



## Spectacle and Female Power: *The Duchess of Malfi* in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse

Farah KARIM-COOPER  
Shakespeare's Globe

In January of 2014 Shakespeare's Globe opened a new indoor Jacobean theatre. Named after the Globe's founder, Sam Wanamaker, the new space would enable year-round performances and it would present not only the plays of Shakespeare, but also those of his contemporaries. Dominic Dromgoole, the Globe's Artistic Director (2006-2016) at the time chose to debut the playhouse with a production of *The Duchess of Malfi* because of the unique conditions the space would offer a play like Webster's tragedy: it is a small, at times uncomfortably intimate theatre space, its layout based loosely on a seventeenth-century theatre by John Webb (originally thought to be by Inigo Jones); the interior is painted and decorated with a Jacobean aesthetic in mind; and it is lit entirely with beeswax candles.<sup>1</sup>

The experiential impression of its spectators is as varied and diverse as the spectators themselves. Yet, the spatial dynamics in this space and the painted aesthetic evocative of Jacobean funerary decoration suggested an ideal setting for Webster's spectacular tragedy. Having worked for eight years in the outdoor Globe Theatre reconstruction, Dromgoole recognised that the indoor playhouse would introduce audiences to a new "sensory norm" as Paul Menzer refers to it.<sup>2</sup> The intimacy that the playhouse architecture produces harkens back to the Blackfriars theatre itself (an influence but not a model for the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse), the indoor venue occupied by the King's Men from 1609-1642 and where *The Duchess of Malfi* would have been staged in 1614. This intimacy has been referred to repeatedly by theatre and academic critics alike as the overwhelming effect or impression of the indoor space. However, Menzer observes that while the Blackfriars introduced "as a theatrical norm a proximity to the actor's face and form", suggesting an "access to an imagined interiority", it was also a theatre that exploited the technological innovations of the seventeenth century, such as "flying machines, creaking

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<sup>1</sup> See Jon Greenfield, "Practical Evidence for a reimagined indoor Jacobean theatre", *Moving Shakespeare Indoors: Performance and Repertoire in the Jacobean Playhouse*, ed. Andrew Gurr and Farah Karim-Cooper, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 32-64.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Menzer, "In the event of fire", *Moving Shakespeare Indoors*, p. 170-183, p. 173.

trapezes, disappearing banquets...” and of course lighting technologies implicit in stage directions of numerous plays:

[T]he commercial success of indoor playhouses brought about, in short, a counterintuitive move – not the close up drama of psychological intimacy, but a theatre of wonder, distance, and deferral, a theatre of domestic spectacle.<sup>3</sup>

*The Duchess of Malfi* offered the Globe an opportunity to explore the ways in which theatrical intimacy, early modern lighting technology and dramaturgical spectacle could exploit and unearth the performance and meaning-making potential of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. Webster’s play raises theatrical challenges that the new indoor playhouse could feasibly and creatively test. This article examines the ways in which the theatrical viability of the Playhouse architecture, its aesthetics and the special effects it enables raised the dramaturgical and thematic stakes of Webster’s most famous tragedy and one of drama’s most famous heroines.

### A Feminist Duchess

Most scholars who comment on *Malfi* note that one of its sources, François de Belleforest’s French translation of Matteo Bandello’s *Novelle, Histoires Tragiques* (1565), does not provide a flattering portrayal of female sexuality and agency. Michael Neill observes that “despite occasional expressions of sympathy for the Duchess, Belleforest makes it plain that her tragedy is a consequence of her surrender to lecherous desire”.<sup>4</sup> Authors who picked the story up subsequently also painted the Duchess in a harsh light; in William Painter’s English translation of Belleforest, *The Palace of Pleasure*, “the Duchess is presented as a warning to all princes, and especially to powerful women, about the dangers of indulging their private appetites”.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising that the histories and fictional prose accounts of the story of the Duchess take a moral stance when it comes to the free reign she was presumed to have taken with her sexual behaviour. Widows were feared in early modern England, precisely because they were largely independent and had been sexually active. As Allison Levy has shown,

stereotypes of widows (as decrepit, dangerous or destitute) coexisted with social demands and expectations of widows (as passive, submissive, weak and silent). But we know that widows in early modern England did not always follow ... (male) dictates of ritual etiquette, instead, often going against the grain and blurring socio-behavioral boundaries”.<sup>6</sup>

