

Edinburgh International Festival Review: Measure for Measure ****

From the offset, it's evident that Declan Donnellan's *Measure for Measure* is going to be bold and modern.

There is no elaborate set to establish a sense of place; instead, Vienna has become a sort of present-day Russia, identified only by five imposing red container boxes and the stark black backdrop of the open stage.

This, however, is anything but a minimalist production.

Everything which has been chosen, from the cast and costumes to the sparse but effective sound effects, has been done so with intelligence and creative ingenuity. This is not Shakespeare as we know it, but nor need it be.

The red glow which is cast from the boxes haunts the audience throughout and is both striking and symbolic; red is the colour of danger, and yet it has other connotations too – of passion, lust and seedy red-light districts. Sex and danger, of course, go hand-in-hand throughout the play; it is the sin of fornication which has led to Claudio's imprisonment, and the loss of virtue which will allow his sister Isabella to stop his execution. Desire is the root of Angelo's corruption, and lust the catalyst to his downfall.

These cubic structures rarely change position throughout the play. Movement, instead, is created by the ensemble, many of whom are present throughout. Their on-stage presence is essential to the success of the production; they act as moving walls, shifting seamlessly around the stage to assist with the changing scenes and locations.

And yet, their purpose is also symbolic. They represent the larger society of the play, at times moving in unison, at times fragmented across the stage, as chaos and order and take hold. More importantly, they represent the silent judgement which permeates throughout. When they swarm like bees around the Duke at the beginning of the play, he writhes and tears at his hair, clearly burdened by the pressures of his role. When they hover, staring, around Angelo, we see his fall from a character who might once have had virtue to one who is consumed by greed and desire. Their watchful eyes haunt Isabella, who must decide between loyalty to her brother or her faith. Their presence is both tactical and effective.

There is little use of sound effects throughout, and yet it is not needed. The dialogue is complex and fast-moving and there are brilliant performances throughout, from our convincing villain, Angelo (played by Andrei Kuzichev) to the strangely likeable Lucio (Alexander Feklistov). Stealing the show, however, is Anna Khalilulina, who performs Isabella with complete understanding of her character – a woman who is both kind and feisty, and deeply, deeply tormented by the choices put to her. Khalilulina dominates the stage even when her character is at her weakest, and is divine to watch.

Though shortened in places, much of the text which is performed is true to the original play. It is a wonder then that Donnellan has been able to marry it so well with such a modern context. Though it is performed entirely in Russian, and though there are certainly nods to Putin's Russia, the setting could easily be interpreted as any developed country and will resonate with anyone who has become distrustful of politicians. The longest scene, in which the Duke reveals his disguise, showcases this well; the addition of a red carpet, and the overhead sound of shutters clicking lends a subtle nod to the relationship between political and celebrity culture. We see the Duke revel in his fame, goading the (imagined) audience for more applause, and this leads us (the real

spectators) to distrust him – an interesting interpretation on one who could quite easily be read as the hero of the tale.

Measure for Measure is one of Shakespeare's most controversial plays, and certainly there will be moments in this production which won't sit comfortably with everyone. A prostitute is dragged across the floor by her hair and twice we witness the attempted rape of Isabella. These moments, however, are essential to the themes of corruption which underpin the play, and are handled with enough tact to prevent them from being distasteful. Similarly, there are enough light moments (believe it or not, this is one of the Bard's best-loved comedies!) to keep the play from feeling too dark and heavy.

This is brave and innovative production with very little to fault. In fact, my only criticism relates to the fact that because the play is performed in Russian, and because the dialogue moves so quickly, it can be a little hard to follow the English subtitles at times. Perhaps if there was a captioning screen towards the centre, it would enable the audience to follow the text without missing out on what's happening on stage – because believe me, you don't want to miss out on this performance!

***Measure for Measure* was performed at Edinburgh's Lyceum Theatre as part of 2016's Edinburgh International Festival.**

It was produced by Cheek by Jowl and the Pushkin Theatre, Moscow, in conjunction with the Barbican, London.