

The Arts

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Jacobean Revenge Tale Updated to the 1930's

Continued From Page C11

Ms. Akalaitis at first presents Ford's play as many do, as a celebration of an outlaw erotic obsession that seems almost pure and idealistic next to the decadent society and corrupt religious establishment that are scandalized by it. What this production does not forget, however, is that in the end it is Giovanni, not society, who butchers Annabella. In Mr. Kilmer's impressively measured performance, the hero stealthily grows from a coltish Romeo into a Nietzschean megalomaniac, and he is not exempted from Ms. Akalaitis's withering indictment of a world in which most men treat most women as whores.

The director's slant on Giovanni is certainly supported by Ford, who shows the young man belittling Annabella's maidenhead as a "pretty toy" immediately after their first tryst. That this "'Tis Pity" billows into dreamy theater rather than settling into earthbound polemic can be attributed to the imaginative depth of the staging. The transposition of Ford's Parma to the 1930's amounts to much more than merely the literal-minded deployment of Brown Shirts and the interjected salutes to Il Duce. The director instead situates "'Tis Pity" in the hallucinatory 1930's of Surrealist art, a state of mind as much as a Fascist state.

As stunningly visualized by Mr. Conklin and the lighting designer, Mimi Jordan Sherin, this Parma merges the eerily deserted piazzas of a Giorgio de Chirico canvas with the lunar dreamscapes of Yves Tanguy. As if to prefigure Annabella's eventual disembowelment, images of female body parts from Salvador Dali and Man Ray proliferate after intermission. The point is not to offer a discourse on art history, but to do what the Surrealists themselves did and bring a civilization's subconscious, forbidden emotions, including its sadistic sexual impulses, to the surface. The scheme even extends to the high-style Italian furnishings, among them twine-covered chairs that seem to be in bondage, and to Gabriel Berry's spectacular costumes, which put the men in oppressive evening clothes and turn the women into Schiaparelli-era fashion victims.

Ms. Akalaitis then adds ominous music (by Jan A. P. Kaczmarek) and sound design (by John Gromoda) worthy of Bertolucci and Visconti films, and fills in the canvas's intimate details. In the secretly pregnant Annabella's wedding of convenience to the proper nobleman Soranzo, the director orchestrates the actors' movements and expressions into an involuntary revelation of their hidden, coarse hungers. These grotesque human tableaux of stylized spasms and malevolent whispering, suggestive of Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysterical theater pieces, raise the play's temperature to a fever pitch even as they imitate Futurism, the aggressive school of art that actually formed a brief alliance with Mussolini's brutal school of Fascism. The dramatic payoff arrives soon after when Soranzo, played with a terrifying mixture of aristocratic gentility and uncontrollable rage by Jared Harris, punishes Ms. Tripplehorn for cuckolding him by repeatedly slamming her against a blood-red wall.

Ms. Akalaitis has been energized by "'Tis Pity" in a way she was not

'Tis Pity She's a Whore

By John Ford; directed by JoAnne Akalaitis; scenery by John Conklin; costumes by Gabriel Berry; lighting by Mimi Jordan Sherin; original music by Jan A. P. Kaczmarek; sound by John Gromoda; fight direction by David Leong; choreography by Timothy O'Slynn. Presented by the New York Shakespeare Festival, Joseph Papp, founder; Ms. Akalaitis, artistic director; Jason Steven Cohen, producing director; Rosemarie Tichler, associate artistic director. At the Public/Newman Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, Manhattan.

