



Philip Shepherd, left, as Dr. Faustus and director Steven Rumbelow as Mephistopheles bring 17th-century tragedy to life. (GREG TJEPKEMA)

Pared-down Faustus extravagant, startling

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THERE has been plenty of evidence lately that the story of Faust endures: Two recent productions in Toronto have boiled down Christopher Marlowe's sprawling version into an essential encounter between man and devil, and successfully presented it as a tale for our times.

At this summer's Toronto Fringe Festival, the English Suitcase Theatre provided a brief, but lush three-character version with a female Mephistopheles. Now, British director Steven Rumbelow teams up with Toronto actor and director Philip Shepherd to offer a 75-minute version of the play that Rumbelow has been reviving on and off in Britain since 1970. Their hugely physical and often violent dramatization features Shepherd as a bold and raging Faustus and Rumbelow himself as a quietly comic Mephistopheles with a vaudevillian air.

In his program notes, Rumbelow defends his reduction of Marlowe's three-hour, 50 character play: He argues that the original version of *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* was actually a bastardization by producers who wanted to pack the show with colourful scenes and on-stage pyrotechnics evoking the horrors of hell. Marlowe's first draft would have been a briefer piece featuring only the two central characters.

Concentrating on the attraction between man and devil in this play written in the early 1600s, Marlowe was creating a surprisingly contemporary piece of psychology. Rumbelow

DR. FAUSTUS

Adapted and directed by Steven Rumbelow

Written by Christopher Marlowe

Starring Philip Shepherd, Steven Rumbelow

Rating: ★★★

low points out that Mephistopheles's name was probably drawn from the Greek, translating as "Faust's other self," the demon is within the man. It is a promising interpretation, but aside from pronouncing the name *Me-fausto-pheles*, Rumbelow's production does make that point directly to its audience.

What it does instead is bring the dense and difficult 17th-century poetry to life (throwing in some Byron and Goethe for good measure) in a show full of extravagant expressionism, gymnastic acting and startling images. When Faustus makes his pact with Mephistopheles, he reads it standing under a shower of water that soaks him to the skin; toward the end of the play, bored and sated by the riches and experiences Mephistopheles has provided, he summarizes his increasing recklessness when he balances on top of a ladder on one leg while shaving.

Juxtaposing this menacing energy against Rumbelow's casual delivery of Mephistopheles does dramatize the notion that hell is here and now. Rumbelow replaces visions of fabulous fire-breathing demons with a kind of psychological damnation that resonates strongly for a contemporary audience. "Where we are is hell and where hell is there must we forever be," he tells Faustus.

At Buddies in Bad Times until Oct. 5