

Venice Preserv'd

Event date(s): 10<sup>th</sup> Jun 2014

Location Paynes and Borthwick Greenwich, London

Reviewed by: Emrys D. Jones

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Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* (1682) was one of the long eighteenth century's most frequently performed tragedies. With its excitingly political plot, its often beautiful blank verse, and its perennial themes of love, friendship and madness, the play does not deserve its modern neglect. But we look to the Restoration for comedy today, if we look to it at all. While commentators despair at the exclusion of John Steinbeck from British school syllabuses, the omission of all literature from Shakespeare's time to Wordsworth's goes entirely unremarked. In this context, a new production of Otway's eminently accessible work is certainly welcome. It is a brave choice of inaugural project for The Spectators' Guild, a company seeking to combine a respect for older dramatic texts with the sort of immersive, site-specific experience popularised by the likes of Punchdrunk Theatre. This is a delicate balance to strike, and one could argue that the original ideas and characters of *Venice Preserv'd* get a bit lost amidst the various fancies and whims of this production. However, there is a great deal of charm and intelligence in evidence here. In short: we need more theatre like this.

One notices the energy and ambition – and potential distractions – of the production from the booking process onwards. Having completed the main booking and been supplied with a ticket, one is directed to a second booking website, where a political census awaits. Quotations are presented, without attribution at first, and you are asked to select the statements that you most agree with. As a survey, it was fundamentally no different from any of the countless 'How should you vote?' quizzes that proliferated online in the build-up to May's European elections, only here there is no answer given at the end of the quiz, no clear sense of how this information might be used or whether it will be used at all. Did the State Inquisitors of Venice really care whether I agreed more with Russell Brand or Winston Churchill? Would I really have been turned away from the performance if I hadn't completed this additional exercise? I was impressed by the levels of immersion suggested by the experience but there was no way that the production itself could match them, short of executing me for my political views upon arrival. Moreover, I am not certain whether this process contributed in any substantial way to my appreciation of the play. Regardless of political affiliations, it would take a heartless individual to watch this production and side completely with the forces of established authority. One's opinion of the play's conspiracy is largely dictated by one's hopes and fears for individual characters, not by underlying ideological sympathies. Maybe that was the point that the census was trying to establish?

The play hinges on the conscience of Jaffeir (sometimes spelt Jaffier), the indebted and impoverished son-in-law to a senator of Venice. With his wife, Belvidera, cut off from her inheritance, Jaffeir is convinced by his friend, Pierre, of the need for violent rebellion against the senate. Belvidera stands in the way of this plan for a number of reasons, both moral and personal. She does not want to see her father killed; she also sees the true loutishness and disrepute of

Pierre's co-conspirators, one of whom attempts to rape her. Like Volumnia in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, she is the advocate of mercy and compromise who ultimately derails the hero's quest for revenge and undermines his manly integrity. Jaffeir informs on his friends and wallows in his guilt before finally redeeming himself by joining with Pierre in a brotherly act of murder-suicide. Belvidera, already driven to insanity herself, dies upon receiving news of her husband's final actions.

While Otway's plot is undoubtedly moving, it takes some effort to render it for modern audiences with appropriate solemnity. This production was very well cast, with stand-out performances by Ferdinand Kingsley as Pierre and Jessie Buckley as Belvidera, but even their well-judged line delivery could not prevent a number of impatient chortles during the play's denouement. One can't really blame the audience. By this point in the evening, they had been engaging with the spectacle for over three and a half hours, treated to a carnival and intervals of Venetian buffoonery, ushered from location to location in the half-completed riverside apartment block where most of the play was performed. After all these gestures to immersion and adventure, it is hard to ask an audience to show much reverence for Otway's earnest protagonists. Ashley Zhangazha, in the role of Jaffeir, would have been helped by some more ruthless editing of his longer speeches. More in keeping with the general mood were the play's lively comedic scenes, chiefly the interactions between lecherous senator Antonio (Pip Donaghy) and his revolted dominatrix, Aquilina (Ayesha Antoine).

The production did gain much from its immersive aspects, however. The opening carnival, an hour-long walk from the prow of the *Cutty Sark* to the apartment building, was an impressively anarchic experience, masked cast members clowning about, playing music, and climbing lamp-posts as they ushered the audience along. It felt like a combination of political rally and bachelor party, and the chaos of the occasion framed the eventual performance of the play itself as just another piece of entertainment, potentially absurd in its own excesses. At a time when London increasingly models itself as a modern-day city state, isolated both economically and ideologically from the rest of the country, the parallels drawn by this production with a politically fractious and culturally brash Venice felt especially pertinent. Canary Wharf watched disapprovingly from across the Thames. Otway's original allusions to the Exclusion Crisis gave way to political reflexivity of a more general kind, a more effective sort of self-examination than was prompted by the online census.

Where the start of the evening seemed to set us on the side of rebellion and lawlessness, the rest of the production complicated this. For one scene, the audience became the senate, garbed in red robes. Difficult to wish for the conspiracy's success when we would be the ones facing assassination. The choice of a luxury housing development for the play's venue likewise confounded one's ideas of where our sympathies should lie. The production both complimented and critiqued the wealth that enables such gentrification. Its press release celebrates the site's "striking resemblance to the Doge's Palace", an observation that threatens to align the development with cruelty and corrupt practices. Though it is excellent to see that the company behind the building has been a major funder of the production, they will have been disappointed if they saw this simply as an advertising opportunity. I would not want to live in a property where Pierre's indictments of the political elite still linger in the air. Thus, as an act of compromise in itself, an exploration of how dissent can survive within compliance and vice-versa, the production effectively staged and partially resolved the dilemmas of its chief characters within the context of modern 'austerity' Britain.

The Spectators' Guild's production of Venice Preserv'd was performed in Greenwich from April 24th to June 7th 2014.