

# Fascism In a Hotbed Of Passion

**'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 Gromada. With Val Kilmer, Jeanne Tripplehorn, Deirdre O'Connell, Jared Harris. At the Public / Newman Theater, 425 Lafayette St., Manhattan. Seen at Thursday evening's preview.

By Jan Stuart

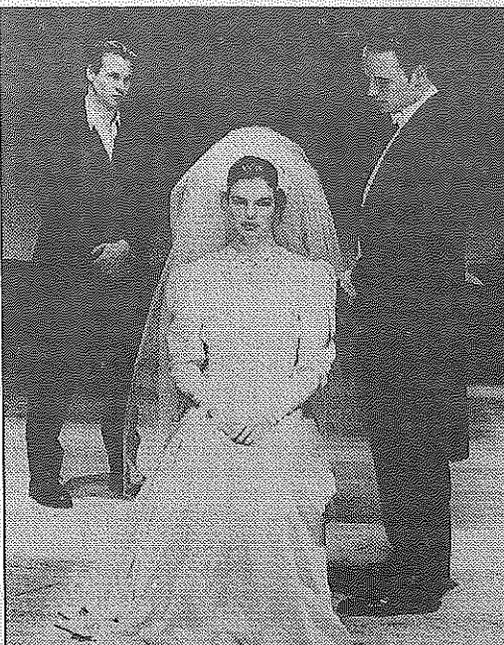
STAFF WRITER

**S**OMEWHERE, JOHN FORD is smiling. Somewhere, the racy Jacobean playwright is staring down (or up) at the Public Theater, where a work he wrote some 360 years ago is being given a doozy of a production. In spite of some pitiable performances in key roles, "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" manages to be fast, sexy, gorgeous, violent, courageous, unnerving and entirely up-to-the-minute. Take a deep breath, and go.

"'Tis Pity She's a Whore" is a tragedy about incest in which incest is the least of anyone's problems. It doesn't appear that way to Ford's young protagonists, a brother and sister who are brought down by their passionate love for one another. Annabella and Giovanni are so tortured by the stern admonitions of a disapproving church that they cannot make out the greater travesty of morality being played out around them.

The 17th-Century Italy of Ford's setting is a hotbed of adultery, murder and betrayal. It is a fiercely patriarchal society in which the casual domestic outrages committed by citizen against citizen or husband against wife find official justification in the church. In this selectively forgiving culture, a woman can have her eyes put out for entertaining wicked thoughts. A man can get a medal for acting upon them.

It is, indeed, just like 1930s fascist Italy, the milieu of director JoAnne Akalaitis' sumptuously cerebral updating. The dominant motif of this staging is Futurism, the art movement that ac-



Martha Swope

Val Kilmer, Jeanne Tripplehorn and Jared Harris star in the 360-year-old tragedy.

panied and facilitated the rise of Fascism. In this Nietzschean glorification of man, militarism and aggression were extolled, feminism and moralism rejected. John Conklin's alluring set design, echoed in Gabriel Berry's marvelously witty array of period costumes, is a haunted futurist and surrealist landscape: De Chirico colonnades; Dali-esque vistas of sea and sky afloat with protoplasmic blobs; large, looming Magritte eyes and Man Ray tears.

All of these images smack together in the stunningly effective second-half opener. Akalaitis envisions the wedding of Annabella and her nemesis Soranzo as a sinister paean to Mussolini's Supermen, complete with daredevil fire twirlers, a lyric soprano singing a vapidly beautiful aria, and a Leni Riefenstahl trio of girl scouts enacting a salute to the Olympics. Amid this three-ring fascist circus, the wedding guests (sporting masks of classic futurist images) inch ominously toward the audience.

Their eerily slo-mo march provides a chilling prelude to the ensuing onslaught of terror. The second half of "'Tis Pity She's a Whore" is an ineluctable wave of vengeance and violence. Akalaitis, deferring to the sensationalism of Jacobean theater — and the terror of Mussolini's

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brownshirts — doesn't hold back. She really gets us going; you can feel the audience cringing en masse as Soranzo tosses his wife around by the hair, or later, as a banquet explodes into a bloodbath.

It's a gripping ride: Akalaitis sets things in motion with the swift toss of a soccer ball and keeps it hurtling to the harrowing fadeout. The momentum gets a boost from David Leong's taut fight direction, Mimi Jordan Sherin's spooky lighting and Jan A.P. Kaczmarek's smashing musical score, undulating with a hypnotic force that gets under your skin. Production wise, it's undoubtedly Akalaitis' most cohesive and coherent work at the Public to date.

Akalaitis' Achilles' heel continues to be her scattered attention span with actors. As demonstrated in "Henry IV," she has a fatal attraction to nubile actors of dubious substance, reminiscent of Alfred Hitch-

cock's penchant for pristine blond leading ladies. Like Hitchcock, she is more obsessed with the total physical plan, so we have to make do with a plastic pretty-boy type like Val Kilmer as Giovanni and a Disney ingenue like Jeanne Tripplehorn as Annabella; imagine Troy Donahue doing "Rebel Without a Cause" opposite a young Natalie Wood, and you've got the picture.

Given their utter lack of dimension or sexual chemistry, it is a measure of the seamlessness in Akalaitis' design that the evening is as strong as it finally is. It is also a credit to the more interesting performers, particularly Jared Harris as a properly arrogant Soranzo; Ellen MacDuff, resembling a surly Carole Lombard as his wronged mistress; Deirdre O'Connell as Annabella's freewheeling chum Putana, and Ross Lehman, alternately irritating and touching as Annabella's ill-fated suitor Bergetto. If and when Akalaitis raises actors to the level of her mise-en-scene, we will have terrific drama in place of rip-snorting tableaux. / III

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