NT Education Workpack
The Duchess of Malfi

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The Duchess of Malfi
by John Webster
Further production details: www.nationaltheatre.org.uk

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The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster is one of the best-known tragedies from the early 17th-century English theatre – and one of the few plays from the period which has a woman as its central character. Although acclaimed at its first performances, its reputation has fluctuated since then. After a long period when the play was thought too gory, sexual and immoral for the stage, it came back into favour in the second half of the last century, during which the role of the Duchess was played by actresses including Peggy Ashcroft, Eleanor Bron, Judi Dench, Anastasia Hille, Helen Mirren, Judy Parfitt, Juliet Stevenson, Janet Suzman and Harriet Walter. This new production is the second time the play has been staged by the National Theatre.

What happens in the play
The young, widowed Duchess of Malfi is instructed never to marry again by her two brothers: Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria and the Cardinal. With the help of her waiting woman, Cariola, the Duchess is secretly married to her steward, Antonio.

Bosola, a spy put in the Duchess’ court by Ferdinand and the Cardinal, becomes suspicious that the Duchess is pregnant. When the Duchess goes into labour, Antonio tries to keep it secret, but Bosola discovers a piece of paper giving details of the birth. He informs the Cardinal and Ferdinand, who swear revenge.

Some years later, after the Duchess has secretly had another two children, Ferdinand returns to Malfi. Ferdinand bursts in to his sister’s bedroom and confronts her, before fleeing in distress. The Duchess pretends to fire Antonio, but privately arranges to meet him in the town of Ancona. She admits to Bosola that Antonio is her husband, and he passes her plans to the Cardinal and Ferdinand. Banished from Ancona, the Duchess and Antonio separate – Antonio taking their oldest child with him. The Duchess, Cariola and the two younger children are captured.

Ferdinand uses Bosola to torture and kill the Duchess. On seeing his sister’s body, however, Ferdinand turns on Bosola. Bosola starts to feel remorse at his action and – in vain – attempts to revive the Duchess.

Assisted by Julia, the Cardinal’s lover, Bosola witnesses the Cardinal’s admission that he ordered the Duchess’ murder. Bosola kills Antonio by mistake, then attacks the Cardinal. Ferdinand, who has gone mad with grief, fatally injures Bosola before he and the Cardinal die from their wounds.

Antonio’s friend Delio asks the court to establish the Duchess and Antonio’s son as his mother’s heir.

The Duchess
I’ve loved the play since I was at school. We all had a very strong sense of what I heard a student say in the lift on his way in to see the show – ‘Oh, the Duchess, she’s really cool.’

Phyllida Lloyd (Director)

Few plays from the Elizabethan and Jacobean period have women at their centre. This reflects the fact that women were prevented by law, religion and custom from active participation in many areas. One of these was the stage, where women’s roles were played by adolescent boys. This may also have affected the scale of roles which were written for female characters.

Both of John Webster’s best known plays have a single woman at their centre, however: Vittoria Corombona (The White Devil) and The Duchess of Malfi. The Duchess is not the largest role in the play – both Bosola and Ferdinand have more lines – but ever since the play’s first performances, she has stolen the show:

For who e’er saw this Duchess live and die,
That could get off under a bleeding eye?
The play

*Thomas Middleton* (one of Webster’s fellow playwrights)

Although this was praise for the performance of a boy actor, fifty years later, when women were allowed onto the stage in England, the Duchess became – and has continued to be – a role which attracted a series of great actresses.

What’s ingenious about the character is that she’s very much who she is – her own soul – but she is also the repository for the feelings of everyone around her. You could describe her as rebellious, wilful, naïve, vain – a liar. Or you could say she’s courageous, modest, compassionate – a whole range of positive qualities.

*Phyllida Lloyd*

The text

One thing that is certain about the version of the play printed in 1623 is that it is not exactly what was performed at the play’s premiere a decade earlier. Webster says clearly on the title page of the script that it is:

The perfect and exact copy, with diverse things printed, that the length of the play would not bear in the presentment [presentation].

So not everything in the printed text was originally performed. Every production of *The Duchess of Malfi* has therefore made decisions about what to cut. This production has concentrated on telling the central story of the play as clearly as possible in one continuous sequence. There is no interval and the performance lasts just under two hours and fifteen minutes. The divisions between the five acts are marked by music, but the rest of the action flows fluidly without stopping for changes of scenery.

The style of the production

It looks as if there’s no scenery there at all, but actually it’s been designed with attention to every image.

