



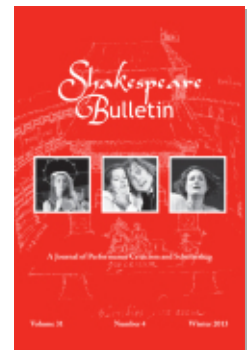
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The Changeling (review)

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The Changeling

Presented by **Resurgens Theatre Company** at **The Warehouse**, Tallahassee, FL, November 9–12, 2012, and at **The New American Shakespeare Tavern** in Atlanta, GA, November 20, 2012. Directed and edited by Brent Griffin. Choreography by Genoa Belson. Costume Design by Michele Belson. Makeup by Joe Fisher. Music direction by Kate Mazzotta. With Adam Braun (Alsemero), Kevin Carr (Alonzo de Piracquo), Zakiya Jas (Diaphanta), Laura Johnson (Beatrice-Joanna), Jim McMurtry/Ty Wold (Vermandero), Lanny Thomas (DeFlores), Art Wallace (Jasperino) and Travis Young (Tomazo de Piracquo).

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Outside of works by Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling* is one of early modern drama's most-performed plays; it is also, however, a challenging play to produce, partly because its alternating plots differ widely in tone and can prove difficult to integrate on stage. Brent Griffin of Resurgens Theatre Company, a theater group that specializes in original practices productions of rarely-performed early modern verse dramas, eliminated the struggle entirely by cutting the comic subplot.

The resulting production of *The Changeling* paid close attention to both the urgency of the verse and the intensity of the tragic action. Griffin directed his actors with specific line readings that utilized the vigorous verse of *The Changeling* (references to whose text here will be to the edition in *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton* [Oxford: OUP, 2007]). In rehearsals, which I was fortunate to observe, he spoke of the music of the words, asking his actors to make the language "reverberate." He reminded them that, in the early modern period, theatergoers were called the "audience," not "spectators," emphasizing the importance of sound in early modern plays. Adam Braun, the actor playing Alsemero, was precise and antiquated in his speech, pronouncing the "-ion" ending of words like "perfection" and "confirmation" with two syllables instead of one. Alsemero's good friend Jasperino, played by Art Wallace, used a slightly Caribbean accent, calling to mind both his class distinction from Alsemero and the early modern transatlantic trade, part of the historical context of the play.

The cast of *The Changeling* took the stage after only a week-long rehearsal schedule, a practice that approximates some early modern rehearsal strategies. The venue was the Warehouse, a Tallahassee bar and pool hall with a large multi-purpose room in back. This room is easily

transformed into a dance floor, a concert hall or, as for this evening, a theater. The dusty wooden beams, dim wall sconces and clinking of beer glasses provided an especially apt atmosphere for a production that attempted to reproduce, in part, the experience of an indoor Jacobean playhouse. The diffused lighting evoked a candle-lit room in which everything, even the stage, was in constant partial shadow. The set was simple; a thrust stage of black platforms extended the existing stage twelve feet into the audience. A black cloth backdrop created a crossover and screened the off-stage areas. The only set piece on stage was a large box with a door—something like a plain black wardrobe. A cellist, Deanna Remus, sat on one corner of the stage, underscoring specific moments of speech and action with music that switched abruptly from lyrical and romantic to dark and menacing with all the intensity of a silent film score. At its most subtle, this music helped set the mood; however, at times it became intrusive and almost humorous, turning DeFlores' entrances into those of a villain from a melodrama.

When the actors took the stage, only three or four stage lights illuminated them beyond the room's ambient light, creating a chiaroscuro effect. Beatrice-Joanna, played by Laura Johnson, was a dark-haired beauty in a crimson gown, full of vim and verve. Her first meeting with Alsemero was all suggestive flirtation and lip-biting hesitation. DeFlores, played by Lanny Thomas, was lusty, funny and forceful, with a head of greasy gray hair and artfully applied pimples and moles to give him the requisite skin condition.

