

## THEATER

Delightful Murders  
and Sheer Torture

by James Moses

While “off Broadway” is often the destination for the worst sort of stage-direction anarcho-anachronism, with *Othello* in spaceships and all-lesbian versions of *Macbeth*, it may surprise the non-New Yorker to learn that it is often the place to discover classic drama played absolutely straight (in all senses) and flawlessly acted.

Such was the case recently with a production of John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, presented by the Kings County Shakespeare Company at Brooklyn’s St. Francis College. The play, first staged in 1614 at the Blackfriars and Globe theaters, has since become the most-performed non-Shakespearean tragedy in the English language. Based on a true story about an Italian duchess who suffered a cruel fate at the hands of her two brothers, Ferdinand and “the Cardinal,” for secretly marrying beneath her station, the drama contains at its core a triangular relationship between the Duchess, her steward-husband Antonio, and Ferdinand, who is captive to an incestuous passion for her.

The Duchess is a “right noble” woman, whose “discourse,” Antonio claims, “is so full of rapture / You only will begin then to be sorry / When she doth end her speech,” and her “days are practiced in such noble virtue / That sure her nights, nay more, her very sleeps, / Are more in heaven than other ladies’ shrifts.”

In the Kings County Shakespeare Company’s production, the role of the Duchess is played by Renee Bucciarelli, a “right noble” woman herself, who, had she lived in the age of the madrigal, would certainly have inspired the full flowering of that art. The Duchess of Malfi is one of the greatest (and, likely, the earliest) of the great romantic heroines of English drama—impulsive, impatient of social proprieties, warmly elegant, and profoundly feminine—and this is an actress who realizes all of these attributes to perfection.

The other star is Juilliard graduate Matt D’Amico as Bosola, the henchman of the brothers, who covet their sister’s inheritance. D’Amico pulls off the neat trick of being simultaneously slimy and sympathetic. Once he has been the undoing of the Duchess, her husband, and her children, he expresses heartfelt remorse for his base deeds. Bosola is both part of the action and outside it, villain and avenger—and even impresario, since he opens four, and closes five, scenes in the play. From being the brothers’ hired spy and executioner throughout most of the story, he becomes, in its waning moments, the avenger of the sister’s wrongs.

A veteran of Shakespearean drama, Jon Fordham is the cold, heartless Cardinal, while Ferdinand is played by Andrew Oswald. The latter’s rage throughout is the fire to Fordham’s ice.

More so than that of other Jacobean dramatists, Webster’s art seems continually to shift perspective, which can make the artistic unity of his plays difficult to define.

One who had no trouble defining Webster was Bernard Shaw, who contemptuously dismissed him as “Tussaud laureate.” He saw the playwright as an exploiter of sensational violence who pandered to his audience’s basest voyeuristic instincts. In the film *Shakespeare in Love*, John Webster is the gruesome little boy who finds the Bard’s plays not sufficiently bloodthirsty.

Indeed, I have it on good authority that some modern stagings have been quite colorful, with blood gushing everywhere and chained women with bared breasts. In this production by Jemma Alix Levy, only the stage is bare, with hardly a piece of furniture set down among the players.

However, placing madness and murder at center stage (the play concludes with a stage-clogging, five-corpse pile-up) should not give offense. Webster’s works are vital, at times excessively so. His world is inhabited by people driven, like animals, only by their instincts. In the case of Ferdinand, the twin brother of the Duchess of Malfi, Webster collapses the divide between human and animal when Ferdinand’s wolfish instincts transform him outright into a *lycanthropos* (a “wolfman”).

Webster admitted that *The Duchess* presents “a gloomy world,” and its gloom

emanates from Italy, a convenient punching bag for many English playwrights, who portray Italy as a sink of iniquity, depravity, and corruption, both religious and sexual. It is not the Italy of their own 17th century, baroque and Spanish-dominated, that they describe but the Italy of the 15th century. In the end, though, Italy and Italians stand less for a real country and her people than for a climate of feeling and action.

Soon after my enjoyable experience of theater in Brooklyn, I ventured back into Manhattan for what might be termed a “subversive” production of Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*. *New York Times* theater critic John Rockwell has assured us that “some ‘subversive’ productions are brilliantly unforgettable, like [Robert] Wilson’s account of ‘A Dream Play’ three years ago at the Brooklyn Academy.” (Several years ago, I found Wilson’s “subversion” of *Lohengrin* on the Metropolitan Opera stage “unforgettable” for the way in which he had the lead singers refrain from even the slightest interaction with one another.)

According to Rockwell, “Mr. Wilson revealed facets of Strindberg that Strindberg could never envisage, making for a compelling dialogue across time.”

Well, in this production in a tiny theater converted from an office space near Times Square, facets were revealed, but not those of Strindberg. They were, rather, the exposed breasts of Cleveland, Ohio’s own Miss Julie Saad, acting in the title role. Why Miss Julie’s “Miss Julie” had to appear topless, I cannot imagine, but, then, neither could I imagine what predisposed the company founded by this sylph-like redhead, the inaptly named “Blush Productions,” to set this 19th-century Swedish play, about the master-servant divide and the clash of the sexes, in New York City on the Fourth of July with the cast and audience anticipating the approach, not of Miss Julie’s aristocrat father, but of her Hollywood-director dad. Throw in a reference to a pet rabbit needing an abortion, and you have 90 minutes of incessant torture.

