

Last-Play-Before-the-Apocalypse *Revenger's Tragedy*

by Sarah Dustagheer. Published in 2020 Issue 1.

For the production: *The Revenger's Tragedy* (*La tragedia del vendicatore*) (2020, Cheek by Jowl/Piccolo Teatro di Milano). Performance attended 2020-03-04. See production details at the end of the review.

A corrupt and inefficient leader. Women unsafe and violently attacked. Moral corruption seeping through society like a plague. Death and danger lurking unexpectedly. *The Revenger's Tragedy* is an oddly prescient play for the last few years...



Figure 1. Fausto Cabrio as Vindice in the Cheek by Jowl/Piccolo Teatro di Milano co-production of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Photo credit: Masiar Pasquali.

It is fitting, then, that it was the last piece of theatre I saw, March 2020, before the world changed forever. Sitting in a packed theatre with my maskless fellow audience members, while six months pregnant, retrospectively now seems as bizarre as many aspects of Middleton's masterpiece. As I write through the prism of the experience of a global pandemic, lockdown baby and the detritus of 2020, it is interesting what elements of this joint production between Teatro di Milano and

Cheek by Jowl remains. *The Revenger's Tragedy* was a collaboration between the Italian and English companies, set in Italy and performed in Italian with English surtitles.

The Revenger's Tragedy is good last-play-before-the-apocalypse because it is a warped and wonderful love letter to the theatre. Donnellan created a strong metatheatrical frame for Middleton's playful text as the production opened with stage manager with headset, before Fausto Cabra's Vindice arrived onstage to usher in the rest of the cast, manically dancing. Already it was apparent that Vindice was in charge of this mad hatter's tea party, leading fellow characters in a merry dance while naming and describing their flaws to the audience. The frame was invoked again at the end of the play when the house lights went up, stage manager reappeared, and the cast came out of "character" to wander off backstage. All



Figure 2. Errico Liguori as Spurio and Pia Lanciotti as The Duchess. Photo Credit: Masiar Pasquali.

the blood, gore, sex, and violence had, after all, been just pretend. In this way, the production paid tribute to Middleton's tongue-in-cheek parody of revenge tragedy dramaturgy, and to Vindice, the ultimate stage manager who can't quite manage what he has staged.

Vindice, of course, in seeking revenge for the murder of his fiancé, disguises himself as Piatto, and poses as confidante and fixer for the corrupt Duke and his feckless sons. But Vindice is far from the only one playacting. Most characters perform upstanding public roles, hiding a private repugnant reality. Massimiliano Speziani's Duke was the slick strutting peacock presiding over the court, his short stature, sharp suits and slick back hair evoking Italy's real life corrupted and lecherous player, Silvio Berlusconi. However, when the Duke's son Lussurio burst into his father's bedroom (as part one of Vindice's plots), the all-powerful leader grabbed and cowered behind his wife; using the woman he had just been having sex with as human shield against potential attack. For Pia Lanciotti's Duchess, Lussurio's ambush was probably the most thrilling thing to happen in the bedroom that evening. Before his ambush, she had been yawning her way through sex with the Duke, providing the odd encouraging sound to help him finish as soon as

possible. Lanciotti had previously revealed the Duchess's skilled acting skills and private dissatisfaction to the audience. In the play's opening court scene, the Duchess is seemingly distraught by the thought of her son Junior's trial (for the rape of Antonio's wife). She wails and sobs with her head down as the stage gradually empties, the ultimate example of a devoted mother. Uncannily aware that the stage has emptied, the Duchess suddenly relaxes, lifts her head, and reveals to the audience her dissatisfaction with her life and her older, useless husband. The inconsolable wife and mother morphs into bored, spoilt, under sexed aristocrat.



Figure 3. Fausto Cabrio's Vindice attempts to corrupt Beatrice Verzotti as Gratiana. Photo credit: Masiar Pasquali.

