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Shakespeare BASH'D's *Measure for Measure*

Directed by Catherine Rainville
Junction City Music Hall, Toronto, CA

Reviewed by NOAM LIOR

Director Catherine Rainville intended this production of *Measure for Measure* to engage with #MeToo and #TimesUp, an intention which is remarkably buoyed by Shakespeare BASH'D's company style.¹ According to the program notes, BASH'D puts on "Shakespeare's plays in social settings, creating a relaxed, stimulating environment for the audience." Co-founder and co-artistic director James Wallis explains that this has largely meant "playing Shakespeare in bars," in which the alchemy of informality, intimacy, and alcohol gives the performance the "social, casual atmosphere" of a post-show discussion in a pub.² Wallis may be underselling the aesthetic somewhat – Rainville's production is intimate and casual, but also raucous, tense, and bristling with energy.

The performance venue is Toronto's Junction City Music Hall, a basement bar in a trendy but away-from-the-downtown-core neighborhood of Toronto. The bar is open throughout, and audience members are encouraged to enjoy a drink during the show. The venue contributes to the production's rough-and-ready aesthetic – it's a small, cramped space, with a decent sound system but not much in the way of lighting options, minimal space for a set, and limited options for backstage areas and exits. The primary playing space is a central aisle between two banks of seats, so spectators can see the audience members across from them throughout the performance, weaving our reactions into the show's visual fabric. On the night that I attend, the play is sold out, with audience members filling every booth and stool, as well as the rows of impromptu seating, all doing our best not to spill drinks on one another (or spill one another's drinks).

The cramped and rough nature of the space would make an illusionistic performance difficult, if not impossible, and Rainville's production aesthetic turns potential liabilities into strengths by eschewing illusionism in favour of playful theatricality. The costumes are perhaps the purest expression of the production's aesthetic. The show is in modern dress, each outfit exaggerated just slightly so that it straddles the boundary between clothing and costume. Sochi Fried, as Isabella, wears a tight-fitting long-sleeved-and-turtlenecked black shirt and floor-length black skirt, which, combined with a substantial silver cross, evoke rather than replicate a nun's habit. Lesley Robertson's Pompey, in denim vest over black netted shirt conjures a clownish version of working-class street clothes, while Geoffrey Armour's Angelo, in patterned waistcoat, French-cuff dress shirt, and silver tie bar, presents an exaggeration of hipster fastidiousness. These characters are legible as social types as well as layered individuals. The costumes are detailed and deliberate – and often visually striking – but still feel like items that the cast

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could have brought from home. They tell us that we are watching a performance, not a world, but that the performance has been put together with care and craft. This tacit artificiality is supported by the doubling of several roles, notably Tim MacLean as Elbow and Barnardine, Cara Pantalone as Mistress Overdone, Froth, and Abhorson,³ and Megan Miles as Juliet and Francisca (the latter also absorbs the part of Friar Peter).

The intimacy of the setting adds a charge to the show's most raucous moments and to its most tense. The performance is never fully interactive, but performers acknowledge and address the audience, looking to us for confirmation or support. According to Rainville, Wallis' standard direction for audience address is that characters engage the audience "speaking to their friends." In comic moments, this easy interaction creates an air of casual camaraderie, enabling Robertson's Pompey to single out individual attendees for her ribald ribbing, and allowing Michael Man's Lucio to pull particular spectators into his saucy confidence regarding the absent Duke's peccadillos. In the play's dramatic moments, an audience of confidantes becomes a collection of witnesses, rendered complicit by our collective silence. The intimate direct address – and the capacity of audience members to see one another – also leads to powerful moments of dissonance: characters engage audience members as friends, but audience members are free to reject that characterization. Armour's Angelo is utterly, sometimes painfully, sincere, and his assertions of infatuation are engaging, even charming at times. At the same time, his rhetorical framework is deeply misogynistic, externalizing blame for his attraction – and his subsequent actions – onto Isabella, in uncomfortably familiar terms of combat and defeat: her virtue vanquishes his resistance. Not surprisingly, Angelo's explanations are not as convincing for us as they are for him, and this moment of attempted engagement also becomes a moment in which audience members watch each others' reactions: who is taken in? Who might be an ally? Whom can we trust? Angelo's misogyny is made more disturbing by his assumption of our tacit approval – we all become, for a moment, the person who does not speak up when the boss says something sexist.

