MSA Theater Reviews · Ann Basso, University of South Florida · Performances Editor

Review of *Doctor Faustus*, by Christopher Marlowe, at The New American Shakespeare Tavern, dir. Brent Griffin, presented by the Resurgens Theatre Company. Oct. 28-31, 2013. Wednesday, October 30, 2013 7:30 pm

The Resurgens Theatre Company offered Atlanta theatergoers quite a rollercoaster ride this past Halloween: an (almost) all-female high-velocity production of *Doctor Faustus.* A short hour after sitting down, audiences had bid farewell to Faustus and were attempting to put together the pieces of their lives. One was dragged by the scruff of the neck to hell and back, but the journey was extremely entertaining.

While Resurgens declares itself to be a company devoted to "original practices," they take mischievous glee in toying with notions of authenticity. Their work in this production included, as the program promised, "audience interaction, minimalist staging, organic music, same-sex casting, thematic doubling, uninterrupted performance, universal lighting, and a very strong emphasis on verse-speaking," but the players were women; the text was heavily pruned and at times significantly altered; and some of the devils ended up being belly dancers! However, these choices resulted in an illuminating performance. The actors' moments of inauthenticity, if one might use that word in a positive sense, revealed many of the strengths and even a few of the weaknesses in Marlowe's script, and the performance was without question one of the most dynamic ever seen at the Shakespeare Tavern.

Using the 1604 quarto as their main text, the production excised nearly every scrap of low humor, leaving only the visitation to Rome intact. What remains is an intense focus upon what one of my students recently described as the play's "bromance": the relationship between Faustus and Mephistopheles. Ten minutes after a group of women in monk's robes chant the Prologue, the play hurtles to the conjuration. Mephistopheles emerges not as a dreadful devil, however, but as a pot-bellied pizza delivery boy in a baseball cap. The tone of Faustus's relationship with Mephistopheles becomes clear once the devil returns once more not as a friar, but as a gorgeous woman in skin-tight leather pants. "Pliant," indeed!

Same-sex casting is the hallmark of Resurgens productions, but in this production we have one male actor: the director himself, Brent Griffin, who plays his role with high-velocity abandon. While male actors do make appearances in the company's productions, the gender dynamic created in this particular play deserves consideration.

Marlowe's play contains few actual women. Indeed, the play seems to delight in the unconvincing presence of the few female characters who appear, because they are either monstrous (like Faustus's "wife," the "hot whore" summoned by Mephistopheles in a fit of pique), demonic (like the figure of Lust, one presumes), or silent, such as the spirit avatars of Alexander's paramour and Helen of Troy. The play does wittily toy with the pregnant Duchess, showing Faustus reaching up her skirt for grapes while the Duchess alternates between cries of passion and labor, thereby erasing the only decent woman in the story.

Faustus's Wittenberg university is a gender fortress full of male companionship and emotional deprivation into which Mephistopheles insinuates himself. However, in this production, the intense friendship becomes heterosexual with the inclusion of a female Mephistopheles. While Laura W. Johnson, the tall handsome woman who plays Faustus's devilish companion, portrays Mephistopheles as one of the boys—her ability to physically take up space in a fashion comparable to Faustus is a subtle feat and an effective one—the play, perhaps deliberately, reveals that the power dynamics between the two are far from one-sided. Indeed, the production plays Faustus's desire to keep Mephistopheles as something closer to sex slavery than necromancy. Over the course of the twenty-four years, we see Mephistopheles develop a strange affection for her mark, culminating in a compelling re-envisioning of Faustus's final scene with Helen.

A weary Faustus begs his companion for Helen in order to extinguish clean his thoughts of repentance. As he kisses the silent beauty, Mephistopheles responds as though aroused and joins the two lovers in their embrace. The three leave the stage for what seems to be a *ménage a trois*, leaving the audience to see Mephistopheles anew as both complicit and desperately lonely. This moment of weakness is somewhat effaced by the demon's appearance to recite part of the Epilogue, a neat trick to show that the theater is the devil's work, but creating a romantically-desirous Mephistopheles raises questions about the significance of the relationship between magician and demon and the agency of either character.

