

Review of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (directed by Maria Aberg for the Royal Shakespeare Company), at The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 9 June 2016 and Jonson's *The Alchemist* (directed by Polly Findlay for the Royal Shakespeare Company), at The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 10 June 2016.

Following on from the previous year's pairing of thematically linked plays by Marlowe and Jonson (Justin Audibert's *The Jew of Malta* and Trevor Nunn's *Volpone*), the RSC found space in its 'Shakespeare 1616 to 2016' season to present a similar juxtaposition at the Swan Theatre, with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Jonson's *The Alchemist*, directed by Maria Aberg and Polly Findlay respectively, playing alongside one another and featuring largely overlapping repertory casts. As was the case last year, this pairing saw one conceptually elaborate production contrasting one that was comparatively traditional, although in this instance it was Marlowe who received the more radical treatment.

Maria Aberg's production of *Doctor Faustus* began on an experimental note. Two identically dressed and similar looking men — both fair skinned and, whether by design or through biology, largely hairless — entered a dimly lit stage and, looking directly into each other's eyes, each struck and held up a match, letting it burn down to the fingers until one of them was extinguished. This conflagratory game of chicken was the mechanism that determined which of the play's leading roles would be played by Sandy Grierson, and which by Oliver Ryan. In this instance Grierson took the role of Faustus, although from my viewpoint I was unable to discern whether this was the result of him winning or losing the contest. The splitting of the play's central roles, and the apparently arbitrary method of attributing them in each performance, might easily have strayed into the realm of gimmickry, but the consistency of this device with the production's broader artistic concerns made it not only justifiable but

fascinating. The production, repeatedly and in a variety of ways, encouraged the consideration of the idea that Faustus and Mephistopheles might be two sides of the same coin. The programme's cover features an image depicting Grierson looking into a mirror with Ryan's image reflected back at him, while a few pages in there is a double-page spread of a composite image, split down the middle, of the two actors' faces forming an oddly convincing single visage. The production itself was infused with a sense of bi-polarity. Naomi Dawson's design was a case in point: aside from the occasional flashes of red (blood and lipstick) or gold (jewellery and fire), the production's visual palette was almost entirely black and white. Faustus's Chaplin-esque students wore black suits and bowler hats; the court of Charles V was peopled by figures in black military uniform with featureless black faces, while their polar opposites, wearing white hooded robes, accompanied the pope in the Vatican scene; Faustus spent most of the play in black trousers and braces over a white vest, while a shirtless Mephistopheles wore a white suit jacket and a pair of undersized white trousers from which poked two black feet.

The inclusion in the programme of a quotation from William Styrom's *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* — 'A phenomenon that a number of people have noted while in deep depression is the sense of being accompanied by a second self' — made clear what the visual bipolarity of the production was gesturing towards. Whether or not the specificity of clinical depression as a reference point was entirely apparent from the production alone (it admittedly did not occur to me), what was clear from the outset was that this was a *Faustus* deeply interested in psychological interiority. The mirroring of the two main roles emphasised a sense of internal conflict that is arguably already present in the play in the form of the good and bad angels, although here the moral polarity of that conflict seemed less clear. Another of the play's famous ideas — that 'Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed / In one self place,

for where we are is hell, / And where hell is must we ever be' (2.1.121–23) — was put to extended use here, as one had the sense that whatever Faustus's hell may have been, he was already living it. The play's diabolical presences were sinister enough; Ryan's Mephistopheles was unnervingly slimy, and the pageant of the seven deadly sins — a kind of grotesque cabaret performed to the jaunty-but-weird music of Orlando Gough — was a wonderfully grim spectacle. But what was most unsettling was the uncanny quality of the play's ostensibly human characters: Faustus's students doubled as the play's devils (indeed, the cast list makes no mention of devils at all; those playing in the roles are listed as scholars), and the supposedly earthly courts of the Emperor, the Pope and the Duke of Vanholt were populated by grotesque, quasi-demonic figures. Unlike the Faustus of Marlowe's play, who despite his diabolical deal is able to interact with the human world, this Faustus was trapped in a psychological hell from which there was no reprieve. This made the production's most daring moment its most powerful moment, too. The request of the scholars to see Helen of Troy had been met with a rather vague video projection onto the back wall of the stage, comprising a series of hazy close-ups of discrete parts of a woman's face, like a visual equivalent of a sonneteer's blazon. As such, when it came to Faustus's famous encounter with Helen, the audience had no coherent sense of what she might look like. There was, then, a palpable sense of audience discomfort when she emerged in the shape of a young girl (played by seventeen-year-old Jade Croot, who might easily have passed for thirteen). Faustus stood transfixed, while the 'Was this the face' address was delivered as a mournful voiceover by the watching Mephistopheles. As Helen approached, the tension was broken when the 'kiss' was replaced by a leaping embrace, like that of a daughter clinging to a father returned after a long absence. Instead of the pinnacle of the play's voluptuousness, then, this scene became a poignant moment of innocence in what had otherwise been a relentless onslaught of malevolence. Any relief was shortlived, however, as Faustus's disconnection

