

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***'Tis Pity She's a Whore* presented by Shakespeare's Globe at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London, November 2014**

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Directed by: Michael Longhurst. With Max Bennett (Giovanni), Stefano Braschi (Soranzo), Fiona Button (Annabella), Sam Cox (Donado), Philip Cumbus (Vasquez), Noma Dumezweni (Hippolita), James Garnon (Bergetto / Cardinal), Michael Gould (Friar Bonaventura), Alice Haig (Philotis), Dean Nolan (Poggio), Edward Peel (Florio), Daniel Rabin (Richardetto), Morag Siller (Putana), Jethro Skinner (Grimaldi).

The opening, by the Shakespeare's Globe company, of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, a reimagining of an early modern indoor theatre resembling the playhouses of Renaissance London, such as the Blackfriars and the Cockpit, has resulted in an increased interest in performing the works of early modern playwrights other than William Shakespeare. While Shakespearean productions in the Globe's main theatre have so far been kept separate from those of his contemporaries in the Wanamaker, the new theatre has had the positive effect of bringing the works of lesser-known Jacobean playwrights to light, and arguably provides the perfect setting for the grisly, dark, revenge tragedies of Jacobean tragedians such as John Webster and John Ford. Michael Longhurst's recent production of Ford's infamous play *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* was no exception, and its themes of sex, violence, revenge and incest were greatly enhanced by this intimate, candlelit theatre.

The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse seats only 340 audience members in total, and its small size became an element that greatly increased the sense of a restrictive claustrophobic Parmesan society that is central to this play. This, combined with the classical Jacobean features and décor of the playhouse, certainly helped to transport the audience back in time, and made us feel as though we were witnessing something close to that of an early modern theatregoer's experience. Due to the close and intimate nature of the

playhouse's design, I felt I could not escape the horrors that unfolded before me in the three hours of the production, and had no choice but to face the controversial issues and questions that the play deals with. Additionally, the element of shock and awe that Ford undoubtedly intended was not lost on a modern audience, due to our proximity to the action, which included vast amounts of blood, the presentation of a human heart, and the naked bodies of Annabella and Giovanni just inches from our faces.

Adding to the foreboding atmosphere and assisting in the generation of tension and fear was the wonderful and distinctive use of candlelight that features in every Sam Wanamaker Playhouse performance. In *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, the candles not only added something unique and nostalgic to the performance, but were also used effectively at several points to enhance the drama in specific scenes. For instance, during the scene in which Vasquez (Philip Cumbus) and Hippolita (Noma Dumezweni) plot against Soranzo (Stefano Braschi), Vasquez attempted to persuade Hippolita to control her 'female spleen'; as he did this, Cumbus held a candle up close to her face, drawing attention to their eyes as he gazed into hers, manipulating and charming her.

Other more dramatic instances of effective lighting were seen during the scene in which Friar Bonaventura (Michael Gould) visits Annabella (Fiona Button) to warn her about the consequences of her actions and the horrors of hell that await her. During his speech, in which he described darkness and the extinguishing of the sun, the candles on stage were slowly extinguished, one by one, and it grew increasingly dark as his speech continued, highlighting the darkness that Annabella would be subject to if she refused to repent, and also perhaps representing the extinguishing of Annabella's desire towards Giovanni, the very thing that the Friar encourages.

Furthermore, the lack of candlelight due to the quenching of the candles in this scene was used most effectively in the following scene in which Bergetto (James Garnon) was stabbed by Grimaldi (Jethro Skinner) in complete darkness. The violent crime was only revealed to us, as well as to the citizens of Parma, by the light of candlelit lanterns, used to build tension and horror as they slowly exposed Bergetto's blood, which saturated the stage.

The costumes in this production were designed by Alex Lowe and offered a mixture of the contemporary with the Jacobean, in keeping with the rich and luxurious feel of the playhouse and production. For instance, both Giovanni and Vasquez were dressed in a combination of skinny jeans and Jacobean ruffs. In the case of Giovanni, his costume highlighted his youth, as he moved around the stage in plimsolls and bright red jeans in the fashion of modern-day teenage hipsters. Moreover, the colour of his clothing throughout the play was predominantly red, usually a signifier of lust and passion as

well as blood, and clearly conveying Giovanni's destructive yet passionate part in the action of the play. Giovanni's devilish red contrasted nicely with the long white flowing gown that his counterpart Annabella wore. The gown in question was the correct compromise between promiscuity and innocence, the colour conveying Annabella's purity and virginal status, and the close fitting, slightly see-through style hinting at her sexuality. Similarly, her hair was used to connote her sexual status as it was styled into a neat bun on top of her head previous to her sexual encounter with Giovanni, and was seen in loose waves in the nude scene that followed their love-making.

