

The Revenger's Tragedy by Thomas Middleton

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The National's production

Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* opened at the National's Olivier Theatre on 4 June 2008

Vindice, the revenger, sometimes

disguised as Piato **RORY KINNEAR**
Hippolito, his brother..... **JAMIE PARKER**
Gratiana, his mother..... **BARBARA FLYNN**
Castiza, his sister **KATHERINE MANNERS**
Duke **KEN BONES**
Duchess **ADJOA ANDOH**
Lussurioso, the Duke's son by a previous marriage..... **ELLIOT COWAN**
Spurio, the Duke's bastard son **BILLY CARTER**
Ambizioso { *the Duchess' sons*..... **TOM ANDREWS**
Supervacuo { *by a previous* **JOHN HEFFERNAN**
Younger Son { *marriage*..... **TOMMY LUTHER**
Antonio, an old lord..... **SIMON NAGRA**
Whore/Gloriana..... **DONATELLA MARTINA CABRAS**
Gentleman/Officer..... **CONOR DOYLE**
Piero/Gentleman/Officer **PETER HINTON**
Judge/Keeper/Spurio's man..... **DEREK HOWARD**
Judge/Nobleman/Officer **PIETER LAWMAN**
Nencio **JANE LEANEY**
Sordido..... **ROBERT McNEILL**
Lady in Waiting..... **PAMELA MERRICK**
Lord/Guard..... **RICK NODINE**
Lord/Officer/Spurio's man **RICHARD SHANKS**
Nobleman/Guard **ROSS WAITON**
Lady Antonio..... **LIZZIE WINKLER**

Director..... **MELLY STILL**
 Designers **TI GREEN** and **MELLY STILL**
 Lighting Designer **PAUL ANDERSON**
 Music..... **ADRIAN SUTTON** and **DIFFERENTGEAR**
 Sound Designer **PAUL ARDITTI**
 Movement Director **RICK NODINE**
 Fight Director **PAUL BENZING**
 Puppetry..... **MITCHELL MORENO**
 Company Voice Work **JEANNETTE NELSON**

Production Manager **DIANE WILLMOTT**
 Staff Director **MITCHELL MORENO**
 Stage Manager **DAVID MILLING**
 Deputy Stage Manager **ANNA HILL**
 Assistant Stage Managers **ALI BIGGS** and **JULIA WICKHAM**
 Costume Supervisor **JILL PENNINGTON**, assisted by **CAROLINE BRETT**
 Prop Supervisor **KIRSTEN SHIELL**
 Assistants to the Designers **SIMON KENNY**
 Assistant to the Lighting Designer **BEKY STODDART**
 Assistant Production Manager **JO HORNSBY**
 Design Associate **ALAN BAIN**
 Production Photographer **JOHAN PERSSON**



Photo (Tommy Luther as the Younger Son, centre, with members of the company) Johan Persson

'A Man o' the Time'

Thomas Middleton's Life and Work

Thomas Middleton was born in London in 1580. His father, William Middleton, was a bricklayer by trade who had ridden the wave of the city's property boom to become a prosperous builder and landlord. In 1568, William acquired a coat of arms, thus confirming his elevation to the ranks of gentry, and ensuring that Thomas was born a gentleman.

William died in 1586, when Thomas was only five and his sister Avis three. Within a year the widow Anne Middleton was married again to a young seafarer, Thomas Harvey, who had returned to England, broke, from Sir Walter Raleigh's failed colony Roanoke in the new Americas. The marriage was to prove a troubled one. Within a matter of months, Anne's new husband applied to the Court for control of his step-children's inheritance, which he claimed was now his legal property. Anne responded by having herself arrested, knowing that her husband would be forced to pay her debts.

Thus began a marriage which was to be distinguished by years of bitter legal wrangling between Anne and Harvey, an experience which must surely have influenced Thomas' biting and cynical view of the judiciary. Indeed the family feud may have been responsible for Thomas failing to finish university, for though he matriculated at Queen's College Oxford in 1598, he was forced to return home 'to ayde his mother' in a court case, and seems never to have graduated.

It may be that he left Oxford to pursue a career as a dramatist. At the time, public theatre was a new, exciting and morally ambiguous enterprise, on the one hand enjoying the patronage of royalty, and on the other being consigned to beyond the city boundaries, along with the brothels and baiting pits. Whether drawn into writing drama through choice or necessity, by the first years of the 17th century Middleton was earning a living as a writer. Whereas Shakespeare, throughout his working life, wrote solely for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which became the King's Men after James I's accession, Middleton was always a freelance author.

