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Studio's 'Kit Marlow': Flashy Olde England

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Christopher Marlowe, superstar: That's the thrust of David Grimm's rambunctious and rather silly "Kit Marlowe," which Studio Theatre's Secondstage is producing at the Church Street space that was recently home to Woolly Mammoth (and Studio itself before that). Marlowe makes his first entrance swinging naked on a rope, fresh from a swim in the river, like Tarzan sans his loincloth. He fights and flirts with vigor; there's a lot of crotch-grabbing and pants-dropping in this show. Marlowe's a sinful, lusty figure, and for Grimm the ultimate question is this: Can he find redemption and love?

Marlowe was Shakespeare's immediate predecessor as London's top playwright as well as a spy for Her Majesty's government, a fast-living rascal who was murdered before he could turn 30. Grimm milks the intrigue of Marlowe's life for all it's worth. Hungry for life and eager for action, Marlowe declares that he'd sell his soul to work for the mysterious Sir Francis Walsingham, uncle of Marlowe's friend and sometime lover, Thomas Walsingham.

The setup is Faustian, and then some. In Mike Chamberlin's production, the stage goes red and fills with what might be the mists of London or the smoke of Hell, and three figures that look as if they're right out of a modern gangster flick haze Marlowe to see whether he's suited for the spy game. (They wear leather coats and neckties, and Ray Hagen's Sir Francis sports a cane and hides behind sunglasses.)

Campy, no? There's more, even beyond the boilerplate gangsters. Take Dan Via, checking his grooming and admiring the cut of his pinstripe suit as he delivers a sneering, effete turn as the Earl of Essex. (Essex sees himself as a rival to Sir Walter Raleigh for Queen Elizabeth's affections; his jealousy drives a bit of the plot.) The only reserved performance among the play's 17 actors is Carlos Bustamante's quietly conflicted portrayal of Thomas Walsingham, who loves Marlowe but is about to marry a woman. The rest of the acting -- and this seems to be what Grimm calls for -- is swaggering and body-slamming as Marlowe establishes himself as the roughest of London's good-time boys, then dives into the netherworld of clandestine politics.

The complicated plot winds through spy-counterspy stuff involving the Mary Queen of Scots faction, but that's not what Grimm is really interested in. Loyalty and love are the big issues, and it's a little strange to watch the tender drama that Grimm ultimately has in mind try to emerge from a play in which the title character could, at times, be reasonably played by Jet Li.

As it is, Marlowe is played like a rock star by Jon Cohn. (Rock stars typically seem to have two speeds: wild, troubled.) Cohn's got energy and sex appeal, leaping around John Raley's docks-of-London set and impishly flashing his body, and the entire show (like a lot of Secondstage projects) has a rock-and-roll vibe. It's vigorous and irreverent, but it doesn't really have a heart, so its attempt to help Marlowe find his feels fake.

Kit Marlowe, by David Grimm. Directed by Mike Chamberlin. Lights, Klyph Stanford; costumes, LeVonne Lindsay; sound, Brian Keating. Approximately 2 hours 20 minutes. Through Nov. 25 at the Studio Theatre, 1333 P St. NW. Call 202-332-3300.