Which is too bad, because Strindberg is a towering figure in world drama. He was alternately a Darwinist, Rousseauist, Socialist, Nietzschean, and Christian mystic; but, whatever his transformations, at the core was an immense personality: sensitive, irreconcilable, occasionally

self-torturing and melancholy. *Miss Julie* contains a remarkable theoretical introduction, in which Strindberg explains his new naturalistic form of the drama: The consistent development of character should be eliminated, because moderns are complicated and vacillating and should be presented as such on stage. Dialogue should be natural and interrupted, as in reality, by sudden thoughts and associations.

The plays should also be short, and *Miss Julie* has a concentrated plot: On a midsummer eve, the young noblewoman Julie is drawn into a love affair with her servant Jean, played here by Bryen Luethy, a junior actor who, unfortunately, gets Strindberg as wrong as does his costar.

Miss Julie falls under his power (at least, that is what happens on those occasions when there is a powerful actor opposite her) and can atone for her shame only through suicide.

The action of the play is continuous. Strindberg was developing a theory that the division of the play into acts with the necessary fall of the curtain shattered the illusion. He even complained that intermissions were only an excuse for the bars to make money.

On this night, I dearly wished that the Common Basis Theater had a bar. Nonetheless, I stuck out to the bitter end this supremely irritating rendition of a classic play, starring and produced by a native of the Buckeye State, a territory of the heartland that had transgressed even more egregiously against New Yorkers and other decadent Northeasterners by stupidly shutting down our power grid. As such, I emerged into the bracing night air to regain my sanity.

Up to a point. Walking the route back to my apartment, I passed the headquarters of Fox TV, whose news "crawl" around the building reported that, earlier that day, "Baddies" (the actual word) had done something "bad" to the occupying power in Iraq and that George W. Bush had manfully asserted in an address in Washington state that "I will do my utmost to protect the salmon of the Pacific Northwest"—no doubt the linchpin of his "No Coho Left Behind" policy.

Webster, thou shouldst be writing at this hour. You could skewer their pretensions and their hypocrisy in Act I and, by final curtain, run all of them through with a sword.

*James Moses writes from New York City.*

## CHRISTIANITY

### Mushy Ecclesial Thinking

by Mark Tooley

National headlines greeted the recent acquittal of a lesbian United Methodist minister by a church court in Washington state. Is America's third-largest religious denomination going the way of the "gay"-friendly Episcopal Church, secular reporters wondered?

The answer is: *probably not*. The trial of the Rev. Karen Dammann was more a reflection of liberal and demographically dying Methodism on the West Coast. The church's growing areas in the South and overseas show no sign of compromising with the times on the issue of homosexuality. Dammann's acquittal, even after she "married" her female companion in Portland in time for the trial, will only help conservatives in the church as they seek to bolster policies against homosexual clergy.

The trial however, cast a spotlight on mushy ecclesial thinking and the flabby reasoning of the *Zeitgeist*, which demands religious conformity to the latest sexual fads.

Crucial to the trial's verdict was the testimony of retired Bishop Jack Tuell, former United Methodist bishop of Portland and Los Angeles. Presented as a "scholar" on church law, Tuell claimed his 8.3-million-member denomination has no official stance on homosexual clergy. The church's Book of Discipline, however, declares:

Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.

Tuell mendaciously argued that this sentence does not really say what it appears to say, because it does not "declare" homosexual practice to be wrong. Instead, the first clause makes an assumption that relies on the church's Social Principles, which are considered advisory and not binding as church law. Therefore, the rest of the sentence is not

enforceable.

Every governing General Conference of the United Methodist Church since 1972 has voted on this language. The prohibition language used to be found exclusively in the Social Principles. In 1998, the church's top court, the Judicial Council, ruled that the prohibition against homosexual clergy was clearly intended to be church law and should be treated as such.

To remove all doubt, the delegates at the 2000 General Conference voted to move the prohibition language from the Social Principles into the Book of Discipline's main body. This action makes Bishop Tuell's claim even more unsupportable. Even further, the Book of Discipline declares that clergy are expected to show "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness." The prohibition on homosexual clergy was reaffirmed at the recently held 2004 General Conference.

Tuell once supported the church's teachings on marriage. How did he come to help a church jury of clergy clearly already sympathetic to Dammann's cause play semantic games to justify their defiance of church law? He has explained his "conversion" in sermons over the last several years. Those sermons reveal not so much a church scholar as a wayward bishop searching for therapeutic justification for his own journey away from historic Christianity and toward cultural accommodation.

"How I Changed My Mind" is a sermon Tuell gave in May 2003 in Claremont, California. In it, he recalls as a "confession" that he helped to develop the current church law requiring "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness." He now believes that he and others involved were motivated only by "institutional protection" and fear.

Remembering his own limited contact with homosexuals throughout his life, Tuell said his stance remained unchanged when he retired as a bishop in 1992. "What is it that makes this mindset so powerful that it can last most of a lifetime?" he asked. First, most people, on the "gut level," have an "instinctive, negative reaction against homosexuality" coming from "subliminal sources." This is fueled by a "pervasive cultural taboo" in society against homosexuality.

Interestingly, Tuell did not question why there is an overwhelming—and universal—taboo against homosexuality. Traditional Christians would say it is the law of God written even on unbelieving