Sexy, Supernatural & Scary
Professional troupe to stage volatile ‘Doctor Faustus,’
Elizabethan tale of age-old struggle between good, evil

There’s insanity and plotting aplenty in American Shakespeare Center’s 2014-15 “Method in Madness Tour” production of Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. The tour will stop at ETSU’s Martha Street Culp Auditorium on Friday, Feb. 20, at 7:30 p.m. for an evening of theater and mayhem, Elizabethan style.

In the classic tragicomedy, Faustus sells his soul, not for riches, but for knowledge and power. Marlowe, born in the same year as the Bard of Avon, weaves a shocking and contemporary tale of the struggle between good and evil, championing what is most daring in the human spirit. Marlowe’s popular early-modern drama predates almost all of Shakespeare’s plays and includes appearances by Helen of Troy, the Seven Deadly Sins, angels, demons and Lucifer himself.

“Like most Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, part of the greatness of *Doctor Faustus* lies in the juxtaposition of the drama and the humor: big hearts, massive stakes, cheap jokes and characters about whom we can care,” says *Doctor Faustus* director and ASC Co-Founder and Artistic Director Jim Warren. “This production is intellectual, sexy, funny, visceral, human, supernatural and scary.”

The American Shakespeare Center brings a unique performance style to ETSU’s Culp Auditorium, blending Elizabethan stagecraft with modern sensibility. The company uses staging conditions from Shakespeare and Marlowe’s time, including universal lighting, minimal sets, actors playing multiple parts, cross-gender casting and music. Audience lights stay on, allowing for a type of audience contact and interaction rarely seen in modern-day theater.

Performing using Shakespeare’s staging conditions means highly technical special effects aren’t possible, yet this production of *Doctor Faustus* features combustible books, mythical transformations, blood, ghosts and demons designed to haunt the mind. “We had to find a way to do [the effects] in a way that is similar to what might have happened on the Elizabethan stage without a lot of modern technical ways,” says Stephanie Holladay Earl, who portrays the demon Mephistopheles, sent by Lucifer to collect on Faustus’ vow to turn over his soul.
“The special effects are very, very cool and we get lots of great reactions and gasps.”

Also true to performances of that time, the actors play contemporary music before the show and during the intermission. Starting 30 minutes before *Doctor Faustus*, the ASC on Tour troupe performs their own acoustic takes on songs by Lady Gaga, The Rolling Stones, Van Halen and Coldplay, among others. “We play music that has been written from around the 1940s to songs that are out on the radio right now,” Earl says, “and we play them all acoustically. We have some incredibly talented musicians in the cast … It’s a lot of fun. Playing the music, and seeing the people sing along and dance along – it’s some of the best fun we have all night.”

The combination of classic work, traditional staging and modern ingenuity should provide a theater experience to remember, says Anita DeAngelis, director of event sponsor Mary B. Martin School of the Arts. “We will get a pretty good feel of what the performance was like in Shakespeare’s time with some modern surprises,” she says. “I think we will be able to enjoy a festive night.”

The 2014/15 Method in Madness Tour production of *Doctor Faustus* features ASC on Tour veteran Andrew Goldwasser in the title role; Stephanie Earl as Mephistopheles and Helen of Troy; Patrick Earl as Lucifer; and Emily Joshi-Powell as Beelzebub. This troupe is also performing two other plays on this tour: *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

“Touring has always been at the heart of what we do,” Warren says. “Part of our mission is to show how accessible, meaningful and fun Shakespeare can be to people locally, regionally and across the nation. We modeled ourselves on Shakespeare's own company, which also toured, so we're designed to turn every space we play into feeling like a raucous Elizabethan theater.”

American Shakespeare Center’s unique productions do create “converts,” Stephanie Earl says. “The great thing about our company – and I continue to see it over and over again over the four years that I’ve been here – is that we tend to change a lot of minds,” she says. “We talk directly to audience members when the line dictates and we feel that we should, and that really creates an immersive experience. The audience is a lot more engaged, they have a lot of fun and they laugh more than they thought they would. They understand more than they thought they would …

“We get such wonderful feedback such as people saying, ‘You know, I hated this play when I was in high school or in college, but it was so good. I wish I could see it again,’ or ‘I had so much fun and I understood everything.’ That has really been a joy for me as an actor.”

*Doctor Faustus*, in particular, Earl says, is very easy to understand. “One of the other things about this script that is so wonderful is that the language is very accessible,” she says. “It is a plot that has been in stories for hundreds and hundreds of years – someone wanting to sell their soul to something evil in order to get things that they want. So the plot will be familiar and the language is very straightforward, easy to follow and very exciting and action packed.”

Based out of Staunton, Va., the American Shakespeare Center’s mission is to recover the joys and accessibility of Shakespeare’s theatre, language and humanity by exploring the English Renaissance stage and its practices through performance and education. The ASC’s Blackfriars
Playhouse, the world’s only re-creation of Shakespeare’s indoor theatre, is open year-round for productions of classic plays, which have been hailed by *The Washington Post* as "shamelessly entertaining" and by *The Boston Globe* as "phenomenal … bursting with energy." Founded in 1988 as Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, the organization became the American Shakespeare Center in 2005 and can be found online at [www.americanshakespearecenter.com](http://www.americanshakespearecenter.com).

Tickets for the Mary B. Martin School of the Arts-sponsored production of *Doctor Faustus* are $5 for students of all ages, $15 seniors 60+ and $20 general admission. Because of some of the “creepy” content, Earl says *Doctor Faustus* might not be appropriate for small children.

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