*Phyllida Lloyd*

The setting for this production is a narrow red platform running the whole length of the front of the stage. Behind this is a shallow gutter, in front of black bleachers – large steps which serve for sitting or standing. The only other permanent piece of scenery is a square glass screen which runs on a track along the back of the front platform.

Although strikingly modern, this setting emerges from a careful understanding of the structure of the play and the theatres for which it was originally written.

It’s not unlike reading a screenplay for a film. There’s the sense that the location is shifting all the time. A scene which appears to begin in some formal hall seems to end in some side room or private chamber, yet we know that in the Jacobean theatre there would have been no change of scenery.

*Phyllida Lloyd*

Director Phyllida Lloyd, designer Mark Thompson and composer Gary Yershon have all worked together many times. The ‘style’ of this production emerged from discussions between them and developed as rehearsals went on.

The production was moving into high stylization, which was obviously the right direction – it was implicit in Mark’s design – and is, in any case, much more to my taste. Music, framing the stage events, creates very good conditions for moving a production away from naturalism, and naturalism is not my cup of tea, especially in verse plays which are already in the structure of their language loudly proclaiming their theatricality.

*Gary Yershon* (Music)
The play

Phyllida Lloyd was also aware of the potential and the challenges of the Lyttelton Theatre, a large proscenium arch space which has been criticised for lacking atmosphere and being more like a massive cinema than a theatre suited to the size of human actors.

The big danger of the space is that the audience feel safely over the other side of the proscenium and are not implicated. We wanted to explore the Lyttelton auditorium and stage as one room, crossing the fourth wall.

Phyllida Lloyd

The fourth wall – the imaginary barrier through which the audience in a proscenium arch theatre spy on the action – is breached in many ways in the production. Actors speak directly to the audience in soliloquies and asides. There is often an onstage ‘audience’ on the large black steps at the back of the stage who can be seen and heard responding to the action: when Antonio is awarded his prize in Act One, or when Ferdinand tells the Duchess he has found her a husband in Act Three, for example. When the Duchess and Antonio part, outside Ancona, Antonio and her son climb off the stage, out through the fourth wall and into the auditorium to escape.

The costumes are modern, with a hint of Italy. Again, this was part of an organic approach to the play between the creative team.

The talk was of the Guccis, The Godfather movies, etc. This Italian theme informed early discussions about the music and its place in the production.

Gary Yershon

It would never have occurred to me to produce the play in Jacobean costume. The Duchess of Malfi was a well known story in 1613, and one known to have taken place in Italy a hundred years before that. Yet it was performed in the costume of the audience – in modern dress. So we are aiming for the same sense of a shared experience between audience and stage. It’s not about connecting it with current affairs or current events, but trying to strip away the things which might stop the audience recognising that these characters are from their own world.

Phyllida Lloyd

Being watched

Your darkest actions – nay your privat’st thoughts – Will come to light.

Ferdinand (Act One)

The sense of a world in which privacy is impossible informs many aspects of the production.

The simple black steps at the back are in some way a mirror of the audience in the auditorium. They serve as a reminder that these characters are actually never in private. Even when they think they are alone, they are not. There’s only one point in the play when they’re not being overlooked – when we turn the lights out.

Phyllida Lloyd

Webster’s original audience would have been used to a kind of darkness Londoners hardly experience now that a permanent glow of artificial light covers the city. Even indoors it is rare to have a complete blackout. This production takes special measures to create a level of darkness which is normally impossible to achieve in a modern theatre.

The glass screen reminds the audience when characters observe others without their knowledge: Cariola watches Antonio as the Duchess woos him, Ferdinand watches the Duchess in her bedroom, Bosola – who is a professional spy in the Duchess’ household – hears the Cardinal’s confession from this hiding place.

The choices made about the role of Delio link to this aspect of the production.
The play

We came up with the idea that he’s a journalist – he’s here to find out about this family, to expose what’s going on. That gave me reasons for certain things in the play: why he returns with Ferdinand [in Act Three], why he’s not always there for Antonio.

Jonathan Slinger (Delio)

This also links to Webster’s source for the play, an English version of an Italian account by Matteo Bandello. Bandello called himself ‘Delio’ and is thought by some to have been a friend of the original Antonio. It is Delio who in this production frames the action.

The opening

At the start of the performance, Delio crosses the stage and looks at the other central characters of the play spotlight behind him. By the end of the play, all of them will be dead. The effectiveness of such a sequence demands detailed collaboration.

