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Dispatches from The Fringe - Marlowe murder mystery misses its mark

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The Secret Art Of Murder by Five Gallants
Five Gallants

The Secret Art of Murder

Rating: ★★★★★

In 1593, playwright Christopher Marlowe died in a tavern in Deptford, England as a result of a bar fight. Or did he? Depending on whom you listen to Marlowe faked his death and became Shakespeare, was assassinated, was killed by a cuckolded husband, a group of men intent on robbery or a vengeful God in retaliation for Marlowe's blasphemy. Mystery and intrigue have surrounded Marlowe death, which has been a source of speculation for centuries. Adding their tu'pence worth are Five Gallants Theatre Company, who's *The Secret Art Of Murder* offers a plausible theory in a meta-theatrical production that aims high but doesn't quite get there.

Written by Stephen McDermott, *The Secret Art Of Murder* offers more speculation without proof. Frequently utilizing Marlowe's blank verse form and references to his work, the whole begins to feel like a tribute rather than the investigation it purports itself to be. Indeed, the script is most

successful when it departs from blank verse and addresses the audience directly. On these occasions characters/actors perform with self aware, meta-theatricality to great, humorous effect.

Performances throughout were enjoyable with Emmet Byrne and James Driscoll showing impeccable, comic timing, as did Jade Roxanne O'Connor and Emily Elphinstone. Rob McDermott, in a triple role as narrator, actor and Marlowe was excellent in the first two of these roles, but his Marlowe was never quite compelling or engaging enough. Voices often struggled to be heard in Smock Alley's, high roofed Boy's School venue, even if it was ideally suited to creating an Elizabethan atmosphere. This was compounded by Conor Madden's direction, which, it if ensured the action moved along at a steady pace, created curious spatial arrangements at times with actors often facing away from the audience or directly at the back wall. In the end the whole had a feeling of a great idea wanting to be realized in a production that often appeared to be punching above its weight.

Programme notes reinforced the sense of many ambitious ideas that the production never fully delivered. Its expressed aims of interrogating shady politics, conflicting ideologies and Marlowe's demise were touched upon, but never truly realised. And yet there is something incredibly clever, curiously inventive and deeply endearing about *The Secret Art Of Murder* which shines when it playfully toys with its own sense of theatre. In the end, when a long white curtain veils the actors dressed in white boiler suits, like the mists of history across Marlowe's past, the sense that there is something else here to be found lingers, like a promise waiting to be fulfilled. The same can be said for Five Gallants', *The Secret Art Of Murder*.

The Secret Art Of Murder runs at Smock Alley Theatre until September 21st. Doors open 9.15 p.m. Admission is €13.00



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