



**RED BULL
THEATER**

Revitalizing the classics for today's audience.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

BY JOHN WEBSTER

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2022

CSC THEATER

RED BULL THEATER IS SUPPORTED, IN PART, BY PUBLIC FUNDS FROM THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CITY COUNCIL, AND THE NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS, WITH THE SUPPORT OF GOVERNOR KATHY HOCHUL AND THE NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE.

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RED BULL THEATER IS A PROUD MEMBER OF THE ALLIANCE OF RESIDENT THEATERS/NEW YORK, THE OFF-BROADWAY LEAGUE, AND THEATER COMMUNICATIONS GROUP.



Council on
the Arts



DONATE TODAY TO SUPPORT RED BULL THEATER AND INVEST IN THE VITALITY OF CLASSICAL THEATER FOR A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE. FOR NEARLY TWENTY YEARS, RED BULL THEATER HAS TRANSFORMED THE CLASSICAL THEATER EXPERIENCE WITH SPECTACULAR, HIGH-OCTANE PRODUCTIONS OF SHAKESPEARE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES, RAUCOUS READINGS OF RARELY-PRODUCED PLAYS, AND VIVID REIMAGININGS OF ICONIC WORKS.

WE'RE DEDICATED TO REVITALIZING THE CLASSICS FOR TODAY'S AUDIENCES, AND WHILE WE TREASURE THESE CLASSICS, OUR APPROACH IS ANYTHING BUT PRECIOUS. **YOUR SUPPORT IS.**

REDBULLTHEATER.COM

RED BULL THEATER

JESSE BERGER | FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

PRESENTS

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

BY JOHN WEBSTER

DIRECTED BY JESSE BERGER

FEATURING

SHIRINE BABB

KELLEY CURRAN

GERRARD JAMES

MAURICE JONES

ALFREDO NARCISO

BHAVESH PATEL

AMELIA PEDLOW

LORENZO PISONI

MATTHEW RAUCH

DEREK SMITH

RAPHAEL NASH THOMPSON

STAGE MANAGER | JENN MCNEIL

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER | JESSICA FORNEAR

VIDEO SERVICES | MERELIS PRODUCTIONS, INC.

SCHOLAR | MARIO DIGANGI

GENERAL MANAGER | SHERRI KOTIMSKY

PRODUCING DIRECTOR | NATHAN WINKELSTEIN

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2022 | 7:30 PM ET

CSC THEATER

SIMULCAST ONLINE | A RECORDING WILL BE AVAILABLE UNTIL 11:59 PM ET ON NOVEMBER 20, 2022.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

| | |
|---|-----------------------|
| Antonio, <i>Steward of the Duchess of Malfi</i> | ALFREDO NARCISO |
| Delio, <i>his friend</i> | BHAVESH PATEL |
| Daniel de Bosola, <i>a discontented gentleman</i> | MATTHEW RAUCH |
| Cardinal of Aragon, <i>eldest brother to the Duchess</i> | DEREK SMITH |
| Ferdinand, <i>Duke of Calabria, twin brother to the Duchess</i> | LORENZO PISONI |
| Castruccio, <i>a Lord and a Doctor</i> | RAPHAEL NASH THOMPSON |
| Malateste, <i>a Count</i> | MAURICE JONES |
| Roderigo, <i>a Courtier</i> | GERRARD JAMES |
| Duchess of Malfi..... | KELLEY CURRAN |
| Cariola, <i>her Lady-in-Waiting</i> | SHIRINE BABB |
| Julia, <i>Castruccio's Wife</i> | AMELIA PEDLOW |

Servants, Guards, Lords, Ladies, Children, and Lunatics
played by the Company.