Because of the play's cuts, the rest of the characters in the play are sins and devils, although doubling allows for the clever appearance of the Good Angel as Lechery, and the Bad Angel as the Pope. These actors are marvelous, and the production uses their various talents to great effect in a series of production numbers that reveal why the Seven Deadly Sins would ravish Faustus's soul and how knowledge can be sexy. Strange stage directions such as "Re-enter MEPHISTOPHILIS with DEVILS, who give crowns and rich apparel to FAUSTUS, dance, and then depart" in scene five were manifested by several belly dancers and fire eaters. When Faustus wishes to "argue of divine astrology," a woman appears for each planet, and they all move around the professor to the dance of the spheres, coming to a screeching halt only when Faustus slyly asks, "Tell me who made the world?" The Seven Deadly Sins, following hard on the heels of this query, employ physical comedy to great effect before pouring into the audience to berate various tables for their seeming godliness.

Because these shows do indeed delight the viewer's mind, discomforts about the significance of the staging choices creep in only later. The effect of all this erotic maleficence is a performance that argues women are indeed evil. When Patrick Stewart played Othello as the sole Caucasian in a race-reversed production at the Shakespeare Theatre in 1997, the inadvertent consequence was to make the tragedy into a plantation saga, largely because the powerful protagonist was a white man enacting violence against various

African American characters. While provocative, the production choices worked against the meaning of the play in some reviewers' opinions. The same issue hovers at the edges of this very entertaining play: by casting every role as a woman *except* the main role, does the play unconsciously recreate and indeed celebrate the misogyny of Marlowe's play? With a troupe like Resurgens, it would be tempting to write off this dynamic as an ironic commentary on the role of women in plays of this sort, but even if the performances were meant to be ironic, they are still compulsively reinforcing the association between the feminine and the ungodly.

One hates to sound puritanical in the face of such a wildly funny and passionate play. The production does seduce, both through the intensity of Griffin's performance—the other players are hard-pressed to keep up with his speed or his emotional heights—and the wonderfully funny production numbers. Additionally, the capable musicians ensconced on the Juliet balcony created a rich emotional soundtrack for the entire performance. As my companion, a brave soul unversed in Marlowe's plays, asserted as we left the theater, "They had me at the Seven Deadly Sins." So say we all.

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***The Jew of Malta,* dir. Douglas Morse, Grandfather Films (2012)**

Last summer, the attendees at the annual MSA conference in Staunton, Virginia were privileged to view the premiere of Douglas Morse's film of *The Jew of Malta* and to participate in an informative discussion with the director and Ben Curns, the actor who plays Machiavel. The film itself opens with Curns's excellent reading of the Prologue, which, in a clever touch, is delivered from the balcony of the beautiful reproduction of the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton. It then turns to Seth Duerr, as Barabas--and it never loses that focus. Duerr dominates the production, not only because he is almost always present, but also because, with the exceptions of Ben Steinfeld and Derek Smith in the roles of Ithamore and Ferneze, he is by far the most powerful actor in the company. As a result, one's opinion of the film depends in large part of what one thinks of his interpretation and performance.

