

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

Carey Perloff, Artistic Director Heather Kitchen, Executive Director

PRESENTS

# WORDS <sup>on</sup> PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

## *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

BY JOHN FORD

DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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## THE CARNAL AND THE CEREBRAL

An Interview with Director Carey Perloff about *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

BY JESSICA WERNER ZACK

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“What if it were not in religion sin to make our love a God, and worship it?”

—Giovanni, in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*

The Baroque world may be different from the Renaissance world,  
at once more grandiose and more ordinary, more like our own.

—Art critic Holland Cotter

During an interview in her office a few days before the first rehearsal of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* at A.C.T., Carey Perloff was brimming with enthusiasm for John Ford's “surprisingly modern” Caroline revenge drama. An inveterate reader and researcher, Perloff had, during the months spent casting the production and refining the sets and costumes with designers, read extensively on sundry subjects germane to understanding this complex play in the 21st century: Freud on incest and taboo; Antonia Fraser and other scholars on Baroque life and literature; art historians on Mannerist and Naturalist painters, including Caravaggio, Pontormo, and Zurbarán; medical histories of William Harvey's “discovery” of pulmonary circulation; literary criticism of the Jacobean and Caroline dramatists. The subjects ranged far and wide in her quest to more fully understand Ford's still-shocking exploration of an outlaw obsession between a brother and sister in 17th-century Parma.

In an in-depth conversation about what most interested her as she explored these themes, Perloff likened the social context in which Ford wrote, and situated his tormented lovers, to “our own culture of ambiguity and ambivalence,” in which we, too, long for certitude in the midst of uncertainty.

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**I UNDERSTAND TOM STOPPARD IS SOMEHOW RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR INTEREST IN THIS WILD PLAY?**

Yes, it's an interesting story. We were doing [Stoppard's] *The Real Thing* a few years ago, with René [Augesen] and Marco [Barricelli]. Tom has woven wonderful scenes from *'Tis Pity* into that play: René's character, an actress named Annie, plays Annabella in a production of *'Tis Pity* and falls in love with the young actor playing Giovanni, which wreaks havoc on Annie's marriage. So we took a couple days off rehearsal and worked on *'Tis Pity* and discovered that we just loved this play-within-the-play. René and I kept looking at each



*Mary Magdalene Carried by Angels*, by Simon Vouet (1590–1649). © Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon, France / Lauros / Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library.

other and thinking, We should have actually done both these plays in rep! It would have been so difficult, but *so* interesting. René is astonishingly capable with language, and although she has played a huge range of roles at A.C.T., she hasn't had a chance to do much Shakespeare or this kind of classical material, which she is eminently trained to do. So I committed to her that we would tackle *'Tis Pity* together, eventually.

**FOR AN AUDIENCE  
THAT IS LIKELY TO  
BE LESS FAMILIAR  
WITH THE  
JACOBAN PERIOD**

**THAN WITH THE ELIZABETHAN, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY DISTINGUISHES THIS PLAY FROM THE BETTER-KNOWN SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDIES?**

The Baroque—as a period, an aesthetic, a world view—is really an avenue into understanding this play. *'Tis Pity* is much closer to Baroque painting and music than to Elizabethan culture. Caravaggio's paintings, for instance, are a good example of this wildly different mindset. They are only 25 years after high Renaissance, yet startling in that they evince a totally different way of looking at the world. Incredibly dramatic colors, visceral appeal, complicated staging and gesture—this is not Raphael territory; it's a new kind of visceral melodrama.

We have to realize that after the long reign of Elizabeth I [1558–1603], which saw the rise in the use of the English language, real antagonism with Rome, and separation from the Catholic church, James I [1603–25] took the throne, and suddenly an entirely different coterie came into power. English culture went through a huge upheaval.

The Elizabethan viewpoint of humanity, or morality, was exceptionally ordered and lines of authority were still clear. They still believed in the monarchy. And in the patriarchy. And in the church. And even though there are examples of duplicitous churchmen in Shakespeare, and people who have to be disavowed, there is a sense in those plays that what one strives for is order, and that the greatest horror possible is a total breakdown in the social order. Shakespeare's tragedies play on that fear of disorder, and they tend to suggest in the end that order can be restored.

By the time you get to the Jacobean, there isn't a clear sense of hierarchy anymore and it is no longer expected that order can or will be restored. With no clear compass or guidepost or authority figure to trust, it is no longer possible to return to a neutral mean. *'Tis Pity* asks the question: What happens in a culture in which everything feels toxic/contaminated? In which it is incredibly hard to trust the organs of authority: the state, the church, the police, the church, family? If none of those traditionally ordering entities is ultimately sacred, then what happens?

This is also such an urban play, which is different from many Shakespeare plays. Shakespeare's Italian plays are not urban, and the urban plays of the period are comedies. It is unusual to have an urban tragedy, although it is true of some of Marlowe and some of Webster. Marlowe was in fact stabbed and killed in a London tavern; people were killed on the street all the time. It is very interesting to me that this is a play about a city that feels very much like early 17th-century London, which was a very violent, duplicitous, and dangerous place to be.

