



Duchess of Malfi: Deconstructing the play

Anatomy of a scene

Elizabeth Freestone

There's something amazing about having a woman at the centre of this world.

Duchess

This you should have begg'd ere now.

Elizabeth Freestone

To create this figure who is a politician, and a ruler, and a royal, and a mother, and a wife, and a friend, you know – in all the detail that he puts in to her character is a phenomenal achievement I think.

Aislin McGuckin

I feel much more vulnerable in that moment ...

Commentator

Doing the workshop day allows Elizabeth and the actors the luxury of exploring various interpretations of the text. This is done through first discussing the various interpretations the text provides and then trying them out.

Aislin McGuckin

I definitely do put it on his finger don't I?

Elizabeth Freestone

And then you say is it fit –

Aislin McGuckin

It has to be me doing it – I can't, I couldn't make you put that ring on.

Commentator

Here they experiment with different ways of performing key moments in the wooing scene.

Aislin McGuckin

And for the first time is it fit really did ... was bigger than the physical question of a ring fitting. Is it fit that I do this, but is this right? Not even about status and the games but ... is this ... in the big world is this the right thing to do.

Elizabeth Freestone

Let's try the beauteous excellence moment, that you don't back down from it.

Edmund Kingsley

OK, cool.

Elizabeth Freestone

Let's play it as a really strong thought, a provocation, play to provoke on it and see where that takes us.

Duchess

*After this triumph and this large expense
It's fit, like thrifty husbands, we inquire
What's laid up for to-morrow.*

Antonio

So please your beauteous excellence.

Duchess

*Beauteous!
Indeed, I thank you.
I look young for your sake;
You have ta'en my cares upon you.*

Antonio

*I'll fetch your grace
The particulars of your revenue and expense.*

Duchess

*You are
An upright treasurer: but you mistook;
For when I said I meant to make inquiry
What's laid up for to-morrow, I did mean
What's laid up yonder for me.*

Antonio

Where?

Duchess

In heaven.

Duchess

One of your eyes is blood-shot; here, use my ring to't.

They say 'tis very sovereign. 'Twas my wedding-ring,

And I did vow never to part with it

But to my second husband.

Antonio

You have parted with it now.

Duchess

Yes, to help your eye-sight.

Elizabeth Freestone

Ok, Ok, let's stop there. God, that's tricky isn't it, it's really hard, if he's that cocky, it's really hard then to ...

Edmund Kingsley

It's quite fun.

Elizabeth Freestone

It made it really playful didn't it, it was suddenly a jousting tournament of wit between the two of them. He needs the space to get vulnerable doesn't he?

Edmund Kingsley

What I keep not doing is sitting down when you ask me to sit down and I wonder if that's really important actually that you place me ...

Elizabeth Freestone

Well let's grab a chair ... Let's get a chair.

Duchess

After this triumph and this large expense

It's fit, like thrifty husbands, we inquire

What's laid up for to-morrow.

Antonio

So please your beauteous excellence.

Duchess

Beauteous!

Indeed, I thank you. I look young for your sake;

You have ta'en my cares upon you.

Duchess

Fie, fie, what's all this?

One of your eyes is blood-shot; here, use my ring to't.

They say 'tis very sovereign. 'Twas my wedding-ring,

And I did vow never to part with it

But to my second husband.

Antonio

You have parted with it now.

Duchess

Yes, to help your eye-sight.

Elizabeth Freestone

It's less, less ruthless that way, isn't it?

Aislin McGuckin

Yes, yes.

Commentator

The actors' familiarity with Webster's text has given them the freedom to play different emotions within the scene.

Duchess

This you should have begg'd now.

Commentary

But there are limits to that freedom.

Duchess

Thus as fearful to devour them too soon.

Aislin McGuckin

We have choices in how we play the line and choices in our backstory, in our personal story, I suppose, but the parameter of what actually happens from the beginning to the end of this play, they are our parameters, we enter into a relationship, the effect of us meeting each other is in stone in a way, we do end up together, you do end up dead, I do end up strangled.