

# Duchess in the Dark

## VENUE

**Flamboyant Theater**

## OPENED

November 4, 2009

## CLOSED

November 7, 2009

## CREATORS & ARTISTS

**Cast** Joe Curnutte, Kyle Davies, Jody Flader, Julia Gwynne, Blake Habermann, Levi Morger, April Palasthy, Michael Schoenfeld

**Author** John Webster

**Director** Mary Birnbaum

**Sound** Chris Rummel

**Sets** Grace Laubacher

**Wigs & Hair** Jojo Karlin

**Stage Manager** Jamie Rog

**Producer** art.party.theater.company

## nytheatre.com review

**Will Fulton** · October 31, 2009

Art.party.theater.company's *Duchess in the Dark* is a slimmed-down adaptation of John Webster's seminal revenge tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), deftly cut and directed by artistic director Mary Birnbaum. Exemplary of Jacobean revenge plays, *Malfi* tells the bloody story of the recently widowed titular Duchess (played with wonderful confidence and subtlety by Julia Gwynne) and her ill-fated love with a court steward, Antonio. Her brothers, wanting to protect their claim to the inheritance and driven by incestuous jealousy of their sister's suitor, concoct a series of elaborate schemes that start with spying, escalate to murder, and end up destroying most everyone involved in a bloodbath ending typical of the genre. Also there is a werewolf—I love Jacobean drama.

Birnbaum's edit shaves the original cast of 15 characters down to a lighter and more nimble eight by cutting down on the extraneous subplots while maintaining the essential core. Her

direction is similarly sharp, drawing noticeably and to good effect upon the Lecoq training that she and many of her actors have to correctly underscore the play's archaic language with a vibrant and violent physicality. Though many little directorial gestures and conventions are at play (more on that below), they all fit together into a cohesive and well-built system that never succumbs to the surplus of clever ideas that plagues so much avant garde work. Chris Rummel's sound design compliments Birnbaum's physical world with an atmospheric soundscape that is both familiar and unsettling. Apart from Gwynne's expertly-played Duchess, the performances are generally just competent, though tending a little unfortunately towards some of the more obvious conventions of melodrama (gravelly-voiced villainy and a lot of yelling).

The primary point of interest for the show, however, is its unconventional lighting design. Every member of the audience is handed a flashlight, and after the first 20 or so minutes of the show, all illumination comes from the audience. However intellectually intrigued by the idea of such a tangible analog for the audience's aggregate attention, I was wary of how it might work in practice. Fortunately, my fears were allayed, and this aspect of the show largely worked quite well. With a reasonably full house, the show was never under-lit, and there was enough variety in the particular uses of the convention to keep it from becoming too gimmicky. The aesthetic result was unique and engaging, and felt appropriate to the dark and paranoid world of the play.

It was also fascinating to watch the audience as a collective get better at their job of lighting the show over its course. By the play's grisly conclusion response times to entrances were virtually instantaneous and actors remained appropriately lit on fast and unexpected crosses. When someone dropped an object on the ground, a handful of lights would deviate from the main masses immediately to highlight it. Although performing a 17th century play with early 20th century technology, the effect resonated powerfully with the 21st century's technically-mediated collective action and the surprisingly nuanced intelligence that can emerge. Furthermore, although I happen to enjoy audience participation, many people very actively do not,

and this was a perfect solution for them. It provided the thrill of engagement without the personal implication or embarrassment that can accompany participatory work.

While the storytelling becomes a little choppy towards the end as it devolves into confusing fits of yelling and fighting, that is not entirely atypical of Jacobean revenge tragedies, which serve as an important foundation for many current forms of popular storytelling. Moreover, these structural weaknesses can be forgiven on account of the show's well-executed innovation with the lights. After receiving a lot of public attention over the summer for their *Bryant in the Park*, art.party has begun to make a name for itself as a young company with a taste for smart and generous experimentation in form. Similarly, Flux Factory, the interdisciplinary arts warehouse space that is hosting them, is doing a wonderful job along with spaces like the Brick or the nearby Chocolate Factory in building a new and established home for such work after the Avant Garde Diaspora caused by rising real estate prices in downtown Manhattan. If work like this is indicative of things to come, then I for one am feeling confident about theatre's continued survival and relevance in an increasingly digital world.