

Theatre Review on *Doctor Faustus*

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* follows the archetype of a medieval morality play with its presentation of vices versus virtue. The play readapts its original fictional German inspiration of that of a learned man—Faustus—whose ambitions mangled with his pride brought him to a sorrowful end. Marlowe underpins the story with that of the Classical mythological character Icarus whose self-conceited desires caused him to pursue an irresponsible and unachievable long-term goal of flying with the aid of waxed wings—only to be brought down when he flew too close to the sun. Similarly, Faustus' obsession with ambition led him into a twenty-four-year contract with the Devil in exchange for pleasure, power and lust; the end to which would lead to the damnation of his soul for all of eternity.

Matthew Dunster's portrayal of the Tragedy of Faustus was well directed and there were no instances of awkward movements or scenes within in the production. The entire play flowed well and the transition between the acts were fairly smooth. Irrespective of this, I felt like the play was very theatrical at times, lacking any real dread or terror for the realities of Faustus' damnation. This was due to the extension of the comical scenes by the minor character Robin as Pearce Quigley, and his companion. While I felt like this was done to showcase the folly of Faustus' actions, since he used magic for similar purposes as Robin, it diminished the essence of the tragedy and made a mockery of the realities of Heaven and Hell. The sound effects used in the performance further amplify this as it was inappropriate for certain scenes within the play that revolved around judgment and condemnation, such as in the final act at the striking on the clock signalling it is midnight and the hour for the condemnation of Faustus' soul. Yet it worked well for the more magical aspects of the play.

In my interpretation of the play text, I felt as though it was a commentary on the emergence of the 'Renaissance ideal', where sixteenth and seventeenth century men sought to advance towards new levels in their education and wealth, as well as a religious and philosophical presentation on the doctrine of predestination. Essentially, Marlowe was warning his audience to be mindful of the manner through which they will obtain their pursuits especially if it will lead them towards a pathway of destruction and condemnation. Ultimately, they should see from Faustus' tragic life that such things yield no real benefits and look towards Godliness and humility. Dunster's enactment of the play reinforces this point through his incorporation of both the A and B texts of the play that allowed for the broader understanding of the play text with the Old Man and Good Angel's extended speeches, but it falls short in its presentation of the actual tragedy.

The play opens with the actor Felix Scott performing the opening lines of the chorus before Paul Hilton as Faustus begins his musings concerning his desire for more knowledge. Faustus interacts with a 'versatile ensemble' who double up as bookshelves, set pieces and stagehands (John Hopkins University Press, 2012). I enjoyed their presentation in the beginning of the play as well as their short dance that transitioned between the first two scenes. However, after this I felt like their use was not optimized to the maximum of their potential, as they could have been more impactful had they presented the role of the Chorus, for example. I did understand Dunster's reasoning for using Scott since he also played Wagner, Faustus' servant. It gave the audience the feeling that he was a storyteller and also a part of the story.

The actors worked well together throughout the play, such as in the presentation of the seven deadly sins, the dances of the mask wearing mimes, the magic trick played by Arthur Darvill as Mephistopheles on the clown Robin, the Pope and the other religious men walking through the audience, as well as the cohesive movements of the goat headed devils. However, there were some instances where I disliked individual actor's performances. For example, Hilton's portrayal of Faustus was good in the beginning, however, it fizzled throughout the play. In the final scene for example, where Hilton performs the final hour of Faustus' life, it felt like just that— a well-rehearsed performance. The event itself lacked any emotion for a role where the character is being condemned to Hell and unable to call upon God for salvation.

The good and bad angels as Beatriz Romilly and Charlotte Broom was well showcased, though the fight scenes directed by Kate Waters could have been extended further. The reason for this is because I interpreted their struggle as a reflection of Faustus' degrading conscience and a symbolism of the ongoing struggle between darkness and light. However, given the time constraints of the production, it is understandable why this was not done. Paul Wills, the play's designer, did well in the selection of their costumes and the choice of colour. However, the wings attached to the back of Romilly's costume felt too dramatic, though it could be interpreted as a representation of the straight and narrow path that Faustus should have followed to obtain his desires.

The stage design and set up was well decorated and simplistic in its style. The use of the curtains depicting different Goddesses helped to bring a cohesive nature to the environment and the tie together the themes of conjuring, mythology and astrology. I personally liked the set up of Faustus desk because each piece was well connected to his identity as a scholar with the presence of the skull reinforcing the loss of Faustus' mind as an intellect to lust and debauchery followed by his life.

The biblical question of 'what should it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?' is well adapted by Will in the selection of Faustus' costumes. He dresses lavishly in a combination of brocades and furs, but it is not long before the audience releases the despair that Faustus is facing as he begins to transition into more elaborate patterns and dark colours. Throughout the play, Mephistopheles' outfit does not change, nor does he enjoy the lavishness that he adorns Faustus with. This I think is Dunster's way of alluding to his loyalty and his consistency to his master. In some instances, Faustus appears almost in the same clothing as he does which indicates that soon Faustus will be as he is— lost, condemned and bound to serve in Hell— without the luxuries which were once afforded to him.

Interestingly, some members of the casts were recycled to play other characters and the two that stood out to me were Sarita Piotrowski, who played Helen and Pride, as well as Nigel Cooke, who was casted as Lucifer and the Pope Adrian. Ultimately, Dunster used these characters to portray a further understanding of his interpretation of the play text. Faustus' marriage to Helen could be an indication of the union he has with pride which ultimately led to his downfall. And the cruel judgement condoned by the Pope/Lucifer of Bruno to the point where a tooth was extracted is symbolic of the concept of hell, where there will be 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'. Whether or not Dunster did this as a religious and political commentary is debateable. Nevertheless, it resulted in mixed responses from the audience at the horrific and grotesque action since the tooth was thrown into the crowd.

Overall, Dunster did well in his adaptation of the play text by Christopher Marlowe. With the extension of the comedic scenes, Dunster makes a mockery not only of magic, but of those who perform it. He suggests that Faustus is no different from the clown Robin through the manner in

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which he has directed the performance and by switching the tone of the play from solemn to comedic. Instead of the audience expressing fear for the damnation of Faustus' soul, Dunster's portrayal causes them to switch to a fear of being a fool, playing on the emotions and insecurities of the viewers.