



Trifling with Cardenio

by Megan Elizabeth Allen. Written on 2017-11-26. Published in 2017 Issue 2.

For the production: *Cardenio* (2017, St. Louis Shakespeare, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

ONE OF SHAKESPEARE'S SO-CALLED "LOST PLAYS," *CARDENIO* IS ACTUALLY A RECONSTRUCTED composite put together by Gregory Doran, Artistic Director of the RSC, from its presumed source in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, along with Lewis Theobald's *Double Falsehood* (1727), other seventeenth-century versions of the Cardenio tale by Pichou, de Castro, Bouscal and D'Urfey, and a single reference to the existence of the play in the Bodleian Library (Doran 7).¹ As a proposed addition to the Shakespeare canon, the play bears a certain cultural weight, but Director Donna Northcott's production, only the fourth to be mounted in North America, approaches the play text with more playfulness than reverence.

Cardenio begins with the titular character's attempt to gain parental consent to woo Luscinda, which is interrupted by a letter from Duke Ricardo (Jeff Lovell) requesting Cardenio's presence at court. In an allusion to the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern storyline from *Hamlet*, Cardenio (Erik Kuhn) has actually been summoned so that he can spy on the Duke's wayward younger son, Fernando (Jason J. Little). Although the Duke's interventions seem ineffectual, his concern is justified, as Fernando buys unreasonable numbers of horses and engages in illicit or unsanctioned affairs. Fernando begins the play infatuated with a wealthy farmer's daughter, Dorotea (Lexie Baker), and ravishes her knowing he cannot marry her, only to switch his affections to Luscinda (Shannon Lampkin), the beloved of Cardenio. Fernando successfully marries Luscinda, who runs away to a nunnery before the marriage can be consummated; Cardenio runs madly through the countryside; the deflowered Dorotea disguises herself as a shepherd; and both parents grieve losses they, in a sense, caused. This is, of course, a comedy, so Fernando's affections are returned to the virtuous Dorotea, Luscinda is restored to Cardenio, as are his wits, and the play ends with the Duke planning the double wedding.

It's a trifle of a play with a few interesting moments, and while it has the feel of one of Shakespeare's late collaborations, it sometimes lacks the polish. As Michael Billington puts it in

his [review of the Stratford \(2011\) production](#), "at no point does the language achieve that blend of the high poetic and the quotidian that is [Shakespeare's] trademark."

St. Louis Shakespeare is a completionist company, in their 30th season becoming only the seventh theater company in the US to complete production of Shakespeare's entire canon. But company founder and director Donna Northcott reached beyond a completist ideal when deciding to put on *Cardenio*. Rather than merely "checking another play off the list," Northcott said, she wanted to engage with the play's theatricality, its Spanish setting, and its strong female characters.

Northcott's casting philosophy, which is "committed to coming as close as possible to a 50/50 gender split," had further repercussions for the company's portrayal of women and gender. Northcott changed Cardenio's father, Don Camillo, to his mother, Camilla, and opted where possible for women in the smaller roles of shepherds and servants. But one of the more interesting moments in Doran's text comes in Act 1, as Luscinda's father Don Bernardo, played with a sort of Liverpudlian insouciance by Colin Nichols, worries that Cardenio will make a poor match for his daughter because "His father is as unsettled as he is wayward in his disposition," and suggests he would refuse the match "If I thought young Cardenio's temper were not mended by the mettle of his mother" (1.2). This would be highly unusual in an early modern play, in which sons are expected to resemble and indeed replicate their fathers, and mothers are rarely mentioned as sources of influence. The text is Doran's, of course, and modern; the genderbent casting, then, of Larisa Alexander as Don Camilla renders this moment normative to an early modern context, shifting the accusation of waywardness to the mother and the location of the ideal mettle to the dead father, and removing any suggestion of a familial structure that might look to a mother as a source of behaviors that should be imitated. Doran's play text describes itself as a re-imagining, but this particular gender switch by Northcott brings the play more in line with its Shakespearean and Fletcherean source.

Northcott also cast Jason J. Little as Fernando, the Duke's wild younger son. Little, one of the only African American cast members, stands out as the villainous Fernando. However, the race-blind casting leads to moments that sit uneasily with current and past racial politics in America, and particularly in St. Louis, the city that became one of the founding sites of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder, on August 9, 2014, of Mike Brown, an unarmed black 17-year-old, by a white police officer who justified the murder by claiming to be afraid of the teen. Fernando's initial approach of the wealthy farmer's daughter, Dorotea, is played as a seduction and received a blend of genuine and uneasy chuckles from its audience as Little's Fernando moved smoothly from cajoling to threatening. The tone shifts by the end so that it

reads as a thinly veiled rape scene in which he offers her marriage or, should she refuse, to "stain with violence this holy pact" (1.6).

Due to the casting choice, the line, delivered by Little with convincing brutality, renders Fernando's villainy in terms that evoke more than a century of white supremacist propaganda projecting the image of a violent rapist onto black men. There are two other characters who are played by black actors, Luscinda's maid and Fernando's long-suffering servant Gerardo, but in a way this makes Fernando's particularly race-coded violence stand out all the more. Visibly different from his white father and brother, Fernando becomes a strikingly distinct version of villainy than would be represented by a too-privileged white man. Rather than calling attention to an all-too-typical abuse of power, Northcott's casting could potentially reinforce the kind of racist propaganda that was used to justify the murders of black men and boys like Mike Brown and Emmett Till.

