

Theater review: “Doctor Faustus” | Daily Bruin

At a church, audience participation is strictly non-optional.

The Phoenix Remains theater’s latest production of Christopher Marlowe’s “Doctor Faustus” gives a particularly sinister look at a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for 24 years of power, wealth and complete fulfillment of every desire. Audience participation, including viewers reading directly from the script, is encouraged.

And by the way, this stuff about conjuring up the devil? It’s being performed at a church, even on Sundays.

The crux of the story is very simple. A mere mortal named Faustus wants everything the world has to offer.

With the help of Valdes and Cornelius, a couple of brigands, he summons up Mephistophilis, who uses the power of Satan to grant his every wish. But when Faustus’s time is up after years of pleasure, the devil comes to collect his due.

Director Ben Prusiner, a graduate of UCLA’s theater program, has created a performance that involves the viewers as a part of the show.

The actors directly address the audience, going so far as to speaking directly face to face and even touching them.

Faustus hands out fliers to the viewers about sorcery, and Mephistophilis takes books from the audience’s aisle to serve as examples of devil’s spells.

In one scene, Mephistophilis introduces Faustus to the seven deadly sins. Two actresses sitting amongst the audience stand up to reveal themselves as Pride and Greed.

The other sins? They are sitting right there amongst us, the viewers reading lines directly from Marlowe’s play.

Unlike Marlowe’s play, however, Sloth has nothing to say, as befits his laziness, drawing a laugh from all the other sinners.

All this from a play advertised with the couplet “See the show; Sell your soul.”

What better place to sell your soul than at a community church? Prusiner’s design makes the church a perfect fit for this version of “Doctor Faustus.” From the sinister organ music that introduces the menacing Lucifer to the eerie and completely darkened setting that’s spookier than a horror movie, the play manages to mess not only with the audience’s expectations but also their comfort levels. Those sudden bouts of light flashes and very loud yelling from the actors certainly helped the cause.

Victor Herminio Lopez’s rendition of the frequently sympathetic Faustus is powerful but subtle. His portrayal makes Faustus seem so desperate that the play sometimes feels like a comical farce rather than Marlowe’s original moral tale.

However, his touching depiction of the key moment, the kissing of a summoned invisible Helen, is eerie yet magical.