The notion that such a woman could hold and maintain a position of power would have stuck in the throats of many male writers and thinkers in Europe and in England. Significantly, the Duchess, as imagined and presented by Webster, is of a markedly different character. In some ways, she is a paragon of modern woman. Webster’s play, it can be argued, provides a proto-feminist perspective on her story. Webster’s contemporaries clearly viewed the Duchess in a positive light. The commendatory verses prefacing the first Quarto edition printed in 1623 by the popular playwrights of the moment, such as Thomas Middleton, William Rowley and John Ford testify to Webster’s

<sup>3</sup> P. Menzer, “In the event of fire”, p. 174-175.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Neill, Introduction, in John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, Norton Critical Editions, New York and London, Norton, 2015, p. xxv. All references are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> M. Neill, Introduction, in J. Webster, *The Duchess*, ed. M. Neill, p. xxvi.

<sup>6</sup> Allison Levy, “Widow’s Peek: Looking at Ritual and Representation”, *Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allison Levy, New York and London, Routledge, 2017, p. 1-24, p. 6.

bold and sensitive construction of the Duchess's character; for example, Middleton asks: "For whoe'er saw this duchess live and die / That could get off under a bleeding eye".<sup>7</sup>

Feminist scholars, such as Linda Woodbridge argue forcefully that the Duchess's mastery over her own desires posit her as a female tragic hero. Woodbridge calls her, in fact, a "hero of desire", remarking that the Duchess is "a champion of desire, defending [it] as wholesome and taking risks knowingly to pursue desire as something she believes in".<sup>8</sup> Dominic Dromgoole's production in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse seemed to be invested in this aspect of her character. She had to be desirous not just for love and her steward, but for life. Gemma Arterton starred as the Duchess and played her with strength as well as sensuality. Her Duchess was clever and resistant, a woman of power and fortitude, but she was also virtuous and empathetic. The Duchess was not the only star or the main headliner in the production, however. The playhouse was proudly on display; its beauty, intimacy and architectural integrity provided an exceptional spatial environment for a Duchess that would need to rival the charms of the theatre space itself. The theatre space imaginatively captures the feminine. Theatre historians have described the Blackfriars Playhouse and other indoor venues as a "private" theatre, a term which stems from the Act of Common Council of 1574. A "private" theatre, as Sarah Dustagheer describes, generally was where "boy companies performed indoors in front of smaller, more socially exclusive audiences".<sup>9</sup> Whether or not it was the "private" nature of the indoor theatre that somehow encouraged more women of the elite classes to attend the theatres is unknowable, but there was a reportorial focus on female tragic heroines well into the Caroline period perhaps suggesting that indoor theatres were viewed as hospitable to female spectators and attracted or cultivated stories of female subjugation, survival and heroism.

One of the most startling features of the new theatre is the lighting created by candlelight, which gives the space its unique visual aesthetic. Researched extensively by Martin White who sat on and advised the Globe's Architecture Research Group on this matter, the candles were to be an essential component of the theatre's sense scape; they were to provide the visual language that each director and company working in there would have to learn, adapt and communicate. While there are candles placed in sconces on the pillars around the front of the auditorium and actors had use of a range of hand-held lights, in Dromgoole's *Malfi*, the chandeliers that hang above the stage were a striking dramaturgical feature. Martin White argues that in the early modern indoor playhouses,

