

‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore: Playwright John Ford’s lurid classic receives Off-Broadway revival

Robert Fowler
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At the Duke Theater, New York City, April 14-May 16.

New York City’s Red Bull Theater Company is the only troupe in the US currently dedicated to the exploration of the Jacobean plays of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries, to what the company describes as “heightened language plays.” The troupe has pursued this artistic mission since its founding in 2003 with productions of Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, *Volpone* by Ben Jonson and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* by Thomas Middleton, to name but a few.

This spring the New York company’s attention has turned to the provocative and lurid *‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore* by John Ford (1586-c. 1639), which has an incestuous relationship at its center. It is believed that the work was first performed some time between 1630 and 1633 (thus actually in the reign of Charles I). The play’s title alone was so controversial over the years that it was often abbreviated to *‘Tis Pity*, or changed to *Giovanni and Annabella* or simply *The Brother and Sister*. The piece was omitted from an 1831 collected edition of Ford’s work.

Ford’s life spanned a number of significant social and cultural events, including the execution in 1587, one year after his birth, of Mary Queen of Scots; the Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604); the death of Elizabeth I and the end of the Tudor dynasty; and the unification in 1603 of the British and Scottish crowns under James I of England (James VI of Scotland), of the House of Stuart. The efforts of Shakespeare and the other major Elizabethan-Jacobean playwrights were obviously important for Ford, who trained as a lawyer, as was the translation of the Bible into the English language in 1611. Although the precise date of his death is not known, it is believed that Ford died on the eve of the English Revolution of 1640.

Intriguingly, the playwright dedicated *‘Tis Pity* to John Morduant, 1st Earl of Peterborough, who had been held for a year in the Tower of London on suspicion of being complicit in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, the failed attempted assassination of James I by a group of English Catholics.

And indeed a sense of injustice and “out of jointness,” which takes an explosive emotional form, permeates the work. Ford was heavily criticized for the play and its refusal to condemn his transgressive protagonist, Giovanni. In this reviewer’s opinion, therein lies the actual strength of the piece. The lead character that Ford created is a complex, dynamic and deeply flawed individual.

Simply to revile him would be a conservative choice and would seriously limit the play’s dramatic impact. Ford was obviously well aware of this.

The play is set in Parma, Italy. Giovanni (Matthew Amendt) has just returned from his studies in Bologna. We quickly discover he has developed an inflamed incestuous passion for his sister, Annabella (Amelia Pedlow). In the opening scene, he engages in a combative discourse on the ethical implications of the situation with Friar Bonaventura (Christopher Innvar). Giovanni suggests that a mere “customary form,” the taboo against incest, stands between him and “perpetual happiness.” Predictably, Bonaventura is appalled (“Have done, unhappy youth! for thou art lost”) and refuses to give his consent, and tries desperately to convince Giovanni that his desires are evil.

Giovanni defends his feelings in a deeply romantic fashion with a speech that includes the following lines: “Say that we had one father, say one womb / (Curse to my joys!) gave both us life and birth; / Are we not, therefore, each to other bound / So much the more by nature? by the links / Of blood, of reason? nay, if you will have it, / Even of religion, to be ever one, / One soul, one flesh, one love, one heart, one all?”

This opening scene and indeed the entire play have a distinctly anti-authoritarian feel to them. Two opposed moral codes are at work, the official one and Giovanni’s, which is essentially anarchistic, atheistic, individualistic. Ford’s is a materialistic world, where no supernatural intervention takes place. People make their own history, for better or worse. Giovanni and to a lesser extent Annabella choose to live by their own laws, and pay the ultimate price.

The “us against the world” sentiments are strong felt, as is the *Romeo and Juliet* -like predicament. Although Ford greatly admired and was undoubtedly influenced by Shakespeare, one gets the impression at times that *‘Tis Pity* is in fact parodying the bard’s classic love story.

This impression is fortified when we are introduced to Giovanni’s “Juliet,” Annabella, who is being hounded by a number of prospective suitors, including the mean-spirited Grimaldi (Tramell Tillman), the poetic Soranzo (Clifton Duncan) and the clownishly camp Bergetto (Ryan Garbaya).

Necessarily for the unfolding of the tragic narrative, Annabella has no romantic feelings whatsoever toward any of these men.

Despite the somewhat formulaic nature of the rejection scene, to Ford's credit his fluid writing allows Annabella to spurn all their advances with compassion and humor rather than outright contempt.