—THERE WILL BE ONE 10-MINUTE INTERMISSION—

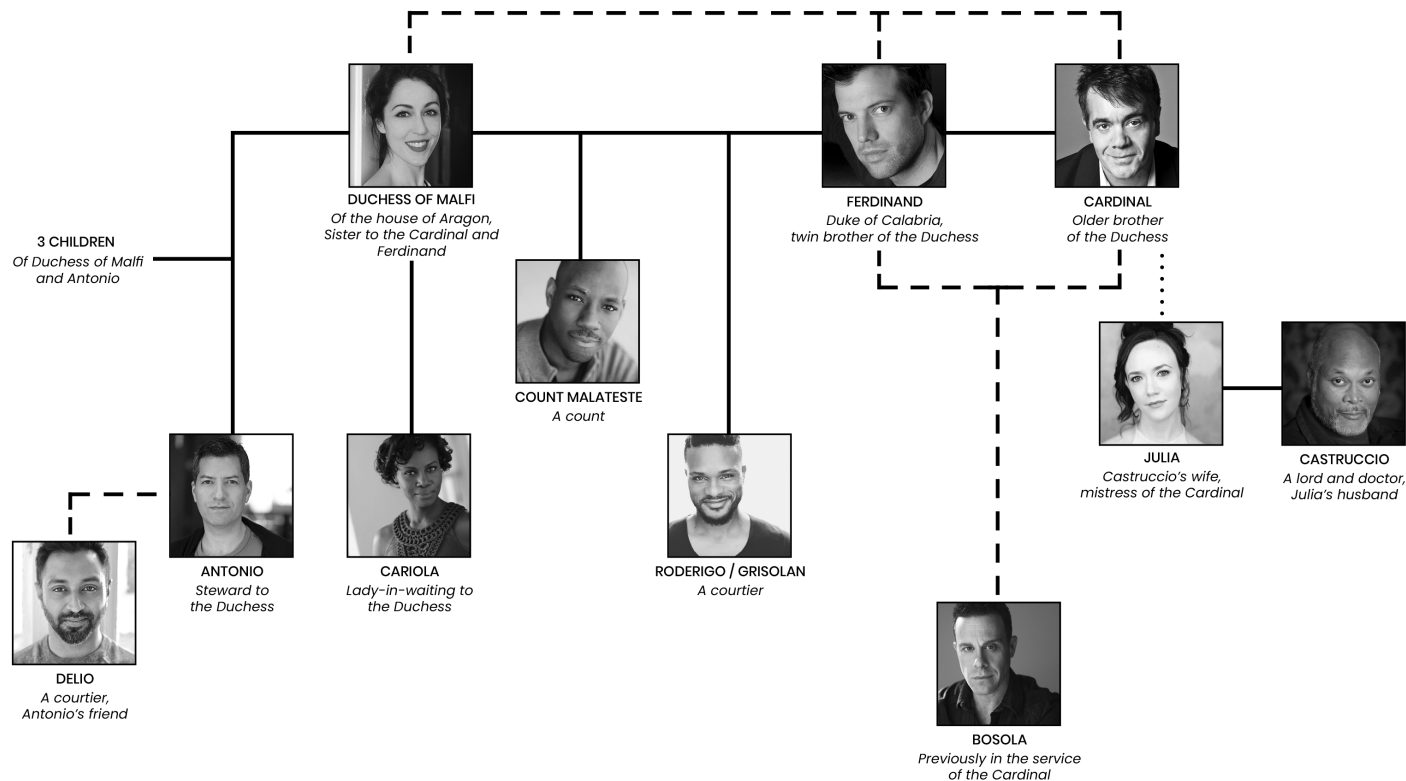


Please join us following the
reading for a discussion with
director JESSE BERGER
and scholar MARIO DiGANGI.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

BY JOHN WEBSTER

CHARACTER MAP



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

JOHN WEBSTER (1578-1634) is best known for his great tragedies of courtly corruption, *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). It's possible that as a young man he was a member of the Middle Temple, one of the London law schools. Evidence of his dramatic writing for the London stage begins in 1602. Although he collaborated throughout his life with popular contemporary playwrights such as Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton, and John Heywood, Webster wrote *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* alone. Both plays are violent tales of sexual and political intrigue centered on an elite woman and her kin. In his poem "Whispers of Immortality," T.S. Eliot wrote, "Webster was much possessed by death, / And saw the skull beneath the skin."

ABOUT THE PLAY

In Renaissance tragedy, women who assert their sexual independence often meet a bad end: think of Juliet, Gertrude, Desdemona, and Cleopatra. Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, who secretly marries her steward in defiance of her brothers' commandments, could be placed in this company, but she also has a unique status as a titular tragic hero, a status she earns through the conviction of her right to act on her erotic desires. This is not to claim that *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) is concerned with sexuality alone. If Webster is drawing from love tragedy such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, he is also drawing on the theatrical styles and ideological concerns of violent revenge tragedy such as *Hamlet*, of sentimental domestic tragedy such as Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, and of political tragedy such as *King Lear*. In the *Duchess*' bold assertion of will—"If all my royal kindred / Lay in my way unto this marriage, / I'd make them my low footsteps"—Webster even echoes Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, the archetype of aggressive masculine ambition.