Friar Bonaventure.....Wendell Pierce
 Florio.....Frank Raiter
 Giovanni.....Val Kilmer
 Annabella.....Jeanne Tripplehorn
 Putana.....Deirdre O'Connell
 Soranzo.....Jared Harris
 Vasques.....Erick Avari
 Donado.....Helmar Augustus Cooper
 Bergetto.....Ross Lehman
 Poggio.....Mark Kenneth Smaltz
 Lieutenant Grimaldi.....Daniel Oreskes
 Richardetto.....Rocco Sisto
 Philous.....Marlo Marron
 Hippolita.....Ellen McElduff
 A Cardinal.....Tom Nelis
 Banditti.....J. David Brimmer, Angel David
 and Larry Grant Malvern

by, say, the boys' universe of "Henry IV." That may be because this play's esthetics anticipate the Jean Genet works she has directed around the country and because its content overlaps the Franz Xaver Kroetz plays about dehumanized women ("Request Concert" and "Through the Leaves") that she staged so vividly in New York. This is not to say that her failings as a director have vanished. Once again Ms. Akalaitis, who has no

A reading informed by Surrealism as much as Fascism.

apparent sense of humor, tries to finesse a classic's comic interludes by giving the clowns leaden burlesque shtick that prompts winces, not laughs. Her tin ear for comedy has also led her astray in setting a tone for the catalytic role of the servant Vasques, an Iago-like villain, who is more flip than sinister in Erick Avari's performance.

Nor can Ms. Akalaitis resist hitting her ideological points with a sledgehammer near evening's end, at which point Man Ray is left behind for a jolting descent into the misogynistic pornography of snuff films. But these lapses cannot destroy the artistry of the feminist statement that has come before. One hallmark of this production is that the men, a few irredeemable creeps excepted, are at times allowed to be appealing and human while the abused women, including those played by Ellen McElduff (Hippolita) and Deirdre O'Connell (Putana), are too self-possessed to devolve into abject victims. Even when Annabella is driven to paroxysms of sobbing by the horrors that befall her, Ms. Tripplehorn shows us a strong young woman with a fiery will rather than a trampled, helpless flower. True to its heroine, Ms. Akalaitis's "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" insists on insinuating its way into our minds rather than emulating its hero by lunging at our hearts.



Martha Swope/'Tis Pity She's a Whore

Val Kilmer and Jeanne Tripplehorn in "'Tis Pity She's a Whore," at the Public Theater.

Review/Theater

Jacobean Tale of Lust and Revenge Updated to the Fascist 1930's

By FRANK RICH

If you were trying to assemble the most invigorating production of a classic to be seen in New York City this season, would you mix the following elements?

An infrequently produced Jacobean revenge tragedy that ends with its hero ripping out the heroine's heart and carrying it aloft on a skewer. ("Enter Giovanni with a heart upon his dagger," reads the Grand Guignol stage direction.) A pair of young lead actors better known for their Hollywood roles in lubricious movies like "The Doors" and "Basic Instinct" than for their experience in speaking verse. A severely intellectual director whose previous encounters with another 17th-century author, Shakespeare, have been her least successful projects. A set designer, most

'Tis Pity She's a Whore

recently of the Metropolitan Opera's "Ghosts of Versailles," who regards a classical text as an occasion for practicing the modern arts of deconstruction and collage.

No, the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle do not remotely begin to connect. But one of the great things about the theater is that logic does not necessarily have anything to do with how artistic collaborations play out onstage. As directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, acted by Val Kilmer and Jeanne Tripplehorn and designed by John Conklin, "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" offers audiences at the Public Theater a fresh, contemporary encounter with a startling play written by John Ford in the 1630's. This is one of those evenings when you leave the theater

convinced that the director must have rewritten the text, for how could a work with language so frank and nasty and sexual politics so sophisticated have been written almost four centuries ago? Yet Ms. Akalaitis has preserved Ford's words with an integrity one rarely finds at the New York Shakespeare Festival even as she weds those words to her own deeply personal vision of its author's themes.

For this director, "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" begins with its famously incestuous love affair between Giovanni and his sister, Annabella — a hot couple indeed in the form of Mr. Kilmer and Ms. Tripplehorn — but hardly ends there. Retaining the original setting, Parma, while shifting the time frame to the 1930's of Mussolini,

Continued on Page C14