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there's a different heat"

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COMEDY, THEATRE, MUSIC AND MORE: THE HOTTEST SHOWS AT THE EDINBURGH FESTIVAL



Striking out

Sultry darling of the Edinburgh festival, **Camille O'Sullivan**, steps out of her comfort zone in a brand new Shakespearean production for the International Festival. She tells Jo Caird of the terrors and challenges involved.

Camille O'Sullivan is trying not to think about the fact that her first foray into Shakespeare, a musical adaptation of *The Rape of Lucrece*, is taking place under the banner of the biggest celebration of the Bard ever staged. The former architect and painter whose heartbreaking renditions of the songs of Nick Cave, Jacques Brel and Tom Waits have made her an international star is "very honoured but very terrified" to be performing her latest work as part of the World Shakespeare Festival (WSF) this summer. But then again, she says, breaking into a joyous cackle of a laugh, "I'd probably have something wrong with me if I wasn't scared about doing Shakespeare."

The chain of events that leads to the Irish performer's appearance at this year's Edinburgh International Festival (EIF) was set in motion when theatre director Elizabeth Freestone saw O'Sullivan's 2008 Fringe show, *The Dark Angel*. Struck by the singer's skill in bringing characters alive through song, she suggested O'Sullivan might be the right person to tackle Shakespeare's rarely performed tragic poem *The Rape of Lucrece*.

O'Sullivan was unfamiliar with the piece, which tells the story of a noblewoman's rape and her subsequent decision to kill herself as the only means of assuaging her shame, but, as a performer who "loves that chameleon thing of becoming different people," she was excited by the challenge.

O'Sullivan and her long time collaborator and musical director, Feargal Murray, set to work adapting the poem's nearly 2,000 lines of verse into a one-woman play with songs. It's the first time the performer has tried her hand at writing music, but the process of putting a melody to Shakespeare's words was surprisingly easy, she says. "Feargal and I were very nervous. We'd never done anything like that. But all the years of singing and playing music together, suddenly we were aware that we might actually know what we were doing."

The Rape of Lucrece is not the only WSF production at this year's EIF. Also programmed are 2008: *Macbeth*, a Polish adaptation of the play set in a contemporary Middle Eastern conflict and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a new version by acclaimed Russian theatremaker Dmitry Krymov.



Taken together, these three very different shows illustrate the breadth of work on offer during the WSF, which includes almost 70 productions by national and international artists. Deborah Shaw, the festival's director, is a firm believer that "theatre is not a museum piece artform, it's always a dialogue. There's no one audience that owns Shakespeare; there's no right way to do him."

Part of the aim of the WSF was to open Shakespeare up to new audiences and explore how his work can be used to interpret the contemporary world. These are ideas that resound strongly with O'Sullivan, who feels that by setting Shakespeare's poem to music, she, Murray and Freestone have hopefully made it more accessible to some people than it might otherwise have been. "What I find fascinating about singing is that sometimes I feel more emotionally connected to lyrics when I sing them. Music touches a different sensibility," she explains.

Working with Shakespeare's language has been the most challenging aspect of the process for O'Sullivan, who came to *The Rape of Lucrece* with plenty of admiration for Shakespeare's work, but with no training or experience as a classical actor. Some good advice has kept her from becoming overwhelmed. "Somebody said, 'don't get caught up totally by the poetry in it all the time; there is a three-dimensional character in there that is more easily accessible'"

It has also helped that O'Sullivan has been encouraged by Freestone to make the play her own. By incorporating elements of the onstage persona that fans will recognise from her previous, self-directed shows, the performer feels better able to communicate with her audience. "It feels good that there is that inclusion of the audience and, I think especially for a poem like this, that they're not just sitting there listening to words, that we have this silent dialogue."

All that said, O'Sullivan is still terrified about performing it. That's not a big surprise perhaps - despite her success, the performer is "always doubting that anything is working right. I am the worst critic."

When it comes to this show, however, she comforts herself with the fact that "not many people probably know it. Luckily for me it's not *Hamlet*. Even if I wasn't the best performer in the world," she pauses. "What I mean is, even if I was the best performer in the world..." She pauses a second time and out comes that infectious laugh again. "However good or bad you're doing it, you're bringing a new Shakespeare thing to people, and that's very exciting." **f**

The Rape Of Lucrece
@ Royal Lyceum Theatre
9:00pm - 10:20pm, 22-26 Aug, £20