Doctor Faustus (review)

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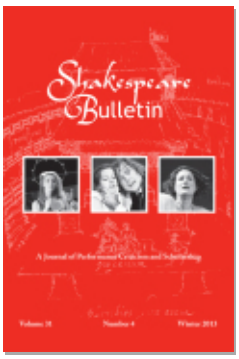

Doctor Faustus
Presented by Resurgens Theatre Company at The Warehouse, Tallahassee, Florida, April 13-16, 2012. Directed by Brent Griffin and Kevin Carr. Choreography by Melanie Cochrane. Costume Design by Alice Woodhurst, Nancy Fisher, and Michele Belson. Special effects by Joe Fisher. Original music composed by Alyze Rabideau. Necromantic art design by Sarah Kiesow. With Brent Griffin (Faustus), Laura Johnson (Mephistophilis), Gwendolyn Gay (Good Angel, Lechery), Tess McDermott (Bad Angel, Covetousness), Holly Grissom (Hot Whore, Helen of Troy), Lisa Reasoner (Lucifer, Old Man), Zakiya Jas (Pride, Emperor), Dorothea Syleos (Envy, Duchess), Danielle Mohr (Wrath, Alexander), and others.

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Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* may be an example of a play that is actually better experienced through reading than in the theatre. Performances of *Faustus* can leave even the most enthusiastic admirers of the play wearied by that character's schizophrenic solipsism. The Manichean struggle grandly captured in the text can seem less fearsome and more tedious on stage: by the time Faustus sees God bending his ireful brow and looking fiercely on him, the audience members might be looking just as fiercely at their watches.

Resurgens Theatre Company, the project of Brent Griffin—a Shakespearean scholar and seasoned actor who has studied at Shakespeare's Globe in London—and Kevin Carr, a scholar of renaissance drama who also has considerable experience in theatre—took risks with Marlowe's play that, in less capable hands, might have ended as regrettably as things do for Faustus. Griffin edited the A-text to omit the "low" comic scenes featuring Wagner, Rafe, Robin, and the horse courser, a choice explained in the program thus: "We… feel that low humor elicited by these scenes invariably detracts from the protagonist's tragic demise. Therefore, we've created a stripped down, psychologically driven version of the play that focuses sharply on the relationship between Faustus and Mephistophilis (and by extension, Faustus and his own highly vexed conscience)." As much as we might quibble with the rationale, the cutting of these scenes created an unrelenting focus on the relationship between the two characters, and the chemistry and tension between Griffin's Faustus and Laura Johnson's Mephistophilis grew throughout this briskly paced performance even until the wrenching end.

Griffin and Carr use the term "original practices" to describe their choices of a thrust stage, universal lighting, organic music, thematic doubling, and audience interaction. They also kept with the early modern practice of single-sex casting—but instead of boy players, the cast was made up almost entirely of women (the only exceptions being Griffin and Joe Fisher in the initial shape of Mephistophilis). The effect was striking: Marlowe's patriarchal scholarly context in which the allure of evil is largely intellectual was transformed into a world in which the temptation toward diabolism is a physical compulsion. Faustus's psychomachia took place in a sexualized context, his self-absorption an expression of masculinity within a realm characterized by feminine sexuality. Griffin's ultra-masculine Faustus was the male center of the universe. In reviving Faustus's sexuality, the production reached back to Marlowe's source text, the English Faust Book, and the sexual prowess displayed by Faustus therein. In addition, the A-text's tacit hints at homoeroticism were transformed into a primarily straight sexual dynamic in this production. The all-female cast shifted the dynamic differently in certain scenes, however. At Helen's appearance in 5.1, instead of the male gaze settling on the object of sexual desire, the scholars were played by women admiring another woman's beauty. Helen (Holly Grissom, who, in a nice bit of doubling, also played the "Hot Whore") was not a sexual object but an aesthetic ideal.

The sexual dynamic predominated in this production, owing largely to a fiendishly hot Mephistophilis. When the devil first appeared, it was

in the shape of a grotesque man with abdominal muscles drawn in black makeup on his naked (rotund) belly, eliciting chortles from the audience. Griffin's command to "change thy shape" omitted the instruction to return as a Franciscan friar. When the fiend returned, it was in the very sexy shape of Laura Johnson, suited up in skin-tight black leather pants, swaggering up to Faustus. "What will I not do to obtain his soul?" Mephistophilis asks, and, in this performance, feminine wiles and sexual charms were included in her bag of tricks. As Faustus, Griffin perfectly embodied the character's narcissism and his utter humanity, here, characterized in part by his own inability to resist sexual temptations—a man who is weakened, not strengthened, by virtue of his sex.

The decision to make Mephistophilis a sexually appealing devil was effective visually, and it had the profound result of making palpable the temptations of the devil, which skeptical postmodern audiences might not otherwise grasp as keenly. If casting an alluring Mephistophilis risked detracting from the crisis of conscience behind Faustus's schizophrenic wavering between repentance and obdurate commitment to the left-hand path, the complexity of Johnson's performance prevented this. "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it. / Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God, / And tasted the eternal joys of heaven, / Am not tormented with ten thousand hells / In being deprived of everlasting bliss?", she intoned desperately, and with chilling understatement.

Actors in supporting roles also delivered strong performances. As both Lucifer and the Old Man, Lisa Reasoner was a crucial presence in the production. In one of a number of moments of audience interaction, Reasoner appeared as the Old Man in the back of the room, among and behind much of the audience, pleading with Faustus to leave his foolish practices and repent: "Break heart, drop blood, mingle it with tears." During the pageant of the seven deadly sins, the actors descended from the stage and taunted and teased audience members as they circulated throughout the room. Griffin grabbed an audience member's beer and took a large gulp, a visual complement to the indulgent "world of profit and delight" Faustus anticipates.

Despite the omission of the comic scenes from the script, the production was not altogether devoid of humor. The initial guise of Mephistophilis, the appearance of the "hot whore" (2.1), and the slapstick Pope-taunting (3.1) got laughs. In a titillating scene that conflated the Emperor and Duke/Duchess of Vanholt scenes (4.1 and 4.2), the pregnant Duchess requested grapes, and Mephistophilis reached up under her skirts, fiddling around for a minute (the Duchess gasping with pleasure) before

Fig. 16. Faustus's (Brent Griffin) psychic battle embodied in the figures of the Good Angel (Gwendolyn Gay) and the Bad Angel (Tess McDermott). Photo by Amanda Kincaid.

withdrawing and presenting her with the fruits of her, ahem, labor —the luscious bunch of grapes. This was good naughty fun.

The set, music, and choreography were appropriate and unobtrusive, keeping the text and performances the focus of this production. The minimalistic setting featured the scholar's desk with skull and books, as well as an elaborate conjuring circle on the stage floor. The play was complemented by Alyze Rabideau's eerie original melodies played on winds and strings. When Faustus and Mephistophilis "argue[d] of divine astrology" in 2.3, the dialogue on the celestial bodies was accompanied by an ethereal dance of the stars and planets choreographed by Melanie Cochrane. These design choices were an excellent backdrop to the psychic unraveling of Griffin's Faustus. In the end, Mephistophilis did not reappear and Faustus's body was not carried away by devils or torn asunder. Crying out for Mephistophilis, Faustus was left alone on stage. Was this an existential portrait of human despair? Was there, finally, no devil, no god, simply nothingness after all? Perhaps—but I think that for this Faustus, Hell might simply be never getting to see his dear Mephistophilis again.