once raised, the chandeliers were for the most part likely to remain at a constant height above the stage throughout each act. However, as they were installed with gear that enabled them to be raised and lowered, it seems inevitable that the company would have noticed the variation in the light levels depending on their height above the stage and taken advantage of that to create different effects.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Middleton, "In the Just Worth of that Well-Deserver, Mr. John Webster, and Upon this Masterpiece of Tragedy", J. Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. M. Neill, p. 6, l. 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Woodbridge, "Queen of Apricots: The Duchess of Malfi, Hero of Desire", *The Female Tragic Hero in English Renaissance Drama*, ed. Naomi Conn Liebler, New York, Palgrave, 2002, p. 161-184, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> Sarah Dustagheer, *Shakespeare's Two Playhouses: Repertory and Theatre Space at the Globe and the Blackfriars, 1599-1613*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Martin White, "'When torchlight made an artificial noon': light and darkness in the indoor Jacobean theatre", *Moving Shakespeare Indoors*, p. 115-136, p. 125.

This is precisely what Dromgoole's production did: it took advantage of the early modern technology of ropes and pulleys that enabled the chandeliers to work in concert with the drama. As Will Tosh observes, the candlelight in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse "is flexible, and provides a powerful tool for the creation of space, mood and atmosphere".<sup>11</sup> During the Duchess's chamber scene, the chandeliers were lowered, two so far down that the lighting intermingled with the actors, who had to move around them. Odd and historically unfeasible though it seemed – given Martin White's argument that in the seventeenth century the chandeliers would have remained fixed for the most part – the chandeliers used in this way seemed to take on a virtuosity in their capacity to illuminate the thematic content of the scene. When the Duchess woos, proposes to and swears to love Antonio for eternity, she is boldly asserting her will and desire. The marital contract that takes place between Duchess and Antonio in I.i exposes the assertiveness, desire and courage of the Duchess. In this production, the chandeliers were lowered to the same height as the actors, forcing them to interact with light in a way that highlighted the agency of the actors and the echoing agency of the Duchess in that moment. Arterton seemed to dance, swirl and move flirtatiously, sometimes alarmingly around the flickering candles (her skirts were at times frighteningly close to the flames of the handheld candelabra placed on the floor at the front of the stage): it focused the spectators' attention on the flames as well as the unique confluence of love, desire and danger that thematically underpins this unique moment. Curiously, in this playhouse, at least, light is a powerful symbolic conduit that works to draw out and shift emotional meaning. As flames flicker, so do intent and feeling:

ANTONIO Ambition, madam, is a great man's madness,  
That is not kept in chains and close-pent rooms,  
But in fair, lightsome lodgings, and is girt  
With the wild noise of prattling visitants,  
Which makes it lunatic beyond all cure.  
Conceive not I am so stupid but I aim  
Whereto your favors tend; but he's a fool  
That being a-cold, would thrust his hands i'th'fire  
To warm them.

DUCHESS So, now the ground's broke,  
You may discover what a wealthy mine  
I make you lord of.

ANTONIO Oh, my unworthiness!

DUCHESS You were ill to sell yourself.  
This dark'ning of your worth is not like that  
Which tradesmen use i'th'city: their false lights  
Are to bad wares off; and I must tell you,  
If you will know where breathes a complete man –  
I speak it without flatter – turn your eyes  
And progress through yourself.

(I.i.408-426)

The language in this scene was largely retained in the production. Its attention to the imagery of light and darkness as if to modulate between Antonio's perception of himself (unworthy) and his perception of the Duchess ("She stains the time past, *lights* the time to

<sup>11</sup> Will Tosh, *Playing Indoors: Staging Early Modern Drama in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse*, London, Bloomsbury/Arden, 2018, p. 91.

come", l.i.202, emphasis added), worked together with the candles as the actors seemed to gesture to and around them, co-opting them into the dramaturgical structure of the play.