He seems to have begun his career writing for Henslowe's rival company The Admiral's Men. His first play for them was the comedy *The Family of Love*, written in 1602, and around that time he married Anne Marbeck (they had a son, Edward, a year later). His association with The Admiral's Men was to continue for the next 20 years; his last play for them was the tragic masterpiece *The Changeling*.

But Middleton also established fruitful relationships with London's other leading companies. For the boy actors The Children of St Paul, who performed in the indoor theatres of the City, Middleton penned a series of comedies, including *A Trick to Catch the Old One* and *Michaelmas Term*.

For The King's Men, Middleton probably revised Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure*, and wrote original plays including *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *A Game at Chess*. This last play, written in 1624, was to be at once Middleton's greatest triumph and his downfall. Developing the conceit of a game of chess in order to satirise the court's relationship to catholic Spain, the play was a box office sensation, playing to full houses for nine consecutive days in what was the first known 'run' on the English stage.

The glory, however, was to be short-lived, for the Privy Council shut down the production. Middleton went into hiding; we do not know what punishment he faced. Possibly he served time in prison, or was barred from writing for the theatre. What is clear is that he never wrote another stage play. After his appointment as the Chronologer of the City of London in 1620, Middleton was no longer dependent on his income from plays, and for the last three years of his life he devoted his time to his public office, keeping records of public events, writing speeches, and organising and composing civic pageants. Middleton died at his home in Newington Butts in 1627.

'But to the Purpose'

A Synopsis of the Play

Unable to recover from the loss of his fiancée Gloriana, who was poisoned nine years earlier by the Duke, and grieving the recent death of his father, Vindice vows to take revenge.

His brother Hippolito, who works at the Duke's court, introduces Vindice – in disguise and calling himself Piato – to the Duke's son Lussurioso, who urgently seeks a suitable villain to procure for him a virgin. Vindice learns that his sister Castiza is the object of Lussurioso's lust. Bound by his oath to Lussurioso, Vindice tests Castiza's virtue and finds it resolute, but to his dismay he is able to persuade his mother, Gratiana, to influence her daughter.

The Duchess' youngest son has been imprisoned for raping Lord Antonio's virtuous wife. Furious that her husband the Duke refuses to pardon her son, the Duchess plans to avenge him by having an affair with his bastard son Spurio (her stepson). Vindice tells Lussurioso about this incestuous affair as a means of diverting him from visiting Castiza.

Intent on killing the adulterers, Lussurioso rushes in to the Duchess' bedchamber in the middle of the night, but instead of finding her with Spurio, his own father the Duke is lying with her. Unable to explain his violent behaviour, he is imprisoned for attempted murder.

The Duchess' older sons, Ambitioso and Supervacuo, persuade the Duke to authorise Lussurioso's execution. He agrees but, second-guessing their motives, secretly orders his son's release. In the confusion the younger son, in prison for rape, is executed.

Now the Duke hires Vindice (still disguised as Piato) to procure for him a virgin. Vindice seizes the opportunity, with Hippolito's help, to kill the Duke.

Lussurioso decides to have Piato killed and, innocent of the irony, recruits an undisguised Vindice as the hitman. Vindice

and Hippolito dress up the Duke's corpse in Piato's clothes and 'kill' him.

The Duke dead, Lussurioso must now ascend the throne, and revels are called for. Meanwhile, Vindice and Hippolito confront their mother Gratiana over her wicked attempts to prostitute Castiza. Repentant, she begs forgiveness and the family are reconciled.

At the masque to celebrate the coronation, Vindice and his supporters, disguised as dancers, kill the new Duke. Ambitioso, Supervacuo and Spurio, with the same intention, join the masque and, discovering the new Duke already dead, fight over succession to the throne and are killed.

Having wiped out the corrupt royal family, Vindice and Hippolito have faith that Lord Antonio will reign as an honest Duke. Far from rewarding the brothers, Antonio sentences the revengers to death.



Photo (Jamie Parker as Hippolito and Ken Bones as the Duke)
Johan Persson

'I Applaud Thy Constant Vengeance'

The Genre of Revenge Tragedy

For two and a half thousand years revenge has proved a compelling theme in the performing arts. If the simplest element of drama is conflict, then revenge delivers it with potent clarity. The story of an individual avenging a wrong presents to the writer a volatile set of building blocks: a sympathetic character on a clear mission; heightened and violent confrontations; moral and philosophical questions to be debated; death, often multiple.

