

## REVIEW

### Stage On Screen: *Volpone*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Doctor Faustus*.

In theatre, timing is everything and Stage on Screen's recent productions have it down to a T. Not only are a few of the neglected gems of the early modern period brought to life, Stage on Screen have also made a valuable contribution to the current widening of theatrical transmission beyond the stage. Whilst the National Theatre Live broadcasts its stage productions internationally using advanced special effects and camera angles to translate live ephemeral performances into cinema, Stage on Screen's understated use of technology captures and enhances the work of the Greenwich Theatre performances and preserves them for repeated viewing. Combined with a website that provides information on the historical and critical background of the plays, as well as cast, crew, costume and set designs, along with an interactive forum for further discussion, these DVDs provide a variety of exciting new teaching resources.

Stage on Screen's production of *Volpone* literally laughs in the face of those who would still label Jonson Shakespeare's inferior, especially in regards to comedy. The play's magnificent humour fizzles and sparkles amidst its darkly satiric commentary on emergent capitalism and the degeneration of social, familial, moral and legal codes. Richard Bremmer's wickedly charismatic Volpone is captured in carefully angled shots and momentary close-ups that allow the screen audience to witness his silent "flux[es] of laughter" during Mosca's mockery of the deaf Corbaccio and the subtle extension of his middle finger when his supposedly weak hands are manoeuvred before the court to indicate his inability to "stroke a lady's breasts." Yet the poetic judgements of the play are retained as long shots of the judges, situated in the uppers during the court cases, create a sense of distance between both the main characters on the stage itself and the audience, demanding – as Jonson did – that spectators all recognise themselves in the primary performers and learn the same lessons. Throughout, both via Elizabeth Freestone's directorial choices, which make superb use of what we know about early modern theatrical practices, and in its careful rendering for DVD by Stage on Screen, the multifaceted and thought-provoking work characteristic of Jonson shines.

Stage on Screen's *Duchess of Malfi* opens upon a crowded and solemnly ceremonial funeral to close with a lingering shot of a bare and blood-soaked stage, which effectively frames the progressive spread of "death and disease through the whole land" when the nation's fonts of power are "poisoned near the head." *Malfi*, however, does not quite live up to the standards of *Volpone*. *Malfi*'s potency originates in Webster's taut eloquence, where language works harder than action to strike its audience's hearts, and from the spirited dignified Duchess who "stains time past, lights the time to come." Neither of these are showcased here to their greatest effect. Frequent long-shots distance the audience from the characters, limiting access to facial expressions, and draw attention not to the crucial notion that the world is a stage but that the stage is its own world. Darkly dominant close-ups of the madmen threaten to overdramatise their comically traumatic appearance in act four, yet the shock of the Duchess's discovery of Antonio and her children's waxwork corpses is

again minimised by a long shot that scarcely illuminates the bodies or her reaction. The screenwork here is in line with the essence of the performance, itself too much reliant on loud outbursts that do little to distinguish the traditionally self-possessed Duchess from the ranting malcontent Bosola, the loquaciously helpless Antonio, the hysterical Cariola or the violent passions of the brothers: the lycanthropic Ferdinand who would throttle his own shadow and the avaricious Cardinal who smothers his former mistress with a poisoned Bible. Whilst a few close shots bring out human touches – Julia's genuine pity for her husband, the Cardinal's affection for his sister, and Ferdinand's infatuation – lending fresh depth to previous interpretations of this play, the overall effect both on stage and on screen diminishes the admirableness of the Duchess to the extent that Webster's macabre snapshot of society is entirely without hope or relief.

*Doctor Faustus*, however, is another example of Stage on Screen excelling. With Freestone's production set upon a circular stage designed like a library with a semi-circular tier of uppers, Stage on Screen use a plethora of clever camera angles to mark the play's evolution. Beginning with mid-range and distance shots, interspersed with poignant close-ups, the camera moves increasingly near to the stage so that by the end the long-shots are few and a multitude of claustrophobic close-ups demonstrate Faustus's entrapment within his small circle of knowledge and by his bargain with the Devil. The limitlessness of the devil's domain is conveyed through intermittent high and low camera angles that alternately turn the two levels of the stage into heaven, hell and earth according to Mephistopheles's perception that to be "deprived of everlasting bliss" is to be tormented by "ten thousand hells." Crucially, the charming *Schadenfreude* humour and sulkiness of Mephistopheles and the juvenile delight of the rebellious young Faustus are also displayed in glimpses of their respective smirks, eye-rolls and grins, as the camera reproduces their on-stage chemistry and oscillating master-servant, friend and foe relationship. This DVD brilliantly displays the dynamism of Freestone's imaginative decisions and the horror and humour of Marlowe's early work.

With these three highly individual productions, Stage on Screen accomplishes exactly what it sets out to do: "to capture the performance without interfering in any way with the theatrical experience." The main DVDs are essential watching in their own right and Stage on Screen's carefully thought out Library and Education packs additionally provide remarkable resources for those teaching English, Drama and Media. Pitched perfectly to suit both casual and academic audiences, Stage on Screen offers an unparalleled array of material on these productions that will be a welcome addition to those who wish to study early modern dramatists other than Shakespeare.

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