In III.iv, Webster provides us with an extraordinary moment of theatricality that again works to throw light upon the Duchess's noble character, and which draws upon the empathetic sensibilities of the spectators. The scene that takes place at the shrine of Our Lady of Loreto sees the Cardinal being divested of his religious clothing and accoutrements and installed "*in the habit of a soldier*" (III.iv.65D). But in the next sequence of the same dumbshow, Antonio, the Duchess and their children present themselves at the shrine and "*are (by a form of banishment in dumb show expressed towards them by the Cardinal and the state of Ancona) banished*" (III.iv.65D). Presumably this banishment was expressed through a gesture of expulsion – a common gesture in paintings or frescoes that show Adam and Eve banished from Paradise. This gestural moment, accompanied by a hymn (or "ditty" as it is described in the second state of the first Quarto) is observed by two pilgrims whose sympathies seem to lie with the Duchess, evident as they discuss her banishment, referring to her as a "great lady":

They are a free state, sir; and her brother showed  
How that the Pope, forehearing of her looseness,  
Hath seized into th'protection of the church  
The dukedom which she held as dowager  
(III.iv.29-32)

Because of the size of the playhouse and the small stage, the Duchess and her family entered through the front door of the playhouse into the pit and their banishment was enacted in between the spectators seated in the rows of curved benches. Witnessing tragedy or certainly emotionally evocative moments in plays from the pit is often a wildly different experience to watching from the galleries, most dramatically different being the experience in the upper gallery. We know from studies of spectatorship and from the experience of watching plays in the Globe and in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse that there is no "unanimity of responses".<sup>12</sup> Will Tosh writes extensively about this variegated emotional response in the playhouse:

Particularly for audience members in the pit and lower gallery, the intimate proximity of the action was striking. It was "one of the most interactive experiences I've had", said Grace, sitting during *Malfi* in the pit: "I'd hear a noise behind me and suddenly turn around and see people walking down the aisle right next to me. It gave me such an opportunity to watch their faces and their body language"... One result of [the] multi-sensory intimacy was that spectators felt an emotional connection with both the dramatic fiction and the business of performance.<sup>13</sup>

The Duchess and her family slowly marched in down the aisle, while the Cardinal is being dressed in military regalia. She is dressed in a dazzling costume that was designed by Jonathan Fensom to sparkle deliberately under the glow of the candles; this made her dignified entrance all the more alluring and eye catching. When the clergymen on stage gestured to banish her, her movements echoed a slow dance; she conveyed amazement and shock, but tried to come forward again, her facial expression regaining its poise and

<sup>12</sup> John J. McGavin and Greg Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship: Mysteries to the Shakespearean Stage*, ed. John J. McGavin and Greg Walker, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> W. Tosh, *Playing Indoors*, p. 123.

her own sense of authority as Duchess. She received the gesture again and then again; finally, she went to her knees as her family echoed her movements, but her face remained elevated, seemingly to retain dignity in the face of public humiliation. She and her family stood, turned around and were forced to leave, exiting the way they entered into the scene.

Dumbshows are essentially allegorical even while they serve a very practical dramaturgical function of driving the plot forward. I have argued elsewhere that dumbshows require elaborate, exaggerated gestures that are meant to do more than convey local emotions: "there is an obligatory absence of speech requiring an ornamental emphasis upon the gestural language itself".<sup>14</sup> Equally, such miming becomes an art within drama: "as an art unto itself, gesture produces narrative through the body, provokes iconographic awareness or memory among spectators and, in so doing, produces passionate responses".<sup>15</sup> As Tosh pointed out, the emotional responses to the Duchess of spectators in the pit testifies to the role of the theatre's experiential intimacy and how it can be harnessed by directors and actors to produce character (in this case, Webster's strong and unshakably feminine Duchess) and encourage or elicit empathetic response.