Every major period of dramatic achievement in Europe has explored the story of the revenger: the Greek tragedies of Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles, staged 500 years before Christ; the Stoic Seneca, writing in Nero's Rome; the Golden Age of Spanish literature in the 16th and 17th-centuries; the stage of the English Renaissance; in France 50 years later, the plays of Corneille and Racine; and, in the 18th and 19th-centuries, opera and popular melodrama. In our own time cinema, displacing theatre's cultural impact and reach, has picked up the baton and run with it, giving us such revenge classics as *Death Wish*, *Unforgiven*, *Get Carter*, *Gladiator*, and *Kill Bill*.

Despite spanning countries, genres and millennia, most of these works follow basic principles of tragedy laid out by Aristotle. The drama starts with a trigger event or incentive moment which sets off a chain of cause-and-effect events; the protagonist faces a reversal of fortune or a surprise, which leads to a moment of self-realisation or a change from ignorance to knowledge; there is a final scene of suffering, destruction or pain, out of which comes the audience's fear and pity for the character and events. But while the basic shape of the revenge drama may fit with this model, the revenger himself is different from other tragic heroes in an important respect. In a classic tragedy, the

protagonist is in some way responsible for his downfall through a flaw or error of his own doing. The revenger's situation, however, is imposed upon him by others. Through a wrong done to him or someone close to him, he is compelled to action, forced to think and behave outside his normal framework of experience in order to redress the injury.

This spur to action is often precipitated by circumstances in which proper legal or judicial process is absent or inadequate, or where the perpetrator of the wrong is above the law by virtue of their position, status or connections.

In modern Western societies the punishment of crime is the prerogative of the state; a criminal 'pays his debts to society', not to an individual victim, and personal vengeance is disallowed. But when the guilty are not punished, when the law has failed, vengeance offers the promise of justice. The doctrine of retribution still has currency in our modern society: the idea that there is a real justice in proportionate punishment, in "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Deuteronomy 19, 17-21). This is the justice Vindice seeks in *The Revenger's Tragedy* when he murders the Duke with poison, a direct reflection of how the Duke had murdered Gloriana.

Vindice does not follow the New Testament edict to turn the other cheek; his faith is firmly in the Old Testament God: wrathful, punishing and unforgiving. It is the God that Jules in *Pulp Fiction* is thinking of when he paraphrases Ezekiel: "There's a passage I got memorized, seems appropriate for this situation... 'And I will strike down upon with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon you.'"

In taking justice into his own hands – in seeking proportionate punishment for the wrong done to him – the revenger enters morally murky waters. For through his actions he becomes like the original aggressor, and at the same time transforms his enemy into a victim. This is the dramatic irony of revenge, reinforced in many tragedies by the additional

'I Applaud Thy Constant Vengeance' The Genre of Revenge Tragedy

bloodshed of casual bystanders and people not involved in the original crime. Not only does Vindice frame at least two innocent men in the course of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, but he takes delight in their misfortune. "New marrow! No I cannot be expressed!" he cries when the Fourth Lord is wrongly convicted for the mass murders at the masque, and carried off for execution. Vindice progressively moves beyond the clean objective of avenging his fiancée's murder, to a broader campaign of assassination whose target is ostensibly the royal family and its inner courtiers, but whose victims are sometimes more random.

Like Euripides' *Medea* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Vindice comes to enjoy his role as avenger and to celebrate his own ingenuity. There is a creative brilliance in what he does that goes beyond good planning and enters into performance, and he must seek acknowledgement for himself as the author. This is the revenger's lot: whereas the murderer tries to cover up his crimes, the revenger's impulse is to reveal. In Park Chan-wook's film *Oldboy*, the character Woo-jin

unfolds to his enemy the reasons behind his 15-year imprisonment and other incredibly complex interventions into his life. Woo-jin then kills himself, as though death is the inevitable response to the completion of the cycle of vengeance.

So it is too with Vindice. After spending much of the play in virtuosic disguise and deceit, in the final moment he cannot help but share how "witty carried" was his plan. But though the confession leads to his and his brother's execution, there is a calm, reflective acceptance of death in Vindice's final speech. The revenger, his enemies killed, his artistry displayed, can rest.



Photo left to right (Rory Kinnear as Vindice, Ken Bones as the Duke and Jamie Parker as Hippolito) Johan Persson

‘Thou Play’st Upon My Meaning’

The Characters and their Names

Though references to a specific location have been removed from this production of *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, the writer actually sets the play in Italy, a place associated, in the 16th-century imagination, with violence, treachery, ruthlessness and sexual debauchery.

