



Mel Raido: meekly appealing

A rebuke to prejudice

CORPUS CHRISTI ★

Pleasance Theatre, N7

Nicholas de Jongh

AFTER demonstrations and death-threats in Manhattan, and promises of hell-fire and damnation at the Edinburgh Festival, Corpus Christi has arrived in London without brimstone or treacle. A small chorus of religious prayers and protesters have generously contributed additional publicity. The Christian religion, you might imagine, has been virtually brought to its knees by some overwhelming act of blasphemy. Not at all. Terrence McNally has merely composed a theatrical fantasy inspired by the spirit, though not the fact of the New Testament. Corpus Christi casts fierce shots at sexual bigotry and ought nag smug consciences.

McNally dramatises Jesus's life and death in medieval mystery play style and from a powerful homosexual perspective. He imagines the Messiah growing up as a gay teenager in a 1950s Texan town, with contemporary American gay

youths enacting the gospel story. Marilyn Monroe and Marlon Brando are on adolescent minds and lips, conformist intolerance pervasive. Better, though, if McNally had set his play today.

Hardly had Corpus Christi opened in Manhattan than a gay Wyoming youth was tortured, tied to a split-rail fence, tortured and died in crucified agony. In London the bombing of a gay pub followed on. The Christian tenet of loving gay sinners but hating their sins enables murderers to justify their depravities. Yet at the Edinburgh Festival one theatre critic confessed that McNally, with his "homosexual agenda... annexing Jesus to the

homosexual lobby", had been "too ghastly to contemplate." To just such impenitently homophobic minds the play directs its vivid rebuke.

Stephen Henry's sharply drilled, well-acted and sung production has to overcome the play's confused split-timing. Mel Raido's meekly appealing Joshua/Jesus, had hard times at High School from bullies until he falls for Stephen Billington's sexually up-front Judas Iscariot, with his Ph.D in the arts of temptation. Their discreetly depicted love-affair is Joshua's undoing. But then McNally abandons the 1950s and jumps into a direct re-enactment of the miracles and betrayal as if timelessly retelling the gospels. Yet the awful finale, with Jesus crucified as "King of the Queers", drives the play's passionate, important message home.

● *Until 20 November. Box office: 0171 609 1800.*

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