### The Spectacle of Horror by Candlelight

Webster's tragedy is perhaps best known for its macabre sequence of psychological tortures enacted upon the Duchess. Bosola, the malcontent and spy for the Aragonian brothers, stage-manages the tortures which take place in three segments: the dead hands, the wax figures and the dance of madmen. I want to focus here on the first two segments. What many critics remark upon is the fact that the text requires the first stage of the Duchess's torture to take place entirely in darkness. Bosola informs the Duchess that Ferdinand has requested "neither torch nor taper / Shine in your chamber" (IV.i.24-25). The Duchess seems unmoved and tells him to "take hence the lights" (29). The title page to the first Quarto tells us that this play was performed by the King's Men both indoors in the Blackfriars and outdoors in the Globe. This scene undoubtedly would have acquired a different set of meanings as it moved from one playhouse to the other. The main difference would be that this scene could indeed be played entirely in darkness indoors. Candles and tapers can be put out rather quickly as artists in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse have learned and this has made for an exciting set of creative options for directors and designers of Jacobean tragedy. Dromgoole's production has the Duchess in her prison cell (ironic for it to be called a "chamber" by Bosola) holding only a taper, while Bosola holds a small candelabra and the servants have torches. When she says to take the lights hence, Arterton's Duchess is left in pitch darkness. The audiences in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse tended to gasp at this point, generating some trepidation, perhaps because audiences are unaccustomed to the practice and darkness leads to a sense of loss of control; it provokes fear, naturally.

When Ferdinand enters with the hand, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse spectators could see nothing; they became auditors solely at this point. What could be heard is the Duchess's calm, sturdy vocal responses when Ferdinand tells her that "This darkness suits you well" (30) and continues to attack her verbally. The dead hand scene has been

<sup>14</sup> See Farah Karim Cooper, *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage: Gesture, Touch and the Spectacle of Dismemberment*, London, Bloomsbury/Arden Shakespeare, 2016, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> F. Karim-Cooper, *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage*, p. 87.

discussed at length, at times criticized as a piece of sensationalist theatricality. However, it is arguable that Dromgoole's production unearthed the horror of the play in this moment, evident in the staging of the torture in complete darkness made possible by the playhouse conditions, and in the emotional responses of the spectators. Will Tosh describes some of the effects that early modern tragedy has had on spectators in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse: "Bruce R. Smith writes of the 'pleasurable twinge of watching and hearing characters suffer on stage', but for some Sam Wanamaker Playhouse audiences the experience went beyond the pleasurable".<sup>16</sup>

When the Duchess takes the dead/wax hand, it takes her a brief moment to realize the hand is severed; she drops it and screams "Hah! Lights! – O horrible" (53). In the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, this occurred in darkness and the audience heard the cold hand drop on to the stage rather than saw the wax prop. This moment was slightly risky with the potential to take the performance to a rather absurd place; however, the lack of lighting had already disconcerted the audience, the tension amongst them seemed to enable the "horrible" moment of the Duchess to play as horrible for them too; thus the sound of the hand hitting the stage floor made some spectators recoil, including me.

An early modern thriller like *The Duchess of Malfi* does not stop at a dead hand. The scene in which the artificial figures are revealed behind a "traverse" or a curtain caused spectators often to take a double look.<sup>17</sup> Scholars have debated and wondered how this scene might be staged: would the King's Men have paid for wax bodies to be fashioned or would real actors have played the "artificial figures" (IV.i.54SD)? This was a question that Dromgoole grappled with early on in the rehearsal process. At this point in the play the spectators are also unaware that Antonio and the children are not actually dead and that the figures are artificial, their revelation designed to psychologically wound the Duchess. Wax effigies were considered fascinating in the early modern period due to their verisimilitude to human flesh. And while wax body parts were common to medieval catholic votive practice, post Reformation the fashioning and display of wax effigies in the funerals of nobility or monarchs continued. Webster, for example, would have likely seen the remarkable wax effigy of Prince Henry during the young prince's funeral procession only two years before *The Duchess of Malfi* was staged. The dead hand might have been made of wax, and while scholars like Rory Loughnane suggest the King's Men were perhaps unlikely to have spent the money on such seemingly elaborate props, there is some evidence and enough logic to suggest that the figures would have been made of wax or at least have been artificially constructed. Why would the King's Men create a tableau of actors playing dead characters (which are not actually dead but the artificial semblance of characters as if dead) when Shakespeare had already created the staged miracle of Hermione's statue coming into life through the micro-gestures of the actor playing her only a few years before?<sup>18</sup> Webster and the original actors may have invented a staging device that would be markedly different, more horrifying perhaps than the device in *The Winter's Tale*, which managed to trick the spectators with a live body. Dromgoole's decision to stage artificial figures made sense and enabled the playhouse to

