

## GREATER MANCHESTER DRAMA FEDERATION

<b>Society</b>	CHADS
<b>Title</b>	<i>Death and the Maiden</i>
<b>Author</b>	Ariel Dorfman
<b>Date &amp; Time</b>	21.11.18, 19:45
<b>Venue</b>	CHADS Studio

### **Production highlights:**

- An excellent production with strong ensemble playing, good characterisation and high standards of acting.
- Pleasingly simple set design.
- Good dramatic achievement.

### **To think about for the future:**

- Be careful of blocking that upstages actors' performances
- Tighter technical execution

## **THE PRODUCTION**

**Adjudicator writes and identifies themes, challenges and requirements, etc., and details the requirements and elements of the production in which he was particularly interested.**

*Death and the Maiden* is a taut, powerful, emotion-battering play that explores trauma, mental stability, justice and revenge.

At the start of the play Paulina waits nervously for her husband, Gerardo, a human rights lawyer in a society transitioning from dictatorship. He brings home Roberto, a good Samaritan whom she believes is the state agent responsible for her rape and torture fifteen years previously. She initiates her revenge, but is Roberto guilty of a heinous crime, or is he a wronged victim?

The play constantly shifts the balance of sympathy. There is a sense of unease throughout. All three roles demand powerful, assured performances.

*Death and the Maiden* raises fundamental questions about the nature of justice. Watching it should be an unrelentingly uncomfortable and uneasy experience. It must crackle with tension.

## **DIRECTION**

**Detailed study/knowledge and interpretation of the text; progressing the author's intent with creativity and sensitivity. Using theatrical dynamics to communicate with the audience. Appropriate delivery of the text using timing and rhythm. Settings with regard to focus, pace and groupings. Movement which is appropriate to the period and style of production. Creating atmosphere and mood to develop the full dramatic impact.**

Director: Victor Hassan

When we consider the skills needed when directing in the theatre, we focus on dynamics, pace and characterisation.

- Dynamics: to stage any play successfully you must consider its rhythm and dynamics. In this production, dynamics were good: from the quieter moments during the monologues, to the desperation of Gerado when he realises that his career is at stake, to the tense moments when Paulina confronts Roberto. These many different elements were drawn together into a cohesive whole.
- Pace: very often, we see actors who are slow in picking up cues, and this can be deadly. Lines should overlap and entrances/exits must flow quickly without a moment's rest. This element of performance was executed well—but could have been pushed even further. There was some evidence of searching for lines from Roberto, but generally these were relentlessly secure.
- Characterisation: when preparing to direct theatre, whatever the genre, most directors would start with characterisation. There is a real depth to all three of these characters and Victor's skills as a director ensured that characterisations were fully rounded and believable. Paulina was tense, shifting from vengeful fury to sudden vulnerability with total plausibility. Gerado is motivated by a theoretical ideal of justice and is shocked by Paulina's attempt to take justice into her own hands and put Roberto on trial in their home. We are never quite certain if Roberto is guilty or innocent—we saw a Roberto who was able to endanger sympathy initially, then fear, then defiance. Despite the physical clues and Paulina's ultimate conviction that Roberto is guilty, he maintains his innocence to the end.

Overall, Victor Hassam demonstrated a good understanding of the script and the situations and characters portrayed. There were, however, many instances when I simply didn't believe that he and his actors fully grasped the full meaning of the lines—uncertain inflexion on key words revealed that, at times, they were simply reciting the lines, not conveying all the levels of meaning. This is a consequence of three large roles in a very wordy play.

All three actors were wonderfully self-confident, with a good physical fluidity, with perhaps some polish needed. Lines were delivered, mostly, in a natural voice, with good pace, clear delivery and believable interaction with other players. I will pick up on this in the individual actors' sections.

Blocking and movement were good and duly motivated if not perfect. In particular, the first scene with Roberto, where he sits facing D but Gerardo played the dialogue directly L. Likewise, it wasn't at all obvious that Paulina was removing her knickers to gag Roberto—this was due to a combination of odd blocking R and low lighting. The groan from Roberto from offstage L wasn't loud enough.

In summary, there was a creative approach to the production and the text was interpreted with some depth and insight. The creation of ensemble playing was excellent and there was a good command of effective stage groupings and movement. In general the shaping of the piece demonstrated a strong understanding of theatrical dynamics.