Dumezweni's Hippolita was dressed in a gown similar in its flowing style to Annabella's dress, but with one notable difference: it was black, obviously connoting death due to the recent loss of her husband Richardetto, but also perhaps alluding to the differences between Annabella and Putana and their contrasting reputations within Parmesan society, with Annabella's costume signifying youth, beauty and purity, and Hippolita's representing something much darker. Similarly, Vasquez's primary outfit was used to symbolise aspects of his personality, as his own Jacobean ruff was combined with Doctor Martens-style boots and a black bomber jacket, perhaps signifying rebellion, chaos and riots, as it resembled those outfits often associated with skinheads and punks in contemporary society, and perhaps also signifying his social status as an outsider and servant in the society of early modern Parma. Indeed, those of a higher status were dressed quite differently. For example, Grimaldi first appeared dressed in a metal breast plate, his outfit reminiscent of a knight, and characters such as Bergetto wore more traditional Jacobean outfits in rich colours such as red and gold. The older and seemingly more sensible characters seemed to have been dressed at the more traditional end of the scale, while the modern elements of costume were kept for characters such as Giovanni and Vasquez, perhaps the two most destructive, impulsive and impetuous of the characters.

The two most outstanding and memorable performances in this production were those of James Garnon in the role of Bergetto, and Philip Cumbus who played Vasquez. Though these roles are completely opposite in character and purpose — the first, a foolish, bumbling, nobleman and the second, a frightening and vicious villain — both actors brought something extraordinary and unique to their characters. With his exceptionally loud speeches that often bordered on yelling, bizarrely hilarious facial expressions, and outlandish sticky-up hair, Garnon's Bergetto bore a certain resemblance to the recently deceased and beloved English comic actor Rik Mayall. He was at his most hysterical when partnered with his equally funny friend and sidekick, Poggio, played by Dean Nolan. The two actors worked brilliantly together and excelled in scenes which involved physical comedy, slapstick and audience participation.

Memorable moments between these two included a scene in which Bergetto mocked his uncle Donado (Sam Cox) by mimicking him and then proceeded to pass the blame to the innocent Poggio, and, most notably, the scene in which Bergetto presented his uncle with a letter intended to woo Annabella. After reading the letter out loud, then screwing it up in frustration, Cox's Donado chased his nephew and companion from the stage, resulting in the pair falling into the audience seated in the lower gallery. The hilarity continued when Garnon thrust himself upon the lap of an unsuspecting audience member, cowering from his uncle, both entertaining and involving the audience. Cox himself added to the comedy in a comparatively subtle style: rolling his eyes, muttering under his breath and sighing in frustration and disbelief at the duo's absurd behaviour.

As well as expertly bringing the comic scenes of Ford's text to life, Garnon also brought a sensitivity and tenderness to Bergetto, particularly in his scenes with love interest Philotis (Alice Haig). In one scene, Garnon timidly approached his beloved, kissed her nervously and presented her with a box, within which was enclosed, not an engagement ring as expected, but a gift of confectionaries, in a surprising, affecting and funny moment. Shy and adorable acts such as this made the couple appear almost like high-school sweethearts in the throes of puppy love, and contributed to Garnon's portrayal of Bergetto as a somewhat socially awkward, yet loveable and endearing rogue.

Due to Garnon's successful creation of a more three-dimensional Bergetto, with more to him than an entertaining lack of common sense, his death scene was one of the most poignant and emotionally arousing scenes in the entire play. In this production, Bergetto became a character that I could identify with, sympathise with, and love, so that his brutal and untimely death not only took him by surprise, but myself as well; his loud, dramatic wailing provoked gasps of both sadness and horror from those of us witnessing his appalling and undeserved murder.

Furthermore, the talented Garnon was almost unrecognisable in his dual role as the cold, unfeeling, greedy and altogether terrifying Cardinal. He uttered the famous last line of the play, 'Tis Pity She's a Whore', with an unblinking stare, commanding vocals and a regal presence, ending the production on a strong note.

