

Review of The Death of Norman Tortilla By Charlotte Coates



"Old-man, look at me now"
by Mathew Strowbridge for remotegoat on 29/03/12

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Half way through an excellent Spring season, the Tristan Bates theatre is fast becoming my favourite in London. Currently running until the middle of April, The Death of Norman Tortilla by debut playwright Charlotte Coates begins as the kind of kitchen sink theatre. Yet is more than this, and has a script packed thick with sharp and witty comic dialogue.

The aging Norman Tortilla flops battered into an armchair in his sink estate flat as his home help sweeps back and forth before him, changing his clothes and harvesting the fungus that breeds on the end of his toenails.

He is a dying man. A haggard facsimile of his younger self. He yearns desperately for recognition, yet always in vain. "I am Norman Tortilla," he announces. "And it is not fair!"

When carer, the Eastern European Jarek, arrives, the old man is transformed into a bitter and needy child. "I keep asking for a slav slave," he spits. "But all they send me is you! Do you even know what a happy ending is?"

Norman kills the days cutting out the photographs that fill his collection of glossy magazines. He appends them to the collages strewn about his flat before soliloquising over their significance. David Beckham is a personal favourite, and he declares his admiration for Peter Andre. "He's been on such a journey," protests Norman.

But the focus of the play is not celebrity. The Death of Norman Tortilla is a tragic-comic parable of how we treat our elderly. It is hilarious but also bitterly uncomfortable.

Written in a single act, the play is relatively sparse on plot. Striving to write a testament before he passes away, Norman struggles to dictate his words against the indifference of his chosen scribe Jarek. Then when Jarek proves unbecoming to the task a third character, Tandie the door-to-door salesperson, is drafted in.

The play is not left lagging though, mainly a result of Norman himself. He is at the heart of every scene; an amalgamation of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon around whose verbal reiterations the play's ominously revolves. It is absurd yet also a literal laugh a minute until its final quarter, where a shift in place drag events into a grotesque Jacobean tragedy.

The Death of Norman Tortilla is a very good play yet it is elevated by the exceptional anti-hero at its centre. Robert Gill's as Norman is simultaneously stunning and delightful - as great as Mark Rylance in Jerusalem. His timing, diction and physical performance are each time judged to perfection.

Coates' first play is a very worthy the watch and she is bound to write more expansive work in the future. But it is Gill's performance that is not to be missed and I will be returning to watch it again before the play closes in the next two weeks.

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