

Blood in,

blood out

Can incest and vengeance right an upside-down world?

By Robert Avila

> a&eletters@sfbg.com

In John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, when Parma's bright and talented Giovanni (Michael Hayden) confesses to Friar Bonaventura (Steven Anthony Jones) his passion for his equally exceptional sister, Annabella (René Augesen), the friar is quick to understand the stakes, declaring, "We have need to pray." He advises Giovanni to turn from so unnatural a desire to repentance and sorrow. "Acknowledge what thou art," he tells him, "a wretch, a worm, a nothing." But this strikes us as something of a denial of nature too, especially given our protagonist's rare qualities. And it's soon clear that religion will give him no solace or cure anyway. This is unsurprising, since the church headed by a slimy cardinal (Jack Willis) is a thoroughly dishonest institution deeply implicated in the pervasive corruption of the age. So where should Giovanni's faith and ultimate allegiance lie in such a world? And where, in turn, should our sympathies lie?

Such questions go to the heart of what remains provocative and compelling in John Ford's Jacobean tragedy four centuries on. It makes a kind of irrefutable sense within the context of the play that Giovanni and Annabella (clearly intended as a darker version of Romeo and Juliet) would pursue a mutual affinity and blood bond to the extremes of physical and emotional passion with tragic consequences of course. But the surprise is that while tragic, the consequences are also, morally speaking, far from straightforward. Forging a bond that denies and defies a fallen world and its judgment, their relationship finally succumbs to the order of the day which is to say, the disorder of violence by self-destructing in an orgy of blood vengeance.

'Tis Pity She's a Whore, Ford's best-known work whose central incest plot comes wrapped in intervening subplots driven by jealousy, power, and revenge plumbs moral confusion and the individual conscience in a hypocritical and vicious age. No wonder it feels thematically and dramatically vital in our own spiraling time. Ford depicts a world the tumultuous mid 17th century where the Elizabethan certainties of Shakespeare's day have dissolved and authority has blurred. Meanwhile, material and carnal appetites have bloomed like overripe fruit in a dilapidated garden that looks more like a jungle. The cruelty and gore here barely merit a raised eyebrow by today's brassy standards, whether in the realm of entertainment, art, or politics. But in Ford's time and ours, taboos don't so much disappear as they become tantalizingly flimsy, porous and seductive, Guantánamo being one byword for this.

The still-burning fire in Ford's tragedy is inconsistently sustained, however, in American Conservatory Theater's new production, requiring a wade through a fairly static and fitfully persuasive first act to get to the juicier scenes and forceful momentum of the second. Artistic director Carey Perloff puts wonderful care into the production values and her casting is generally shrewd (in addition to leads Augesen and Hayden, who really heat up by the end, Anthony Fusco, Susan Gibney, and Gregory Wallace turn in particularly noteworthy performances). The baroque world of Ford's play and our time is architecturally bridged, meanwhile, in Walt Spangler's multileveled scenic design an abstracted cathedral in its jewel-like beaded curtains, scattered candles in soft-colored glass, steep metallic stairways, and a treelike cluster of massive dangling organ pipes enshrouding composer-musician Bonfire Madigan Shrive and her cello on a recessed tier. The "avant-baroque" cello score and Shrive's occasional anguished vocal lines add a somewhat thinner aural texture to character and scene than seems intended. But the set is stunningly integrated with Robert Wierzel's sensual lighting design, evoking baroque canvases while draping the action in a sense of carnal luxury and exquisite decadence.

It's a bumpy ride, but the end is well played and gripping, casting a memorable image of Giovanni drenched in the blood of his sister and lover, having utterly retreated into himself literally into the womb of his flesh and blood, where sibling,

wife, and child have all become horribly blurred. In the play's crowning and irresolvable tension, incest is both a fundamental violation of natural order as well as an assertion of blood as the only terra firma in a world of quicksand. *

'TIS PITY SHE'S A WHORE

Tues. Sat., 8 p.m. (also Wed. and Sat., 2 p.m.); Sun., 2 p.m., \$14 \$82

American Conservatory Theater

415 Geary, SF

(415) 749-2228, www.act-sf.org

Wednesday June 18, 2008