The rich theatrical legacy Webster weaves into his tragedy contributes to the fascinating complexity of the *Duchess*' character. Citing the Renaissance stereotype of the "lusty widow," some have found that the play condemns the *Duchess* for indulging her imprudent passion for a servant. Although the *Duchess* conceals her marriage to Antonio for many years, her subjection to private surveillance and public scrutiny undermines her political authority, taints her family's honor, and exposes her husband and children to danger. In the play's characteristically treacherous and competitive Italian court, rumor thrives: after the birth of her third child, the *Duchess*' subjects regard her as a "strumpet" and her children as bastards. Nonetheless, others have found the *Duchess* courageous and sympathetic. The *Duchess*' corrupt brothers, Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who hypocritically keeps his own mistress, tyrannically impose their will upon her. Ferdinand,

in particular, is no less a creature of passion than his sister: at one point, he whips himself into a violent frenzy at imagining the pleasure she would take in having sex with a sturdy laborer. Most importantly, the play belies the simplistic stereotype of the lusty widow by revealing the Duchess' genuine affection for Antonio: the tender, playful intimacy she shares with him explains why she would risk so much to marry beneath her rank.

Webster's characteristic fascination with death adds atmospheric intensity to the threat of ruin that hangs over the Duchess. Beneath the glittering surface of the court, with its ordered ceremonies, rich attire, and elegant language, lurk confusion, decay, and deformity. The glorious palace sits above the dungeon in which the Duchess will suffer grotesquely cruel torments. A bitter philosopher of mortality, Bosola ponders the "rich tissue" that adorns the courtier's body, "eaten up of lice and worms," and instructs the Duchess to regard her flesh as no more than "a little curded milk, fantastical puff-paste." Ferdinand's suspicion that the Duchess has "witchcraft in her blood" not only associates female sexual vitality with the hidden physical abnormalities typically attributed to witches, but also suggests that the very blood of the royal family is tainted with madness or sin. Tormented by guilt over the Duchess' death, Ferdinand will fall victim to lycanthropy, thus ironically losing hold of the very aristocratic identity whose purity he had tried to restore by violently purging his sister of her sexual transgression.

As in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, by the last act of *The Duchess of Malfi* corpses have rapidly accumulated and the future of the state remains uncertain. Dying, Ferdinand articulates a grim philosophy of passion as a self-destructive force: "Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, / Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust." Ferdinand's bleak sentiment, however, must be counterpoised against the play's suggestion that passion can also motivate honorable and compassionate actions—actions that are worthy even when impure or ineffective. Regretting his role in the Duchess' demise, Bosola belatedly determines to vindicate her by seeking "just revenge" against her brothers and by protecting Antonio from their wrath. Howsoever we might judge Bosola's imperfect morality and imperfect success, Webster's tragedy asks us to pause before condemning as self-destructive those actions that might reflect a more considered form of self-awareness or even self-sacrifice.

— MARIO DiGANGLI, Lehman College and The Graduate Center, CUNY

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ADMINISTRATIVE FELLOWJESSICA FORNEAR
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JESSE BERGER | FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Red Bull Theater brings rarely seen classic plays to dynamic new life for contemporary audiences. Our work unites a respect for tradition with a modern sensibility.

Red Bull Theater is named for the rowdy Jacobean playhouse that illegally performed plays in England during the years of Puritan rule, and was the first London theater to reopen after the Restoration. This bold spirit is central to our identity. With the Jacobean plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries as our cornerstone, Red Bull Theater is New York City's home for dynamic performances of great plays that stand the test of time. The company also produces new works that are in conversation with the classics.

Red Bull Theater delights and engages the intellect and imagination of audiences. A home for artists, scholars and students, we strive to make our work accessible, diverse, and welcoming to all theatergoers. Educational as well as entertaining, our work keeps a rich and vital tradition thriving.

Red Bull Theater believes in the power of great classic stories and plays of heightened language to deepen our understanding of the human condition. We believe in the special ability of live theater to create unique, collective experiences. And we believe in the timeless capacity of classical theater to illuminate the events of our times.

Founded in 2003 with a production of Shakespeare's *Pericles*, Red Bull Theater has been acclaimed by The New York Times as "a dynamic producer of classic plays" and by Time Out New York as "the most exciting classical theater in New York."

Red Bull Theater serves adventurous theatergoers with OFF-BROADWAY PRODUCTIONS, REVELATION READINGS, and the annual SHORT NEW PLAY FESTIVAL. The company also offers outreach programs including SHAKESPEARE IN SCHOOLS, bringing professional actors and teaching artists into public school classrooms, BULL SESSIONS, free post-play discussions with top scholars, and MASTER CLASSES in classical actor training led by veteran theater professionals.

In our 19-year history, Red Bull Theater has produced 21 Off-Broadway Productions and nearly 200 Revelation Readings of rarely seen classics, serving 5,000 artists and providing quality artistic programming to an audience of 65,000. The company's unique programming has received ongoing critical acclaim, and has been recognized with Lortel, Drama Desk, Drama League, Calloway, Off Broadway Alliance, and Obie nominations and Awards.

Visit **REDBULLTHEATER.COM** for more information.