This was a good piece of theatre. Polish in some areas—specifically conveying the nuance of meaning in the text and engendering a more naturally fluid physicality—would have taken this from very good to excellent. It was so nearly there!

## **ACTING**

**Characterisation which is believable shows flair, originality and understanding. Vocal technique which is appropriate to the play and is delivered with understanding and a good technique. Movement which is in character and in period and incorporating movement to deliver pace. Supporting ones fellow actor unselfishly and enhancing his performance. Using all available theatrical skills to make a noticeable contribution to the play.**

### Paulina (Lorna Kong)

This is a massively difficult role to play, demanding a brittle, on-the-edge performance that only the best actors can pull off. I'm happy to report that Lorna Kong gave us a masterclass in just how to play this character.

Act 1, Scene 3, conducted without words and in darkness, demonstrates the confusion, violence, and terror that underlies so much of the tension in *Death and the Maiden*. The audience does not yet know the motivation behind Paulina's actions in this scene, which makes it mysterious and baffling. This was a moment of frightening uncertainty that helped to enhance the danger and immediacy of the plot, superbly acted with tautness and skill.

Act 1, Scene 4 is the first time in the play that Paulina becomes the dominant character. She starts the scene with a long monologue—beginning with a truly chilling “good morning Dr Miranda”—that hints at some of the horrors of her past, delivered with a calmness that belies the rage and fear she still feels (the line “such a sad, noble sense of life” was delivered to perfection). Lorna’s acting here was terrific, with a measured delivery matched by subtle movements such as a small turn of the head to indicate that her thoughts are being delivered as they occur to her. Later, there was real power and tension in the lines “I want him to confess” and “do not invoke God.”

Roberto's appearance in the final scene is a clear indicator that he is, literally or figuratively, still haunting her. Lorna’s wordless intense stare spoke volumes.

#### Gerardo (Simon Darlington)

Whilst not wanting to take anything away from a good performance this evening, I do feel that there are some areas on which to work.

Simon Darlington gave us a very Northern-sounding Gerardo (“...if ‘is wife ’appened to remember...”). The opening scene nicely established the tension in Paulina and Gerardo's relationship—his love for her was evident—but it all seemed a little too passive. As an example, Gerardo’s entry in Act 1, Scene 4 didn’t really convey the shock he should experience when seeing the violence unfolding before him.

Simon needs to work on a more naturalistic delivery, rise and fall in particular—his delivery was very much on one level. He should consider where emphasis falls on a line such as “do you want these people back in power?” (the emphasis should be on “want”, not “people”). “Unless you confess, she’ll kill you” was delivered as a statement not an affirmation of the previous line.

In contrast, during Act 2, Scene 2 when Roberto’s indignance frustrates Gerardo so much that he finally loses his temper we really saw Simon let go: “How many times did you screw her?” was visceral. And, in the following scene, we hear Gerardo’s desperation in “now we’re going to do to each other what those bastards out there couldn’t do to us.” This is the level needed throughout.

Simon sometimes simply waited for his next cue, occasionally using that palms forward physical tic we see in actors who cannot quite decide what to do with their hands. Work on more natural, fluid vocalisms and physicality and add these to your acting arsenal.

The ingredients are all there—let’s add some spice!

### Roberto (Chris Rogerson)

The introduction of Roberto Miranda sets the dramatic action in motion. Chris Rogerson have us a strong performance here, although I do think that he could have more bullish in his protestations of innocence. The line “leave my mother out of this” should have shown real anger.

*Death and the Maiden* never fully affirms or denies Roberto's guilt. Chris was able to play this character without revealing this either way; this was subtly done and very satisfying. All in all, we saw a credible performance needing polish in some areas. Take a sideways look at the lines, consider where emphasis falls and which words are the most important. Tackle dynamics by whispering, shouting, overlapping dialogue and pausing occasionally.

## **TECHNICAL**

### **Set and props**

**A set which shows creativity and innovation and addresses the style of the production. Is well constructed. Props which are in period, authentic in appearance and placed strategically e.g. furniture.**

We should ask four questions of the stage presentation.

- Do the settings and furnishings demonstrate appropriate creativity?
- Is there is a very good understanding of the interaction of design skills?
- Is the use of lighting, sound and other technology both creative and appropriate in creating atmosphere and mood, and executed successfully?
- Does the use of costume and make-up communicate the characters successfully to the audience?