Some of the sounds that Simon [Baker, Sound Designer] and I used in our initial explorations into the mad scene have found their way into the music. When the iron [safety curtain] goes out at the top of the show, the bass plays its low E flat, immediately followed by two unearthly sounds, one low, one high, before the glass screen starts its move across the stage to the accompaniment of flute and trumpet chords. Both Simon and I thought it was important to blend the instruments in with those kinds of sounds – part of creating the atmosphere of The Dead that must be set up at the beginning.

Gary Yershon

The ‘Mad’ Scene

The play was criticised for many years as being gratuitously horrific. This opinion shifted through the twentieth century, amid debates about the extent of human cruelty, particularly in war. This production did not want the horrors of Act Four to be simply a ghoulish pageant, from which the audience remains detached.

Her suffering in Act Four we take part in. We experience the horror that she’s subjected to, the shock of what she sees.

Phyllida Lloyd

From a very early stage Phyllida imagined this scene as involving some kind of aural assault of the Duchess.

Gary Yershon

The episode when Ferdinand makes the ‘mad people’ perform to the Duchess as part of her torture is, in this production, a sequence involving the entire company of actors and musicians, the whole stage space, movement, music, sound, lighting and video.

Initially we worked on the soundtrack to the madness video together – [Simon Baker] came up with a draft of his sounds ideas, I came up with mine. What is heard now is something of an amalgamation, but hugely refined by his detailed work editing soundtrack to picture. I think his final edit is absolutely brilliant. As is what Michael Keegan Dolan [Director of Movement], working with the actors, came up as a backing for the video. To me Act Four is everyone at their very, very best – the actors, Terry King [Fight Director], all of us.

Gary Yershon

The deaths

I do account this world a tedious theatre, For I do play a part in’t ‘gainst my will. 

The Duchess (Act Four)

This metaphor of life as a stage is continued at the end of Act Four when the Duchess rises and ‘escapes to the steps behind her which represent death’ (Phyllida Lloyd).
The play

There are famously a lot of deaths in the play and rehearsals explored the best way to enact these.

There were two areas of interest. First, the death of the Duchess and the superficial assumption that she goes to her death without fear. We felt in the end that of course she’s afraid, but her faith and her imagination give her the strength to endure it.

Webster gives you two remarkable death scenes – the Duchess then Cariola. One is transcendence and grace and poetry. The other, in which Cariola dies in complete terror, could be out of an Edward Bond play in its stark jagged rhythms.

Then there’s a second section when the corpses start piling up. Each person who dies gives a short valedictory speech – some shorter than others. And I was exercised by how to avoid a ‘cowboys grimacing in the gutter’ bloodbath – people groaning out these lines with their last breath and the audience not really understanding what they are saying.

One thing we did do in rehearsal is have all the dead bodies on stage – it turns out ridiculous – a heap of flesh.

We asked the actors to send their souls up to the upper levels of the stage and leave their body behind. That was the beginning of the development of our more formalised approach to the deaths in Act Five. It was something to do with death as a release – into oblivion perhaps, but a release nevertheless.

Phyllida Lloyd

During rehearsals Phyllida experimented with the way the actors did their death speeches. To mark the moment when they actually died, I played a little two-note tolling figure on the piano. I then thought it would be interesting to transfer this to guitar, hitherto not used in the production. I asked Michael Bernardine to play it. Everyone thought it effective. So there it is in the show.

Gary Yershon

The language

It was the poetry as much as the drama that excited me at school. The couplets stuck in everybody’s mind, even if we were not quite sure what they meant: ‘Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, / Like diamonds we are cut with our own dust’. (Ferdinand, Act Five)

Phyllida Lloyd

When it came to directing the play, however, poetry for its own sake was not going to be enough.

The priority is to close the gap between themselves [the actors] and the language to the point where it feels they are making it up as they go along – that they are able to behave with the freedom, fluidity or formality that they might in any given situation. They must express themselves through the text and not in parallel with it. It’s like a musical score – you can’t half blow the trumpet; you have to play the whole note.

Blank verse is close to the rhythm of speech – Webster uses it in quite a freestyle way – it’s not regularly ten beats to the line – like jazz there’s quite a lot of variations on that.

Phyllida Lloyd

Compared to Shakespeare the rhythms are much more syncopated, the language itself is clearer, more visceral. I get a lot of delight out of saying a lot of it.

Jonathan Slinger

‘I’ll go hunt the badger, by owl-light: / ’Tis a deed of darkness’ (Ferdinand, Act Four) – that’s
The play

got to be one of the best exit lines ever.
Phyllida Lloyd

The first weeks of rehearsal were spent in close attention to every moment of the text.

