

The Duchess of Malfi: Interview with Director Rebecca Frecknall Directorial Challenges

What aspects of the play provided the greatest challenges?

The Duchess dying in Act 4

In the original version of the play the Duchess dies halfway through the fourth act of a five act play. It's one of the things that doesn't entirely work dramaturgically in the play and I think that's really hard for an audience. They have come to see a play called *The Duchess of Malfi*; they meet and fall in love with that character only to lose her and then still have another half an hour of the play to go. I think that jump is always something a director needs to solve but I think what Webster has done is show the audience the world of the play without her, to demonstrate the fallout and the chaos of what happens once they have killed her.

I think the tragedy of the play for the men is that they are so swept up on their plight of revenge and desire for power that they just go so far. They don't realise how far they've gone until she's dead and then by that point it's too late. It's almost like they wake up to the world after her murder and the fifth act is about them being confronted with their own actions. None of them survive that confrontation, they either go mad or get killed or kill someone else. I think that's part of what Webster's trying to get at – look at what happens when we're driven by revenge/power and we destroy others for our own gain.

I tried to solve all of this by keeping the Duchess in the production. When she's killed in my production she doesn't leave the stage, none of the women do. They stay and they become voyeurs of the aftermath of their lives.

I actually made the decision to put the Duchess into a scene which she's not normally in. There's a doctor in the play that comes to Ferdinand when he's mad and I decided that character would be played by the Duchess. This was partly because I liked the idea that he was seeing her in his madness but it was also a way of keeping her present. It kept her active and gave her agency. It gave a sense that after her murder she could still come back and manipulate the play.

I also have her physically be the echo in the echo scene, which is not always done like that.

I felt it was important that after their deaths, although the women no longer have any text, they are not forgotten and they are still seen, watching everything. I wanted to flip the play on its head at the end and really highlight the divide between the men and the women so that at the end we see all the women cased up and all the men dead on the floor.



ALMEIDA THEATRE

The Character of Bosola

I think Bosola's character journey is really difficult and I think Leo Bill does a brilliant job of getting to grips with it. Bosola is so integral because he's the one character who is there at the beginning and he's there at the end, he's the one that talks to the audience the most and he is the one that plays across both teams; he's an infiltrator of all the elements of the story.

His psychological journey is really difficult because he changes allegiances and he has a philosophical awakening towards the end of the play. He goes from being someone who thinks 'people are as they are and we have to play our roles' to someone who has more of an opinion on right and wrong and a desire to have agency within that. He's ultimately unsuccessful but the desire is there. I think figuring out the arc of that character with the actor was really tough and but ultimately really brilliant.



The World of the Play

There are oddnesses in the world of the play and you have to decide whether you're going to go along with them or not. There are some I decided to keep in and go with, for instance the fact that Ferdinand suffers from lycanthropy and believes he is turning into a wolf, but there are some that I didn't. I've cut the whole madmen scene for example. It's a scene that I think the Jacobean audience would have probably really enjoyed but when I came to it I just felt that the questions around madness and what we mean by it are very different now. I wanted to address and answer and interrogate those questions that are in the play but I didn't want to do it through that scene. So I cut that right at the very beginning of editing it.

There are also difficulties with the timeline of the play. If you actually look at what happens and what the characters say happens you realise that it takes place over years, but the characters act like it's taking place over a week.

We did discuss how much time we think had passed, but we also considered what's actually useful for us to play and what does Webster care about. I don't think that Webster actually cares about how much time has passed. I think what he cares about is that time has jumped and she's kept her family a secret so well that she's managed to have more children and no one knows. So we had to work out how to find a sense of truth and a sense of history and of time passing for the actors playing those characters. But it was also important not to get too bogged down in finding the answers in the text, I always said to the actors 'we're going to look for all of this in the text but if we don't find it, it's probably because it's not there, not because we can't see it.' I was very clear that this is not a naturalistic play and that we weren't going to treat it as one.