

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The Massacre at Paris*, presented by The Dolphin's Back at the Rose Playhouse,
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Directed by James Wallace. With James Askill (Duke of Anjoy), Ed Barr-Sim (Mugeroun / Duke Dumaine / Prince of Condy / Loreine), Rhys Bevan (Henry, King of Navarre), Beth Eyre (Duchess of Guise / Queen Mother of Navarre / Taleus / Surgeon), Neal Gavyn (Soldier / Duke of Joyeux / Gonzago), John Gregor (Duke of Guise), Howard Horner (Charles IX / Cutpurse / English Agent), Théo Kingshott (Cardinal of Lorraine / Retes), Richard Koslowsky (Epernoun / The Lord High Admiral / Seroune), Kristin Milward (Catherine de Medici), Ella Road (Margaret / Son to Guise / Pleshé / Wife to Seroune), David Vaughan-Knight (Cossin / Mountsorrell / Bartus), James Wallace (Apothecary / Ramus).

The Dolphin's Back presented a production of Marlowe's final play that showcased the horrific and the humorous that is repeatedly intertwined in the text, in equal measure. It is to that grim humour that I will turn in the first part of this review. The production provided plentiful evidence of director James Wallace's claim in the programme that 'Marlowe certainly knows how to play with the sensational to entertain'. The sensationally entertaining and the shocking frequently blur together in *The Massacre at Paris*, and The Dolphin's Back emphasised the dark humour in many of the visceral scenes of butchery and brutality. When Joan, the Queen Mother of Navarre, received the poisoned gloves with childish naivety from the shady and evidently frightened Apothecary, her prolonged sniffing of the delicate red leather became hilarious. Her utter ignorance, nay, stupidity, was emphasised by the fact that she continued to sniff the gloves even after complaining of the strong scent causing a headache, reducing Marlowe's tragical moment to a parodic farce. The fact that the Queen Mother of Navarre, Charles IX, and the Duke of Anjoy - later Henry III – all flopped to the same floor space of the stage, in the same position, provided a nice continuity between the

echoes and similarities apparent in all three of their death speeches. Marlowe's very tongue-in-cheek verbalisation of the moments when hearts break and brains turn upside down – evident in the fact that a couple of people in the audience sniggered upon hearing Charles IX's description of his death (13.13-15), a close verbal echo of the very process of dying prolonged by the Queen Mother of Navarre (3.18-20) – can also draw some titters from the audience who observe the elements of comedy and absurdity.¹

Perhaps one of the most chilling yet undeniably humorous scenes was the murder of the Lord High Admiral. After the Admiral had been slaughtered, a body-sized dummy was thrown onto the stage where the Duke of Guise stamped on his lifeless bulk, crushing the Admiral's head with his booted foot and stamping on it, much to the merriment of the feral party of Anjoy, Dumaine, and Retes. Anjoy's childish laughter lasted longer than the others, but as the Guise viscerally brought his foot down on the Admiral's head approximately thirty times, even Anjoy's laughter died away as the gathered party gazed on rather bewildered and nervous at the brutality displayed by the Guise. It was one of those moments where the brutality is intertwined with the comic; I couldn't help but smirk as the Guise repeatedly crushed the white head of the dummy with his boot, repeating the exact same action over and over again, in true Marlovian sadistic fashion. The poor body of the Admiral was also the subject of further dark humour in a scene which should arouse utmost disgust in the audience. One soldier stood patiently on stage, as offstage limbs belonging to the Admiral were lobbed onto the wooden boards of the Rose near the soldier's feet. The ghastly assortment of body parts numbered one foot, two hands, a leg, and a bloodied head. Both soldiers finally agreed to string the Admiral's limbs up in a tree, before being told to take the body down and throw it in a ditch by the Duke of Guise. The stifled displeasure of the soldiers, evident in their Laurel and Hardy-esque scowling at each other, again revealed the humour in the brutality that Marlowe expected his audience to revel in. The production was certainly more *Scary Movie* than it was *Scream*.

