

John Ford's *The Broken Heart*: Impressive production of a rarely performed 17th-century classic

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Directed by Selina Cartmell, at the Duke Theater, New York City, February 5, 2012–March 4, 2012

The Broken Heart, by 17th century English playwright John Ford (1586-c. 1639), is playing Off Broadway at the Duke Theater on 42nd Street in New York City, part of the current season at the Theater for a New Audience (TFANA). The production, directed by Selina Cartmell, is impressive and the cast includes some of Off Broadway's finest performers.

Ford is known to have written numerous plays during the reigns of James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649), although only eight have survived. Their somewhat morbid and violent character speaks in part to the growing social tensions in the years before the English Revolution of 1640, which would lead to the execution of Charles nine years later.

The Broken Heart (written between 1625 and 1633) is laid in ancient Greece and its complex narrative revolves around Amyclas (Philip Goodwin), king of Sparta, his daughter Calantha (Bianca Amato) and their royal court. Commentators suggest that the court of Charles I might more appropriately be considered the play's real setting.

We discover early on that a long feud between two noble Spartan families came to a halt with the engagement of their children, Penthea (Annika Boras) and Orgilus (Jacob Fishel). However, Penthea's father dies before the wedding could take place. Much to her chagrin, this made way for Penthea's twin brother, Ithocles (Saxon Palmer), to coerce her into a more "socially beneficial" elopement with Bassanes (Andrew Weems), a nobleman. Bassanes proves to be a sociopath and insanely jealous.

Understandably, Penthea is deeply depressed in this relationship. And such is Orgilus' unhappiness that he implores his father, Amyclas, for permission to depart for Athens, as he can't bear to see Penthea in the clutches of

such a figure as Bassanes.

However, Orgilus does not leave and disguises himself as an elderly scholar. Ithocles returns from victory in war, with his heart set on the king's daughter, Calantha. But Amyclas seems to have made up his mind that she will wed Nearchus, the prince of Argos (Justin Blanchard). Meanwhile Orgilus' sister, Euphrania (Margaret Loesser Robinson), is for her part very much in love with Prophilus (Ian Holcomb), a close friend of Ithocles. Ultimately, this proves to be the only successful relationship in the piece.

Annika Boras, who performed wonderfully as Lady Macbeth in TFANA'S production of *Macbeth* last year, is especially powerful as the distraught Penthea. Boras and Justin Fishel as Orgilus drive the play forward with their intelligence and sensitive approach to the language.

A turning point for Orgilus comes when, after disguising himself as a scholar, he encounters Penthea all alone in a garden. This scene is both comic and moving in its trajectory. Orgilus attempts to woo Penthea with a ridiculously faux Irish accent, showering the lady with rose petals. This of course does nothing more than perturb her and she quickly rejects the "scholar."

However, Orgilus is stunned when Penthea shuns his advances even after he reveals his true identity. She claims she has been too defiled by her marriage to Bassanes and would not take Orgilus back even if she were widowed. This painful rejection tragically influences subsequent events.

Orgilus sets his sights on revenge against Penthea's brother, Ithocles. The latter, however, apologizes to Orgilus for mistreating him and his sister. Almost as surprisingly, Orgilus accepts the apology, as he does the marriage of Euphrania to Prophilus. However, this equanimity is fleeting.

Ithocles persuades his sister to inform the king's daughter Calantha of his undying love for her. Penthea agrees, but not before reminding him he has deprived her of such affection. Bassanes charges in on this conversation and accuses Penthea and Ithocles of incest. Bassanes' erratic and irrational behavior is portrayed splendidly by Andrew Weems.

Penthea sets out to starve herself in an effort to be rid of the tyrannical Bassanes. This harrowing process concludes with a mesmerizing "mad scene," undoubtedly the highlight of the production. Boras unnerves all those around her and indeed the audience with an indignant animalist rage, pacing the scene just right, skillfully balancing the challenging language with a calculated yet raw physicality.

The moment is quite moving. Penthea has been deprived of the life and love she desired. That she seems in many ways the sanest and most honest character throughout the piece, while those around her falsely pass themselves off as "level headed," is the highest compliment one can pay Ford, Boras and Cartmell.

In any event, Penthea does indeed inform Calantha of her brother's affection. However, the possibility of any successful relationship between Ithocles and Calantha is disrupted by the embittered Orgilus. Penthea's death by starvation propels him to take desperate measures.

Not a great deal is known about playwright John Ford's personal life. Born in Devon and apparently coming from a well-to-do background, the youthful Ford was encouraged by his father to pursue a career as a lawyer.

Ford was accepted into the Middle Temple, a prestigious law school, as well as a center of literary activity, at the age of 16. However, he was expelled three years later for a failure to pay his bill. Although he was eventually admitted, Ford never qualified for the bar.

Certain themes and concerns recur in Ford's body of work. They include a fascination with grotesque violence, high society's morals or lack thereof, injustice and tragic love affairs. Indeed his best known and most often performed piece, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, can too easily be dismissed as sensationalist, considering its mayhem and incest-laden plot.

It might be argued that Ford merely took the work and ideas of John Webster (*The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi*) to a higher level. Webster (c.1580 – c.1634), whose plays were also renowned for their grisly character, acted as a tutor to Ford in the early part of the latter's playwriting career.

Such a view fails to take account of the beauty and

depth of Ford's language and drama, at its best. Unlike so many of today's playwrights, Ford certainly can't be accused of using violence as a gimmick or for mere shock value.

This is particularly the case in *The Broken Heart* (available <http://www.luminarium.org/editions/broken.htm>) and the current production permits the play's strengths to emerge. Director Selena Cartmell has chosen a minimalist set, allowing the language and actors performances to shine. One is delighted to report that finding fault with this production is rather difficult, other than perhaps criticizing its length.

TFANA's version of *The Broken Heart* unfolds in a macabre fashion, but not without some moments of considerable subtlety. One of those, most notably, takes place during the wedding party of Euphrania and Prophilus, when Calantha receives calamitous news, but rather than offer a clichéd melodramatic reaction, Bianca Amato takes it all in with great, stoical restraint.

This is not to say that the melodrama that does take place in the TFANA production is clichéd in any fashion. The epic, non-naturalistic scenes in the Duke Theater's intimate setting rarely fail to deliver.

John Ford was at times accused of leaning too much on melancholia in his works. There may be something to this criticism, but in this version of *The Broken Heart* that melancholia never veers off into sentimentality or becomes unbelievable. TFANA's artistic director Jeffrey Horowitz, Cartmell and her talented cast deserve a great deal of credit for this.



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