EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster, presented by Eyestrings Theatre at the Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury (touring), 9th October 2013.

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Directed by Owen Horsley. Designed by Simon Anthony Wells. Sound design by Helen Atkinson. Lighting Design by Daniel Street. With Beatrice Walker (the Duchess), Charlotte Powell (Cariola and Julia), Vincent Enderby (Ferdinand), Nicholas Figgis (the Cardinal), Phil Cairns (Bosola), Owen Young (Antonio), and Ashraf Ejjbair (Delio).

Renaissance dramatists are not our contemporaries, but often the alchemy of theatre can make them seem astonishingly fresh and modern. Eyestrings Theatre gave just such life to *The Duchess of Malfi*, using clear and precise verse-speaking (conversational and contemporary without sacrificing poetical effect), together with sharp direction to make this two hour production, with no interval, a tense thriller, with the rapidity and fluidity of a dream.

The cast were in place as the audience entered, seated in an X pattern, each holding a cocktail glass, under bare lightbulbs on cables. As the production began they took on exaggeratedly cheerful rictus grins, looking out to the audience as if to best friends, waving, pointing, gurning with pleasure. Bosola stood centre stage dressed as a waiter with a tray of drinks, underlining his social inferiority and enforced subservience as he argued with the Duchess's brothers. The manically happy party guests were later to make a reappearance as the madmen who were brought in to torment, and in this production help to execute, the Duchess and Cariola.

The production was emotionally naturalistic, with impressively heartfelt and passionate performances, particularly from Beatrice Walker as the self-assured Duchess, and from

an increasingly tormented Philip Cairns as Bosola, her assassin. Despite this, the setting and stage business were non-naturalistic, hallucinatory and dreamlike. An old-fashioned radio microphone on a stand made repeated appearances, first at centre stage where, after a public speech by the Cardinal, the Duchess and her brothers mimed their public mutual affection in slow motion hugs and touches while Antonio, her steward and husband-to-be, described the three. Later the microphone was moved to the side of the stage, where Ferdinand used it to shriek prompts and demands to the reluctant Bosola as he forced him to continue as Ferdinand's murderous proxy. It was used, with echo effect, by the Duchess as Echo, and most disturbingly was used again by out-of-scene actors to voice emotionless factual stage directions as the deaths began to mount - 'They strangle her', 'He stabs him' - with sepulchral repetition as first the Duchess and Cariola, and later the Cardinal, Ferdinand, and Bosola died in quick succession (Julia and Antonio's deaths being more isolated). After her death the Duchess stalked the stage, visible to Antonio as he spoke his death speech, before he walked to sit by her side as his life ebbed.

In the last scene, the ghosts came together to pinion the Cardinal as he pondered the theological niceties of hellfire, desperate and trapped by his impending fate, and the weight of bodies on his conscience. The production finished with a literalisation of Webster's tragedy's pile of corpses: Bosola died sitting at the feet of the ghosts of the Duchess and Antonio, holding up the bodies of Ferdinand and the Cardinal, as Cariola/Julia crawled in alongside him.

Despite reducing the play for a cast of seven actors, with only Cariola/Julia doubled, the remaining narrative did not seem in any way disjointed or incomplete. Sometimes, the simplest effect was the most powerful: as when the Duchess and Antonio, preparing for lovemaking upstage, removed Antonio's shirt which was swiftly bundled and cuddled in the Duchess's arms to make an entrance in the next scene as their baby son.

Eyestrings claim to 'rebel against convention to unleash the brutal, beautiful and visceral nature of these epic stories'. In this instance, I felt, they succeeded in doing so, giving a contemporary feel without abandoning the emotional and narrative structure of the original play.