Despite the above, the production did still manage to terrify me at several moments. The Duke of Anjoy was childish in a frightening manner in the early parts of the play, possessing all of the traits of a psychopath. Clad perpetually in a red dressing gown and slippers, he looked latently aggressive and unstable. Such serial killer-esque qualities were later realised during the massacre of the Huguenots, when the future King of France wore a Porky Pig mask and wielded a sickle. Add into the equation the low-level

¹ Compare Charles' 'My sinews shrink, my brains turn upside down, / My heart doth break, I faint and die' (13.14-15) with the Queen Mother of Navarre's 'the fatal poison / Works within my head; my brain-pan breaks; / My heart doth faint; I die!' (3.18-20). Act scene and line references refer to '*Dido, Queen of Carthage*' and '*The Massacre at Paris*', ed. by H. J. Oliver (London: Methuen, 1968).

lighting of the stage during the massacre, with the butchery taking place in near darkness, this was sheer terror to experience. The massacre became even more brutal as dark shadows raced across the stage in a blur amidst terrifying screams of pain and suffering; innocent Huguenots screamed in terror as they desperately tried to flee across the stage, always chased in close pursuit by the long knives of the Guise and his faction. Throats were cut and bodies stabbed as the Catholics laughed heartily in the shadows.

The production was incredibly beautiful on an artistic level. Coloured confetti was employed with terrific emotional effect throughout the production. Red confetti symbolised blood, and was expertly scattered across the stage as characters were massacred, ensuring that the floor of the stage became a collage of tiny red pieces of paper. The actors often concealed handfuls of the confetti before scattering it over the floor of the stage at key moments in the production. For example, after inhaling the poison embedded in the red gloves, the Queen Mother of Navarre raised her left hand to her mouth, and coughing, let a couple of pieces of the red paper fall from her hand to the stage floor, creating the illusion that she was coughing up blood. Confetti also littered the floor after a soldier carefully positioned himself along the back wall of the Rose beyond the archaeological remains, just visible behind the transparent black mesh curtain. He sat still with a sniper rifle, before taking aim and shooting the Lord Admiral, who, by throwing red coloured paper out of his right hand whilst clutching his left shoulder, gave the impression that he had been shot and that his blood had poured out of his wound. After Mugeroun had been assassinated – shot three times by a soldier – confetti was once again used in an innovative fashion as the Duke of Guise, with his back to the audience, went through the motions of urinating on the prostrate corpse, showering yellow pieces on Mugeroun's body.

The Duke of Guise was the ultimate professional mercenary in this production, clad in a black leather jacket and sporting sunglasses to hide his eyes, which, incidentally, never displayed any inklings of remorse for his actions. He was portrayed as bloodthirsty, scheming, and incredibly intelligent in this production, and was decidedly disgusted with King Henry's flamboyant toying with the minions. The Guise occupies a complicated relationship with a modern audience watching *The Massacre at Paris*, who are never quite sure how to respond to some moments in the production where he may attempt to elicit our empathy or sympathy, whilst his diabolical actions that set in place the massacre of the Huguenots ensure that we should hate him as a character. There were some moments in this production at which the audience's relationship with the Guise became problematic in a manner in which perhaps Marlowe's original audiences would never have experienced, such was their hatred of the Guise. One such moment was when the Guise entered to Henry's royal cabinet (a toilet upon which Henry sat),

and Henry wiped his posterior before making the Guise kiss his hand. At this moment, it is possible that the audience, who know of Henry's debauched court, could share the Guise's ire with the King. Similarly, the Guise was made more human during the discovery of his wife's infidelity. The Duchess of Guise wore exquisite lingerie, as did her Maid (who actually was a French maid wearing a very saucy costume), which perhaps served to flag up the adulterous letter writer's lust. As the Guise arrived wearing a towel covering the lower part of his body, and discovered his wife's unfaithfulness, he viciously pulled her hair before pouring ink over her face. His anger and despair was apparent; no more was he the infallible Caesar of his age – the Duke of Guise – he was a human being with very human problems. This conflict between men and supermen plagued the Guise throughout the remainder of the production, and his glassy eyed stare as he was cut down by the murderers who slashed his body with knives as more red confetti littered the floor, ensured that the production's exploration of humour, horror, and psychomachia was deliberately ambiguous, unresolved, and essentially, Marlovian.

Like Marlowe's Guise then, the production was skilful in manipulating the emotions and psychological states of mind of its audience, who, like me, were encouraged to express feelings of horror, disgust, and laughter. It was also an incredibly clever production, with several excellent pieces of stagecraft – such as John Gregor playing the part of the Friar who murders Henry – ensuring that the audience laughed with glee as the Friar removed his hood to claim that he had been a great sinner, realising that here was the same actor who had played the Duke of Guise moments before. Overall, this ambitious production was successful in perfectly blending the macabre and the humorous, qualities which must have fascinated and horrified its original audiences over four hundred years ago.