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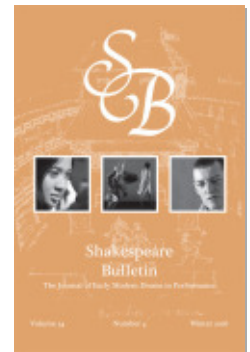
*The Alchemist* Presented by Resurgens Theatre (review)

Samantha Smith

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*The Alchemist*

Presented by **Resurgens Theatre** at the **Shakespeare Tavern Playhouse**, Atlanta, Georgia. April 11–15, 2016. Directed by Brent Griffin. Costumes by Anné Carole Butler and Catherine Thomas. With Janine DeMichele Baggett (Doll Common), J. Tony Brown (Sir Epicure Mammon), Hannah Lake Chatham (Dame Pliant), Emily Crawford (Neighbor), Thom Gillott (Subtle), Brent Griffin (Lovewit), Joe Kelly (Ananias), Genevieve Leopold (Neighbor), Stuart McDaniel (Face), Daniel Pino (Kastril), Chris Rushing (Surly), Catherine Thomas (Neighbor), Jim Wall (Drugger), Amelia Waters (Neighbor), and Frankie Webster (Neighbor).

SAMANTHA SMITH, *The Atlanta Shakespeare Company*

Resurgens Theatre employed the original practices for which the company is known—including universal lighting, minimalist staging, Renaissance costuming, original pronunciation, interaction with the audience, and editing of the source text—to present a straightforward production of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. The production showed that Jonson's play requires no transmutation to function in the modern era; this seventeenth-century portrait of avarice felt familiar in a twenty-first-century world of corruption. Director Brent Griffin's judicious decision to excise the characters of Dapper and Tribulation shortened the play and focused the narrative to the series of deceptions most crucial to moving the plot to its conclusion. Without the complex visuals or superimposed themes of some modern productions, Resurgens presented a staging that put the actors in the forefront. In their respective performances as Doll, Sir Epicure Mammon, and Surly, Janine DeMichele Baggett, Tony Brown, and Chris Rushing stood out by making choices that encouraged the audience to ponder the benefits and dangers of greed.

Playing a member of the triumvirate of deceivers, Baggett made Doll's avarice for material possessions evident throughout the production, but she also highlighted Doll's enjoyment of more power than women were typically awarded in Jacobean England. Choosing to operate outside the law is what allows Doll also occasionally to operate outside the bounds of a rigid patriarchy. Unlike Dame Pliant, played with enchanting flirtatious energy by Hannah Lake Chatham, Doll did not always need to acquiesce to the demands of men. Baggett perfectly captured Doll's feistiness when she responded to being pushed to the floor by Face by pulling his own sword on him; later, she herself threw Subtle to the floor, effectively forcing him into a position of subservience, just as Face had done to her forty lines earlier (Fig. 11). Baggett's performance choices in



Fig. 11. Janine DeMichele Baggett as Doll Common and Thom Gillott as Subtle in Resurgens Theatre's 2016 production of *The Alchemist*, directed by Brent Griffin. Photo courtesy of Ivan Machiz.

the scenes where Doll is courted by Sir Epicure Mammon drew attention to an agency that female characters do not usually have in courtship scenes in Renaissance drama. Doll's power in these scenes comes from her misleading Mammon by pretending to be a well-born lady as part of the long con that she, Subtle, and Face are carrying out. Baggett made the ruse obvious and comical by speaking in a higher voice than usual, with slightly elongated vowel sounds, as if she were impersonating a member of the English upper classes; she employed stylized gestures that both mirrored and mocked the aristocracy's behavior. Doll's power is temporary, but the fact that she has the agency to participate directly in deceiving Mammon made the stage picture of an older man leering over a young, pretty woman more palatable for a modern audience. Although Doll is never rewarded with the material possessions she seeks, Baggett's performance raised the question of whether there were social, although definitely not moral, gains to be made from the greed that fuels Doll's actions within the play.