As the villain of the piece, Vasquez, Philip Cumbus provided a clever, complex and cunning portrayal of Ford's despicable and notorious criminal. Ranging from quietly charming and manipulative in his scenes with Putana and Hippolita, to furiously violent when battling against Giovanni, and openly distraught at the death of his master, Soranzo (Stefano Braschi), Cumbus successfully portrayed a chillingly changeable

Vasquez who kept not only the citizens of Parma on their toes but also those of us watching in the audience as well. Especially enjoyable were his asides to the audience, in which he came across as utterly revelling in the chaos and violence being enacted around him, even chuckling to himself at the prospect of his evil plans and stroking his beard in the manner of a James Bond villain. Particularly striking was his portrayal of utter indifference in scenes that saw him strutting about the stage with an air of nonchalance at some of the most riveting and disturbing points in the drama. This was especially effective in Hippolita's death scene, in which, despite his responsibility for her death, Cumbus's Vasquez showed absolutely no remorse, sympathy or emotion as she writhed about the stage, screaming, wailing and foaming at the mouth. His detachment continued as he coolly and calmly dragged her corpse from the stage, all the while remaining distinctly unmoved as myself, and the audience around me looked on in horror.

Equally enthralling was the scene between Vasquez and Annabella's nurse, Putana (Morag Siller), in which he manipulated her into revealing the father of Annabella's unborn child. At the beginning of the scene Vasquez was charming, overly-kind, and almost affectionate towards Putana, convincing her of his sadness and distress about the events unfolding around him. He laughed with her, hugged her and held her hand, almost persuading myself, as well as Putana, of his innocence. In one paradoxically touching yet calculated moment, the pair were seen sitting next to each other with their backs against the wall, resembling a couple of school friends in the playground telling each other their secrets. He then rejoiced upon his discovery of the incestuous couple's behaviour, exclaiming as though he was the recipient of some exciting news or glad tidings, laughing and embracing Putana in an odd, twisted, celebratory fashion at the prospect of the undoing of Annabella and Giovanni. However, the pair, and their jarring mirth and merriment, were soon interrupted as they were joined by two of Vasquez's henchmen who entered via two doors either side of the stage, dressed head to toe in black and grey, joining with Vasquez to surround Putana before gagging her and dragging her through the central doors at the back of the stage. The doors were kept open slightly so that we could hear her laughter turning to chilling screams and were able to glimpse her limbs flailing as her eyes were put out, the doors closing fully only after her screams desisted. Once again, Cumbus skilfully portrayed indifference, behaving as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and jovially greeting Giovanni as he entered, simultaneously disregarding and adding to the horror of the previous scene and proving the sinister, cruel and sadistic nature of Ford's villain to the audience.

Juxtaposed with these frequent demonstrations of cruelty, violence, and general disdain for those around him, were scenes in which Cumbus expertly captured the love and loyalty between Vasquez and his master Soranzo. For instance, in an especially violent scene between Annabella and Soranzo, Vasquez attempted to calm his master down by holding him and rubbing his back and shoulders, demonstrating physical affection as well as concern for his wellbeing. Furthermore, in the final scenes, in which Soranzo is stabbed by Giovanni, Vasquez held him, patted him affectionately and wept as he died. The love and emotion felt in this death scene, as well as in Bergetto's, rivalled the less impactful deaths of the central characters of the play, the sibling lovers.

Strong performances were also given by Stefano Braschi and Noma Dumezweni as Soranzo and Hippolita. Braschi's performance was at its peak when slinging Annabella around the stage and knocking her to the floor as he accused her of promiscuity and infidelity, bringing a thrilling and terrifying presence to the stage. As well as physically dynamic, Braschi's performance here was vocally powerful as he brought Ford's plosive language to life, shouting at his new 'bastard bearing' wife, and shooting her with insult after insult. Dumezweni was equally engrossing to watch, bringing a sense of strength and sexuality to Ford's lusty widow character, and enacting one of the most disturbingly dreadful death scenes; she simultaneously managed to generate a moving sense of sadness and to draw sympathy from the audience despite the character's terrible transgressions.

Turning now to the protagonists of the play, Max Bennett and Fiona Button's portrayal of Ford's notorious incestuous couple began successfully in this production, with the two sibling lovers giving a convincing, chemistry-fuelled performance, their first kiss starting slowly and softly before growing increasingly passionate, and their touching yet dangerous vows to each other in which they declare 'Love me or kill me', conveying a deep, dedicated and seemingly genuine love for one another. Furthermore, during the final act there were a few moments of tenderness when Bennett embraced Button and kissed her sweetly, before descending into the passionate, violent act of murder.