Annabella then confides in her tutoress Putana (Franchelle Stewart Dorn) that she reciprocates Giovanni's affections. Putana (clearly an homage to the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*), in contrast to the Friar, gives her full blessing.

At this point, an intriguing subplot emerges through the presence of Hippolita (Kelly Curran), a former lover of Soranzo. Upon seeing the latter, she verbally assaults him for having let her send her husband Richardetto on a dangerous journey she believed would lead to Richardetto's death, simply so Soranzo and she could pursue their affair. At the conclusion of this rant, Soranzo exits, seemingly nonplussed. His servant Vasques (Derek Smith) stays behind, allowing himself to be seduced by Hippolita. Vasques assures her he will carry out revenge on his master. This scene was executed with a great rhythm and considerable panache by the three performers.

Ford's ability to tell a complex story now comes to the fore. Richardetto (Marc Vietor) is not dead, but has in fact arrived in Parma disguised as a doctor, along with his niece Philotis (Auden Thornton). Richardetto, for his part, is also seeking revenge on Soranzo and convinces Grimaldi that by stabbing Soranzo he will eradicate his principal competition for Annabella's affections.

Alas, this clever plan goes dreadfully awry as Philotis, Richardetto's naive niece, and Bergetto have fallen madly in love and are planning to consummate their desires in the location where Grimaldi intends to kill Soranzo. Inevitably, Bergetto is murdered by mistake, leaving Philotis, Bergetto's servant Poggio (Ryan Farley) and Signor Donado (Everett Quinton), Bergetto's uncle, in despair.

Meanwhile, Signor Florio (Philip Goodwin), Annabella's father, insists his daughter choose a suitable mate. Having no choice, she succumbs to Soranzo's advances and the wedding date is set.

But more melodrama ensues as Annabella's secret dalliances with her brother have resulted in her pregnancy. After admonishing her in suitably pious fashion, the Friar convinces Annabella to marry Soranzo before the pregnancy becomes too obvious.

In the subsequent lavish wedding scene, Hippolita disguised as a masque dancer reveals herself to Soranzo and sarcastically raises a toast to his marriage. The tension is palpable. She confesses her intention was to poison his wine. Vasques, Soranzo's servant, however, steps forward retracting his betrayal of his master and announces that he has in fact poisoned Hippolita's beverage.

She falls to the floor dying melodramatically, enraged at Vasques, unleashing insults at everyone present at the wedding and offering vengeful prophecies. ("Take here my curse amongst you; may thy bed / Of marriage be a rack unto thy heart.")

In a moment of genuine humanity, deeply affected by Hippolita's horrible death and revolted by the impact that the desire for vengeance has on the human spirit, Richardetto abandons his plans to murder Soranzo and sends his niece Philotis off to a convent to save her soul. ("All human worldly courses are uneven, / No life is blessed but the way to heaven.")

The relationship between Giovanni and Annabella has a predictably tragic outcome. Giovanni, despite being called upon to "to cry to Heaven" for forgiveness, dies unrepentant, hoping only that wherever he is going, heaven or hell, he may see "my Annabella's face."

In the final scene, Ford once again takes aim at Church authority figures in the form of the Cardinal (Rocco Sisto), who was introduced midway through the play. Observing the carnage before him, the Cardinal callously declares that "all the gold and jewels" of the dead are to be confiscated by the Church and put "to the Pope's proper use"!

Ford's play is turbulent, bloody and disturbing. A sense of doom pervades it. '*Tis Pity She's a Whore* is a rationalistic, but pessimistic account of human beings and their actions. In the struggle between the instinctive desires of individuals and the crushing weight of institutions and traditions, the outcome is never in doubt. The Red Bull Theater deserves credit for attempting the work.

One of the weak points of the production is a relatively bland and generic scenic design by David M. Barber, along with distractingly contemporary costumes designed by Sara Jean Tosetti, which did little to aid the actors.

Some of the performances are stilted, particularly from the more veteran actors in the company. Director Jesse Berger needs to shoulder some of the responsibility for this, however, as much of the direction is too self-conscious. Certain scenes were laboriously presented and seemed overly naturalistic for such an epic piece of theater. One felt the actors were rejecting impulses to "go bigger" in fear they might appear to be "over-acting." On the contrary, this is what the production was largely lacking.

That being said, Matthew Amendt as Giovanni—playing a character younger than he obviously is—copes ably in an emotionally demanding role, as does Amelia Pedlow as his tragic partner. They convey the grandiosity of the macabre text successfully, particularly in their intimate scenes together.



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