

'Pity' skewers conventional assumptions

ACT STAGES RARELY SEEN CLASSIC JACOBEAN DRAMA

[By Karen D'Souza](#)

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O happy dagger! The last time American Conservatory Theater plunged into the dark heart of Jacobean tragedy was Robert Woodruff's infamously graphic 1993 production of "The Duchess of Malfi," which offended audiences and sent them scurrying from the theater.

Now ACT again thrusts into the fray with a sumptuously dark rendering of John Ford's rarely staged 1633 revenge drama " 'Tis Pity She's a Whore," the anti-"Romeo and Juliet."

Director Carey Perloff reclaims the obscure epic in a wildly passionate, if somewhat erratic, revival that no lover of the classics should miss.

Bile and blood flow like wine in this lurid 17th-century realm, where corruption eats away at the state, abuse of power rots the church and incest soils the family.

Ford gives lies to the modern assumption that there ever was a time when life was simple and people virtuous, in a Jacobean classic so juicy it may well squirt in your eye.

Walt Spangler's baroque tableau of a set seduces us instantly. It's a velvety blackness bejeweled by pinpricks of candlelight, entangled with stairs and balconies and framed by a colossal pipe organ hanging in midair like an icicle.

And there, high atop the stage, sits the punk-cellist Bonfire Madigan Shive, who taunts us with an eerie experimental score marked by plaintive wails, erotic sighs and, in a climactic moment, a piercing shriek that disturbs even the most jaded ear. Shive looks down upon the seamy universe of the play like a dark angel, ever watchful, ever pure.

Below her, a torrent of sins bursts forth. Michael Hayden and René Augesen nail the heartbreaking echoes of "Romeo and Juliet" in the dark rapture between Giovanni and his sister Annabella.

Hayden ratchets the lovesick brother from forbidden pining to ecstasy to the madness of vengeance with great delicacy, letting Giovanni's desperate actions spin out of the poetry.

The actor's mastery of the language quickens our ears to the play's ambiguities. If the world is filled with villains, could it be that none of us is truly guilty? Ford's charity for black deeds gives the play an enduring sense of depth and uncertainty.

Everyone in this universe falls from grace, plunging from triumph to despair on a dime. It takes a truly great actor to make that nose-dive strike a chord within us. If some of the cast glides over the surface of the text, others mine deep down.

Sharon Lockwood shines as the peasant governess who doesn't mind the stain of incestuous sheets, only the pain of exposure.

Susan Gibney etches a sumptuous performance as the black widow Hippolita, who happily dispatches her husband (James Carpenter) and then seeks vengeance on her untrustworthy lover, Soranzo (Michael Earle Fajardo).

The extremes of the human heart course throughout the play, but, alas, not every cast member is quite so expert at the reversals of fortune. Fajardo possesses a quiet sincerity as Soranzo but misses his volcanic rage.

Anthony Fusco grounds his portrayal of the wily manservant Vasques with intelligence and integrity, but there's some ardor lacking in his attacks. The comic buffoonery of Bergetto (Gregory Wallace) and his servant Poggio (Stephen Barker Turner) lacks conviction.

And yet, Ford's shadowy vision of the world still pricks at the heart. The gut-wrenching clarity of Hayden's portrayal of Giovanni's descent into madness makes the play burn brightly indeed.

While Perloff spares us the sight of a heart skewered by a dagger, the blood-soaked violence of the finale is undeniably disturbing. 'Tis pity that not all of the production approaches this white-hot stab at the visceral, because the carnality of the play by no means has lost its power to scorch.

' 'Tis Pity She's a Whore'

By John Ford

The upshot: A juicy revival of the rarely staged Jacobean revenge drama.

Where: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary Blvd., San Francisco

When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, 7 p.m. June 15 and July 6

Through: July 6

Running time: 2 hours and 40 minutes, with intermission

Tickets: \$17-\$82; (415) 749-2228, www.act-sf.org