



## 'Tis Pity She's a Whore

### A Play with No Whores, and Less Pity

By John Ford

[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.

Sunday, April 29, 2012, C-5&6 (center stalls)

Directed by Jim Warren

Some plays' plots in the late 16th and early 17th centuries turn on social taboos that today have become a "so what?" We must accept long-past moral conventions and convictions to fully appreciate the plots of, for example, *Measure for Measure*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Incest, however, is as abhorrent to us today as it is for the characters of 16th century Parma in John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, written around 1630. The incestuous relationship at the center of this play is that of Giovanni and Annabella, brother and sister, who give in to their mutual sexual desires and genuine affection, apprehensively at first but more than willingly when they discover that their loves will be genuinely requited. Their initial kisses are passionate. "What must we do now?" asks Giovanni. "What you will," replies Denice Mahler's Annabella with an expectant grin. "Come then," Patrick Earl's Giovanni says, excitedly grabbing her hands: "After so many tears as we have wept, let's learn to court in smiles, to kiss and sleep," and off to bed they ran. And in bed, we next saw them. And the early 21st century audiences in this Blackfriars Playhouse squirmed uncomfortably.



Patrick Earl as Giovanni and Denice Mahler as Annabella in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* at the Blackfriars Playhouse. Photo by Tommy Thompson, American Shakespeare Center.

But what's to come would turn those squirms to head-grabbing gasps: a woman disemboweled on stage, a human heart skewered on a dagger, lots and lots of blood. This Jim Warren-directed production by the ASC's touring troupe did not shy away from presenting neither Ford's illicit sex nor excessive violence.

Turning the screws even further on modern audiences was costume designer Erin M. West's edgily modern designs: leather pants for rock-star like Giovanni, spiked hair and leggings for naïve romantic teen-ager Annabella, three-piece Italian suits for wealthy nobles such as the sibling lovers' father Florio (Daniel Abraham Stevens) and Annabella's betrothed Soranzo (Jake Mahler), ultra-tight, ultra-short mini dress and spiked heels for Soranzo's ex-mistress Hippolita (Stephanie Holladay Earl), and sport jacket and jeans for the youth-advising Friar Bonaventura (Kevin Hauver). For other characters, costumes went to extremes: Richardetto (Ronald Peet), Hippolita's nobleman husband disguised as a doctor, wore a long white rubber coat, and Bridget Rue stuffed herself into a zippered rubber miniskirt as Putana, Annabella's tutor, and appeared in a Heidi-style dirndl and

## WILL POWER ON STAGE

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pigtails as Richardetto's niece.

Even in this edgy society where individual hipness was the primary creed, incest was still very much seen as extreme behavior. Nevertheless, Ford's portrayal and ASC's playing did not cast the incestuous siblings as anything but true-hearted individuals who just happen to have fallen in love with someone sprung from the same womb. Theirs may be the squirmiest sin, but many other characters prove more loathsome in their violent natures, their greed, their infatuation with revenge, and their self-serving righteousness. The only innocents in this play are the foolish gadfly Bergetto, played in top hat and tux with a bright red-patterned vest by Rick Blunt, and his trusty servant Poggio, Stephanie Holladay Earl as a geeky kid in overalls. Not ironically, Bergetto is the first character killed, an accidental victim of others' revenge plots.

If Ford is being moralistic in this play, it's a troubling moral argument he presents. Even if the incest is based on the purest feelings of love, it is still incest, and Giovanni goes to great lengths in his debates with Friar Bonaventura and his seduction of Annabella to excuse his natural feelings with spiritual validity. His agnostic pronouncements may bother some, but it's his ever-enlarging egomania that undoes him as an ethicist and dooms both him and Annabella. "The more I hear, I pity thee the more," an exasperated Friar Bonaventura finally replies to one of Giovanni's rants.

The incest, the rampant disregard of others' feelings, and the extreme violence may have all been intended as shock value—Ford pushing the envelope of Renaissance playwrighting to the realm of a Troma film. However, he also drew two servant-master relationships that might represent the true moral conscience of his play. Bergetto-Poggio was played by Blunt and Earl as chest-bumping, high-fiving best buddies, and even through his self-centeredness, Blunt's Bergetto craved Poggio's company and counsel while Earl's Poggio genuinely doted on his master. Bergetto's death, concluding the play's first half, left a stunned Poggio repeating quietly, "Oh my master, my master, my master." We never see him again.

This is juxtaposed with Soranzo's servant Vasques, slickly played by Eugene Douglas. A two-faced schemer, Vasques double-crosses Hippolita in her plot to kill Soranzo, and he manages Soranzo's revenge in bringing about the tragic endings of Giovanni and Annabella, using deception and torture without scruple. Though he comes across as the kind of villain who inspires hisses from an audience, with Douglas deftly balancing the character's eloquent charm and dangerous resolve, Vasques does all in service to his master. Soranzo may be a real jerk (Jake Mahler certainly played him convincingly as one), but Vasquez's final speech reveals himself to be the most honor-bound character in the whole play.

*'Tis Pity She's a Whore* is peopled with such interesting characters, and yet Ford does not deserve much merit for composition skills. He not only is no Shakespeare; if this is his masterpiece he is no Jonson, Marlow, Fletcher, or Middleton, either. The language plods, the plot gets clumsy. Keen acting skills are required to get us emotionally involved in these characters, and Blunt and Stephanie Earl inspire us to love Bergetto and Poggio, Jake Mahler inspires us to loath Soranzo but still feel his sense of betrayal, and Douglas inspires us to be attracted to, yet scared of, Vasques. At the emotional center is Patrick Earl's Giovanni and Denice Mahler's Annabella. He may have worn his passion on his sleeve, but he proved devoted to his love; she may have been naïve but she courageously stood up to the travails she brought on herself. They managed to make the audience care for them even as they so easily melted into a taboo we could never condone. We understood how and why they loved the way they did. But we still squirmed.

Eric Minton  
May 2, 2012

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