

## *The Upstart Crow* A play by Ben Elton

Review by Tony Herbert

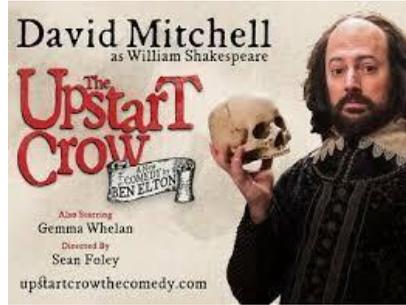
I was at first reluctant to see Ben Elton's stage version of *The Upstart Crow*. It's a comedy, but would I be able laugh at yet more stuff about the man from Stratford?

Could even Ben Elton, a highly intelligent and erudite man, still think that Mr Will Shaksper was the author we all so admire? Well, putting aside the last question, I was certainly glad I overcame my reluctance. It's a great show: funny, inventive, and refreshingly able to send up some of today's thespian absurdities.

Will Shakespeare, superbly played by David Mitchell, is struggling to write another play that will please the new king, James I, having – as he confesses – written a few ‘clunkers’ like *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* – it should be called *All's Well That Ends Crap*, says Will's helper. We then get scene after scene with clever references to some of the plays we all know, mainly *Twelfth Night*, *Othello* and – somewhat bizarrely – *King Lear*. Can one make King Lear funny? Answer: up to a point ...

The references to *Twelfth Night* allow cross-dressing jokes galore, but also make splendid fun of cross-racial casting as the two twins who get washed up on the shore are black and from North Africa. We also get Malvolio ramped up to comic excess. Dr John Hall, Will's doctor, is an appalling, self-lacerating Puritan (Puritans are ‘puretitties’ in one of Ben Elton's pieces of verbal nonsense.) They do a Malvolio on him by suggesting that he'll get off with Will's maid if he wears a truly vast cross-gartered codpiece.

Much of the action gets helped along by a large dancing bear, which in turn amuses and terrifies the characters. Will complains that he may well have written some pretty good plays but hasn't yet managed to write a really memorable stage direction. It takes some time, but eventually we get to the ‘Exit-pursued-by-a-bear’ joke.



What about my initial troubles? Did it all reinforce the orthodox Stratfordian mythology? Not really. It's all a superb send-up, not just of Shakespeare's cross-dressing plots and the like, but also of some of our 21st-century silliness. And then, Will himself seems to be a bit of a 'clunker'. It's his maid who comes up with many of the plot ideas. Perhaps after all Ben Elton is in fact sending up the traditional Stratfordian myth. Perhaps he should be offered honorary membership of the DVS.

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