THEATRE REVIEW

THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY

A Thomas Middleton play

'When the bad bleeds, then the tragedy is good'

Undoubtably one of the most unique productions the RGS has ever seen, our first Senior production in the Agora was a sight to behold. With the direction of Ms Davison, Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* was brought to life by Years 11-13.

The Agora was transformed into a Jacobean theatre reminiscent of London's Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, complete with candles, a live orchestra, and of course, a skull. The costumes were no less authentic, every member of the cast dressed in 17th-century attire which consisted of the ruffled necks, ornate bodices and the flowing gowns that we have come to associate with the period. The commitment to this alone is to be greatly admired! Furthermore, the minimal usage of furniture and props allowed the performances to truly shine, in particular, the tense, physically confrontational interactions between Vindici and Gratiana (Joe W[redacted] and Grace S[redacted]) and the moments of unadulterated passion from the Duchess (Ruby-Anne R[redacted]). With the audience sitting so close to the action itself, we were left even more immersed in the events that progressed, the few moments of audience participation delighting the specially chosen few.

The play follows in the typical style of a Jacobean revenge tragedy (the key elements of which often include elaborate murder plots, madness, betrayals, and imminent death for all those involved) as we see the members of an Italian court, particularly Vindici, who wishes to avenge his fiancé's death at the hands of the Duke (Silvia M[redacted]) nine years prior. The plot as it unfolded became all the more convoluted and gruesome, as we witnessed poisonings, executions, mistaken identities, and even the constructed animation of a corpse – the most overt instance of the dark comedy Middleton exudes in his play. This was, of course, only heightened by the setting of the Agora, as it became a sort of liminal space in which the chaos and trappings of court life were made to seem inescapable. This indeed proved to be true, as the audience was treated to a staple of the revenge tragedy genre – the final act's bloodbath, in which balance was restored, and our cast proved to be just as talented at enacting murders as they were at exacting them.

One of the most memorable moments of the play was the court masque, a traditional dance in plays of the Jacobean era. The dedication shown by the cast (with help from Old Novo Jake Bradbury) in including and perfecting the choreography was a delight to see on stage. Paired with the era-appropriate attire and music, the whole affair was made to look entirely authentic. Further mentions must go to Bede D[redacted]'s Lussurioso, Ellie D[redacted]'s Hippolito, and Flo E[redacted] as both the Keeper and the corpse of Antonio's wife! Each and every performance of the cast members stunned, as their lines, while often a mouthful, were delivered with great conviction and ease.

A great thanks to the direction of Ms. Davison, and the entirety of the orchestra – the atmosphere created for Revenger's will cement itself in RGS production history!

Sanjana S[redacted]










THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY

If *'Chicago'* and *'Sister Act'* got you used to seeing a musical on the RGS stage, then this year's production could not have been more different if it tried. Easily one of the most ambitious productions since I have been at RGS, Thomas Middleton's *'The Revenger's Tragedy'* brought the Machiavellian melodrama of Jacobean court theatre into the present day with all the subtlety of a Hammer horror film. For the first time, the Miller Theatre was exchanged for the intimacy of the new *agora* to fit with how the play would first have been seen. Putting on Shakespeare in a school setting is a challenge in itself, but such a little-known play by one of the bard's contemporaries, where the plot seems to befuddle even its own characters, is an even tougher ask. So why put on *'The Revenger's Tragedy'* at all?

Middleton was writing at a time when revenge tragedy as a genre was going out of fashion; the playwriting culture of the late Elizabethan/ early Jacobean era was fast-paced, and the emphasis was on churning out entertainment quickly rather than working on a magnum opus (some of Shakespeare's plays were probably written in under a month). In such an environment the heyday of revenge tragedy came and went in 30 years. Middleton was accustomed to writing 'city comedies' which were in vogue in the first years of the 1600s. And so his intent with 'The Revenger's Tragedy' is to poke fun at the older genre, to overdo it to the point of irony. This 'camp' attitude, as Emma Smith puts it, is akin to how mock-horror films like Scary Movie parody the aforementioned Hammer Horror style. The play is intentionally ridiculous; the characters have Italianised names for sinful attributes like Lussurioso and Sordida. There is certainly no regard for subtle characterisation. The play is a pantomime Hamlet – Vindici adopts the quintessential trope of "soliloquy to a skull" until his brother punctures the moment witheringly: 'Still sighing over death's vizard?', perhaps echoing the sentiments of a Jacobean audience who feel similarly tired with weighty revenge tragedies. The plot is complicated to the point of lunacy, which was probably Middleton's intention; no audience being able to grasp each of the slimy, sleazy threads of the plot at once, but being invited instead to sit back and enjoy the debauchery. Vindici, as "master of ceremonies" curating the increasingly outrageous action, is in some senses aware that he is in a play – throwing out some knowing meta-theatrical quips like 'when the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good', and 'when thunder claps, heaven likes the tragedy'. Jacobean theatre was never meant to be naturalistic anyway, but showed how real life can be just as mannered and artificial as theatre; Webster's 'Duchess of Malfi' 'account[s] this world a tedious theatre', and Jaques famously tells us that 'all the world's a stage', not the other way round.

So it seems fitting that this year's school production, which ostensibly seems like such a high-minded affair, was in fact a parody of itself. We weren't doing a revenge tragedy, we were "doing a revenge tragedy". The wonderfully atmospheric set design, period musical ensemble, and magnificent costumes from Scottish Opera all helped fuel that sense of indulgence. The *agora* presented its own unique challenges as a space not originally intended for performance, but perfectly captured the intimacy of Jacobean court theatres like Blackfriars which Middleton wrote for. This allowed a sense of involvement in the action, and gave those of us acting a chance to include some audience participation and throwaway insults to friends unlucky enough to be in the eye-line. It took some time to get the hang of how to convey the language, often more complicated and less recognisable than Shakespeare's, in a way that a contemporary audience would relate to as much as possible. On some evenings members of the cast could be espied playing frantic games of tag around the agora in one of Miss Davison's games about intention. There is certainly none of the introspection of 'to be or not to be' in the play, and the aim was to turn every emotion up to 100, in a way which should leave an audience giddy with schemes and blood by the end.

So how can this obscure melodrama relate to us now? Some understanding of its social context helps; the skull of Vindici's 'once betrothed wife' is called Gloriana, the name given to Queen Elizabeth I. Much Jacobean drama evokes nostalgia for the Elizabethan age, as King James' court was thought to be stained with debauchery and nepotism. Vindici's revenge upon the sordid court in The Revenger's Tragedy, in Gloriana's name, seems to play on this public mood. We too have just seen the end of an Elizabethan age, and like the court of Middleton's play we have also seen our leaders indulge in 'revels' instead of honouring the dead. The Revenger's Tragedy seems to speak to a time when we lack common purpose, and the tragedies of politics have descended into farce.

Joe W[redacted]