The small playing area in CHADS’ studio necessitated some compromises. The main set comprised a simple table and chairs and a wooden desk. No more was needed. The terrace, with metal furniture, was placed up, behind the main playing area, so we needed

to suspend disbelief when Paulina entered in Act One, Scene 2. Placing the dining table immediately down meant that either Paulina or Roberto was obscured by Roberto for many of the audience in Act Two, Scene 1. In truth, there is no easy answer in such a tight playing area. The L-shaped grey flats hiding the exit UL could perhaps have been set slightly further from the back wall: Paulina's entrances and exits here were awkward.

The floor-to-ceiling mirror, a key part of the final two scenes, where the play departs from realism and forces the audience to stare directly at themselves, was unfortunately if understandably omitted.

Nevertheless, the decision to stage this play in the studio was absolutely right.

There were only a few props, but these were of a high standard—the cassette player and cassettes, glasses and decanter, plates and bowls of food. Attention to detail here was evident. I'm no expert but it looked like a starter pistol to me.

The cassette tape with the Schubert recording was incorrectly set—it should be brought in by Paulina (she takes it from Roberto's car) not set on the desk from the beginning.

### ***Lighting and Sound***

*Lighting and sound effects which contribute towards the dramatic potential, etc.*

Overall, the main set was lit well: warm yellow daytime and blue/green night wash. There was a practical table lamp which looked great, although the floor lamp didn't seem to be working as it should—perhaps it was my position in relation to it. The bright lamp for the car headlights worked well enough (one of the cues was 5 seconds late) but might have been more effective as a movable spotlight in the corner of the room.

The music choices were correct, as per the script. Sound effects were carefully selected and executed—sea, car arriving and departing, voices on cassette, audience applause, toilet flushing. There were some abrupt fade-ins and, I think, a panning error when moving from up to down speakers, and no sounds of urination in Act Two, Scene 1.

Overall, this production had a good level of technical invention and execution.

## **Costumes**

**Costumes which are in of the period, well fitting, colour co-ordinated and enhance characterisation.**

Costumes were, necessarily, simple but effective. Paulina's mostly-black floral dress and flat shoes were ideal, with a pearl wrap and black cardigan for later scenes, with a smart black coat and handbag for the conclusion. Gerado's suit was just right, and Roberto's more casual look was good—but would he have slept in his shirt?

## **Makeup and hair**

**Make-up, hair and wigs which are in period and appropriate to the production (including size of venue) and assist in developing the character.**

Hair and make-up was excellent, especially Paulina's tight plaits. I think a trickle of blood from Roberto's temple would have been a good addition.

## **OVERALL ACHIEVEMENT**

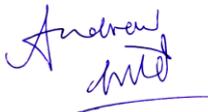
**An excellent understanding of the author's intent. Direction which shows skill, originality, sensitivity and creativity using all the theatrical tools of pace, focus, delivery, timing and rhythm. Talented actors creating highly effective dramatic impact. Evidence of teamwork and unselfish ensemble playing. Actors who interact and react and a production team who use all resources to create atmosphere and mood.**

Production values this evening were high, with a confident realisation and interpretation of the text and a creative and positive dramatic impact throughout. This production achieved its objectives and we were fulfilled in both the delivery and execution. We saw positive support between the members of the cast. Vocal pace and blocking was good and we saw a developed understanding of theatrical communication.

A play is a two-way street – what is sent from the stage gets an immediate response from the audience. There is an exchange that doesn't happen in the cinema or reading a book. It is an actor's job to communicate to the audience and they will answer back. This aspect was well conveyed by CHADS this evening. Parts of *Death and the Maiden* were superbly produced and very tense indeed.

*Death and the Maiden* is a difficult play with three very demanding roles. Any imbalance in performance will threaten to de-rail the production, or, at the very least, needlessly distract from the impact of the words. The director must be able to work with his actors to convey the depth of meaning in this very wordy play. Whereas we certainly saw three very accomplished actors giving skilful performances, I do worry that only one of them—Lorna Kong—truly got under the skin of both her character and the full meaning

of the dialogue. There is so much more to a play like this than simply learning the lines and not bumping into the furniture. I enjoyed all three actors' performances but feel that both Simon Darlington and Chris Rogerson didn't *quite* pull off truly wonderful performances—they were so nearly there that some polish on inflexion, meaning and delivery would have taken *Death and the Maiden* into a wholly different realm.

<b>Adjudicator (print)</b>	Andrew Wild
<b>Adjudicator (sign)</b>	
<b>Date</b>	22.11.2018