The actors made good use of the space, often descending from stage to audience area to deliver lines or even entire scenes. At one point, DeFlores leered over a table of young women to provide a description of the ways in which Beatrice-Joanna spurned him, causing a ripple of giggles through the room. During the scene in which DeFlores gives Alonzo a tour of the castle, the two actors moved between the tables of theatergoers. DeFlores stabbed Alonzo in the back of the room, behind most of the audience members, a choice that occluded some of the sightlines. However, this enhanced the tension and shock of the act as he quickly dragged Alonzo, screaming, through the audience to the front to finish the job on stage.

In cutting *The Changeling's* subplot, a director runs the risk of losing almost all of the play's comic relief. Without the madhouse scenes, the pace of Beatrice-Joanna's downfall seems even more frenetic and gives the audience almost no breathing room from the dark, claustrophobic atmosphere of the Alicante plot. However, this production compensated



Fig. 8. Laura Johnson as Beatrice-Joanna and Lanny Thomas as DeFlores in Resurgens Theatre's 2012 production of *The Changeling*. Photo courtesy of Ivan Machiz.

for this through the character of Alonzo, Beatrice-Joanna's unwelcome suitor, played by Kevin Carr, co-founder of Resurgens Theatre Company. Wearing a long curly wig and big pantaloons, Carr brought out the humor in his character by emphasizing his obliviousness. His reading of the line, "You speak as if she loved some other" had the audience howling (2.1.143). Carr also made the character effeminate; in almost every scene, Alonzo carried a single long-stemmed flower with which he twirled and gestured. Even his death scene included some humor. When DeFlores murdered him, Alonzo's wig fell off; DeFlores picked it up and stuffed it in his mouth, suffocating his cries for help. Alonzo's return as a ghost was also cut from the production, preserving our sense of his presence as an exclusively comic one.

Like many directors since the sixties and seventies, Griffin read the play as a Freudian tale of unconscious desire rather than a morality tale about the wages of sin. In his staging, Beatrice-Joanna was an amoral woman whose latent lust had been awakened by the man she finds most revolting. Johnson played Beatrice-Joanna's disgust for DeFlores admirably, tossing her head and wrinkling her nose each time she encountered him. Their first kiss was forced, awkward, and terrifying to watch, but their sexual relationship quickly warmed after that. Instead of a wedding masque, Griffin explained in the after-show talk-back, he staged a short symbolic dance "to convey the dual nature of her sexuality." Beatrice-Joanna, dressed as a bride, swayed with Alsemero romantically. After Alsemero

left, DeFlores entered, to ominous cello music. Beatrice-Joanna leapt on him, straddling him. He lowered her to the stage, violently thrust her legs apart, and they mimed sex, Beatrice-Joanna grasping at him in climax. He grabbed her veil, laughed and exited the stage. Beatrice-Joanna continued to lie in the same spot, groaning and touching herself in what looked like a masturbatory act, before huddling on the floor, weeping.

The final scene of *The Changeling* almost always provides insight into the director's interpretation of the relationship between Beatrice-Joanna and DeFlores. In it, the adulterous couple, awaiting Alsemero's judgement, are forced into a closet together, from which Beatrice-Joanna's cries are heard moments later. When the couple emerges, Beatrice is fatally wounded. However, her screams themselves are ambiguous; they could signify a rape, consensual sex (and orgasm) or simply murder. In the final scene of this production, the cries were not conclusive; they might have been produced by pleasure or pain. However, the actions of the couple after their release indicated a deep psycho-sexual bond on both sides. Beatrice-Joanna, blood stains spreading across her belly, slumped on the stage crying and begging for forgiveness. Her guilt and shame, however, did not stop her from clasping DeFlores center-stage while they died. Their connection was emphasized again during Alsemero's final speech, when they rose from their prone positions and exited the stage separately, waving mournfully at each other. DeFlores' prediction came true: "She that in life and love refuses me, in death and shame my partner she shall be" (3.4.157–8).

