

THEATRE: Theatre GreenwIch

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THEATRE

Dr Faustus

Greenwich

Claire Armitstead

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE's *Faustus* gives a unique spin to the term *damned for eternity*.

Not merely is he purgatory's most prominent citizen, but he has a knack of recreating himself in the cultural consciousness; of moulding himself to the demonology of the day. The strength of Philip Franks's richly imagined debut production is its exploitation of this fact.

Here is a *Faustus*, touselled, intense, troubled, who swigs milk from a bottle in a student squat and allows himself to be enlisted by a smooth spy master. Jonathan Cullen abandons himself to Hugh Ross's Blunt-ish Mephistopheles with much the same muddle-headed recklessness as he might (and probably does) abandon himself to drugs.

The analogy is made explicit by the hallucinogenic quality of the apparitions paraded before him. The deadly sins ooze from the fixtures and fittings of designer Stephen Brimson Lewis's magnificent crumbling house. There is a tricksiness, a promiscuity in the imagery that cleverly captures the scary intoxication of cheap conjury.

The flaw of this visually exciting reading is in the distraction it continually offers from the central relationship of man and his devil. Cullen is charming, mischievous, fractious, but there is no sense of a great man, greatly ensnared.

More fundamentally, the representation of Mephistopheles as the civilised, prosaic face of evil — while cogent in itself — pushes him on to the sidelines, crucially marginalising the struggle for *Faustus*'s soul. The immortality of *Faustus* lies in his freedom to choose. This mortal seems hooked from the start.



Jonathan Cullen and Hugh Ross in *Dr Faustus*

GRAHAM TURNER