It became evident early on how thorough we were going to be – sometimes people don’t spend enough time working out what they’re going to say to each other.
Lorcan Cranitch

It’s very easy to skim – you kind of get a gist of what a section means. But you can’t say a line if you don’t know what it means – that’s when your voice goes on to that octave of ‘classical text speaking’ and at that moment the audience is totally lost.
Jonathan Slinger

I don’t want ever to say anything which I don’t understand. I don’t think in life one ever uses an example without a good reason. In verse plays there are often two examples a line. I think they’re very realistic fragments of thought – three second bits of thought.

It’s written in an extraordinary and heightened way. You have to believe in the characters having that interest in language. If you’re saying ‘Or dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur’ [Act Three] it’s an improvement in his mind: ‘in pitch or – no, better – sulphur’ It’s not just using language to express what he’s feeling – it’s using language to create what he’s feeling.
Will Keen (Ferdinand)

‘Closing the gap’ between the actor and the language takes different forms. Lorcan Cranitch discussed the potential in using his own Irish accent for Bosola.

It’s a tricky one, because he does a lot of killing – I didn’t want to go down that route. But the fact that he’s an outsider in this world –

I’m trying to use a natural music in the delivery of the lines. He uses the word ‘sure’ – ‘Sure he was too honest’. [Act Three] There’s something different in the Jacobean ‘sure’ and the Irish ‘sure’ but they’re both emphatic.
Lorcan Cranitch

Finding a through line

Another challenge for many of the actors was finding a ‘through line’ for their characters – what is it that links their actions in the play from beginning to end? It was important for them to explore why the characters in the play do what they do, especially since the answers are rarely clear cut.

There’s an ambiguity about [the Duchess’] motives. The ambiguity of the first thing she does in the play is rich and exciting. Is she just madly in love with Antonio? To what extent is she in rebellion against a political and sexual regime, and so possessed with a desire to defy it that to some extent she just picks the nearest man?
Phyllida Lloyd

We’ve become quite sophisticated in our ability to follow the truth of someone’s motivation.

The question ‘Why?’ comes up a lot, especially with Bosola.

I’ve tried to keep it as simple and straightforward as through line in what is actually a bizarre journey. I think he changes. I think he reluctantly takes the job, does it to the best of his ability, then it all goes wrong and blows up in his face – and then eventually the remorse he feels for where he’s landed. He’s a highly intelligent man but he does some really stupid things.

When I said yes to the part everyone said, it’s impossible – all you’ll be doing is crawling around and howling.
The play

As an actor you have to think of him [Ferdinand] as becoming sane at the end – it’s about grief. I think he finds all these people in himself – he’s killing them in him. He has to avenge her. I think he’s much madder before. Act Four is the real madness.

The difficult decision for me is at what point [Ferdinand] discovers he is in love with her and at what point the audience discovers. They are probably different – I haven’t even decided what the order is. I’m not sure he properly knows until he sees her corpse. That speech, the moment with the body – that is the complete pivot.

Will Keen

Delio is widely thought of as just a ‘best friend’ – his only action throughout the play is to help and support Antonio. I don’t believe that that’s ever somebody’s sole intention over the span of a play like this.

I started with the idea that he is in love with Antonio – but I felt that’s been done, I wanted to find a motive that was more – that was motivated by self-interest. I played around with his being actually as dark as the brothers – it’s all duplicity. That was going against the text too much. Then we came up with the idea that he’s a journalist [see above] – it gave me something else to play, it illuminated a lot of the scenes, made him more interesting, more believable.

Jonathan Slinger
Exploring the play practically

1. Being watched
The production explored the way the court watches everything the Duchess does. Read the beginning of Act Three, up to the start of the conversation between Ferdinand and Bosola. Which parts of this scene are in public and which in private?

Try performing the scene with everyone who is not speaking in the scene playing one of the Duchess’ court. Who is trying to hide what they are saying? Are there moments when a character (Ferdinand, for example) might involve the rest of the court in the scene deliberately?

In rehearsal, we looked at points when the court might react to the events of the scene, for example when Ferdinand says the name of the man he wants the Duchess to marry, or when the Duchess mentions ‘a scandalous report’ about herself. Which reactions help to tell the story of the scene, and give us a sense of the world in which the Duchess lives: applause, boos, cheers, gasps, silence? Try different possibilities and see how the atmosphere changes.

2. Collaboration
Gary Yershon talks about the collaborations between the different members of the artistic team to create sequences in the production. Choose one of the episodes from the play which interests you: the opening, the ‘mad’ scene, the Echo scene, for example.