The second encounter between Angelo and Isabella, in 2.4, is, understandably, the production's soul and centre. The proximity of the audience adds to the scene's tension, making us both witnesses and accomplices. The scene is delicately balanced, with Isabella struggling to find the arguments she needs, and Angelo's coyness appearing more as his own discomfort with desire than deliberate manipulation. When Angelo finally announces his desire, Armour leans in for a kiss, his hands encircling her face; Fried's Isabella recoils, shocked. That shock launches into the confidence of Isabella's accusation, which crumbles before Angelo's response: "Who will believe thee, Isabel?" Armour commits fully to Angelo's darker side – "I have begun, and now I give my sensual race the rein" – a transformation that feels like the release of all that was pent up in him before. But the turning point of the scene, the moment that truly sucks the air out of the room, is "who will believe thee," a rhetorical question made urgent both by the presence of literal witnesses and by the weight of the current cultural moment. Rainville explains that it was important that the kiss read as impulsive, but not

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assaultive, Isabella's reaction as a response to (unwelcome) surprise, rather than to threat. In this production, what makes Angelo terrifying is not his physical power or desire, nor even his ability to harm Isabella's brother, but rather the institutional structures which legitimize his position and trivialize hers: "Say what you can, my false o'er weighs your true". Armour takes these lines lightly, not as threats (though they are), but as unshakeable, reliable constants. The cost of this actorly/directorial choice is that the scene peaks a little early – the threat to Claudio, which will drive the ensuing action, becomes denouement rather than climax. That structural loss is worth the payoff, as this sequence of reversals is breathlessly riveting, linking the play's action to larger cultural conversations – and to the lived experience of at least some audience members - and adding fresh urgency to Isabella's closing address. Here, the contact between Shakespeare's world and our own is not an indication of timeless truths, but an indictment of, as Rainville puts it, "how far back and how deep these issues go."

"The women's voices are hard to hear in this play," Rainville says in our interview, and the production aims to amplify them, without substantially altering the text. This intention plays out in the treatment of Isabella, Mariana, Juliet, and Mistress Overdone, but also in cross-casting a number of the other parts, most notably Lesley Robertson as Pompey and Olivia Croft as Escalus. Robertson's brash bawdy provides loud counterpoint to the dramatic scenes, but her presence as Pompey also extends the play's representation of sexuality. *Measure for Measure* is overtly concerned with anxiety around women's sexuality, and the need for it to be contained. Robertson's irrepressible Pompey boisterously, shamelessly, joyously mocks those anxieties, revelling in shocking audience members and vexing Tim MacLean's Elbow, the endearingly hapless Elmer Fudd to Robertson's sly Bugs Bunny. Pompey finds as much fascination and mirth in her illicit position as bawd as in her state-sanctioned position as executioner's assistant, accepting and mocking of both sex and death. Like many fools, Pompey is defined by poverty, and the necessity of working for wages, but her embracing of unabashed, comfortable carnality works to broaden the play's spectrum of possibility, adding a sex-positive woman's perspective which is muted in the play as written.

The production uses what Djanet Sears calls "societal casting," in which the range of actors on stage "reflects the diversity of contemporary culture": the cast is relatively young, but otherwise portrays an ethnically-diverse urbanity reflective of Toronto.⁴ Sears calls out the tendency – common in productions of "classical" plays such as Shakespeare – to mix societal casting with a kind of colorblind casting, such that actors of color are cast "while at the same time are encouraged to leave the richness of their cultural histories at the stage door." Olivia Croft's Escalus may not evoke a rich cultural history, but the casting here is by no means colorblind. Rather, Rainville and Croft use this presentation of Escalus to evoke a gendered and racialized bias in Angelo's promotion over Escalus. Croft makes Escalus not only an experienced public servant passed over for promotion, but also a qualified, competent black woman who is ignored so that the reins of power may be passed to a mediocre (and, as it turns out, disastrous) white man. Escalus is something of a thankless part, lacking the more satisfying theatrical moments of others in the play, but Croft laces the character's

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benevolent patience with a simmering resentment that makes Escalus' measured justice a pointed rebuke to Angelo's inflexibility. Full disclosure: in watching the performance, I had been attentive to the gender dynamic at play but had not considered the racial politics of Angelo's promotion over Escalus until Rainville mentioned it in our interview, which speaks to my own interpretive biases.