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<sup>16</sup> W. Tosh, *Playing Indoors*, p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> See Nathalie Rivère de Carles, "Channelling the Tragic Through the Arras in *The Duchess of Malfi*", *The Duchess of Malfi: Webster's Tragedy of Blood*, ed. Pascale Drouet and William C. Carroll, Paris, Belin, 2018, p. 267.

<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to Gary Taylor for his insight into this comparison in a conversation that took place prior to the production opening.

showcase its dynamic capacity to produce special effects: the figures were wheeled through the central opening on a type of cart, in front of them were five rows of lit small candles. The effect was a spectacle of seeming death that also resonated with Webster's thematic and visually compelling preoccupation in the play with Catholic imagery and ritual, also linked in the modern imagination with candles: the dead hand being a reminder of votive offerings at shrines of waxen hands or other body parts, or the Cardinal's dumbshow, which was staged with elaborate reference to shrines and lit stunningly with tapers. The wax figures seemed to recall the imagery in the shrine of Our Lady of Loreto, both of which astonished the audience, but in dramatically different ways.

Rory Loughnane reminds us that the "staging of the tableau of artificial figures showcases multiple onstage audiences with differing levels of knowledge".<sup>19</sup> The layers of spectatorship are curious regardless of the theatre, but they are heightened in a theatrical space that feels like a small chamber or an intimate room:

Few of us live in galleried candlelit halls, but many artists noted the domestic quality of the playhouse. "It feels", said James Garnon (the Cardinal), "like such a room". Many modern actors, especially those schooled in studio-sized performance, are inclined to regard their playing spaces as human-scale "rooms" rather than public auditoria, but the domesticity of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse was articulated in specific ways.<sup>20</sup>

Given the proxemics of actor and audience, the Duchess's experience becomes our own in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse and our horror is refracted through the lens of her pain and grief:

DUCHESS There is not between heaven and earth one wish  
I stay for after this; it wastes me more  
Than were't my picture, fashioned out of wax,  
Stuck with a magical needle, and then buried  
In some foul dungill; and yond's an excellent property.

...

BOSOLA Come, you must live.

DUCHESS That's the greatest torture souls feel in hell:  
In hell that they must live and cannot die.  
Portia, I'll new-kindle thy coals again,  
And revive the rare and almost dead example  
Of a loving wife.  
(IV.i.60-64; 68-72)

Such an experience suggests what John J. McGavin and Greg Walker refer to as a "vicarious contemplation of suffering flesh".<sup>21</sup> The Duchess has already been established as a heroine by the production and its elements and, as many have argued, Webster's portrayal of the Duchess invites spectators to feel empathy:

<sup>19</sup> Rory Loughnane, "The Artificial Figures and Staging Remembrance in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*", *The Arts of Remembrance in Early Modern Memorial Cultures of the Post Reformation*, ed. Andrew Gordon and Thomas Rist, New York and London, Routledge, 2013, p. 211-228, p. 223.

<sup>20</sup> W. Tosh, *Playing Indoors*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> J. J. McGavin and G. Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, p. 13.



[T]hroughout the play the Duchess is marked as the object of empathy – in the warmth of her humanity, in the attractive intimacy of the loving bed chamber scene, in the courage and dignity with which she faces death.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion: Death and Intimacy

When Dromgoole embarked upon rehearsals, finishing touches were being placed upon the interior of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. The designs of the scenic façade and the painted decoration throughout were created by Jon Greenfield; all decisions came through the project management team of which Dromgoole was a part.<sup>23</sup> In his preparations for rehearsals, the culture, rituals and imagery of death stood out for him. This Websterian preoccupation, Dromgoole admitted, shaped his notion of how the decorative design of the playhouse should be completed. The Architecture Research Group had suggested painting the scenic façade with paler colours to provide a reflective surface for the candlelight, but Dromgoole insisted upon a dark palette, which is why the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is perhaps darker than an indoor Jacobean theatre might have been historically. Nevertheless, this was a significant decision in part because it demonstrates *The Duchess of Malfi's* enduring effect on the aesthetic of the playhouse. It is an aesthetic in which the dark panelling and blackened pillars on the tiring house wall are evocative of the funerary monumentalism that is so fundamental to the play's obsession with death.

