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'White Devil' could have been torn from 16th century tabloi

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Date: Jul 15, 2001

Start Page: 6

Section: H

Document Text

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John Webster, the Jacobean playwright whose "The White Devil" opens next week at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, is something of a curiosity. In his substantial career Webster generally was a collaborator with other playwrights -- Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and others of Shakespeare's immediate successors. But in the middle of an at best fair-to-middling career, he wrote alone his two masterpieces, "The White Devil" and the better known "The Duchess of Malfi." He did not rise again to the heights of these two lusty, bloody tragedies.

The complex plot of "Devil" tells a violent love story with its basis in 16th century Italian history. Webster's leading lady Vittoria Corombona was in fact Vittoria Accoramboni whose life to some degree followed the lurid, bloody track the playwright depicts.

Vittoria's husband is murdered so that she might marry the duke of Brachiano. To accomplish this marriage it is also necessary to kill the duke's wife Isabella, but these are characters who stop at nothing to gratify their desires. Vittoria's brother Flamineo, the prime villain in the piece, is busily at work in this plotting and at moments makes you remember Shakespeare's Iago as a sort of bumbling, misguided meddler. After a murder trial and confinement in a nunnery, Vittoria is rescued by Brachiano, and they elope. Then Francisco, duke of Florence and brother of the late Isabella enters -- more than a little upset at the course of events involving his sister. The revenge begins in spades, and -- needless to say -- the stage ends up ankle deep in blood and gore.

Now if this strikes you as somewhat outré, may I remind you that a few weeks ago in this newspaper you read an account of a 60-year-old woman who murdered her 70-year-old husband for insurance money to pay for her middle-aged nephew's sex-change operation. Tell me about outré.

In fact director Drew Fracher, who I met recently with two members of his cast, observed, "It's a great story. It might as well come out of the Star or the Inquirer. It's totally tabloid -- O. J. all over again." There's no disagreeing with that summation.

Fracher, who is directing at ASF for the first time although he has a lengthy association with the company as a fight choreographer, feels his chief goal is to clarify the play for the audience so that we don't get lost in the convolutions of its plot. He tells me that "Devil" is one of several shows he suggested to the leaders of the master of fine arts program. They were seeking a heavily dramatic script to follow the group's "Scapin," and they found it in this play: volatile and extreme emotions, characters seemingly bent on self-destruction and contrasting characters who are confounded by the action.

Scott Mann, playing Brachiano, describes his character as a "fascinating, extremely powerful man" with no emotional restraints. "He's a bit like a teen-ager and a lot of people live this way but not everyone is a duke." So the duke simply eliminates the people who block his marriage to Vittoria.

Amy Louise Sebelius, in contrast, plays Cornelia, Vittoria's devout and loving mother who is appalled by the actions of the play, giving us a sort of point of sanity. Sebelius says she wants to project "a sense of weariness and a sense of loss" to manifest this interesting character.

Once again the MFAs are giving us an opportunity to see a relatively rare theatrical gem. We can see in the 1612 play -- the same year as Shakespeare's final work, "The Tempest" -- the direction the stage would take for the next several decades.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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