

# 'Tis pity she's a snore at Public

By JERRY TALLMER

**M**ETHINKS John Ford in 1624 or so set out to go dear departed Willie Shakespeare one better, invent a more monstrous villain than Iago as *deus ex machina* for a more horrific play even than "Titus Andronicus." And boy, did Master Ford come up with a doozy in Vasques, that smoothly scheming liar, flatterer, hypocrite, poisoner, torturer, who gets away with murder and much worse in "Tis Pity She's a Whore."

JoAnne Akalitis has chosen "Tis Pity" as her big spring production at the Newman/Public Theater, and as its director has chosen to move the ancient Parma of this bloody Elizabethan drama to the Mussolini era of the early 1930s with

its fascism, Futurism, and glorification of — her words — "youth, speed, athleticism, and power."

Would there were more of that in her staging — more speed at least, and less elaborately choreographed spectacle. As it is, the whole arbitrary "updating" — three Mussolini masks at a masked wedding, a few Fascist salutes here and there, one sub-villain in Black Shirt uniform, a neon sign with the Fascist motto "*Dio Patria Famiglia*" — is irrelevant, unwanted, and unnecessary. As is a pathetic backdrop that is certainly not Futurist but might be some sort of second cousin to bastard Surrealism.

No, what counts is the play; and the play, God knows, is bloody

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enough and crazy enough and passionate enough in itself. It is a play about the sexual love of a brother and sister, a play about incest, two hearts that sprang from the same womb, handsome young man, lovely young woman, and its end is welded into its opening lines, when Giovanni, the young man, pleads to his father confessor: "Must I be forever banished from her bed?" and the friar replies: "Death waits in thy lust."

It does indeed, and before the play is out one of those hearts will be ripped, pulsing, from one of those lovers' bodies, by the other, and a woman who is tricked by

Vasques into giving away the lovers — the fact that they *are* lovers — will be blinded on stage, and various others will die — by knife, poison, pistol shot — writhing in agony and swamped in blood, or in any event *mercurochrome*.

I wish I could say that Val Kilmer and Jeanne Tripplehorn as brother and sister were as passionate as the words they were speaking — "Love me or kill me, brother" — and as what was passing between them together in the beds in our heads. But for the most part these are two pretty washed-out young people, she like a kid in bobby sox talking about stolen pleasures at a sorority tea, he paying homage to the ambrosia from her lips like an accountant going

over an annuity table. Only in a scary knock-down-drag-out fight with the husband (Jared Harris) her father has forced upon her does this Annabella spring to life, and then it's too late.

Fiercely anti-clerical playwright Ford sees to it that at final curtain the Church presides in its vested interest over the corpses and the spoils. For Vasques — pardon, for Erick Avari, who gives the one true, sinister knock-out performance of the evening — the sentence is "banishment within three days." It's as if John Gotti were given three days to get to Scarsdale and stay there.

Public/Newman, 425 Lafayette St., (212) 598-7100. Closes April 19.