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aEUR [masc ordinal]Excellent performances propel ASC's 'Duchess'aEUR [masc ordinal]

The News Leader - Staunton, Va.
Author: Albrecht, Frank
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Document Text

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John Webster's tragic

masterpiece "The Duchess of Malfi" was first produced around 1612 at the London Blackfriars and the Globe. Watching it is like plunging down a steep hill straight into hell. All seven principal characters are killed. Why it should be entertaining to watch that happen is a mystery of the human spirit. Nevertheless, the current production makes an enjoyable evening.

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The story is simple. We are

in Italy at the height of the Renaissance -- the age of Machiavelli. The Duchess is a young widow -- strong, independent, loyal and trustful. Her male twin, Ferdinand, and her older brother, the Cardinal, don't want their sister to remarry. Both are vicious, cruel and vengeful: Name a sin, they've done it.

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In secret, the Countess marries and has children by Antonio, a commoner. The brothers' spy, Bosolo, finds and reports the truth. The brothers turn on her -- the Cardinal because she is corrupting the family blood, Ferdinand out of incestuous jealousy. Ferdinand imprisons the Duchess and tries to break her spirit. When that fails, he has Bosolo kill her, her babies and her servant. He then goes insane.

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Antonio escapes with the oldest son and tries to reconcile with the Cardinal. Bosolo, meanwhile, has repented. He tries to save Antonio, but the play ends with Antonio, the Cardinal, Ferdinand, a servant and Bosolo all dead on the floor. Killed earlier was Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, who tried to help Bosolo.

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Melodramatic? Yes. Wildly improbable and a really unbelievable story? Yes. Do you notice these flaws as you watch it? No, not at all. The action moves like a tall tree falling, with unstoppable force. The words are forceful and flowing.

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James Keegan as Bosolo dominates the stage whenever he is on it. So does Vanessa Mandeville Morosco as the Duchess. Their scenes together feel like a test of wills, as they should. The Duchess is a simple character, the same person underneath as on her surface. Her struggle is with her brothers. In the end she forgives her executioners and faces death with neither fear nor anger. Morosco puts these qualities across convincingly.

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Bosolo's struggle is with himself. He knows he is doing wrong but doesn't care. He slowly grows uneasy with his conduct and begins to admire the Duchess. These changes are expressed only indirectly in his words, and Keegan successfully gets the point across with tone of voice and body language.

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It's hard to pick out one or two outstanding performances. The entire troupe does everything well. I will say that Gregory Jon Phelps effectively shows Ferdinand's cold cruelty, Benjamin Curns makes the Cardinal properly despicable, Susan Heyward is a fetching lady's maid, RenA(c) Thornton Jr. is just what Antonio should be and Miriam Donald's Julia is a minor masterpiece of sexual sleaze. Donald also wins the doubling award, playing five parts.

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The intricate and potentially confusing first scene is beautifully conceived and executed and makes clear the characters and their qualities. The madman scene is truly macabre. Without pretense of realism it conveys the horror of chronic mental illness. I am astonished the company can create and execute complex scenes like these without a director and in only 11 days.

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These costumes are from many eras but appropriate to the characters. I did feel that the flashlights used in a dark scene and a modern-shaped pistol used later were annoying distractions. In this Renaissance Season show the cast has to use what comes readily to hand, but there ought to be some limits!

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I enjoyed this play. I believe other theatergoers will as well.

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Theater News

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On Feb. 9, Mary Baldwin is producing "The Pretty Perfume Maker," a comic opera by the French composer Offenbach. Now best known for "The Tales of Hoffman," Offenbach wrote dozens of popular stage pieces in his day and can be said to have invented the kind of musical play we now call "operetta." This production is based on a made-in-Staunton translation from the French by the combined efforts of Susan Webb, Louis Dolive and Virginia Francisco, who also is the director.

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At 7:30 p.m. Feb. 4, the Blackfriars Playhouse will host a rehearsed reading of "The Island Princess" by John Fletcher (who was house playwright for "The King's Men" after Shakespeare retired). The readers are experienced actors from this area and there is no charge for admission.

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Finally, Shakespeare's "Pericles, Prince of Tyre" opens Feb. 2 at Blackfriars.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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