I'm excited about this play in part because it feels very modern. Maybe that's because we are also a culture of ambiguity and ambivalence, and we, too, long for something that we also don't see being restored. I think people will be surprised that nobody in the play is quite what they seem, and that's what saves it from being a pat revenge drama. It's actually a surprisingly contradictory play. Except possibly the Cardinal, you can't mark who the villains of the play are, and that makes it fascinating.

**CRITICS OVER THE YEARS HAVE QUESTIONED HOW MUCH SYMPATHY FORD SHOWS FOR GIOVANNI AND ANNABELLA. HAS THIS BEEN ON YOUR MIND, SINCE THEIR INCESTUOUS RELATIONSHIP IS AT THE HEART OF THE PLAY?**

You do have to keep reminding yourself when you read the play, Oh my god, that's her brother and this is completely taboo! Annabella and Giovanni share the same sense of humor and wit and intelligence, and Ford gives them really gorgeous language—all of which reinforces why the word “natural” is used in the play so much and why it's possible for Giovanni to use that word about his love for his sister. In a skewed and violent world in which you can't trust anybody, it somehow seems *natural* that the person Giovanni trusts is his closest blood relation. In a very dangerous world, being together, in each other's arms, is how they feel safe. There is a completeness in that to them. And we get seduced into their way of thinking, their longing.

**THEIR CONNECTION MAKES ME THINK OF THE PLATONIC IDEAL, THIS LONGING NOT JUST FOR A PEACEABLE SOCIAL ORDER, BUT ALSO FOR A HIGHER TRUTH, THIS BELIEF THAT THEY WERE ONCE ONE.**

That's right, and you can't get beyond the sense that, for people who share blood, who shared a womb, everything about them is bonded. In that case, of course they should bond themselves, because it is the truest thing they can do. It's odd, yet compelling. This play really looks at how little it takes to cross that line when the longing is that great, the taboo is also that great, and when you live in this private zone in which there is nobody else in the world you feel understands you.

**DO YOU SEE 'TIS PITY AS RELATING TO OR BEING IN DIALOGUE WITH *ROMEO AND JULIET*?**

Marlowe was actually a bigger influence [than Shakespeare] on Ford, and I recently reread *Tamburlaine* in this context. But, yes, *'Tis Pity* is absolutely and recognizably in dialogue with *Romeo and Juliet*. It starts out with a brawl in the street. You see the setup between warring families. The Italian notion of vendetta is a theme, in which revenge is repeated endlessly and honor is paramount. You have Putana, who is the flip side of the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*—she's not exactly warm and comforting—and the Friar as go-between. People have read *'Tis Pity* for centuries as a darker version of *Romeo and Juliet*, although I think Giovanni is a much more interesting character than Romeo.

You have to really think with Giovanni, Who *is* this man? He is modeled on Faust, so he is a very smart, Jesuit-educated intellectual and logician. On the other hand, he is completely passionate. It is not an intellectual passion he has for his sister. The collision of the carnal and the cerebral is very intriguing.

In some ways, the more interesting question comparing Romeo and Juliet with *'Tis Pity* is, What about Annabella? I don't know the answer yet, but it's very complicated. She can be rather passive, and then all of a sudden outrageous, complicated, wicked, and funny, like Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*. She is a very textured heroine.

**THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF DISCUSSION OVER THE YEARS ABOUT THE RISK A.C.T. TOOK IN PRODUCING *THE DUCHESS OF MALFI*, ONE OF THE COMPANY'S FAMOUS, OR INFAMOUS, JACOBAN PRODUCTIONS. DO YOU FEEL YOU ARE TAKING ON ANY RISK IN PRODUCING *'TIS PITY*?**

Look, you're in trouble as soon as you take on the Jacobean (*laugh*). We courted trouble when we did *Edward II*, too [in 2000]. Even the title of this play makes people turn away! Advertising has been a challenge because certain spaces have refused our ads because of the title of the play—as if the word “whore” were a four-letter word! When, really, the real tragedy and truth of the play is, “’Tis Pity She's a *Woman!*” The label “whore” is placed on Annabella once she's considered used and degraded, while Giovanni, the instigator of their sexual relationship, doesn't get labeled as such.

There is no way to do the Jacobean and not court some controversy. This play is very sexual and very violent. Yet, the shocking elements are transgressive because, as in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the real scandal of the play is the way it portrays the church. *'Tis Pity* is wildly anticlerical; the real villain is the Cardinal, who, unfortunately, offers no moral solace, nor moral compass.

**YOU'VE MENTIONED BEING INTRIGUED TO DISCOVER IN YOUR RESEARCH THAT THE HUMAN CIRCULATORY SYSTEM WAS IN EFFECT DISCOVERED AT THE SAME TIME FORD WROTE THIS PLAY.**

It's interesting to me because, in contrast to the Elizabethan, Shakespearean sense [in Humorism] that the goal is to neutralize and bring imbalanced humors back into alignment, William Harvey's Jacobean discovery that inside this frame of ours is this pumping fluid and that the heart is actually a muscle sending the blood to circulate and recirculate helps explain why things get extreme, why tempers and passions flare. Order cannot always be restored, and it is no longer possible to always return to a neutral mean. Life is too complicated, the world is skewed, corrupt, and decadent. In this violent world where you can't trust anybody, of course it's natural that the person you trust is the only other person who came from your mother's womb. That is where blood is shared, and where blood is shared there is consanguinity. And that is a kind of completeness. In that framework, of course she is *the one*.