

ALMEIDA THEATRE

The Duchess of Malfi: Interview with Director Rebecca Frecknall Design

How did you work with the designer on the concept for the set?

The set came from conversations about how to do this play now and allow it to speak to a contemporary audience.

Designer Chloe Lamford and I started by thinking about what the play needed for example a feeling of wealth, status and hierarchy, a sense of Catholicism or at least religion and the ability to jump location swiftly.

We didn't want to try and create a naturalistic set; we wanted something that felt more gestural or symbolic.

We then began looking into the philosophical questions of the play. A section of text that we were particularly inspired by was when the Duchess says to Ferdinand

Why should only I,
Of all the other princes of the world,
Be cased up like a holy relic?

I thought at once that's a really interesting question and plays into a lot of the gender politics of the play. It also feeds into a lot of the ideas in the play about putting people in positions of power and leadership on pedestals and whether they can live up to the expectations placed on them.

We also wanted to explore the role of Catholicism within the play and interrogate our relationship to relics and special things, asking why we case them up. So Chloe and I started looking at display cases in gallery spaces and museum spaces. We started looking at these glass cabinets that would hold relics and explored this idea of special things that you can look at but can't touch.

That's where the aesthetics began to emerge from, the idea of things cased in glass that you can watch and see through, so they are at once protected but also cut off. It's voyeuristic and it's about spying and watching things and about the idea of privacy which I think is key in the play.

Bosola has a line where he says:

And though continually we bear about us
A rotten and dead body, we delight
To hide it in rich tissue.

In my version of the play the speech from which this line is taken opened the production. I felt this sense of hiding things in rich tissue was a key idea and related both to the literal costuming of the actors and to the experience of being a member of a Royal Family, dressing up and having to play a particular role in society.

So we decided to create one big display case that was for the characters and their costumes, and the play opens with them dressing in their costumes while he's commenting on that. Then we had smaller display cases that held all of the murder weapons so that every object used in the play became a weird relic and had a special and ritualistic quality to it.

The design we ended up with looks very shiny and moneyed because the locations within the play are elite spaces. We also loved the idea that if we had a shiny black floor and shiny black blood then we could hide the blood to begin with and seep it into the world slowly so you wouldn't notice it until it started to flood the floor at the end. We

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wanted to feel that when the men go into their killing massacre they would get tainted by the world in a way, because the blood wouldn't be coming from a naturalistic place, it would seep through the world they inhabited and colour them.



What did you hope to achieve through the sound design?

Sound was really interesting, I didn't want original composition, but instead I wanted to work with a piece from *Dido and Aeneas*, the Opera by Henry Purcell called *When I am Laid in Earth* or *Dido's Lament*. It's the final lament of the opera and I think it's the most beautiful thing ever and I weirdly found the lyrics really resonant with the play.

When I am laid, am laid in earth, may my wrongs create
No trouble, no trouble in, in thy breast
When I am laid, am laid in earth, may my wrongs create
No trouble, no trouble in, in thy breast
Remember me, remember me, but ah
Forget my fate

It felt really similar to what the Duchess says to Bosola before he kills her. It also had an aural aesthetic that I felt keyed into a lot of the paintings we'd been looking at of Italian Renaissance pictures from that time, particularly those of **Caravaggio**.

George Dennis, the Sound Designer, noticed that the film *Melancholia*, which inspired a lot of the imagery in the production, is scored by the music from the opera *Tristan and Isolde*. So Lars von Trier (director of *Melancholia*) has also used very classical and traditional music and then transformed it by repeating and stretching elements. George had the idea of taking the opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, and creating the entire sound world for our production from that.

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So everything that's in the production is a remix or sample or interweaving of pieces from that opera into the sound design. If you listen to the score there are moments from *Dido's Lament* we have weaved through the play. When the Duchess' daughter is seen for the first time you can hear it being played, it's layered up through the production until the piece in full is used at the end to accompany the final killings.

We wanted the audience to feel like they had heard it before as a foreshadowing of the end. There's something within the play that makes it feel inevitable that everyone is going to die and that there's no other possible outcome. This is because of every bad decision that's made and every bit of time pressure and everybody's own inner brokenness and corruptness. I liked the fatalistic quality of the score and the sense that it is leading the audience towards the end before they know that is what is happening.

The score also helped to make the killings at the end feel distinct to the murder of the Duchess earlier in the play. I wanted the Duchess' murder to feel as real as it could to illustrate what an awful thing it is that they do to her and to highlight that it's not a poetic or beautiful death, the reality is that they strangle her to death and it takes a long time and it hurts and it's horrible.

In contrast I wanted the underscore at the end to make the final fight feel operatic and expressionistic. In our production the killing of the men became this weird gestural movement sequence which was designed to illustrate how ridiculous the situation has become by the end.

How did the lighting design feed into the aesthetic of the production?

The *Caravaggio* and *Melancholia* references really informed the lighting decisions and we also talked a lot in the technical rehearsal about the lighting feeding into the production's operatic aesthetic.

The lighting was also very cinematic and this is a quality I wanted to combine with elements of the set. A key element of the set was a cabinet that we could track upstage and downstage. That felt very filmic as if we were using a lens, zooming in and out at you and bringing things into and out of focus for the audience. The lighting served that purpose too, operating like a camera lens as well as a paint brush.

It helped to keep the atmosphere of the piece and to keep it feeling like, underneath that beautiful world, there is violence and danger. The lighting worked to balance those two qualities at the same time. There are times when the world goes from being side lit, golden and beautiful, to being focused on the inside of the cabinet where it's really white and stark and clinical.