Sir Epicure Mammon is the victim of the avarice of Doll, Subtle, and Face, largely because he himself is driven by an avarice so great and so acute that he cannot be persuaded by his more sensible companion, Surly, of the folly of pursuing the philosopher's stone. Tony Brown drew attention to Mammon's unadulterated greed with almost every performance

choice he made onstage. Brown spoke Mammon's line "Be rich" with such yearning, lingering on each monosyllable, that it seemed like an invocation (see *The Alchemist*, in *English Renaissance Drama*, ed. David Bevington et al, Norton, 2002, 2.1.7; all subsequent references to the play are to this edition). Similarly, he ambled through the delivery of the long speeches in act two, scene one, in which Mammon details what he would do with his enormous wealth if he were to acquire the stone. Brown's delivery gave the lines a daydream quality that showed just how much Mammon hungers for the riches and pleasurable life that he believes will accompany possession of the stone. By moving from gazing into the distance to using original practices by making eye contact with the individuals seated closest to the stage, Brown seemingly invited the audience to participate in his reverie. Unsurprisingly, Mammon never receives the stone, but the danger and futility of avarice were amply illustrated by Brown's depiction of his covetousness.

Surly, played by the talented Chris Rushing, served as the moral compass of the play, providing a brief but welcome respite in a comedy overrun by selfish, covetous characters. Rushing's physicality greatly enhanced his character; when talking with Mammon, he frequently stood with his arms firmly crossed, as if creating a physical barrier between himself and Mammon's overwhelming greed and foolishness. Every performance choice Rushing made reinforced Surly's resolute desire to avoid being a gullible victim, such as his choice of a harsh staccato tone in which to speak the words, "I would not willingly be gulled" (2.1.77). Rushing wore light yellow tights, but Surly's behavior provides a stark contrast to the similar attire of the easily beguiled Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Malvolio is so easily tricked into believing that Maria's letters are indeed from Olivia because he is hoping for the transformation of his social status if he marries Olivia. Driven by logic, Surly recognizes that Mammon is being fooled by the prospect of financial and social transformation offered by Subtle and Face, who promise to create the philosopher's stone through an alchemical transformation that they have no real ability to generate.

Rushing portrayed Surly at times as burdened by the responsibility of being the only pragmatic character on the stage. When listing all the components that could combine to create the philosopher's stone (2.3.185–91), Rushing rattled through the series of words with incredulous contempt. He made Surly's stint as the Spanish grandee a delightfully humorous one, bolstered by the actor's strong Spanish skills and his amusing flirtations with audience members and Dame Pliant alike. The earnestness Rushing showed in expressing his romantic interest to Dame

Pliant made it more disheartening when she rejected him for Lovewit. Surly is the moral hero of the play, but he does not get the traditional hero's recompense of the lady's hand in marriage. Rushing's sorrowful, downcast eyes at the play's conclusion invited some scorn for a world in which virtue earns no recompense. Perhaps the fact that *The Alchemist* transfers seamlessly into the modern era suggests that the play encourages some derision for the modern world order as well.



***King and Country: Shakespeare's Great Cycle of Kings***

Presented by the **Royal Shakespeare Company** at the **BAM Harvey Theater**, Brooklyn, New York, in partnership with The Ohio State University. March 24—May 1, 2016. Directed by Gregory Doran. Set and costumes by Stephen Brimson Lewis. Lighting by Tim Mitchell. Music by Paul Englishby. Sound by Martin Slavin. Movement by Michael Ashcroft. Fights by Terry King.

***Richard II***

With Jasper Britton (Henry Bolingbroke), Sean Chapman (Earl of Northumberland), Oliver Ford Davies (Duke of York), Julian Glover (John of Gaunt), Jane Lapotaire (Duchess of Gloucester), Sam Marks (Duke of Aumerle), Christopher Middleton (Duke of Mowbray), Matthew Needham (Harry Percy), Sarah Parks (Duchess of York), Leigh Quinn (The Queen), David Tennant (King Richard II), and others.

MANUEL JACQUEZ, *The Ohio State University*

***1 Henry IV***

With Martin Bassindale (Prince John), Jasper Britton (King Henry IV), Antony Byrne (Earl of Worcester), Sean Chapman (Earl of Northumberland/Earl of Douglas), Robert Gilbert (Lord Edmund Mortimer), Alex Hassell (Prince Hal), Emma King (Lady Mortimer), Jennifer Kirby (Lady Percy), Sam Marks (Ned Poins), Matthew Needham (Hotspur), Sarah Parks (Mistress Quickly), Joshua Richard (Owen Glendower), Antony Sher (Sir John Falstaff), Andrew Westfield (Earl of Westmorland), and others.

STEPHANIE PIETROS, *College of Mount Saint Vincent*

***2 Henry IV***

With Matthew Bassindale (Prince John), Jasper Britton, (Henry IV), Antony Byrne (Pistol), Sean Chapman (Earl of Northumberland), Oliver Ford Da-