

THEATER

The devil's advocate

Oregon Shakespeare Festival celebrates gay playwright Christopher Marlowe

BY ANDY SIMON

It's not hard to name contemporary playwrights who are gay: Edward Albee, Tony Kushner and Terrence McNally spring readily to mind. But the tradition goes back all the way to Elizabethan times. Christopher Marlowe, playwright, poet, atheist, spy and lover of men, was born the same year as William Shakespeare. He was poised to be the great dramatic voice of his age when an assassination plot disguised as a tavern brawl cut short his life.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland is celebrating Marlowe's life and work this summer. His most famous play, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, is on stage at the Elizabethan Theater through Oct. 7. Stanford University scholar David Riggs, whose recent biography *The World of Christopher Marlowe* has been widely praised, will present one of the festival's Noon Lectures on Aug. 5. The title of his talk is "Re-Inventing *Doctor Faustus*."

Even if only a fraction of the stories and rumors about Marlowe are true, he led a colorful, exciting life. Riggs argues in his book that most of the stories are credible.

A poor boy by birth, Marlowe managed to get an education and eventually earn an advanced degree from Cambridge University. His achievement is all the more remarkable because he was an avowed atheist, and the university was run by religious authorities. Marlowe, however, had powerful friends.

Queen Elizabeth herself offered him support and protection, no doubt in return for his loyal service as a spy. Her Privy Council interceded directly with the university and requested that he be awarded his master's degree.

He was also denounced to the authorities as a homosexual, probably by one of his lovers.

Yet he was not prosecuted.

Eventually, however, he fell from favor with the queen. His involvement in murder plots, counterfeiting, street fighting and atheist proselytizing may have been a factor. It is well-known that he was killed in a tavern brawl, but there is good evidence that the stabbing was arranged by the queen's agents.

Amid his life of adventure and intrigue, Marlowe managed to make a major contribution to English literature. He invented blank verse as a form of dramatic speech that gave his plays lyrical beauty and emotional depth. The plays were immediate hits.

A young actor from Stratford-on-Avon adopted the form and used it in his own plays. We all know where that led.

Though by no means openly gay, Marlowe's sexual orientation influenced his work. He wrote one of the first historical dramas focused on an English king, *The Troublesome Reign and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second*. Edward



Christopher Marlowe led a colorful life full of murder plots, counterfeiting, street fighting and atheist proselytizing.



Faustus (Jonathan Haugen) summons Mephistopheles (Ray Porter) to arrange the selling of his soul to Lucifer in *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*.

was widely perceived as a weak and corrupt monarch owing largely to his devotion to one then to another of his male courtiers. As the title of Marlowe's play suggests, his account of the king is more nuanced and more sympathetic than prevailing views.

Faustus constitutes another first for Mar-

lowe: It's the first dramatic account of the not-so-good doctor who sold his soul to the devil for 24 years of knowledge and power. The play does not have an overtly gay theme; in fact, at its climax the title character conjures Helen of Troy to fulfill his amorous desires.

(If you're looking for queer content, Stark Raving Theatre coincidentally is restaging Joseph Fisher's contemporary version of the classic dilemma in *Faust. Us. (Version 2.0)* through Aug. 6. Gay director and composer Matthew B. Zrebski cranks up the camp with a Mephistopheles who's positively flaming, so to speak.)

Marlowe's *Faustus* does not triumph. As is typical of the "moral" plays of the time, he is carted off to hell in the end. Yet he is decidedly a hero, if only for refusing to give in. Despite the damnation that awaits him, he remains true to himself, or at least to the choice he made when he entered his pact with the devil. **J**

THE TRAGICAL HISTORY OF DOCTOR FAUSTUS plays through Oct. 7 at the Elizabethan Theater, 15 S. Pioneer St. in Ashland. Tickets are \$21.75-\$65 from 541-482-4331 or www.orshakes.org.

FAUST. US. (VERSION 2.0) plays through Aug. 6 at Stark Raving Theatre, 2257 N.W. Raleigh St. Tickets are \$10-\$20 from 503-232-7072; Thursdays are "pay what you can."

ANDY SIMON is a teacher and theater lover who lives in Southeast Portland.

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