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THEATER.

Dueling The Devil

'Dr. Faustus' Reveals The Darkness Of The Human Heart

July 23, 1995 | By Lawrence Bommer. Special to the Tribune.

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When [it](#) arrived at the Theatre Building 13 years ago, Steven Rumbelow's two-person play "Dr. Faustus" was already 13 years into what would turn out to be the longest running tour in British theater history. Constant as the Rolling Stones, the circuit has returned to Chicago for a month-long visit to the Ivanhoe Theatre.

The popularity of this "Faustus" may stem from its [success](#) at cleaning up a classic. Returning to the origins of Christopher Marlowe's 1593 masterpiece as a work for two actors, Triple Action Theatre's stripped-down, emotionally concentrated treatment teems with vivid stage pictures--dangling bulbs which Faustus will try desperately to relight, puppet-show shenanigans, a literal bloodbath and a clock that ticks down his doom.

Borrowing from Byron and Goethe to retell the cautionary story of a hungry scholar who forfeits his soul to the devil for a trivial pursuit of [knowledge](#) and power, British film and stage director Rumbelow emphasizes how the devil and his prey create each other through their too-human needs and inhuman denials.

Now in its third visit, this back-to-the-future "Dr. Faustus" offers more than just an Elizabethan literary monument. Over the last quarter century Rumbelow has tried to make this Renaissance mirror reflect our present.

The inaugural 1970 venture was simple--just Faust and Mephistopheles in hell. Since then, six casts have tackled the lean script, with Rumbelow changing the staging to suit their talents. (The current pair are Philip Shepherd and Alan Bridle.) But though "Dr. Faustus" has changed with the times and Rumbelow's artistic growth, he gives due credit: "Marlowe's insight into the human condition stands up to so many interpretations."

The 1995 edition reflects a national mood of personal predation that Rumbelow feels has intensified since the 1987 [stock market](#) crash. "In order to support or defend their families, people have become more aggressive in their daily lives. That sense of belligerence was probably equaled in Elizabethan England."

It's embodied in Faustus, one very greedy knowledge-seeker. "Marlowe's grasp of the avaricious academic who makes a damnable decision, right or wrong, and forces that opinion to happen is truer than ever," Rumbelow says. "Faustus' vanity defeats his knowledge and his better judgment."

Rumbelow's most potent revelation is that, far from being an infernal adversary, Mephistopheles is Faust's other self. "I was stunned to [learn](#) that Marlowe invented the name from the Greek for 'Faust's other self.' The two are twins of the same pole."

That discovery, plus Marlowe's intention to make this a two-man play (until his colleagues forced him to add the usual hellish trappings and burlesque comedy), persuaded Rumbelow to re-create that critical minimalism. "Throughout the play Marlowe underlines the human predicament, the traps we can fall into. Our production has lasted this long because it mirrors conflicts we face in daily life," including struggles between power and right, ambition and justice, truth and consequences.

Ironically, it's Mephistopheles who warns Faustus his [actions](#) will take him to hell, but Faustus calls hell "a fable." As we might say today, Faustus is deep in denial; he's cut himself off from any comfort in culture or in the past.

Nor is he alone, Rumbelow argues. "As a society we're a lot like Faustus. We skim the surface of knowledge, grabbing what we can, but we don't go deep enough to examine the consequences of decisions we make from all this insufficient evidence." As proof, Rumbelow points to the bombing of Hiroshima almost 50 years ago.

Of course, on stage this must be seen as much as felt. That's where Rumbelow has made the most changes, without altering the premise. Mephistopheles now appears as a cyberpunk-like cardinal; Faustus resembles a devastated stockbroker.

No longer exactly an hour long (a concept based on the line "Faustus, thou hast but an hour to live"), the performance lasts 90 minutes, including an intermission injected more for commercial purposes than artistic ones.

"Theaters need their bar business for a safety margin of [profit](#)," says Rumbelow.

Significantly, the director has brought Faustus back to a favorite town. "New York is a savage environment in which to generate theater. Toronto is dry ground with no big audiences except for blockbusters. L.A. doesn't exist theatrically. London is too expensive for most new work. The only English-speaking town that has truly vibrant theater in a hothouse environment is Chicago."

Besides trying out this newest "Faustus," Rumbelow hopes "to get my toes into the cultural waters of Chicago." He's already left a legacy: His stagings in the 1980s at Remains and other venues of such visual stunners as "Moby Dick," "Ulysses," and "Bridal Polonaise" (featuring now-famous actors like Aidan Quinn, Gary Cole, Brad Hall and William Petersen) are fondly recalled.

But, as always, it's one show at a time; Rumbelow doesn't want to overreach. Faustus is warning enough.

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