Delivering the verse both beautifully and forcefully, Duerr gives us a strong, dignified Barabas, who seems (physically as well as figuratively) to tower over the other characters; staging and costuming emphasize his dominance: he is dressed in voluminous robes, and often positioned on a platform or seen in close-ups so that he appears much larger than those who surround him. Especially in contrast to the lesser figures in the play, whose leaning toward caricature seemed to be emphasized both intentionally and by inferior acting, he is one of the few characters who never appears ridiculous (except when that is his objective, in the role the French musician). Duerr holds the film together and moves it along with the force of this performance. One result is the inevitable downplaying of the play's farcical elements and contradictions: this is Barabas as a fully realized tragic figure, capable of some feeling for Abigail, but motivated primarily by self-interest and hatred for those who oppose him. When Abigail retrieves his treasure, for example, he delivers the line "Welcome, the first beginner of my bliss!" (2.2.49) directly to the bags of money, remembering his daughter merely as an afterthought. "I am always nearest to myself" (spoken in English as well as Latin; 1.1.188) is his clear, consistent guiding principle. Among the first-night audience, there were those who objected strongly to this portrayal, feeling that it robbed Marlowe's play of its absurd humor. While my own interpretation of the text leans toward emphasizing some of its absurdities, unexpected turns, and strange juxtapositions, however, I found Duerr's performance—and the film in general—both powerful and persuasive.

Appearing tiny in his rags, Ben Steinfeld as Ithamore makes an excellent foil to Duerr. He gives us the wily slave as a comical evil sprite, who makes up for his deficiencies in intelligence with his dark humor. His duet with Barabas about the misfortunes they have visited on Christians is stunning and he shines even in the inevitably silly scenes with Bellamira and Pilla-Borza.

Derek Smith's Ferneze was also worthy of note. Smith plays the governor as if he were the descendant of one of Richard Burton's lesser kings: drily low-key but powerful, seeming vaguely but not wholly British, he was quite obviously deceitful from the beginning. And this is fortunate, because one of the film's excisions is the sequence with del Bosco, in which Ferneze is offered the support of Spain if he refuses to pay tribute to the Turks. Apparently, this was omitted for technical reasons, but it was one of a group of similar cuts that made the story-line (such as it is) seem much more straightforward, depriving it of some complexity. In this case, it did away with the political triangulation that Emily Bartels and others have discussed. Some in the audience also complained that it left Ferneze without a motive for his betrayal of the Turks, but Smith's portrayal of Ferneze allowed one to believe that he broke the truce simply because he, too, cared for no one but himself--an interpretation that could be justified by Barabas's earlier advice to Abigail, "[Christians] themselves hold it as a principle / Faith is not to be held with heretics" (2.3.314-15)--and certainly, Marlowe's other plays have contained similar betrayals (see particularly the Christian Sigismund's breaking of the truce with Orcanes in *Tamburlaine II*). I was more bothered by the cuts that occurred toward the end—especially Barabas's speech about his intention to play Fernenze and Calymath against each other, reprising his earlier actions. These appear to have been made in the service of moving the action more quickly towards its conclusion, but they had the unfortunate effect, at least in my view, of rendering events more confusing and diminishing the force of Barabas's death.

The remaining actors read Marlowe's lines with varying degrees of facility. Kate Heaney as Abigail did a serviceable, if slightly student-like, job, in a part that is difficult to play (and apparently, according to the director, to cast). Ian Antal and Geoffrey Murphy as a foppish Mathias and a thuggish Ludovico made a good pairing, as did Ian Gould and Paul Klementowicz as the similarly contrasting Jacomo and Bernardine. The Turks spoke with appropriate accents, but the speech patterns of the other performers seemed somewhat erratic. While it makes sense to contrast Barabas and the other Jews, for example, here they seemed to inhabit entirely different universes. The scene-setting was irregular as well, sometimes appearing almost impressionistic (Ferneze sitting alone on a battlement to meet with an unaccompanied Calymath) and at other times fully realized, though from a variety of periods: one of the oddest examples of the latter is when Barabas and the other Jews meet in a relatively modern synagogue (rather than in his home), with an ark that remains open throughout the scene; I would assume that this was done to create visual interest and to set some markers of "Jewishness" against the Maltese crosses in the following scene—but to those with a Jewish background, it could also be a little distracting.

But these are, to my mind, small cavils. I found the film, and especially Duerr's and Steinfeld's performances, quite compelling. I might hesitate to recommend it to those who have not read the play, but I think it would be wonderful to have in the classroom. While it may not be exactly in accord with my own interpretation, the differences should make for a very lively and interesting discussion.