

***Doctor Faustus*, directed by Benedict Esdale for Flywheel Theatre Company,
The Old Red Lion, Angel, London, 8 October 2025, stage left.**

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If not quite “*Infinite* riches in a little room” (*The Jew of Malta*, 1.1.37), Flywheel’s production of *Doctor Faustus* provided riches enough and, given the constraints—financial, material and spatial—Esdale and his company are to be commended for a lucid and engaging performance. The Old Red Lion Theatre has a capacity of just forty-five, seated on two sides of a square. Within this tiny playing space, a company of six actors, with the aid of four Billy book-cases (mounted on castors) and a variety of hats and masks, presented an abbreviated version of Marlowe’s play, cut down (without interval) to ninety minutes.

In such a small space, the company made good use of the audience presence with Faustus (Joseph Stanley) addressing the queries from his opening soliloquy, directly at those perched on the front row. It was a nicely confrontational performance, as though Faustus had already made up his mind: his questions were less enquiries than an exercise in building his self-confidence. The good and bad angels appeared as winged puppets (puppetry by Adam Boyle)—one brandishing a cross, the other an inverted pentagram with a human skull perched on the top of each—as the symmetry of the psychomachia was underlined. Indeed, this production prioritised (rightly, in my opinion) the play’s dramatic shape over any sort of psychological depth.

In line with this, many of the performances were caricatures rather than “rounded” characterisations. So, for instance, the play’s various dry scholars and old men stooped, limped, trembled and whistled in high senile voices; devilish declarations were bass in pitch and amplified from loudspeakers like something from a Hammer House of Horrors movie of the ’seventies and as Charlie Woodward’s Lucifer told Faustus to “Talk not of paradise” (2.3.110), the final word was rendered with a snakey sibilance: “paradisssssssssssssse.” This performance style fitted perfectly within the allegorical limits of Marlowe’s play—one about the apocalyptic clash of Good and Evil rather than the psychobiographical struggles of any individual.

There were some inventive and effective touches. As he drew his circle on the floor in order to summon Mephistopheles, Faustus used not chalk but his fingernails so that the effect was cringe-worthy (think, scraping nails on blackboard). Later as the prospect of Helen, the

most beautiful woman who ever lived, was spoken of, “she” was represented by a bright light behind the audience (lighting design by Brett Kasza). We saw her reflected glory in the ecstatic faces of her admirers rather than the unstageable woman herself.

The costuming was part of this allegorical effect (costume design by Rebecca Ward). Most of the company wore simple dark two-piece suits over white T-shirts. The devils wore red shirts and one of them a red suit over a black T-shirt. Shanice Petilaire and Gabriel Lumsden split the role of Mephistopheles between them. Each sported a pair of long antelope horns and wore “tatter jackets” like malevolent Morris dancers. Less straightforward was the sometimes clumsy resetting of the bookcases. The thinking seemed to be to reconfigure the space and to block parts of it off, but the repositioning was intrusive in such a tiny space and the effort outweighed the effects.

One especially economic and successful sequence was the presentation of the Seven Deadly Sins. Each Sin spoke through a mask and these had been ingeniously tailored to the particular vice they represented. Gluttony was a sausage string of intestines; Lechery was a push-up bra and so on. While one member of the company spoke the individual sin’s lines, others stood around mimicking each other in appropriate gestures; Sloth, for instance, required them to stretch and yawn. In this way the stage pictures were kept refreshing and enthralling and the verbal fireworks of Marlowe’s script were nicely attuned to their presentation.

As time ran out for Faustus, his final great soliloquy (the climax of Marlowe’s play) was delivered, lit by a single lamp angled up at him from floor level. There was a real sense of aching loneliness about Stanley’s performance here. Interestingly, Mephistopheles gave the coda, “Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight...,” and, as the lights faded, the final image was of Mephistopheles’ sinister smile.