

Queer Eyes on Queer Lives Review – History, Humour, and Queer Representation

When covering a sweeping topic such as queer identity through history, picking just three snapshots is a daunting task. Louis Davenport's anthology of historical tales, 'Queer Eyes on Queer Lives', balances a variety of tones, periods and representation, all whilst meeting the zeitgeist of the times and altogether having a great deal of fun. Whilst topics such as sexuality might have been limited to subtlety in their time, modern times allow topics like gayness amongst gladiators to take centre stage in this historical comedy/drama.

The last ride of Julie d'Aubigny sets the tone for the rest of the anthology, blending humour with the tragic reality of social confines of 17th century France. The actors seamlessly navigate a small but convincing set, using physical comedy to uplift the sadder reality of the situation as the conflict grows, ending with a satisfying conclusion.

Dramatic lighting and stage direction begin the next piece; a Roman gladiator and a 1970s homosexual activist are trapped in a space between land and time. The science-fiction elements bridging the differences in language and culture are explored particularly well. Owen Ellis' performance grounds this piece as the strongest in the anthology; his shame and passion gives depth to a well-researched script enriched by references to Polari and the troubles of the time.

The final piece of this anthology, 'Who Killed Karl Heinrich Ulrichs', underscores the entire work's themes and makes specific ties to the medical world. The piece stars famous doctors who have all made a mark on the medical field: Dr. Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, and pioneer of the study of libido; Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, founder of much of modern sexology and forensic medicine; and Dr. Karl Friedrich Otto Westphal, the first doctor to accurately describe conditions such as agoraphobia, cataplexy and narcolepsy.

These three figures bumble around, clashing wits and egos as they co-operate (poorly) towards solving the titular murder mystery. The actors' comedic skills shine here, especially Kira McGuinness' self-important Dr. Westphal. Clear hints are given early on as to the plot direction where perhaps slightly more subtlety might have improved the eventual reveal.

The doctors, though often celebrated today, are cleverly revealed to have each contributed to the murder. In reality, each contributed to the pathologising of homosexuality and resulting mortality, whether from suicide or hate crime. This nuance is showcased in the form of a beautifully written speech from the resurrected Ulrichs, who in the case of all but Freud had his writings misused by doctors he personally trusted.

The themes Davenport conveys are as relevant today as ever. Although treatment towards queer people and the medical understanding of sexuality generally has improved, it is paramount to understand the roots of queer people's trepidation towards engaging with the healthcare system. These fears are founded in a history of cold fascination, pathologisation, and discrimination.

By Arya Rassi