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## A REVIVAL OF "TIS PITY SHE'S A WHORE' OPENS AT THE PUBLIC THEATER

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Apr. 6, 1992 12:28 PM ET

NEW YORK (AP) \_ Sinister figures in black lounge in ominous open archways that look like they were taken directly from a de Chirico painting. Time melts in homage to surrealist Salvador Dali, and a wide-open eye suggests that Magritte is being celebrated, too. Erotic photographs of submissive women, recalling Man Ray, appear from time to time.

Such is the blazingly theatrical - and unnerving - world of " 'Tis Pity She's a Whore," created by director JoAnne Akalaitis and set designer John Conklin for one of the most effective revivals seen at the New York Shakespeare Festival in a long time.

The production, which opened Sunday night at the Public Theater, rethinks John Ford's Jacobean tragedy and makes it seem remarkably pertinent to our own equally violent times.

Akalaitis has fast-forwarded the play from 16th century Parma to 1930s Fascist Italy. Soldiers and ordinary citizens raise their arms in salute of Mussolini. Intimidation is in the air. So is corruption - political, social and sexual - a sense of people and institutions being bought for a price.

In this decadent world, the love between Giovanni and his sister Annabella seems almost pure. They are the most noble and moral people on stage. Both are willing to pay for their transgressions.

Annabella eventually marries the Italian nobleman Soranzo, after she becomes pregnant by her brother. When Soranzo learns of their incestuous relationship he beats her in a horrifying fight scene, staged here with such graphic realism by David Leong that it's hard to watch.

Much of the play rests on the conviction of the actors playing the ill-fated lovers. Val Kilmer, the star of such movies as "The Doors" and "Thunderheart," brings a passion to the role of Giovanni, and he negotiates Ford's verse with ease. Jeanne Tripplehorn as Annabella matches Kilmer's intensity.

The rest of the large cast is not as consistently compelling. Jared Harris has the oddest accent as the brutal and sexually ambiguous Soranzo. Ross Lehman brings out comedy and pathos as one of Annabella's doomed admirers. Deirdre O'Connell also has the right amount of humor and sexiness as Putana, Annabella's confidante.

But it is the director and her production team who are the stars of this high-concept revival. Akalaitis has created a striking environment, a society where violence rules and the degradation of women is the norm, not the exception.

Conklin's impressive setting, one of the Public's most imaginative in years, pays homage to various Surrealist and Futurist masters. A huge arm extends into the middle of the set, at one point, as does a foot, reminding the audience of the Futurists' use of such visual props.

The conceit is not overbearing, and the stage has been hotly lighted by Mimi Jordan Sherin. The costumes by Gabriel Berry evoke the 1930s, especially the women's stylish dresses.

Akalaitis, who succeeded Joseph Papp as the artistic director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, has finally stepped out of the man's shadow. "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" makes one look forward to her next production.

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