



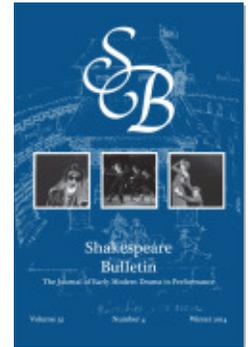
PROJECT MUSE®

The Duchess of Malfi by Resurgens Theatre Company (review)

Cameron E. Williams

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 32, Number 4, Winter 2014, pp. 760-764
(Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/shb.2014.0061](https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2014.0061)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/shb/summary/v032/32.4.williams.html>

the alliance between the darkly besuited Brutus and the calculating Cassius. Cassius was the calm eye in the storm made of intrigues and omens, whose clear motives and absolute unwillingness to be forcibly subjected to any singular ruler made of no more mettle than he brought Brutus's equivocations into stark relief. In the scenes between Cassius and Brutus the clatter of plates and clink of steins was stilled, the audience pausing for a minute to take in the stakes of tyrannical representation.

Such an atmosphere begs for some comic relief, and the Soothsayer served this turn, played as both a prophetic voice—it was he that incanted “beware the ides of March,” the date on which this performance took place—and human jukebox. A tall and lank hobo with beaten guitar, patchwork scarf, and fingerless gloves, he kept the action continuously in motion with cover songs both related to the action and immediately sing-able by the audience. The most powerful instance was his concluding the play with U2's “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” to which both audience and actors sang along. It was then that our communal script was most clear and we as an audience were allowed to enjoy the kind of social cohesion that the ephemerality of the play event makes possible, even if only for a moment.



The Duchess of Malfi

Presented by **Resurgens Theatre Company** at the **New American Shakespeare Tavern**, Atlanta, Georgia. April 14–16 and April 18, 2014. Directed and edited by Brent Griffin. Stage-managed by Kathryn McDonald. Choreography by Hayley Platt. Costume Design by Anné Carole Butler. Fight Choreography by Matt Felton. Props by Kathryn McDonald. Vocal arrangements by Olivia Kaye Sloan. With Chelsea Braden (Julia), Daniel Carter Brown (Bosola), Laura Cole (Duchess of Malfi), Bryan Davis (Cardinal), Kayla DelPizzo (Cariola), Thom Gillott (Ferdinand), Ryan Krygier (Delio), Stuart McDaniel (Antonio), Jim Wall (Doctor/Executioner/Servant), and others.

CAMERON E. WILLIAMS, *University of North Georgia*

In the first act of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the titular Duchess defies her brothers' orders never to remarry and proposes to her steward, Antonio. It is a pivotal scene that exposes the strength and fearless confidence of the Duchess's character. Resurgens Theatre Company added another layer of complexity to this scene in its recent production of Webster's tragedy: as she delivered her proposal, the Duchess (played

with bold and artful savvy by Laura Cole) removed her long, traditional wig and revealed a very modern, very short, spiky blonde close-cropped cut, a hairstyle she then sported for the duration of the play (Fig. 17). It was a surprising and suggestive move on the part of director Brent Griffin. In Webster's play, the Duchess—as both wife and ruler—is a powerful and threatening female figure. On Griffin's stage, as Cole and her modern blonde 'do visually attested, the Duchess was really a force to reckon with.

Gender politics, already one of the more incendiary aspects of Webster's tragedy, were at the forefront of Griffin's production, and Cole's unconventionally shorn locks were a radical staging choice that underscored the play's feminist themes. That the role of the Duchess was filled by a female actor who eagerly embraced a masculine haircut was noteworthy. Resurgens Theatre Company frequently relies on "original practices" in its productions, and although plenty of these were employed in *Malfi*—such as Renaissance costuming, universal lighting, minimalist staging, and a fast-paced performance uninterrupted by intermission—it was Griffin's departure from common portrayals of gender in early modern drama that made this play so exciting. Cole was magnificent in the role of the Duchess. She was a commanding presence onstage, delivering a nuanced performance that struck the right balance between daring and disarming. With cocksure coolness she declared, "Even in this hate, as men in some great battles / By apprehending danger have achieved / Almost impossible actions—I have heard soldiers say so" (1.2.259–61; citations are taken from the Arden edition of the play edited by Leah S. Marcus, London: Methuen, 2009). Cole's Duchess then adopted a masculine swagger and strode defiantly downstage, demonstrating her easy negotiation of male and female spaces. This was compounded when, moments later, she asserted her own agency and took off her wig, that patriarchal symbol of codified feminine beauty, thus further collapsing gender binaries.

