

How much of art is the pure exposition of idea? Not a lot, not in the theatre, well not in our theatre, it grows, it grows because the creative theatrical process is collaborative and accumulative. Well, ours is.

Why do we do it, well, as ever, that's relatively easy: we do plays. How do we make a play that will get a few hundred people in a theatre together and have a good time? Do we make a good play? You judge.

So, why this play? We made this play with a small development budget and a small budget is always a challenge, an opportunity, a challenge, a gift of necessity. And I saw this as the opportunity to have a look at Dr Faustus, a play which intrigues many of us and has this fascinating central piece of action: a man who sells his soul to the devil and goes to hell. We could afford three actors.

Who - well, Faustus and Mephistophilis, - the fixer and the subject, the text determines that these two start the play as the main protagonists but what or who is the driving force behind the whole thing, mostly unseen in the text but she/he/it that makes it all happen?

What is the temptation - what does the devil look like when he/she/it walks through the door? Well, appealing enough to make you do the craziest thing imaginable, straight up, like a fool, no risk assessment.

The text tells us that Faustus is a scholar arrogant in his learning and hungry for more, but what beguiles him, what destroys him?

So, Faustus, Mephistopheles and Lucifer. And Lucifer's a woman, no question.

What? That is what will the material be, we can't - and would not want to - do the whole play as written, we can't because there are only three of us - oh we could run around and change hats and put on funny voices but we did that years ago and although throwing on hats and characters can be fun, once you've heard from the audience "who is he now", while adopting your third lord of the evening, there is a tendency to look elsewhere for your strategy towards multi-characterisation.

Also and worth noting, the script is huge, rambling, badly resolved, full of pantomime and topical gags from four hundred years ago, things about the Emperor of Germany that mean nothing to us now, bits put in to sell tickets, bits almost certainly not written by Marlowe, so we cut the text. Also I feel it's worth pointing out for those of you considering the exam question "what was the difference in staging" That we don't necessarily have the appetite for very long plays these days. I'll leave it to you to ponder why that may be.

What are our criteria? Well, what do we like? We like the exquisite verse, philosophical questioning and story telling of the opening scenes, the argument, the contract, meeting Lucifer and the denouement, the

descent to hell. Most of the rest can go. There must of course be an arc of a story. Faustus has a life to live and a journey to make. Also there are set pieces and audience expectations - the seven deadly sins. What shall we keep and how will we make the rest?

A few years ago, we produced Middleton & Rowley's *The Changeling*, a psychological tragedy with a well written top story and a subplot which relies on the notion that madness is funny, which, in 1620 or thereabouts, it probably was, nowadays we have different sensibilities. We didn't want to lose the comic subplot as a counterpoint to the main story so we decided to devise our own version of it. Of necessity, the language we would use for the subplot would be our own.

This was for us as performers a freeing moment.

Often when directors overlay a weighty conceit on the classics in order to engender some spurious relevance or topical freshness, what happens is that the joins where the play doesn't fit the conceit show badly; either that or the concept takes time out while we plonk through some verse in order to keep the plot up to scratch.

In doing 'Richard III - To Hell on a Handcart', we found that the characters, which we created in order to tell Shakespeare's story, happily continued with their own lives in between the scenes. They employed their own demotic and played through any potential scene-splitting hiatus.

We may interject our own words among the text (and as much of the performance is devised on the rehearsal room floor as given in print), our respect for the fine words and structure of a great dramatist is not diminished and we never seek to debunk the work.

The characters primarily responsible for the story telling stand free the story itself and represent themselves as a meta character, self-reflexive, commenting on their story as well as Marlowe's - and performing a cabaret which is in itself visually stimulating while at the same time advancing the story and further informing us about the characters. They are theatricals using their own language of stage presentation as well as Marlowe's text.

We are not party to the advice Marlowe may have given to his players. We know Hamlet's advice to the players of course.

Marlowe may never have even seen his play performed and there is much in the style of the interpolated scenes which suggests that he did not write them.

Where we create scenes in *Faustus* it is our modern take on scenes which have a given dramatic function but we find obscure to the modern ear and eye.

Comedy and broad humour in Elizabethan drama provide a rest from dense text in the exposition of the play. Our use of popular forms similarly allow a way in to the drama without insistence on the text and let the audience relax.

‘Third Party’s Faustus is an example of an interpretation that works on many levels, and therefore appeals to different audiences and to different expectations and levels of understanding and interest within those audiences’

The verse form may take precedence over content and slow down the delivery of the drama. With a declamatory style, coming from the Restoration onwards, we hear the music of the language, but not the language itself. Not clearly anyway and it’s imperative that we don’t turn our audience off. We need to keep them in the drama, in the moment. I prefer “I wonder what happens next” to “What did he say?” Our style is conversational despite what may seem at first sight to be heightened language. We believe that serious things spoken lightly have greater weight..

