

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## **Staging Ford in New York, 2015: An Interview with Jesse Berger, Artistic Director of the Red Bull Theater**

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2015 was a good year for John Ford in New York City. Three years after Theatre for a New Audience staged *The Broken Heart* and Cheek by Jowl brought *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* to BAM, the Red Bull Theater celebrated Ford with not only a full production of *'Tis Pity* (April 14-May 16, 2015), but also accompanying staged readings of *Perkin Warbeck* (March 9, 2015) and *Love's Sacrifice* (May 4, 2015). In conversation with Tanya Pollard (Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, CUNY), Jesse Berger discussed the process of developing a season of Ford, and the experience of directing *'Tis Pity*. Excerpts appear below, with relevant web links following.

**Tanya Pollard:** Why did Red Bull turn to Ford now, and how did you settle on *'Tis Pity* for this year's main production?

**Jesse Berger:** *'Tis Pity* had come up in Red Bull's discussions of plays from the beginning. It was always in the mix, and seemed inevitable, as one of the most visible, colorful, well-known plays from the period. We've always been conscious of highlighting diversity of authors – we'd done plays by Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson, Kyd, Middleton, Webster, and others – but nothing by Ford, aside from his contributions to *The Witch of Edmonton*. But it's a complicated play, and it took a while for us to develop the acting pool and growth to tackle it. We needed to be able to make it both moving and funny, both of which are crucial. We've had a lot of growth in the past ten years, and we knew we were ready. It was time.

**TP:** How would you describe the visual style of the *'Tis Pity* production, and how and why did you settle on it?

**JB:** We wanted Jacobean lines for contemporary players: something that would feel like a period production, but would have modern appeal, not ruled by pumpkin pants. We stayed close to traditional lines and styles from the period, but used modern materials. This was true also for the set. Our first plan was to do the play in the round, which didn't work out for logistical reasons. So the set was based on a picture of a Jacobean house with oak walls, but we built ours out of metal, giving it a sleeker, modern twist.

We wanted the set and costumes not to interfere with emphasis on the language – the minimalism allows us to project our own responses. It's easy to go overboard with these plays, but having directed early modern plays for more than ten years, I've developed more restraint. In particular, our staged readings have taught me a lot about trusting the text, not needing the visual design to do as much of the work.

**TP:** What sorts of responses did you hear from audiences about their experiences of the play?

**JB:** The most common response I heard was surprise at how sympathetic the lovers were. This really comes from Ford – it changes throughout the play, but their sympathy is a strong force, and the production embraced that. Some productions play up their rebelliousness and sexiness, but the sympathy for them in the play is even more disturbing.

Another common response was shock, not only at the incest, but especially the violence. People who didn't know the play were really taken aback by the violence of the final scene, the famous stage direction of Giovanni entering with Annabella's heart on a spear. Even the previous murders didn't prepare people for the horror of that moment.

People were also really surprised by the play's humour. Audiences assume that an early modern tragedy will be serious and dark, not playful and forthright. The scenes with the clown, Bergetto, surprised people.

**TP:** He was very effective, and very appealing. The laughter really disarms people, lets down our defences, and makes it all the more affecting when he dies.

**JB:** I'm glad you thought so. His humour and his death are crucial to the play's impact. His death is the first in the play, the fall of the innocent – after that, the play really turns into a tragedy. In Ford, the innocent get it first.

**TP:** Do you think Putana's death is similar?

**JB:** She's not innocent in the same way – she breaks ethical rules, isn't the person you'd want looking after your children – but she cares about them, and her punishment doesn't fit the crime. All the women in the play are destroyed: poisoned, burned, sent to a nunnery, stabbed in the heart. They're all victims, but Annabella especially has our sympathy, all the more because she repents. At the end of the play, if we are an audience of believers, she believes she's going to heaven, while Giovanni, who hasn't repented, believes he's going to hell. The difference makes an impression on us and affects our sympathies whether we are religious or not, but this difference may have affected the sympathies of early modern audiences even more.

**TP:** How did you choose *Perkin Warbeck* and *Love's Sacrifice* as accompanying staged readings?

**JP:** *Perkin Warbeck* was exciting because it was a less visible example of the history play genre, with connections to Shakespeare through *Richard III*. We ruled out *Broken Heart* because we had already done a reading of it back in 2006 and Theatre for a New Audience had done a production a few years ago, so *Love's Sacrifice* seemed the obvious other choice. The plays offered a great context for *'Tis Pity* because the three of them share a lot of themes: wrongful or illicit love affairs, fascination with blood and hearts, combination of tragic material with comic elements.

**TP:** When people think of early modern drama, many just think of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. What did you find distinctive about Ford's Caroline perspective?

**JB:** All these playwrights are different from each other, but Ford grew up in the early modern theatre, and came of age at the end of the Jacobean period watching these earlier plays. *'Tis Pity* is in some ways an homage, but not just an homage – it's an attempt to do his own version of a specific genre, a backwards look. There's a romanticism towards earlier plays, like *Romeo and Juliet* – unlike earlier playwrights who directly competed with each other even while borrowing, he has enough distance from them to treat them with respect while still branching out.

Red Bull's *'Tis Pity*:

<http://www.redbulltheater.com/#!tis-pity-shes-a-whore/cb7w>

New York Times review:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/theater/review-in-tis-pity-forbidden-love-the-most-attractive-kind.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/theater/review-in-tis-pity-forbidden-love-the-most-attractive-kind.html?_r=0)

New York Daily News review:

<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/theater-arts/tis-pity-whore-review-tragedy-taboos-article-1.2201020>

Broadway Blog Review:

<http://thebroadwayblog.com/2015/04/30/12356-review-tis-pity-shes-a-whore>

Red Bull's *Perkin Warbeck*:

<http://www.redbulltheater.com/#!perkin-warbeck/cg7f>

Red Bull's *Love's Sacrifice*:

<http://www.redbulltheater.com/#!loves-sacrifice/cjqv>