The relationship between the Duchess's sexual courage and her eventual death seems to be on display throughout the play and the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse production gestured to this relationship throughout. The theatre space produces a particular set of effects due to its visual aesthetic and architectural construction of intimacy; proximity is a condition produced by the size and shape of the theatre which helps determine the spectatorial experience. John McGavin and Greg Walker have noted that "witnessing the actions of ... bodies on stage" can make spectators "acutely aware of themselves" as bodies that are close to "the other bodies around them".<sup>24</sup> When the Duchess is faced with her own death after she endures the sequence of tortures her courage is perhaps most evident. Webster's proto-feminist Duchess is literally besieged by men who torture her at the pleasure of her tyrannical brother. Witnessing the final stage of this in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse had the potential of creating a profoundly disturbing spectacle in which a woman is tortured and murdered, her body on display in a setting that at times resembles the early modern anatomy theatres where bodies were routinely dissected for an audience of medical students and evidently some members of the public too.

When Bosola and the executioners threaten the Duchess, her response is in keeping with the courage she displayed in her wooing of Antonio, her pregnancies, her banishment and her grief at seeing what she thought were the dead bodies of her family. Bosola asks, "Yet methinks / This manner of your death should much afflict you, / This cord should terrify you" (IV.ii.199-201). But the Duchess's following speech and death is an act of deep resistance:

Not a whit.

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<sup>22</sup> L. Woodbridge, "Queen of Apricots", p. 162.

<sup>23</sup> Jon Greenfield is the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse "reconstruction" architect and the architect of the Globe.

<sup>24</sup> J. J. McGavin and G. Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, p. 14.

What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut  
 With diamonds, or to be smothered  
 With cassia, or to be shot to death with pearls?  
 I know death hath ten thousand several doors  
 For men to take their exits, and 'tis found  
 They go on such strange geometrical hinges,  
 You may open them both ways – any way, for heaven sake,  
 So I were out of your whispering! Tell my brothers  
 That I perceive death, now I am well awake,  
 Best gift is they can give or I can take.  
 I would fain put off my last woman's fault:  
 I'd not be tedious to you.  
 (IV.ii.202-213)

When the executioners loop the cord around the Duchess's neck in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse production, they stand directly next to the side-stage Lord's Boxes (audience seating in the lower and upper gallery nearest to, if not, on the stage). When they tighten the noose and strangle her, the spectators in the pit and side-stage Lord's Boxes were forced to confront the death scene in a way the other spectators around the auditorium were not – because of their proximity to the actors. Webster constructs several layers of spectatorship and response here: the spectators earlier witnessed the Duchess gazing upon a spectacle of death she believed to be real; she is objectified by the gaze as much as the wax figures are objectified by their own artifice. How are we as spectators then co-opted into the tragic event? In discussing the medieval York Crucifixion pageant, J. McGavin and G. Walker argue that the medieval cycle did not just seek:

to represent the events of Christ's passion, nor merely to show its spectators what it might have been like to have rejected and mocked Christ. It seems designed to cue them to feel what it is like in the real time of the performance ... [b]y witnessing the scene, each spectator might feel that they have themselves performed a material act of affective piety.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of the Duchess, her horror is mirrored in the affective participation of the spectators, their pity and fear as they resign themselves to the "sad spectacle" of death in this play: a spectacle particularized in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse with its capacity to enhance the emotional encounter between the noble but tragic Duchess and her spectators.

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<sup>25</sup> J. J. McGavin and G. Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship*, p. 8.

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