

Review: Gormenghast at UBC
Vancouver Sun

<http://www.canada.com/vancouvernews/news/arts/story.html?id=f9e09fa0-114b-49fa-b032-c7485c93e1f0>

Gormenghast is a castle so vast that it boggles the mind. Everything about this edifice, from its infinity of corridors and turrets to the endless array of bizarre people who inhabit it, is fodder for the imagination of fantasy fans drawn to the Mervyn Peake trilogy.

By Vancouver Sun
Peter Birnie

GORMENGHAST

In the Frederic Wood Theatre at UBC, to Sept. 27
Tickets \$10 to \$20, call 604-822-2678

Gormenghast is a castle so vast that it boggles the mind. Everything about this edifice, from its infinity of corridors and turrets to the endless array of bizarre people who inhabit it, is fodder for the imagination of fantasy fans drawn to the Mervyn Peake trilogy.

Gormenghast is a castle so vast that it boggles the mind. Everything about this edifice, from its infinity of corridors and turrets to the endless array of bizarre people who inhabit it, is fodder for the imagination of fantasy fans drawn to the Mervyn Peake trilogy.

The first two books have been adapted for the stage, and Theatre at UBC opens its new season with an ambitious assault on the great gothic fortress.

On the 50th anniversary of the founding of the university's department of theatre (now the department of theatre and film) by Dorothy Somerset, it's a treat to see so ambitious a project given so satisfying a production.

Stephen Malloy directs his student cast in a 1995 adaptation by John Constable, who had shaped his play to suit the distinct style of a U.K. ensemble led by David Glass.

Heavy on mime and movement, making its dark mood work with lighting effects, licks of music and the smallest of stage embellishments,

Constable's version of Gormenghast perfectly suits a playwright who is also a South London shaman and mystic.

It's also a great forum for young actors who can test broad characterizations and precise physical actions. Malloy's ensemble is magnificent in this regard, ably attempting the boldest of moves and often creating stage magic as a result.

One such moment occurs when the play's antagonist, a ruthlessly ambitious young escapee from the castle's kitchens, murders the royal family's master of rituals. As Steerpike (Kevin Stark) takes a stab at dispatching Barquentine (Colin Ormiston), we're treated to a delightfully dark montage of mayhem where death might come from fire or falling or drowning in the moat.

Ronald Fedoruk's scenography calls on every trick in the book.

The stage is riddled with grilles where smoke might billow up or a body plunge down, the revolve turns to reveal a crumbling terrace atop Gormenghast, and a slice of wall or wash of greenery goes by to convey the castle's endless spaces.

His lighting is even more fun, with long corridors created this way and that, broken by brief blackouts to further convey the sense that this place goes on forever.

When movement slows to a ritualized crawl, or Flay the servant (Michael Neale) walks with the loud clicking of some strange device assisting his odd gait, the rich phantasmagoria of Peake's creation is amply conveyed.

Carmen Alatorre's costumes are equally clever, opulent and outlandish in their Goth excess.

The like-minded gloominess of Cristina Mihaela Istrate's original music is beautifully incorporated into Jason Ho's lush sound design; original songs by Patrick Pennefather are less successful as they offer a paucity of variation.

Kudos to Jeff Kaiser as both ancient Sepulchrave, 76th Earl of Groan, and his planning-to-be-prodigal son Titus; Kristine Jesudason as our hero's strange sister Fuschia; Maryanne Renzetti and Jocelyn Gauthier as their even weirder twin aunts Cora and Clarice, and especially Stark as Steerpike.

Here's a great villain for an actor to sink his teeth into, and Stark is sharp

in his biting performance.

Just like the books, Gormenghast is such a labyrinth that a single two-act play cannot possibly convey everything that occurs.

Constable's adaptation sacrifices some coherence and rather too much of Peake's decidedly dark humour in favour of a tone tending toward the myth-making of Tolkein - - a first act of 90 minutes needs to be trimmed of too many dramatic pauses slowing the action.

pbirnie@png.canwest.com

© (c) CanWest MediaWorks Publications Inc.