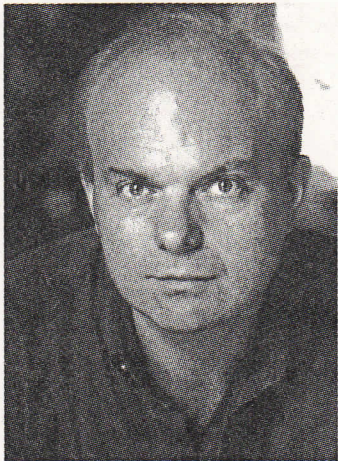


THEATER

Interview

BLOODY CHEEK

Declan Donnellan returns to BAM to direct a gore-filled Jacobean tragedy



Creative approach: director Donnellan

Cheek by Jowl is back at the Brooklyn Academy of Music with a startlingly fresh look at a three-century-old play. Following its all-male production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which entranced New York audiences last year with its wit and talent, the innovative British touring company presents a haunting production of John Webster's 17th-century tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi*, which plays ten performances at BAM starting December 6.

Like the Shakespeare comedy, *The Duchess of Malfi* is directed by Declan Donnellan and designed by Nick Omerod, the cofounders of Cheek by Jowl. But in contrast to *As You Like It*—which, of course, ends in joy and celebration—*Malfi* strikes darker and more disturbing chords. In Webster's tragedy, the Duchess of the title is punished horribly by her two brothers as a result of her decision to marry without their permission. She is sent to an asylum, forced to witness the murder of her lover and eventually is put to death. Her two brothers succumb to madness and despair before they too are assassinated. The bloody excesses of this Jacobean revenge drama (the body count rivals a slasher movie) could invite giggles from today's audience. But not in Donnellan's production. Having recently commenced a ten-month international tour—after BAM comes St. Petersburg, Slovenia and Bogotá—the director makes it clear he takes the spiritual crisis at the heart of the play very seriously, pointing out that revenge and damnation are “hideously modern concepts.”

Donnellan and Omerod met while studying law at Cambridge University in the early 1970s. They had their first encounter with *Malfi* there, playing the two brothers in a student production. Donnellan laughs at the memory: “I was just 19, and I remember we used to chase each other around the stage with knives!” The two men founded Cheek by Jowl a decade later. During the past few years, the team has also been responsible for a string of widely acclaimed productions at Britain's Royal National Theater, including a revival of Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* and the London production of *Angels in America*, which is credited with helping to propel Tony Kushner's Tony award-winning epic to Broadway.

The vibrant energy and the seeming spontaneity that characterize a Cheek by Jowl production originate in Donnellan's approach: allowing a text to “yield up its riches, bit by bit,” through rehearsal. “You know from the smell of the language that it is the play to dig,” he says, adding that he begins without preconceived notions. The discovery process continues even after the production embarks on tour.

Typically, Donnellan stumbled upon a production style for *Malfi* by accident, a result of his symbiotic relationship with Omerod, his partner outside of the theater as well. Donnellan had begun staging the play in the traditional manner, presenting it directly to the audience. About three weeks into the rehearsals, Omerod drew a checkerboard design on a piece of paper and turned it 45 degrees. Suddenly Donnellan had the inspiration to present the play in angles by having the actors play to the wings rather than out to the auditorium, heightening the audience's sense of voyeurism—and curiosity. As the actors move obliquely across the stage, which is painted like a chess board, the spiritual and moral despair of the characters is illuminated in powerful flashes.

One of Donnellan's insights for *Malfi* is that the play is about the shedding of people's vanities. “The more successful you are, the more frightened you are—we build ourselves up with vanities and we scare the shit out of ourselves,” he explains. Everybody in the play has to get rid of their illusions about themselves. The spiritual intensity of *Malfi* puts it “up there with the great plays of the world,” says Donnellan, but he adds, chuckling, the dense writing makes the experience “a bit like being force-fed on peacock.”

But there is a change of menu on the way for Donnellan and Omerod. Their next project is *The Return of Martin Guerre*, a new musical from the creators of *Les Misérables* and *Miss Saigon*. This Cameron Mackintosh project (scheduled for London's West End next spring) marks Donnellan's first stab at a mega-musical. *Malfi* might be bloody difficult, but tackling a singing and dancing 16th-century peasant musical could be even bloodier.

—Gerard Raymond

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