Yet the play is deeply English in its themes and structure. In displacing the location, the writer gives himself licence to serve up a biting satire on the social, economic and political vices of Jacobean England – including at Court – without risking treason.

The English roots of the piece are also clearly evident in its debt to medieval morality plays. The allegorical nature of the characters; the scathing attacks on lawyers, women, and the nouveaux riches; the central images of the skull (*momento mori*) and the Dance of Death: all are present in the morality tradition.

The archetypal morality play *The Castle of Perseverance* presents a lesson on how “Everyman in himself truly may it find/ How Mankind into this world is born full bare/And bare shall be buried at his last end” – words which would not feel out of place coming from the lips of Vindice. The protagonist of *Perseverance*, Mankind, encounters the virtuous embodiments of Meekness, Charity, Soberness, and Chastity, who vie for his soul alongside the temptation of characters such as Folly, Flesh and the Seven Deadly Sins.

The Revenger’s Tragedy inherits this tradition and develops it, fusing biting social satire with ethical colloquy. Castiza – emblematic of Chastity – is beset by the powerful Lussurioso – Lechery – thus playing out a classic conflict of abstract qualities, within a specific and fully imagined social context.

The names of many of the characters in the play are derived from Italian, and carry a clear and direct symbolic association. Middleton may have drawn on John Florio’s dictionary *A World of Words* (1598) for the names; certainly Florio’s definitions are

useful to us now in helping us understand what Middleton had in mind:

Lussurioso: lecherous, riotous, lustful

Spurio: a whore’s son whose father is not known, a bastard, one base born, used also for a counterfeit

Ambizioso: ambitious, very desirous of honour

Supervacuo: too much superfluous, overmuch vain, not necessary, unprofitable, no use

Vindice: a revenger of wrongs, a redresser of things and abuses

Nencio: a fool, an idiot, a natural, a dolt, a gull

Sordido: absurd, filthy, corrupt, unclean, beastly, a niggard, a dodger, a covetous wretch

Gratiana: from *gratia*, grace

Castiza: from *casta*, chaste

Piato: a plea, a suit in law, a controversy, a process, a pleading. Also flat, squat, cowered down, hidden

The following names do not appear in Florio’s dictionary:

Antonio: this is the Italian and Spanish form of the popular name Anthony, and doesn’t have a ‘meaning’ as such. This, in itself, is interesting given the fact that Antonio in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* is difficult to get the measure of – is he a quiet Machiavel who manipulates Hippolito and others into clearing the way for his rise to power, or is he a morally upright innocent who only reluctantly agrees to leadership?

Hippolito literally means “freer of horses”, from Greek hippos meaning “horse”, and lya meaning “to loosen”. In Greek legend he was the son of Theseus and the subject of his stepmother Phaedra’s incestuous love, a myth worked into plays by Euripides and Seneca. The fact that in these plays Hippolytus worships the goddess of hunting, Artemis, and shuns the goddess of love, Aphrodite, may be relevant to Middleton’s choosing the name.

'What Moved you to't?'

Conversations with Cast and Creatives

Staff Director Mitchell Moreno talks to the show's composer-musicians: ADRIAN SUTTON, who previously composed the music for *War Horse* and *Coram Boy* at the National, and dance music DJs and producers GINO and QUINN, who work under the label differentGear.

Adrian, your background is classical music, and Gino and Quinn, you specialise in acid house. How did you end up working together on this project?

QUINN: We were introduced through Melly's partner, and I remember when we first met we all got along very well. It became quite geeky: we started talking about software!

ADRIAN: It's the area where we interfaced best – although the musical areas that we come from might not exactly be poles apart, we are from different backgrounds, and disciplines. The software that we use is really the first meeting point, even though we use it in different ways.

GINO: Straight away Adrian understood what we were talking about, and we knew we could really have some fun, doing things like sampling.

Is making music now – both from a classical and a dance music point of view – completely different from how music was being made 20 years ago?

ADRIAN: Absolutely. Technology is becoming more and more integrated into concert music. You can regularly go to concerts at the Royal Festival Hall and see laptops being used alongside an orchestra.

QUINN: Now the drive is more towards making the computer technology work quickly and intuitively enough to be able to do it live, so it's starting to resemble an instrument in its own right. It's starting to feel like being in a band again, where you can create music on the fly, whereas three years ago, we'd sit there for hours trying to programme stuff. I think now the push is to try and find ways in which the technology doesn't get in the way.