from such innocence was given expression by Coot's Helen guiding his hands to her throat to force him to strangle her, and Faustus, after managing to release her unharmed, convulsing in the middle of the pentagram that he had earlier daubed on the stage; the overall effect was to transform the scene from one about desire and lust to one about grief and loss.

This will, I am sure, prove to be a divisive production. It was very much a director's interpretation, and much of Marlowe's play was either obscured or omitted in the service of that interpretation. The production dispensed entirely with the play's comic scenes, resulting in a pacey and uninterrupted ramping up of claustrophobic intensity (one hour and forty-five minutes, with no interval). Despite the presence of Lucifer and the occasional appearance of good and bad angels, the production seemed also to be relatively uninterested in the play's theological dimension; its Faustus suffered not from religious but from modern, secular despair. Neither did this Faustus seem entirely concerned with knowledge; the production rejected the standard tableau of the scholar in his study surrounded by folio volumes, opting instead to begin with the comparatively banal spectacle of Faustus packing away his paperbacks into cardboard storage boxes, implying that his engagement with learning was already over at the beginning of the play (indeed, Faustus here pre-empted his climactic promise to burn his books by setting fire to several of them during the conjuration of Mephistopheles). This was not, then, a comprehensive realisation of the play, but a production which pursued a very specific conceptual approach; for my money, the result was gripping.

Polly Findlay's production of *The Alchemist* also made significant adjustments to its text; Stephen Jeffrey's revised script, including a new, spoiler-free prologue, cut approximately

twenty percent of the play. But, for all that, this was in comparison with Aberg's *Faustus* a production that let the text do the work. Sian Harris's costume design (with the exception of Face's laboratory wear, which seemed to take inspiration from the early days of aviation), adhered to seventeenth-century conditions, and Helen Goddard's sparingly-furnished period set was remarkable only for the presence of an alligator — apparently a common feature of the Renaissance alchemist's lab — that was suspended from the ceiling by a pulley system and periodically lowered to allow Face to deposit his earnings in its jaws. On the whole, then, this was a comparatively conservative production, but this is not to do it a disservice; this was beautifully-paced comedy that served as a welcome reminder of just how funny Jonson can be in performance. Ken Nwosu's Face, Mark Lockyer's Subtle and Siobhan McSweeney's Doll Common communicated an infectious relish in duping both the play's cast of gullible Londoners and each other. The production was particularly effective at teasing out the play's inheritance from Jonson's earlier comedies of humours, the cast clearly having fun emphasising the specific predispositions of each of the gulls, and with great effect: Richard Leeming demonstrated his versatility, one night after cutting a disturbing figure as Sloth, by delivering a lovably sanguine Abel Drugger, cruelly out of his depth in the company of Face, Doll, and Subtle; Tom McCall judiciously overacted as the irascible Kastril, flapping and squawking his way about the stage to confront anyone who would pay sufficient attention; best of all was Ian Redford's red-faced and richly-dressed Sir Epicure Mammon, whose virtuosic flights of orgiastic fancy drew an impromptu round of applause from the audience.

The production's most notable deviation from its largely traditional approach came in its new epilogue, in which Face, who had been swapping clothes and identities repeatedly throughout the production, removed his costume to become the actor Ken Nwosu, dressed in jeans and a Ramones t-shirt, and smugly performed a calculation of the estimated takings from the

production (in the process singling out those in the expensive seats and those who had got in with a ‘cheeky fiver’). The effect was to revive a confrontational aspect of Jonson’s play, which was both set and performed in Blackfriars, that implied a degree of commonality between the gulls that the audience had spent two hours laughing at, and the audience itself; both sets of individuals (and Aberg’s Faustus, too) had, after all, paid a price to experience something beyond the quotidian, but something which is ultimately artificial. Theatre itself, this excellent production reminded its audience, is a kind of alchemy.

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References

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