The seduction is overseen by the other actors in masks, carrying branches lit with electric lights, representing a festival which provides the backdrop to the scene's action. Although they are meant to be outside Dorotea's bedroom, as Fernando becomes more threatening, the masked figures creep ever closer, and as she acquiesces, they turn their backs and turn off their lights. The eerie figures clearly cast judgment on Fernando's actions, adding a meta-textual lens which directs how the audience is meant to read the scene; as [Judith Newmark puts it in her review](#), Northcott's production of *Cardenio* could "be read as a Renaissance version of 'no means no'" drawing attention to issues of consent not questioned in the play text itself. In imitating the tone shifts of the Jacobean tragicomedy, Doran's *Cardenio* features scenes of romance that take on uneasy contemporary resonances in terms of consent and, in Northcott's production, racial politics. Her casting could also work to mock racialized stereotypes, as the play ultimately treats the happy reunion of the interracial couple, Fernando and Dorotea, as a just and welcome ending. It's a complicated moment, and as with many tragicomedies, the shifts in tone can seem harsh to a modern audience.

Although at times the humor sits uneasily with the darker implications of the play, the humorous moments were overall received generously by a packed house. The audience was a potentially unusual one, in that the performance I attended was also the League of Women Voters' 2017 Theatre Party, a fundraising event for voter citizen education and advocacy services, and comprised mostly of white women in their fifties and sixties. Is it a generational difference that enabled them to laugh at scenes of dubious consent? Hard to say. It is perhaps difficult to attribute the humor with which the play was received to audience demographics, given the generally positive reviews from local publications.

Indeed, Northcott's production injected a great deal of humor. In the second half, when Fernando and his older, usually wiser brother Pedro kidnap Luscinda from the convent in which she was hiding, literally stuffing her in a coffin, incredulous chuckles burst forth. As Cardenio fled into the countryside "wilderness," several of the main cast gamely doubled as sheep, baaing to the humorous effect that undercut many of Cardenio's more doleful scenes and broke the tension any time his or Dorotea's laments became too weighty. Northcott's additions seek to even out Doran's play text, which overall suffers from an inconsistent tone, pairing scenes more appropriate to a revenge tragedy against the light, humorous moments. [One reviewer noted of the tonal incongruities](#), "ten minutes before the ending, you can't decide if it will end with two weddings or four funerals." Doran's incorporation of the extreme tones typical of Jacobean tragicomedy is heightened in Northcott's production and moved slightly toward the humorous in the second half, which helps foreshadow the happy ending.

By necessity fairly open, the simple set design makes the most of the Ivory Theatre's small stage. Letters feature prominently in the play, passing from one character to another (Fernando summoning Cardenio, tearing him away from Luscinda, Fernando rejecting Dorotea, sending her fleeing to the countryside, Cardenio rejecting Luscinda, driving her to a nunnery) and this prominence is reflected in curtains of hanging letters that form the stage's backdrop, in a sense 'floating' above the action, and hanging over the characters' heads. Two sets of moveable columns, influenced by the architecture of the Alhambra, provide flexibility for scene changes, and a central carved wooden door reminiscent of Renaissance Spain provides a weighty focus for the action. The play's signature color, amber yellow, appears in a basket of flowers carried by Luscinda's maid Duenna (Kanisha Kellum, game in a role without lines), and in the falling autumn leaves during Dorotea's lament. While Fernando is mostly dressed in villainous black, the gold embroidery at his shoulders also echoes the signature color, as do the touches of gold in Dorotea's dress, the gold cape Cardenio is given at court, and the floral branches above the arches in the Shepherd scenes.

At the play's end, however, the resolution seemed too quick and somewhat marred by how easily Fernando is forgiven by the other players, Camilla's righteous rage shifting almost instantly to forgiveness as new alliances are proposed by the Duke. Typically of comedies, the Duke's ability to right all wrongs enables the play's structure as well as its adherence to a sense that justice is possible and attainable.

Notes

1. ^ Gregory Doran and Antonio Álamo, *Cardenio: Shakespeare's 'Lost Play' Reimagined*. Nick Hern Books: London, 2011.

Eg.

- http://www.laduenews.com/arts-and-culture/features/st-louis-shakespeare-presents-rare-performance-of-cardenio-theater-review/article_od8897d8-af70-11e7-b225-2f2ee3cfc709.html
- <https://www.riverfronttimes.com/stlouis/with-cardenio-st-louis-shakespeare-makes-the-most-of-the-bards-lost-play/Content?oid=9313316>
- <https://www.talkinbroadway.com/page/regional/stl/stl534.html>

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Cardenio
<i>Year</i>	2017
<i>Theater Company</i>	St. Louis Shakespeare
<i>Theaters</i>	Ivory Theater (USA)
<i>Start Date</i>	2017-10-06
<i>End Date</i>	2017-10-15

Cast

DONA CAMILLA	LARISA ALEXANDER
DOROTEA	LEXIE BAKER
CARDENIO	ERIK KUHN
LUSCINDA	SHANNON LAMPKIN
FERNANDO	JASON J. LITTLE
DUKE RICARDO OF AGUILAR	JEFF LOVELL
DON BERNARDO	COLIN NICHOLS
PEDRO	KEVIN O'BRIEN

Creatives

DIRECTOR	DONNA NORTHCOTT
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