

At the Public, "Tis Pity" it's a bore

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'TIS PITY SHE'S A WHORE. By John Ford. With Jeanne Tripplehorn, Val Kilmer, Jared Harris, Erick Avari and others. Sets by John Conklin. Costumes by Gabriel Berry. Directed by JoAnne Akalaitis. At the Public.

RECENTLY, IN A MAGAZINE article attacking several problems of the New York theater, I discovered that there was a lack of appreciation of "advanced" theater. Because JoAnne Akalaitis was specifically cited as a creator of such theater, I looked forward to her production of John Ford's "Tis Pity She's a Whore" with relish. Here was *my* chance to learn what "advanced" theater was all about.

To my amazement, "advanced" theater here in 1992 is an awful lot like the "advanced" theater I remember from 1967. Except maybe worse. In the '60s, when "advanced" theater was born, actors still remembered how to handle classical texts. They weren't cowed by language. Nor did they have to undercut the powerful emotions of the play by camping it up.

Akalaitis treats the play like a cartoon. One of the characters wears an Italian fascist uniform and constantly salutes Il Duce. Another acts like a fluffhead from P.G. Wodehouse. Coherence, I guess, is not a feature of "advanced" theater.

Ford's play does not have the depth of works by his predecessors John Webster and Shakespeare. But it has great potential sensuality, which presumably is what attracted Akalaitis to it. Curiously, although "advanced" theater always flirts with the erotic, it never scores.

Here, although there is some nudity and vintage pornography (which seems quaint rather than provocative), the overall aridity of the direction robs Ford's images of incest and gory revenge of any pungency. At the end,



ADVANCED: (l.-r.) Val Kilmer, Jeanne Tripplehorn, Jared Harris in "Tis Pity She's a Whore"

when there's blood all over the men's white shirts, all I wondered was whether the Public, in its current fiscal crisis, could afford such heavy laundry bills.

Val Kilmer is occasionally forceful as the lustful brother, Jeanne Tripplehorn whines amateurishly as his sister. There is nothing dangerous or sensuous about them. Jared Harris, who has

mushmouth diction and a lisp, is hardly threatening as her husband. Of the other characters, Erick Avari's villain is the most effective.

Citing various historical periods, alluding to different artistic styles, Akalaitis has created a collage. Collages, however visually arresting, are static. So, I'm afraid, is most "advanced" theater.