Divide responsibility for different aspects of the scene: music, other sound, movement, setting, costume, lighting – between different people or groups of people. Read the episode together and discuss your responses to it. Come to an agreement about what the most important aspects of this episode are for you. Then each person (or group) should go off and work on their aspect of that episode separately.

Come together again and present your ideas to the rest of the group. Bring material – drawings, pictures, recordings etc. which help to give an idea of your plans. Discuss how these different ideas might work together. Be prepared to modify your ideas at this stage – you may get inspiration from something one of the other collaborators has come up with. Always keep a sense of what you agreed was important about this episode.

Give yourselves a deadline and put your ideas into practice, using whatever resources you have available to stage this episode in line with your ideas. (You might decide to present it as a ‘model box’ for example, or use multimedia on a computer.) See how effectively you can work together to make the expressive presentation of the episode.

3. Improvisation
Phyllida Lloyd describes how, in rehearsal: ‘We asked the actors to send their souls up to the upper levels of the stage and leave their body behind.’

Read Act Five from the point Bosola overhears the Cardinal plotting his death. Once you have an idea of what is happening in this sequence, divide your acting area into two. Place chairs in one half for all the characters who die in the scene. No-one else should enter this space.

Act out the end of Act Five in the other half of the space (the one without the chairs). When a character dies, the actor playing that character
Practical exercises

goes and sits in one of the chairs, although as far as the other characters are concerned the body remains (invisibly) on stage.

Experiment with different timings for the deaths. In this production the deaths happen before the characters’ final words, so there is a difference between how they speak when fatally wounded and when they become a sort of ghost.

See if you can give each of the deaths the respect it deserves, preventing the scene becoming simply a pile-up of corpses.

4. The language
The actors talk about the importance of understanding every word and image that they speak. Have a look at Bosola’s speech in Act Two which starts: ‘What thing is in this outward form of man / To be beloved?’

With a partner, read the speech through to each other and highlight everything you are sure you understand first time. (Don’t worry if there isn’t much!) Go through it again and see if there are any words you don’t understand. Your edition of the play may have notes which help, but you’ll probably need a dictionary as well. Once you have understood the words, go back and see if any more of the speech makes sense. Keep saying the lines, observing where the punctuation comes, until each phrase makes sense to you. You may need to ask for help with some of the more difficult lines, but see how much you can work out on your own.

Once you have understood all the details in the speech, talk about why you think Bosola is saying it. What is he trying to communicate to the audience through this speech? Why does he want to do that?

Listen to each other speaking the speech in the light of all the discoveries you have made. Point out moments when you really understand what each other are saying. Be strict about the points when the speech still doesn’t make any sense.

Once you are sure that you understand everything in the speech, try performing it to a larger group. See what they feel and understand from the speech and use that to improve your performance.
For discussion

1. The play and our world

*The Duchess of Malfi* is set in a world of political intrigue, religious intolerance, exile and search for asylum, imprisonment without trial, torture, murder and revenge. What connections could you make between those things in the play and in the world you live in?

2. The Duchess

In the moment of disobeying her brothers and remarrying (remarrying a social inferior to emphasise the contrast between ‘lust’ and ‘duty’) the Duchess of Malfi asserts her sexual self ... From the moment of her assertion of sexual independence, the Duchess moves with dignity but inexorably towards a ritual chastisement worthy of a flagrant breach of public order

Lisa Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*

What are the differences or similarities between the powers and freedoms women have in the world of the play and in your world?

What ‘private’ behaviour by a public figure would now lead to the kind of punishment inflicted on the Duchess?

3. The end of the play

Let us make noble use
Of this great ruin, and join all our force
To establish this young hopeful gentleman
In’s mother’s right.

*Delio* (Act Five)

What is the effect of the final sequence, when Delio brings in the Duchess’ son? Is it hopeful? Sinister? What about Antonio’s dying words? How would you choose to present the end of the play?
Other resources

Books
Muriel C Bradbrook *John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist*
Bertolt Brecht *Collected Plays Volume 7* (includes an adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi*)
E K Chambers *The Elizabethan Stage*
Lisa Jardine *Still Harping on Daughters*
John Webster *The White Devil*

Film
Francis Ford Coppola *The Godfather*
Luchino Visconti *The Leopard*

Productions
*Mamma Mia* (Prince Edward Theatre, London) directed by Phyllida Loyd, designed by Mark Thompson
*The Handmaid's Tale* (English National Opera, London, April/May 2003) directed by Phyllida Lloyd

Websites
The following Google directory links to a number of *Duchess of Malfi* sites:
http://directory.google.com/Top/Arts/Literature /World_Literature/British/16th_Century/Webster,_John/Works/The_Duchess_of_Malfi