same - about masturbation, homosexual relations, Freud, and Havelock Ellis. As each student testifies, the tangled web of shame grows more and more elaborate. As each student names subsequent names, the list of those implicated grows, culminating in the expulsion of many of those involved.

The central flaw of Richardson's concept is the lack of thematic development that occurs throughout. Though the story of these nine Harvard men is intriguing, it's unlikely that an audience's view of the situation at hand will be significantly altered over the course of the evening. The play is, in essence, a problem play in this regard, though the dialogue on hand is well-crafted and often entertaining.

Director Ryan J. Davis adds an invigorating visual flair to the proceedings. Particularly notable are the representation of the late Cyril as an empty suit, the presentation of his coffin-less funeral procession, and the encroachment of a band of young homosexuals, doused in pink light, upon Lester's personal space. On the whole, Davis turns an above-average script into a dynamic, well-paced theatrical evening.

The cast is uniformly strong as well, especially Morgan Karr as Ernest Roberts, Justin Blanchard as Stanley Gilkey (one of the students pronounced "innocent"), and Eric Nelson as Edward Say. There are no weak links within the group; they operate well as a Greek chorus of sorts and have a playful sense of

camaraderie as a unit.

Unfortunately for the production as a whole, the play's final section seems somewhat misconceived. The two Harvard men who were acquitted, Gilkey and Lombard, recount their lives' successes, having learned to "play the game" and tell "selective truths." I suppose this conclusion is meant to demonstrate how far we've come since the days when suicide and reckless behavior seemed the only methods of coping with one's homosexuality. Ultimately, however, we're left with the conclusion that these men's lives (and deaths) were not in vain, a noble assertion but one that sheds no new light on the situation at hand.

Perhaps if the acquitted, or even Cyril himself (we never learn that much about the man whose death sparked such controversy), were better-established presences within the text earlier on, a stronger connection would have been drawn between the guilty and the innocent, the tormented homosexuals and those willing to blend in. As it stands, however, *Veritas* remains a valiant, flawed effort, hinting at the search for truth inherent in its title without presenting audiences with a satisfyingly complex conclusion.