Tone is such an important aspect of *The Revenger's Tragedy* — the odd mish mash between tragedy and slapstick comedy that throws in some melodrama, black humour, and farce for good measure. Indeed, a 2010 BBC Radio 4 documentary described the playwright as "[The Tudor Tarantino](#)". This production grasped tone very well — a good example was the moment the disguised Vindice attempted to seduce his sister Castiza into sleeping with Lussurio, and to persuade his mother to act as pimp. Marta Malvestiti's Castiza expressed righteous indignation that was believable and just the right side of earnest. In the maelstrom of violence and corruption, she provided a calm and sobering moment. It contrasts with the queasy levity of earlier in the

scene where Vindice's mother attempted to kiss her son, have been utterly fooled by his Piatro disguise and flattering words.

As ever with designer Nick Ormerod's work, the aesthetic and set were visually arresting. The play opened with a series of wooden boxes strewn in red with the word "vendetta". Like a luxurious box of chocolates, each wooden cube was wheeled around to reveal an interior set for action. Thus, the set was a metaphor for the public façade/private turmoil that marks the characterization of the play and, as noted, was embodied in this production. I would have appreciated Ormerod's work even more if I had known that art galleries would be closed for the next year or so. Inspired by the Italian setting, some interiors felt like stepping into the Uffizi gallery, with the set registering visually the court's decadent extravagance.

The run of *The Revenger's Tragedy* at the Barbican was cut short because of the global pandemic; but there are three "Suspended Productions" in Milan, Paris and Madrid listed on Cheek by Jowl's website. I hope it will make a welcome return — it was highly entertaining, beautiful to look at and had some standout performances. In the meantime, it is worth noting the very rich archive of production materials and interviews provided on the [Cheek by Jowl Productions website](#) that offer a useful insight into this production. *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a firm fixture in the canon of regularly staged non-Shakespeare, and Donnellan's production is a great edition to the play's performance history. I have reviewed it here with post-pandemic eyes and, thinking more broadly, I wonder what other non-Shakespearean plays will gain new traction and meaning in our "new normal" world. I look forward to finding out in a socially distance and masked theatre soon.

Links

The Revenger's Tragedy: Cheek by Jowl Productions.

<https://www.cheekbyjowl.com/productions/the-revengers-tragedy/>

The Barbican Theatre: *The Revenger's Tragedy* (*La tragedia del vendicatore*) Cheek by Jowl/Piccolo

Teatro di Milano. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2020/event/cheek-by-jowlpiccolo-teatro-milano-the-revengers-tragedy>

Arkwright, Dominic. "The Tudor Tarantino." BBC Radio 4 Extra (2010).

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00s936x>

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	<i>The Revenger's Tragedy (La tragedia del vendicatore)</i>
<i>Year</i>	2020
<i>Theatre Company</i>	Cheek by Jowl/Piccolo Teatro di Milano
<i>Theatre</i>	The Barbican Theatre
<i>Start Date</i>	March 4, 2020
<i>End Date</i>	March 7, 2020

Cast

LUSSURIOSO	IVAN ALOVISIO
VINDICE	FAUSTO CABRA
JUNIOR	ALESSANDRO BANDINI
JAILOR	MARTIN CHISHIMBA
SUPERVACUO	CHRISTIAN DI FILIPPO
IPPOLITO	RAFFAELE ESPOSITO
BISHOP	RUGGERO FRANCESCHINI
SPURIO	ERRICO LIGUORI
THE DUCHESS/GRATIANA	PIA LANCIOTTI
CASTIZA	MARTA MALVESTITI
AMBITIOSO	DAVID MEDEN
THE DUKE	MASSIMILIANO SPEZIANI
DOCTOR	BEATRICE VECCHIONE
JUDGE	MARCO BRINZI

Creatives

DIRECTOR	DECLAN DONNELLAN
DESIGNER	NICK ORMEROD
ITALIAN VERSION	STEFANO MASSINI
LIGHTING	JUDITH GREENWOOD, CLAUDIO DE PACE
MUSIC	GIANLUCA MISITI
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	FRANCESCO BIANCHI
MOVEMENT	ALESSIO MARIA ROMANO