Before turning to the play's conclusion, I wish to address an unfortunate contextual element that became part of the show's reception, at least for me. On April 23, 2018, a week before the show opened, Alek Minassian murdered ten people and injured sixteen, most of them women, in what has become known as the Toronto van attack.⁵ In a social media post which circulated hours before the attack (since authenticated by Facebook) Minassian linked his action to the so-called "incel" culture, a strain of violent misogyny whose proponents identify as "involuntarily celibate." In the week following the attack, news media and social media filled with examinations of misogyny, men's violence against women, and the social structures which enable that violence. Though Rainville's production was fully rehearsed at this point, and did not consciously engage with this conversation, it acquired an unintentional charge from this context. A week later, that context became, for me, the de facto lens through which to view Angelo, whom Armour presents as a man deeply uncomfortable with his own desire (Rainville describes him as an emblem of "sexual shame"), intensely wanting to be desired but unwilling and unable to speak his desire except through demands backed by power. Angelo's soliloquy at the end of 2.3 resonates disturbingly with incel rhetoric, as he externalizes his desire, frames his attraction as the result of a literally diabolical scheme against him, and so figures Isabella's virtue as an (innocent and unwitting) assault on his own constancy. Since Angelo is the righteous hero of his own narrative, he is capable of a chilling cognitive dissonance which recognizes Isabella as a "saint" and a "virtuous maid," while simultaneously understanding her as a tool employed by the devil against Angelo's constancy. That dissonance makes his later actions understandable, to an extent, and perhaps tragic, without making them any less revolting.

The play's final moment is ambiguous, of course, but is open to new resonances in this production by the casting and performances. Rainville refers to the play as "*Undercover Boss* by way of *Black Mirror*," and the play's conclusion plays up that premise's emphasis on authority, manipulation, and surveillance. Here, David Ross' Duke is a white man surrounded by women and people of color, and the production's final moments suggest a reading in which he is isolated from his constituents, shielded by layers of privilege from a recognition of the impropriety of his treatment of his own authority and of Isabella. This impropriety is recognized and tacitly acknowledged by the others on stage, and by the audience, in the uncomfortably long silence that follows his proposal to Isabella – made even more pointedly awkward by Fried's costume, a forceful visual reminder of her commitment to a celibate, religious life. The text does not offer Isabella an opportunity for active resistance, and this production takes no liberties in that regard. In the absence of a revisionist resistance, the production invites us to read her silence (and others') as constraint, rather than consent, let alone enthusiasm. However sincere Vincentio might be in his matrimonial offer, the awkward silence,

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contextualized by the rest of the production, presents him as a subtler form of harasser. Where Angelo's extortion was overtly malicious, the Duke's is oblivious, privileged in not having to understand – let alone question – the power dynamic that renders Isabella unable to speak, but also unable or unwilling to stay. Her wordless exit (pointedly not an “exeunt”) is a forceful reminder that, whether one is propositioned by a creepy boss or a likeable one, power makes consent complicated, if not impossible.

Notes

1. On June 26, 2018, I interviewed director Catherine Rainville and co-artistic director James Wallis in preparation for this review. Any quotes from them that are not directly attributed to the production's program are taken from these interviews.

2. Wallis shares his directorship with Julia Nish-Lapidus.

3. On the night that I attended, Pantalone was too ill to perform, and artistic directors Julia Nish-Lapidus and James Wallis stepped into these roles, with Wallis taking on Abhorson, and Nish-Lapidus playing Froth and Mistress Overdone.

4. Djanet Sears, “Play Equity and the Blindspots,” *SpiderWebShow*. 16 Feb. 2016, <https://spiderwebshow.ca/play-equity-and-the-blindspots/>.

5. On the attack, see “Toronto Van Attacks: How You Can Help and What We Know So Far,” *The Globe and Mail*, 23 April 2018, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-toronto-van-attack-what-we-know-so-far/>.

On the victims, see Wendy Gillis and Betsy Powell, “Rampage Victims Mostly Woman,” *Toronto Star*, 25 April 2018,

<https://www.pressreader.com/canada/torontostar/20180425/281556586433723>

On connections to “Incel culture,” see Zack Beuchamp, “Incel, the Misogynist Ideology Behind the Deadly Toronto Attack, Explained,” *Vox*, 25 April 2018,

<https://www.vox.com/world/2018/4/25/17277496/incel-toronto-attack-alek-minassian>.

Noam Lior is a PhD Candidate at the University of Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. His dissertation, “Multimediating Shakespeare,” examines digital multimedia Shakespeare editions. Noam is a co-founder and production dramaturge for Shakespeare at Play (www.shakespeareatplay.ca), an app which combines a digital edition of Shakespeare plays with full video productions.