

Cheek By Jowl:

An Actor's Story

By Gerard Raymond



Scott Handy as Ferdinand & Anastasia Hille as the Duchess in rehearsal for Cheek by Jowl's *The Duchess of Malfi*. John Haynes

“This is a dream job for an actor,” says Scott Handy. “There is only one terrible thing about working with Cheek by Jowl, and that is, what do you do next?”

Trained at London's Central School of Drama, the 27 year-old Cambridge University graduate got his first taste of touring with the classical company last year. He played Orlando in Declan Donnellan's all-male production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which enjoyed a sold-out run at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last December. Handy is back with Cheek by Jowl in Donnellan's production of John

Webster's 17th-century melodrama, *The Duchess of Malfi*, which plays ten performances at BAM this month.

Handy plays Ferdinand, the title character's twin brother. Their other brother is the Cardinal (Paul Brennen). When the Duchess (Anastasia Hille) marries her steward against her brothers' wishes, Ferdinand and the Cardinal exact a bloody revenge which results in a body count that rivals *Hamlet's*.

Three months ago, *TheaterWeek* talked to Handy in Cheltenham, a genteel resort town in West England. It was the second stop in Cheek By Jowl's ten-month tour of

The Duchess of Malfi. The company would then travel to Rome, Dublin, Oxford, Melbourne, and Bucharest before the New York engagement. At the end of the year they will play for a month in London's West End before continuing their way across the globe. Here is Handy talking about how the production evolved and describing the unique advantages of being a part of Cheek by Jowl.

The Early Rehearsals

“The first thing Declan said to us was, ‘I don't know what we are going to do,’ and we all laughed. But I promise you he

stage as myself in a play I've written, and then stepped directly from there into another character, a character very, very different from me both racially and in every other way. My heart would race with terror every night before I went out onto the stage.

You've said that the characters in *Valley Song* are based on actual people?

Yes. On two people I've known for a long time. Though the two are not actually related in any way, I've brought them together into the relationship of grandfather and granddaughter.

During the South African run of *Valley Song*, was anyone critical of your decision to play a black character?

There were no problems at all in that sense. Whether they'll be any problems in this country, I'll have to wait and see. But, as someone recently pointed out to me, that choice to play both myself as well as this character has become one of the political points of the play.

Returning to the United States with this play, do you have any fresh observations about race relations here?

Working on *Valley Song* in this country, I'm once again conscious of how much anger and resentment and bottled up frustration there is in terms of race. It seems, in some ways, like America is moving backwards. After the Simpson verdict was announced, I was speaking with a white professor at Princeton University, and he said to me, "I've never felt more white in my life." This country was split down the middle on that day. That's quite an object lesson.

Once *Valley Song* settles into its New York run, Fugard will again have time to pick up his pencil and start on something entirely new, something he no doubt will infuse with his passion to keep theater vital in the new South Africa. "The future of theater must rest, ultimately, in the hands of the writer," he believes. "There must be writers creating plays to which people, finally, do come."

Though he's feeling rejuvenated, Fugard is not expending any of his creative energy by looking for a new enemy. "More than anything," he says, in a tone both hopeful and cautious, "I want to celebrate. That is really, above all, what *Valley Song* is about. It's a celebration of life and of all its possibilities."



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didn't, because in the first two weeks we were working on ideas about the play that were diametrically different to what we ended up with.

"He told us that there were certain givens about the world of the play in terms of the beliefs [of the characters]—essentially concerning royalty, power and the Catholic Church. So we spent the early part [of the rehearsals] trying to set the specifics and the nature of those beliefs—which are so far away from us now—into our consciousness so that we could actually talk about God and Heaven and get the same kind of meaning.

"What Declan knew [at the beginning] was that he was going to cut a lot of the minor characters and create a chorus—six actors who can sing and act. We started off doing the last scene first with all of us dead on stage. The six actors would then revive us and present the story of how we died to the audience. The chorus would be watching us, giving people props....It was like continual improvisation with [the chorus] facilitating the play. We did that for a while but then Declan said, 'that is a little too clever; let's try something else.' "

An Idea Emerges

"At the end of the second week, Nick [Omerod, designer and co-founder with Donnellan of *Cheek by Jowl*] came in and said he had an idea. He drew four lines and scribbled in some squares like a chess board. Then he turned it around 45 degrees. That's how it all began. [In the production the actors move across a chess board stage, as though they are playing to the wings.] It is the idea of an oblique world. The characters are very self-aware and controlling, but at the same time unaware of how vulnerable they are in their denial. There are so many scenes in the play and it is quite difficult to follow plotwise; there is a sort of an arbitrary nature about the way it is written. So [in Donnellan's staging] everything happens at angles, going obliquely to the audience; suddenly you get a peek into something like a shutter opening. That was something that Declan and Nick discovered in front of us and worked out in the rehearsals. It was such a privilege to see these minds working."

How Donnellan directs

"Declan knows so much, but he makes you discover it. He describes himself as a

coach. The actor is the athlete. Over the months [while touring], he is constantly talking and developing a theory of art and a theory of acting. You learn so much. It's like a traveling drama college.

"He doesn't talk about stagecraft in conventional terms and he'll never say anything like 'louder,' or 'be more down-stage,' and he'll never give you a line reading. He believes the [practical aspects of performance come from] a belief and a truth. He's right, of course. If you can't be heard, it means you don't believe what you are saying, not that you haven't got the correct vocal technique. Something he talks about a lot is that when you are in control as an actor, you are out of control as a character, and vice versa. So your character must be out of control and that would put you into control. But of course everything in your body wants to take that extra beat longer, wants to do that line in a certain way because you think it works."

Anticipating New York

"Whenever anyone gets glum at the moment, you just say 'New York!' and we all sort of cheer. It's like this holy grail. The last time [with *As You Like It*] it was a mixture of astonishing excitement and terror. There was a hunger, an enthusiasm, and an energy that greeted the players in New York. It really shocked us and it made us giddy. It went to our heads in the sense that the play became too entertaining. We got lulled by the laughter and sheer enjoyment of the audience recognizing things in the play and it got about 20 minutes longer. We were milking it like crazy, having such a good time being loved. Then we went straight from there to Moscow. There is no laughter in Moscow. But there is this absolute laser sharp analytical perspective on the work. We had to very quickly stop that self-awareness and get much more specific. That is not to say that New York is a less discerning audience. It has just got a different relationship to theater—a relationship closer to entertainment. The wonderful thing is that in Shakespeare it is built into the play, the bawdy and the divine. I think it's going to be very interesting to see how *Malfi* goes down in New York because it is not as entertaining [as Shakespeare] and the language is more difficult. There is a different music in Webster. It's in a different register."

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