



Measure for Measure

by Eleanor Collins. Written on 2010-03-21. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Measure for Measure (2010, Almeida Theatre, UK). See production details at the end of the review.

SUSPENDER-CLAD, SEMI-NAKED WOMEN WRITHE IN RED-BACKLIT DOORWAYS TO A THUMPING disco beat in the opening of the Almeida's Measure for Measure. It is a brave, even uncomfortably overstated, beginning. The scene's immediate fade to Duke Vincentio's office, from which the music's muted bass can still be heard, seems furthermore to suggest that the Duke's discussion of state business and assignation of power to Angelo occurs in the backroom of a nightclub. Curious though this may be (especially given the austerity of later scenes that also take place 'in the Duke's palace'), its ostensible function – to establish to a modern audience the play's emphasis on the sexual corruption in Vienna – is guaranteed. It is ironic, then, that one of the production's problems concerns the extent to which the sleaze that is initially apparent here is not successfully integrated into the rest of the action. From the large-scale rendering of Da Cortona's Rape of the Sabine Women that forms the backdrop of approximately half of the sets, to the series of leopard print-heeled prostitutes that occasionally scuttle across the stage, the sense of Vienna's licentious decay remains superficial, a theme imposed onto a narrative world in which the characters are essentially honest, confused and overwhelmed.

The portrayal of Angelo is exemplary in this case – Rory Kinnear's very human and almost pathetic representation of the scheming administrator is fascinating, and at times touching. Angelo stands bespectacled and waist-coated, with feet together, hands behind his back and eyes cast downwards during parts of I.i in which he receives the Duke's authority, and his humility persists throughout. In a hilariously winning moment in 2.4, which highlights the equal measures of panic and pleasure that he takes in Isabella's presence, he rehearses studious poses to adopt on her entrance and struggles to replace his glasses with contact lenses before she appears. The characterisation is slightly at odds with the original text's descriptions of Angelo (which are retained in performance) – a man so passionless he 'scarce confesses / That his blood flows, or that his appetite / Is more to bread than stone', and whose urine Lucio compares to 'congealed ice'. Yet the representation of a government official who is

fundamentally and quite transparently inept, but whose decisions entail consequences of public and state importance, is a pertinent reading. Angelo's demeanour at the end of the play, following the public unveiling and condemnation of his behaviour in office, suggests a shame and embarrassment so horrifying and deeply painful that it almost renders him insensible; his failure to acknowledge Mariana as his loyal wife might be read as an inability to function, rather than steadfast refusal.

Anna Maxwell Martin's Isabella is as strong, articulate and quietly confident as Kinnear is flustered and rash. Her performance brings a physical concentration and intensity to the role, and her slight frame is counterbalanced by poise and passion alternately. The rare consequence of this rendering is that when Isabella refuses to sacrifice her virginity for the life of her brother it does not seem ridiculous, even to modern sensibilities; Isabella's restraint and rationality is reassuring rather than cold; we do believe in her choice. In many ways, she is the only character in the production who seems fully in control of her actions, and sensitive to what is going on around her. Her self-possession lies in increasingly stark contrast to the Duke's rapidly degenerating credibility. In his first appearance as the Friar, the Duke (Ben Miller) comes across as a familiar, benevolent patriarch, but his actions become more difficult to justify as the play continues. This is a familiar criticism of the play, but the absurdity of the Duke's decision to let Isabella believe that her brother is dead comes across more clearly than in any production I have seen. Here, the Duke's lapse of judgement is not attributed to any ulterior or sinister motive; it is, instead, apparently unconscious, inexcusably naive, and frankly deluded.

If the Duke's scheme is guided by anything other than a blind lack of foresight, it is his inability to negotiate the world around him, an essential cluelessness that is hinted at in Miller's presence on-stage as the audience enter and are seated, before the action has officially begun. Lurking towards the back of the stage and occasionally pacing, the Duke is observed here in protracted self-contemplation, weary and tired, his head often cradled in his hands. His desk is covered in papers, half-finished work, empty coffee cups, plates, a full ash-tray; it is late at night and he is drinking red wine as he hands his affairs over to Angelo. These little signals, gesturing to a life in disorder, rouse sympathy rather than suspicion and the Duke's headlong plunge into a series of events that do not, ultimately, lead to his intended outcome, indicates a simple inability to handle affairs, and to assess accurately the reality of situations. While it is intensely uncomfortable, it is not surprising when Isabella cannot answer the Duke's proposal for marriage and stands aghast, shocked by the sheer madness of the unfolding events. But here, there is no sense that the union will be forced; the Duke's growing realisation that he has made a terrible error is palpable; he begins to fidget, look embarrassed; his confidence and authority are undermined sufficiently to suggest that Isabella's implicit, silent refusal is

accepted. Isabella's supreme example of rationality wins out in this character-led production. How Vienna will fare under the rule of the visibly shaken Duke, his confidence at its lowest ebb yet, is a question that lingers longer than usual after his slow retreat from throne to backstage before a silent crowd.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Measure for Measure
<i>Year</i>	2010
<i>Theater Company</i>	Almeida Theatre
<i>Theaters</i>	The Almeida (UK)
<i>Start Date</i>	2010-02-12
<i>End Date</i>	2010-04-10

Cast

VINCENTIO	BEN MILES
ANGELO	RORY KINNEAR
ESCALUS	DAVID KILLICK
CLAUDIO	EMUN ELLIOT
ISABELLA	ANNA MAXWELL MARTIN
JULIET	DAISY BOULTON
MARIANNA	VICTORIA LLOYD
LUCIO	LLOYD HUTCHINSON
PROVOST	DAVID ANNEN
FRIAR PETER	ANDREW FRENCH
JUSTICE	NICK RICHARDS
ELBOW	TONY TURNER
MISTRESS OVERDONE	FLAMINIA CINQUE
POMPEY	TREVOR COOPER
ABHORSON	MARK MONERO
BARNADINE	SEAN KEARNS
FRANCISCA	JESSICA TOMCHAK

Creatives

DIRECTOR	MICHAEL ATTENBOROUGH
DESIGN	LEZ BROTHERSTON
LIGHTING	DAVID HERSEY
MOVEMENT	IMOGEN KNIGHT
SOUND	JOHN LEONARD
MUSIC	STEPHEN WARBECK