I understand that the music in this show will be played and mixed live. How will that work?

ADRIAN: I'm looking after the live players – a string trio and a counter-tenor – and in

addition to having them play and sound like fairly conventional instruments, they will be treated with live effects to create certain atmospheres.

That material will be fed across to Gino and Quinn, who will take into their system, sample it live and manipulate it.

We might work to a certain extent the other way around. For example, in the middle of doing a live set, if Gino and Quinn suddenly come up with a gesture in sound which is really interesting and exciting, it may well be that the live musicians can respond to that by improvising.

QUINN: It definitely captures what DJing is all about too. If you're mixing two records together, it could all fall down at any moment; half the excitement and the tension lies in this, and the fact that what the actors are doing will be different every night.

Can you describe what the music in this show is going to be like? What are people going to be listening to?

GINO: At the moment, we are trying to understand more and more of the play and trying to get under the surface of it; it's quite dark and murky and the emotions run very deep.

QUINN: The trick is – because it's going to be electronic music and orchestral music – to marry the two without it just sounding like they've been forced together, like an *Enigma* record or something! That would be really easy, but if we make this work, it will be potentially more interesting than either of them on their own. Our side of it is quite sparse electronic stuff; Adrian's is referencing Renaissance music, but not absolutely rigidly.

ADRIAN: Yes, my approach is to refer to and use elements of Renaissance music – so we have a counter-tenor, a string trio, people playing recorders – yet being played in ways that are far removed from the traditional Renaissance style. We might use the strings to create effects focusing on slides, grunts, anything like that. It's all about referring to, but, at the same time, creating something new out of previous material.

There's something about the music you're creating, the rhythm and the heavy bass, that has a very physical impact on the audience.

QUINN: Yes, when we were originally doing the workshops and watching everyone move around the hall in strange ways, I thought, I want to support and expand on this. Obviously because it's dance, it's rhythmical, so when we put the

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Conversations with Cast and Creatives

two together, I am imagining it’s going to look pretty spectacular and sound pretty heavy as well.

For you, Gino and Quinn, not having worked as theatre composers before, has it presented new ways of working, new challenges?

GINO: The main problem for us is making stuff happen in the short amount of time that we’ve got for particular cues.

QUINN: Usually when we create work, each piece lasts about seven or eight minutes, but in theatre, you have much less time, sometimes just a few seconds. You have to get everything you want – the build-up, release, whatever – into a very short space.

What is the working process?

GINO: Obviously when we are in rehearsals there’s a lot going on in the background, we’re limited with how we can work with sound, so we’re generally just gathering ideas.

ADRIAN: We email each other files or get together and listen to things. We’re constantly having to take direction from Melly and I certainly reach points beyond which I can’t go without Melly’s input. You have to wait for her to be free. The other half of the job is to do what you’re paid for, which is to interpret the director’s ideas musically.

QUINN: We’re quite lucky that Melly’s open-minded.

ADRIAN: There’s nothing worse than working with a director who says, I don’t know why it’s wrong, but it is!



Photo (Adjoa Andoh as the Duchess and Bill Carter as Spurio) Johan Persson



Photo (members of the company) Johan Persson

‘What Moved you to’t?’

Conversations with Cast and Creatives

Staff Director Mitchell Moreno talks to the play’s director, MELLY STILL.

When did you first come across *The Revenger’s Tragedy*?

I read it when I was doing English A-level, and *The Changeling* was on the syllabus. We had to read the other two plays in the collection, which were *The White Devil* and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*.

Do you remember it making an impact on you?

Actually, less so than the other plays in the collection, because I don’t think I really understood it then - I found the language denser than the other two.

So when was it that you first thought it would be something you wanted to do?

After *Coram Boy* – which I directed in the Olivier in 2006 – I felt I wanted to work on a revenge tragedy. I was interested in *The Changeling*, but that wasn’t right for the National at that time, and so I started reading other plays, and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* came to my attention.

What influences and references have you drawn on for this particular production?

When I was considering working on a revenge tragedy, I thought it might be interesting to devise one based on the life of Caravaggio because he lived at the turn of the century in Italy, where these plays often reside. He had a dark and difficult life, and I thought this might be quite an interesting project to pursue. But actually investigating his life in workshops led to creating a revenge tragedy around another story. However, the Caravaggio world remained with me and has continued to inform me throughout the time I’ve been working on this project.

Would you say it’s a very modern production?

It has become modern because the subject matter is pretty modern. Yes, it could be contained in the world of 1606 England, but it resonates today.

