

## **Hyenas or the Monologue of Theodore-Frederic Benoit**

Reviewed By Dink O'Neal

### **"Hyenas or the Monologue of Theodore-Frederic Benoit "**

presented by Stages Theatre Center and Circle X Theatre Company at Stages Theatre Center, 1540 N. McCadden Pl., Hollywood. Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 3 & 7 p.m. Oct. 16-Dec. 4. \$18. (323) 465-1010.

Subtitled "Or the monologue of Theodore-Frederic Benoit," this engaging, sometimes rambling biographical piece by Christian Simeon is certainly that. First and foremost, it's brought to life single-handedly by actor Eric Szmanda. Second, director Paul Verdier's translation/adaptation gives great breadth and depth, melodramatically in some instances, to the horrors suffered by the titular 22-year-old Frenchman. He was convicted for murdering his male lover and his own mother. Now, Simeon's 90-minute piece plays out in Benoit's prison cell on the eve of his 1832 execution.

Szmanda stretches his theatrical wings far and wide. With an almost choreographic take on Benoit, he challenges us-nay, dares us to explain why we are seated before him. A paper-thin sanity, the result of his caged surroundings, offers glimpses of lucidity among a seemingly endless series of 90-degree turns in subject matter. The result of playwright Simeon's construct is somewhat sidetracking for his character and the audience. Not to say it isn't moving and beautiful to watch at times. It's just that Szmanda is left to rely occasionally on a facial grab bag of standard wide-eyed, slack-jawed lunacy while playing out what comes close to being a narrated piece of performance art.

His eventual recounting of the murderous details, peppered with angst-ridden denials of culpability, unleashes a torrent of resentment and anger, which rings as the truest moment of grounded emotional reality. And yet we are left questioning whether he committed these horrible deeds. No doubt playing on his captivity-based schizophrenia, Szmanda's final minutes onstage are riveting as he walks us through a gripping description of his impending death.

Jim Sweeters' black-box set with an expected series of upstage iron bars serves as a neutral palette for Kathi O'Donohue's sharply defined illumination. Her use of straight white lighting works effectively when countered by a sharp infusion of color for the play's final tableau. Sound designer Hayley Moss' cacophonous collection of metallic clanks, animal-like screeches, heartbeats, rushing/boiling water, and indecipherable human murmurings set a perfect pre-show mood.

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