Cole's Duchess also spent a good deal of her time onstage visibly pregnant. As a sovereign in Webster's play, the Duchess is not relegated to the private sphere of home and hearth; in Griffin's production, her body quite literally became a site of public speculation, as Bosola (played expertly by Daniel Carter Brown, who was at once sinister and delightfully smarmy in the role) made conspicuous through his attempt to induce labor by offering her "apricocks." Cole's turn in prosthetic pregnancy padding was an adept costuming choice. The Duchess's pregnant belly provided physical and very public evidence of her sexuality, and Cole flaunted it, striding brazenly across the stage and wielding both her authority and her body with equal measure.



Fig. 17. Laura Cole as the Duchess and Stuart McDaniel as Antonio in Resurgens Theatre Company's 2014 production of *The Duchess of Malfi*, directed by Brent Griffin. Photo courtesy of Daniel Parvis.

Cole's chemistry with Stuart McDaniel, who played her lover Antonio, was most enchanting. In one scene, Antonio, the Duchess, and Cariola (Kayla DelPizzo) languidly relaxed on floor cushions while Antonio waxed poetic about Ovid's Daphne and Syrinx. Griffin's direction seemed to want this scene to play as sexual dalliance between all three of these players, but the erotic energy palpable between McDaniel and Cole excluded DelPizzo's vivacious Cariola. That energy became more tangible in the same scene when Cole's Duchess and McDaniel's Antonio shared what appeared to be a perfectly natural and sensual kiss. The magnetism between the two only enhanced the earnestness that McDaniel infused into his portrayal of Antonio.

The Duchess's depraved brother, Ferdinand (Thom Gillott), was an equally captivating onstage presence. Gillott stole many of the scenes in which he appeared. The manic intensity of his performance was overwhelming at times, leaving the audience anxious and uncomfortable in just the right way. His delivery of the line, "Shine on him till he's dead. Let dogs and monkeys / Only converse with him; and such dumb things" (3.2.103–4), animatedly jumping around with hands to armpits in cartoonish mimicry of a monkey, elicited nervous laughter from the audience. Gillott played a very convincing villain; as Ferdinand, he was unpredictable and hateful, and his descent into madness was enthralling. Gillott also skillfully conveyed Ferdinand's incestuous desire for his sister. Every word he spoke to her seemed fraught with innuendo; yet, that desire was most noticeable when he snuck into the Duchess's chambers and watched her until she caught a glimpse of him in her mirror, gazing at her lustfully. The Duchess's other malicious brother, the Cardinal (Bryan Davis), similarly delighted in perversion, the extent of which was captured in the single moment when he killed his mistress, Julia (a beguiling and sultry Chelsea Braden), by forcing her to kiss a poisoned Bible that he held suggestively at groin level.

Cole's Duchess was ultimately executed at Ferdinand's command, but not without first issuing a formidable reading of her famous declaration: "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.137). As the executioner (played by Jim Wall, who in a clever move on Griffin's part also doubled as the doctor) wrapped a red satin cord around her neck, Cole's Duchess remained stoic. Unlike that of her "woman," Cariola—who died violently, kicking and screaming—the Duchess's death was dignified.

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the first production of Webster's play. Profoundly resonant in its own time, *The Duchess of Malfi* is no less relevant today. Griffin's *Malfi* offered a timeless account of the

dangers of corruption and brutality in a Gothic production complete with severed hands and werewolves. Undoubtedly, one of the main reasons for our continued fascination with Webster's play is the power of its eponymous heroine. As Resurgens Theatre Company's production evidenced, the Duchess remains an impressive female character and a remarkable symbol of strength and resolve.