We are used to what is often referred to a tradition of playing Elizabethan and Jacobean plays. But these traditions were born of performers who feared the church and the state. And cemented in the Victorian tradition of doublet and hose. To A sixteenth century audience, that was of course modern dress.

Design, briefly: The original concept for our set was that in hell, these scenes would be played out interminably – once again, this is hell nor am I out of it. So Faustus burns at the beginning and at the end and his life is a continual flashback. The drama may not point this up but the images please us and so we stuck with it. In terms of a comparison between this stage and an Elizabethan one, well, the presence of a quasi realistic faustian study pin it very much as modern but the reveal of Lucifer in the bookcase may be analagous to an Elizabethan inner stage. It is certainly a device that we have used before with this in mind. Also we use technology, it is unlikely that you spotted that the appearances of technology are historically sequential.

Nick Collett:

Having opened this second tour of Faustus at Trinity Theatre in Tunbridge Wells, we had a discussion with a group of AS level Theatre Studies students. They expressed surprise at how funny the play was – in fact they were unsure as to whether the play was “meant to be done like that”. Our production of Hamlet in 1999 was our first collaboration with John Wright. John unlocked something in the play that I think

Shakespeare would have enjoyed enormously – the use of comedy to release tragedy. Comedy as a counterpoint is not a new concept, but I believe many directors (and actors) fight shy of it, because they mistakenly feel the audience might believe they are debunking the text. Used deliberately and well-placed, comedy butts up to tragedy and throws it into relief, making it much more powerful. Our student group particularly liked the improvised scene where Lucifer and Mephistophilis create a journey for Faustus on the back of a dragon – he sees, as he does in Marlowe’s text, all manner of wonders, the beautiful cities of Trier, Paris, Naples, then high above the earth, the planets and the moon – close up. In our version there is one difference - the trip is made under hypnosis. After he lands, L & M decide that the 5 or so minutes they’ve invested in creating this spectacle should constitute 8 years of his 24 under the bargain. It’s funny and sad in equal measure at the same moment. It also tells us as much about L & M’s motives as it does about those of Faustus.

NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR – JOHN WRIGHT

Christopher Marlowe’s “The Tragical History Of Doctor Faustus” is the story of an insatiable intellectual who, having mastered all the academic disciplines of his age, turns to black magic, abjures God and sells his soul to the Devil for twenty four years of magic power.

It’s a lousy deal by any standards, especially to a devout Christian. But Marlowe didn’t write this play to bolster Christian complacency.

Marlow was a closet atheist and he wrote the play as a metaphor about faith and learning. Faustus believes that knowledge is power and that total knowledge brings absolute power. He believes that the promise of celestial bliss in the ever after is nothing compared to what you can do in the here and now. This isn’t the tragedy of a man who sold his soul to the devil so much as the tragedy of the man who, having got the knowledge and the power did nothing with it. In trading off ‘the happy ever after’ for ‘the here and now’, he finds himself missing it deeply.

If ‘This is hell nor am I out of it’, as Mephistophilis tells him; if ‘hell is the world and all that’s in it’, rather than the eternal furnace of popular myth; if sin is part and parcel of human nature, then, maybe, thinks Faustus, being damned is not so bad after all. But ‘The reward of sin is death’ and the certainty of that final goodbye without the prospect of heaven is appalling to him. ‘I’ll burn my books’, he wails at the end, but all the knowledge in the world can’t save him from his despair.

If you scrape away the gloss of liturgical drama, make a hell out of other people, turn mystery into sleight of hand and emotional integrity into sentimental popular music then the venerable Dr Faustus becomes a man who’s so clever he’s stupid. For all his power and knowledge he’s just like the rest of us: caught up in a world just that bit too big for him.

In our production we’ve focused on Faustus’ stupidity rather than his ambition. We’ve tried to make it a production that’s as funny as it is

tragic. Few of us believe in heaven or hell anymore and if you don't believe in the Devil, how can you be expected to take the central conflict of the play seriously? I'd say, because of the drama and because of the language. In editing the play down to three characters and in following the logic of 'This is hell, nor am I out of it', I believe we've strengthened the conflict, clarified the drama and revealed the play as an atheist tragedy. But there is some of the most popular dramatic verse ever written in this play and we think we've found some splendid comedy to go with it.

"Faustus was, as was Richard III - To Hell on a Handcart, what rural touring should be! Well made, directed, performed, and creatively produced with real quirky surprises which thrill and engage but are reverent to the script. An extremely entertaining piece of work that pushes boundaries with style and convention in the treatment of classical material without alienating."