Have there been any anachronisms with that sort of situation – the 1606 play in the now – that have been difficult to resolve?

Not difficult to resolve, sometimes a decision needs to be made. Swords are mentioned a

lot so we decided to have swords. These can be unwieldy, so sometimes a dagger became more appropriate. There were times when we discussed whether we should have a dagger or a machete, in line with modern street armoury, but the anachronism to have swords worn with suits seemed to settle well with the company.

I suppose there was a decision about technology. On the one hand there is a lack of it in this production – there are no mobile phones or laptops – but there is very conscious use of computer graphics and video.

In terms of the staging are there any particular challenges that the Olivier represents? People talk about it being a notoriously difficult space.

I’ve not found any particular challenges. I think you have to be very aware of the audience, and when you’re presenting a play like *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, where there is no “fourth wall”, it makes it more straightforward, you can speak very directly to the audience. It doesn’t matter that you’re embracing them and allowing them access to you – looking round and making sure that they can see you seems absolutely appropriate.

So does the audience become a sort of character in the play?

It’s not the kind of escape into soporific darkness that one usually experiences in theatre, because they’re talked to very directly. The characters are all trying to recruit the audience members in different ways, so they become confidantes, as well as witnesses and participants in the world of the play.

The play appears to be quite misogynistic. How do you, as a female director, respond to what seems to be its scathing attack on women?

When I first read it, I did find that extraordinary, but it’s so absurd and so extreme that I could only imagine Middleton was satirising it. I don’t think it’s as black and white as him being a misogynist puritan and his baddies being seedy Italianate Catholics. I think it’s far more complex than that. I think Middleton’s a real humanist and, much as he would have been frustrated with women – and probably not sufficiently insightful to understand that their world was circumscribed so narrowly by the patriarchy of the time – I think he could understand their predicament. I think what he wanted was for

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women to stick up for themselves more and to learn to fight. A lot of his heroines are fighters.

So, the satire of the misogyny became clear to me, and it was something that I really wanted to emphasize in this production. But it meant that we had to trust that it was one of Middleton’s focuses as well. It’s something I can’t impose on the production, but I can highlight it.

Do you think that within the world of the play that you’ve described there are characters you would empathise with or support?

Yes, up to a point. I think we find ourselves being drawn to characters even if they’re predominantly bad. The characters are drawn quite emblematically, so there is a two-dimensionality about them and we’ve worked hard, in this production, to create a complexity and depth in all the characters and the decisions they make in the play.

We certainly empathise with Vindice: we can understand his moral outrage at the beginning. But of course, as he gets more and more embroiled in his revenge, we question his behaviour and, in the end, we’re worried about him dying. I think we get involved in a sense of higher poetic justice. I’ve tried to explore the notion that the audience would have empathy with every character, to some degree,

to understand their behaviour, if not sympathise with it, and I keep asking actors to look for that.

Finally, you’ve mentioned Middleton a few times. Do you fall down on that side of the debate about who wrote *The Revenger’s Tragedy*?

At first I didn’t know. I had several copies which were all ‘by Cyril Tourneur’. I did read a bit about Tourneur and a bit about Middleton but I didn’t know enough about them, or the plays they’d written, to pass any judgment.

It wasn’t really until during workshops when I met Gary Taylor who has just edited the complete works, that I became more convinced that it was Middleton. That was very helpful because I could really think about the author and his experiences, and what he was experiencing at the time he wrote the play. This anonymous character started to come alive in a very vivid way.



Photo (Elliot Cowan as Lussurioso)
Johan Persson

'What Moved you to't?'

Conversations with Cast and Creatives

Staff Director Mitchell Moreno talks to actor RORY KINNEAR, who plays Vindice.

What drew you to the role of Vindice?

When I first read the play, I found the language incredibly alluring, trenchant and decisive, but I wasn't quite sure how it could work psychologically. If I'm not sure if something can work, but I have a feeling it might, I find that quite enticing. I guess that's been the important part of the rehearsal process for me: creating a psychological fleshiness outside of the text, and, at the same time, using the text to join up dots that seem occasionally distant.

Were there any particular insights which helped you round out that psychological picture?

I guess creating the family – because that's all Vindice has had for the last nine years – as well as the person he was nine years before, including his relationship with Gloriana. Then there's the person he has become during this time, which is essentially a third of his life. Once you've got that in place, the play becomes easier because all the external forces that he's exposed to buffet that character.

