

# ALMEIDA THEATRE

## The Duchess of Malfi: Interview with Director Rebecca Frecknall Rehearsing and Staging

### How did you begin rehearsing the play?

On the first day we did a design presentation, which means we showed the actors and other company members the model box, the costume references and drawings. We talked the actors through what the world we were creating was, what the aesthetic was, why we'd come to those decisions and examples of things that might happen in the play. We showed them how the design might work and talked through how I imagined that certain scenes might be staged, but we left things open for us to discover those things together.

We showed them a lot of our design references so we had a whole wall of images up of things we'd looked at on our journey to getting to the model box.

Then we read the play together. We read the first half on day one and discussed it, and we talked about our first impressions of the play. On the second day we read the second half and discussed that. We also touched on the beginnings of a movement language, we looked at working with different qualities of movement, in particular slow motion, what it means and how you do it. So for the first couple of days we kept it quite creative.

Then towards the end of the week we did a full reading and we talked about the themes of the play.

### What did you want to convey through the language of movement?

Some of it was to do with using movement to convey the slowing down or speeding up of time, which is a cinematic idea. We were trying to solve the problem that the play presents where each chapter makes you jump ahead, possibly a few years or sometimes just a couple of months.

We have moments in our production where a scene is playing in real time and there's a scene in the background in slow motion so that the flow of time is already in question.

I'm referring to the movement as slow motion, but in fact what we did in the show is called moulding which is slightly different. It's the same effect but you achieve it by keeping tension in your body and imagining that the air is made of clay and you're pushing through it. This creates motion in the body so there is a sense of actual emotional effort and engagement in that movement language. It creates a sense of emotional baggage, difficulty and frustration, because you're trying to do something and you can't because the air's too thick. I'm interested in how that affects the chemistry between the actors, and also between the actors and the audience.

Moulding comes from **Michael Chekhov** and his four qualities of movement which are moulding, floating, flying and radiating.

Moulding is the one about slowness. All of the qualities are linked to the elements and moulding is the one linked to earth. I think there's also an interesting question about what earth means within the play, and how that is in juxtaposition to the idea of heaven.

I also wanted to create a movement language that would allow for some of the things that happen off stage in the play to occur on stage. For instance, the Duchess giving birth. This is a moment in the play where a woman is going through a very important, catalytic event in the play, it's incredibly demanding and painful and yet it's written that she just goes off and gives birth while the men stand and talk about it. We created an abstract movement language for the birth, and set it up so you have a juxtaposition of a scene with lots of men standing in suits in front of these

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two women going through a really difficult experience together. I was interested in how, when you work with movement, you can create things in an abstract and poetic way and stage what is unstageable. This is really useful because there's a lot in this play that's unstageable.