

## **Blue Beard Babes**

Six actors, twelve stories, fourteen characters, thirty-five decks of playing cards and thirty-eight years of British history in one hour? Hard to pull off, maybe, but the high-energy women of the Playades Theatre Company took it in their stride at the 2011 Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

The central story, or to be more accurate, central six stories, are those of the wives of Henry the Eighth. The construct for presenting these stories is a play-within-a-play in which each of the actors plays an actor who is cast as a specific wife. Each of these actor-characters has present-day issues that correspond to the historical character she is cast to play. Each looks desperately for direction to the two male characters who never appear on stage; these are Hal, the fictitious producer of the play, and of course King Henry VIII himself.

Confused yet? Well, don't panic. Within the whirlwind of the script, even the characters can't keep straight who they are supposed to play. Confusion is built into this drama of six prima donnas forced to share the spotlight and tiny stage in a whirl of loose playing cards. They have roughly ten minutes each to create memorable and meaningful characters with nothing for props except those many cards, which somehow transmogrify into anything they need them to be.

Perhaps the real drama of this production is how it came to be created. The script was written in just two weeks, through collaborative improvisation by the Playades Co. under the direction of Eva Mann. Kudos to Movement Director Laura Milani, who somehow kept the actors all onstage and moving gracefully more or less without stepping on each other's toes.

But did they pull it off?

I thoroughly enjoyed the sheer energy of the performances and creativity of the production. This is what the Edinburgh Fringe is all about. The Fringe is a festival that expects audiences to work hard, too. In fact I was somewhat overwhelmed by the scope of the story and the amount of information I needed to keep straight in order to follow the play. The actors, the props and the script are wonderful but more time and space are needed to really make this incredibly ambitious production shine.

The Playades Theatre Company is an international group of female actors who studied at East 15 Acting School in London, England. Alice Frick played Catherine of Aragon; Maria Alexe played Anne Boleyn; Jin Jang played Jane Seymour; Lauren Karl played Anne of Cleves; Romina Boldasu played Catherine Howard; and Cindy-Jane Armbruster played Catherine Parr.

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