Button's Annabella was at first a little underwhelming as she was somewhat overshadowed by some of the stronger members of the ensemble, but she came into her own as the play endured, and gave a thoughtful, striking, and memorable performance as the intensity of the narrative increased. Particularly arresting was the balcony scene, which differed somewhat from *Romeo and Juliet's* famous example: Annabella stood above the stage, frightened, sad, and a little disturbed, clutching a letter, with bloody bandaged wrists and yet more blood dripping from her red stained hands, demonstrating the horrific and poignant effects of Annabella's forbidden love and moral conflict.

Another high point for Button was the scene she shared with Braschi which is mentioned briefly above, in which he discovered his new bride's secret pregnancy. The chemistry between Braschi and Button in this volatile and violent scene was especially intense, and rivalled that of the passionate exchanges between Annabella and Giovanni. During the scene Annabella appeared dishevelled, her hair was loose, and her dress undone. She held her own against Braschi's enraged Soranzo, indifferently laughing at him and taunting him in Latin as he slapped her, spit at her, insulted her, and threw her about the stage, yet simultaneously managing to appear as an innocent, hurt and scared little girl when she sat on the stage hugging her legs close to her body.

As the leading man, Max Bennett began by subtly and successfully capturing the impetuous, youthful, and slightly arrogant nature of Ford's Giovanni, and as he slowly descended into madness Bennett skilfully acted the part of a fearful, jealous, paranoid lover who was beginning to have thoughts of vengeance. However, for me, his conveyance of madness eventually became irritatingly over the top, as he shook uncontrollably and lashed out, hitting inanimate objects like a child having a tantrum. Moreover, the poignancy, sadness, and brevity of Annabella's death was overshadowed by Bennett's absurd lunacy as he rocked backwards and forwards, blinking madly, and staring at her gormlessly and open mouthed after stabbing her to death, making the scene a little ridiculous. While Bennett's Giovanni shed a few tears for his sister/ lover, his underwhelming expression of pain was short-lived and he continued in the same childish, annoying, and ludicrous vein by repeatedly hitting himself in the head before entering Soranzo's banquet, where he threw objects on the floor, sang his lines, and crawled along the tables, knocking off plates and dishes, in a scene, which, if played and directed a little more subtly, could have been sinister and chilling rather than absurd and almost comic.

Unfortunately, Bennett's final scenes undermined the seriousness and depth of Giovanni's love for Annabella, resulting in both of the siblings' deaths leaving me strangely unmoved. Perhaps this was partly due to the decision to have Giovanni, immediately following the murder of his sister and so-called beloved, be covered from head to toe in blood, dancing around the stage and jumping on tables like an enraged animal that had escaped from the zoo. This demonstration of an insensitive, unfeeling, arrogant, and attention-seeking nature in the leading man was also one of the reasons that I found Bennett's Giovanni so unlikeable and extremely difficult to sympathise with. Whether this was the director's intention or not, it certainly contributed to a feeling that the gravity, seriousness, and sadness found in Ford's text was absent.

Indeed, while the comic scenes were brilliantly acted and hilariously dynamic, one major problem I had with this production is that there was no real sense of tragedy at the points where there should have been, apart from some touching moments in the subplot. The decision to generate more sympathy for Bergetto and Philotis than Annabella and Giovanni had both good and bad effects. Firstly, it produced an effective and affecting reading of the play, giving the text new and interesting meanings and highlighting a tender, pure and loving relationship between the two characters that is usually somewhat underplayed, overshadowed and therefore seemingly unimportant.

Conversely, the downplaying of sympathy for the protagonists, our sibling lovers, was, in my opinion, one of the only pitfalls of this production, and was largely due to the directional and acting decisions made for and by the leading man, Max Bennett. His performance may certainly be regarded as a valid and illuminating reading of the play, but at some points the lack of sympathy that this production generated for Annabella and Giovanni went a little bit too far, and for me, the emotional impact of Ford's love story was somewhat lost.

While this production certainly provided the shock factor of the play through its use of full frontal nudity, buckets of fake blood, and the presence of a vital organ being carried onto the stage, I felt that it lacked something that is essential to the controversy and the scandalous nature of the message of Ford's play: the generation of sympathy for two young people embroiled in an incestuous, forbidden love. Presenting an incestuous relationship to an audience may be a little shocking, but what is often considered most disturbing about *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is the fact that the playwright manages to create sympathy for the couple, despite their apparently abhorrent sexual relationship and the horrific actions of Giovanni, so that the audience often leaves the theatre emotionally and morally conflicted about what they have witnessed. Sadly, this production, while entertaining as well as beautiful to behold, chose not to generate the climactic, heart-stopping, breath-taking mixture of horror and sorrow that the finale that I expected from Ford's most controversial, emotional and thought-provoking play.