You always have to start with the character at the beginning of the play; Vindice goes on an amazingly varied journey, but it all comes back to the person he thought he was to begin with. That gave it the first bits of flesh; then I spent a weekend writing out what goes on in between the scenes. That requires a degree of imagination – and it's not always something that an audience will pick up – but what you've done informs the scene you go into. There are thousands of different stories that you could have between the scenes, but you have to settle on one.

Is that way of working – creating a back history and making very clear choices about what is happening off-stage – part of your particular methodology as an actor?

This is probably not a particularly unique way of working but the more you add, the more detail you get, and the less you feel like a chump! If you don't have an idea of who the character is, and you don't dig into that, then the relationships and drive of the character are half-hearted. Obviously, there is a difference with verse drama: the thoughts go through the words and you need to work harder with the text than you would normally. An audience comes to experience the play as much through their ears as through seeing an emotional truth.

Sometimes modern writing can seem an adjunct to thoughts, whereas you are actually speaking your thoughts in this kind of drama.

So is it a drama without subtext, where there's no discrepancy between what the characters say and what they mean?

No, because you are still talking to people, and people can lie. That's obviously not the case with soliloquies, where you rarely lie to an audience. In this play it's not just the good characters who get soliloquies. Those who seem to be of the 'evil camp' also get the chance to put their case to the audience. That's one of the strengths of the piece: you feel a sense of pity and, if not pity, then certainly an empathy for everyone at a certain point – people's sympathies should be constantly changing.

There isn't one great hero; the one person that seems to be focused as the embodiment of hope and virtue is Castiza, but at the end of the play their brother, Hippolito, no longer works at court, and they no longer receive money from him. What does Castiza do now? How do she and her mother go about living?

You were talking about Vindice addressing the audience through soliloquy – how do you approach those moments?

Within this play there are different kinds of soliloquy. For example in Vindice's first soliloquy, he unpacks his heart and reaffirms his vengeance to himself – but within it, he addresses the audience, vengeance, the skull, the Duke – there are lots of different sections in it. I see the section where he talks about what happened to Gloriana and describes how she was as addressing the audience. I wasn't sure about that to begin with but you need that early start for an audience to know that they can be addressed; you go on to address them later, so you might as well get it out the way at the very beginning of the play!

Not only in your soliloquies, but also throughout, you have an amazing facility for making the language very clear. Do you have a strategy or methodology for tackling verse of this kind, a take on how it should be performed?

I've tried lots of different ways. I've done a fair bit of verse drama and I think, more often than not, simplest is best. I've tried end-stops and I've done some metrical work, but I see the form as something that has developed as an easy way of keeping someone's attention, because of its

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rhythmic power. You have to consider how verse drama developed – due to the great noise they had to overcome within those theatres at the time. We don't have that today; we also don't have the same ear for it. So I think one has to play the simplicity of the thoughts. At times, they aren't simple: they can go on for eight or nine lines, have four or five clauses and the beginning of a sentence is very difficult to link up with the end, because of the journeys Vindice goes on through the speech.

There are also tropes of the language: the alliteration, the different vowel and consonant sounds, and the antitheses. However, you can keep on driving through the thought, and I think that's the thing to look out for. You also have to be aware that it's not like normal speech – it's heightened and you have to let it land with an audience.

There are great points in the play where the language is so simple that you don't have to try at all, like the line "Why are there so few honest women? Because it is the poorer profession" – it's very simple and direct and it just 'lands'; you can relax into that.

I have to keep that balance between what I need to do in order for an audience to understand, and what I have to do to stay with the character's emotional truth – as well as serve the poetry.

You can't get away from the fact that these characters are creating these images, using this heightened language in the instant, and that this is a poetic and theatrical form. It's important not to be too embarrassed about that when sometimes you might feel a bit hammy!

In the classical notion of tragedy we find a hero who has some flaw, or commits some error, which leads to his downfall. Do you think that model applies to Vindice?

Vindice has made the decision to action.

Obviously the parallels with *Hamlet* are strong. Vindice has had his Hamlet-Act-IV moment before the play begins. He's realised that he's been festering away for nine years with a broken heart, and now that his dad is dead, he realises he died 'of discontent'. He resolves that this will not happen to him and that he will do something about it. He has to because he's been powerless for too long, so he begins on that 'front foot' of action, waiting for his opportunity, which he finds within the first scene. I suppose his tragic flaw is his obstinacy and his single-minded commitment to his revenge.

He goes beyond that first commitment to take revenge on the Duke though, doesn't he? He doesn't stop at what he has to do.

