

ALMEIDA THEATRE

The Duchess of Malfi: Interview with Director Rebecca Frecknall Concept and Inspiration

What drew you to the play?

I was really struck by how current it felt. It's a play about the politics of the family, corruption within a political or a state system and society's perception of goodness or merit. It also explores the questions of whether individuals can be rewarded or survive within a system that's corrupt. All of those things felt like really exciting and current conversations.

I also found it really amazing how many great characters there are in it. It's a story that affects a group of around 8 people very directly and in this version I've cut a number of surrounding characters to focus in on the central players. Theatrically I thought this is a real actors' play and ensemble piece.

I also think the language is so wonderful, so the combination of those three things made me think this would be a good one for me.

What was your vision for this production?

I wanted to focus down on the central characters and make it more of a family thriller, rather than keeping everyone in the world of the court. That informed my decision about how I edited the play because I got rid of a lot of the exterior characters.

It's one of those plays that is really famous but not many people have actually seen it. It's famous for being really bloody and, as it's a revenge tragedy, it's famous for pretty much everyone dying at the end.

Aesthetically there are a few contemporary artists who came up in our conversations linked to work of that nature. One was **Quentin Tarantino**: we wondered if Jacobean tragedy was being made now, who would be making it, and we thought maybe Tarantino.

I also thought that the films of **Lars von Trier**, particularly **Melancholia** were operating in a similar area. His work is so dark and tragic. What I liked about von Trier's work in relation to *The Duchess of Malfi* was that his work feels like it is often about broken people which resonated with my interpretation of the characters in our play.

At the same time I got really interested in **David Lynch** because it's such a weird play. It's full of strange shifts in time and location alongside madmen and people turning into wolves, some of it doesn't really make sense. So I thought about Lynch's films like *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* where as an audience you are constantly reassessing what is real and unreal. I also think Lynch deals with dream and nightmare in a really interesting way. There's quite a lot in the play about dreams, so aesthetically I started going down that route as a way of framing some of the more unusual and strange events that happen in the play.



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I also wanted it to feel bleak, because I think it's talking about bleakness in society. I feel like Webster's saying you can't really fight the system and I didn't want to shy away from that, so I was interested in finding a poetic visual language where all of these elements could exist and it would still end up feeling quite contemporary.