Once he kills the Duke and realises he has the power within him, he has this sense of invincibility. When people single-mindedly pursue something they want to achieve, they can become insufferable, because they struggled for so long to get to where they are. In the second half, there's that sense that Vindice feels invincible, which Hippolito finds greatly unnerving. There's a sense of single-minded isolation or self-righteousness that what he's doing is right, but only once he's become corrupted through success, and the people and atmosphere around him.



Photo (Rory Kinnear as Vindice) Johan Persson

'I'll Follow the Event'

Further Exploratory Work and Tasks

1. Authorship

Today, many academics and publishers think that *The Revenger's Tragedy* was written by Thomas Middleton. When the play was first published in 1607, however, it was done so anonymously. This may be because the writer felt that the material was sensitive or inflammatory in some way or, more likely, simply that the printer was following the conventions of the day – in the Renaissance, it was not unusual for a play to be published without its author's name.

Edward Archer was the first to attribute an author to the play; in 1656 he compiled a list of plays, in which he named Cyril Tourneur as the writer of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Only one (other) play by Tourneur – *The Atheist's Tragedy* – survives.

Task

Read *The Atheist's Tragedy* by Cyril Tourneur, and either *Women Beware Women* or *The Changeling* by Thomas Middleton, then compare these plays to *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

Think about differences and similarities in the style of the language, the use of imagery, the themes and the dramatic structures of the plays.

Do you think Tourneur or Middleton is the most likely author of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Why?

2. Revenge on Film

The cinema has created some striking examples of revenge tragedy including (but by no means limited to) the following:

- *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952)
- *Get Carter* (Mike Hodges, 1971)
- *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974)
- *Carrie* (Brian de Palma, 1976)
- *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992)
- *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995)
- *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000)
- *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003)
- *Kill Bill I and II* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003 and 2004)
- *The Brave One* (Neil Jordan, 2007)

Task

Choose a film from this list and watch it. Consider the similarities and differences with *The Revenger's Tragedy* in terms of plot, characterisation, language, and imagery.

What moral questions do the pieces raise about the nature of revenge?

Where does the tragedy lie within each piece?

Are the pieces specific to their times and cultures, or could the stories work in other settings?

3. Middleton's *Hamlet*

William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* was written about six years before *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Many critics have commented on the degree to which *Hamlet* seems to have influenced Middleton, and some even suggest that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is a conscious response to Shakespeare's play.

Task

1. Read *Hamlet*. Compare and contrast it with *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Some particular areas to consider might be:

- Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude, compared to Vindice's with Gratiana

- The use of the skull in both plays, and the reflections on life and death which it prompts

- The theme of incest

- The role of creativity, art, and performance in each of the plays – for example the 'play within a play' in *Hamlet* and the masques/puppetry in *Revenger's*.

2. Consider the language used in both *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Hamlet*? Select a similar scene from each play eg: when both Hamlet and Vindice hold the skull in their hands.

How might they differ and be the same in both cases?

Consider the rhythm of the language and the ideas expressed. How do these playwright's styles compare?

'I'll Follow the Event'

Further Exploratory Notes and Tasks

4. A Revenge Tragedy for Today?

Revenge drama has been around for over two thousand years, yet continues to fascinate, engage and provoke debate to this day.

Task

Consider this question in light of *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

What issues in the play might be most relevant to us in the modern-day in terms of our social values, the opinions expressed and political themes?

Violence motivates the actions of most of the characters in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. What are the chief motivations for using this violence?

5. The Genre of Revenge Tragedy

The article in this pack entitled: "I applaud thy constant vengeance: the genre of revenge tragedy" looks at the basic elements and structure of revenge drama.

Task

Write a treatment or outline for an original revenge play or film. Include a plot summary, description of each of the key characters, and information on the setting of the piece (time and place.)

6. Middleton's Women

In the programme for this production, the academic Celia Daileader describes

The Revenger's Tragedy as a "feminist Hamlet".

Task

Consider the different female characters in *The Revenger's Tragedy*: Castiza, Gloriana and the Duchess. Study their soliloquies and behaviour within the play and consider the following questions as discussion points.

1. Do you agree with Daileader's opinion?
2. How are women portrayed in Middleton's play in general?
3. Do you think it is possible to empathise with the women in the play?
4. To what extent do their social situations influence each of their actions?
5. What is Middleton trying to say by presenting these women as he does?
6. How might these women's choices and behaviour be similar or differ from women today?
7. What do you think Middleton's portrayal of these characters says about the playwright's own attitudes to women in society?



Photo (Rory Kinnear as Vindice) Johan Persson