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viewfinder

MOVING IMAGE AND SOUND, KNOWLEDGE AND ACCESS

DECEMBER 2010 No 81



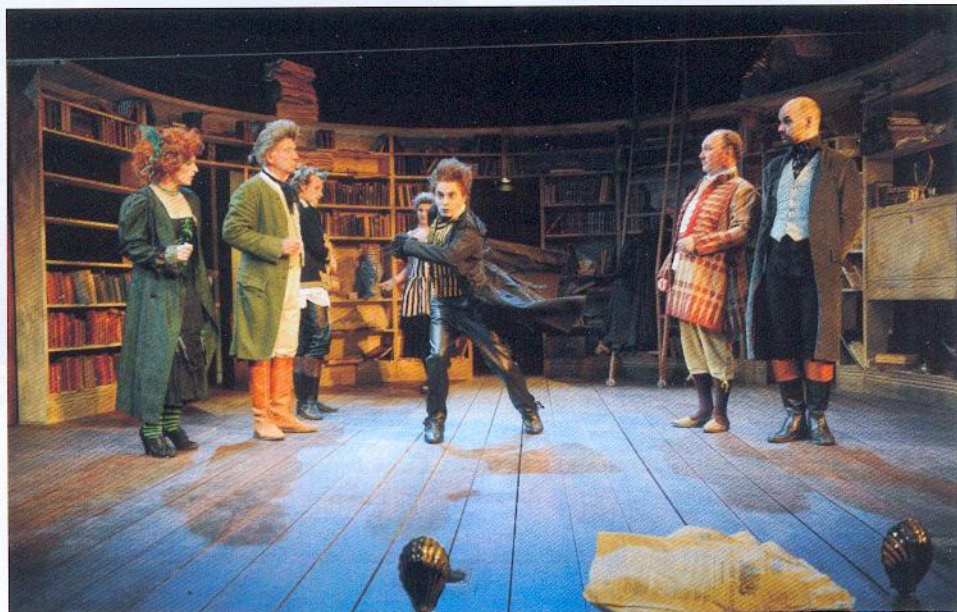
THE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH UNIVERSITIES FILM & VIDEO COUNCIL



Stage on Screen

For decades classic stage dramas like *The Duchess of Malfi*, despite being a staple for UK exam boards, have been unavailable to view on home video. *Stage on Screen* is a new company dedicated to changing that.

Phil Reese presents their work so far and **Dr Pascale Aebischer** reviews one of the company's latest DVD releases.



SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL.

Stage on Screen was formed in 2009 by Richard Adams, Phil Rees and Peter Eyles to produce classic stage drama and record live performances for students, teachers, lecturers and theatre lovers in general who otherwise would not get to see these important works, or would like to own a recording of the performance for future reference. All three are keen theatregoers with backgrounds in film and television, education and publishing and they realised that in a world of new media there was no access to these great plays apart from the occasional live performance. Stage on Screen (SoS) is providing that access.

The Plays

The plays are directed, designed and performed by highly talented, experienced theatre professionals with lists of credits from major companies including The National Theatre, The Globe and the Royal Shakespeare Company and of course the worlds of film and television. The plays offered include Renaissance Theatre, which includes Elizabethan (*Dr Faustus*) and Jacobean (*Volpone*) Theatre. In addition 'The School for Scandal' is an excellent example of Georgian Theatre, while 'The Duchess of Malfi' is a particularly bloody example of a revenge tragedy.

... the plays are filmed in front of a live audience to capture the atmosphere and tension of live theatre

SoS professionally stages their chosen plays at London's historic Greenwich Theatre, and then records them with multiple cameras on high definition 16:9 widescreen video and 5.1 surround sound. The plays are filmed in front of a live audience to capture the atmosphere and tension of live theatre. These recordings are then finished, with optional subtitles added, and are made available to purchase on DVD.

The Production Process

As can be imagined, recording these DVDs to the highest broadcast standard is quite a complex operation that requires detailed preparation in both the creative and logistic fields. It is key that the director and actors understand the roles of the SoS producer Richard Adams and the Outside Broadcast director Chris Cowey, and are clear that on filming day the filming will not have an impact on

REVIEW

DUCHESS OF MALFI EDUCATION PACK

2010. GB. DVD. 156 minutes + extras. Stage on Screen. £49.99 + VAT

The Duchess of Malfi is the latest in a series of 'classic' plays produced for stage and DVD by Stage on Screen, a company which ought to have a tangible impact on how early modern drama is taught. All plays in the series, which includes *Dr Faustus* and *Volpone*, follow the same formula: they are commissioned from the Greenwich Theatre, London, where they are directed, with great clarity of narration and diction, by Elizabeth Freestone. At the end of the run, Chris Cowey, an experienced live, multi-camera TV director, and his team of six cameramen record a single performance. The performance is edited live and then polished, with Freestone's input, in post-production, when optional subtitles are added for further clarity. The result is a highly unusual product: a DVD which at no point hides its theatrical origins while using film techniques and the hectic editing familiar from recordings of live music concerts and TV shows. The combination of media can, at times, be jarring, but overall, the project is successful.

Here, at last, is a film of *The Duchess of Malfi* that can be used in the classroom to give students a sense of the power of Webster's most widely read tragedy in performance. The production's avoidance of the controversial directorial choices that have brought recent productions by the National Theatre, Punchdrunk and Cheek by Jowl to the attention of performance critics might disappoint some, but the benefits of the approach for an educational DVD are obvious. It will not provoke animated debates about interpretation, but will be the starting-point for discussions about the play itself, its structure, its verse, characterisation and staging challenges. The warm glow, archness and effortless poise of Aislín McGuckin's Duchess in the opening scenes make the spectacle of her disintegration under torture the more appalling. Even though the production does not quite manage to sustain the level of interest aroused by the fate of the Duchess, the narrative momentum is not lost as Bosola descends into the murky darkness of the play's resolution. Strong performances by Tim Steed's lycanthropic Ferdinand in pyjamas and by Edmund Kingsley, as a belatedly resolute Antonio, sustain the tension and human interest amid the ever-increasing body count in the centre of the stage.

With much of the educational content of the 'Education Pack' and online study area squarely aimed at Key Stages 3 and 4, one of the pleasant surprises of the DVD is the way the production's resolutely twenty-first century stage and lighting design (by Neil Irish and Wayne Dowdeswell) will facilitate classroom discussion of Jacobean indoor theatres for undergraduates. The play's more gothic moments – the macabre waxworks and severed hand, the echo scene in the graveyard and the carnage of the final scene – are staged and lit in ways that correspond closely to the lighting designs possible in an early modern indoor playhouse. This is the more remarkable since, judging from the interviews with most members of the artistic and technical team that are provided on a separate disc, Dowdeswell and Irish seem to have been unaware of the ways in which they were replicating early modern staging conditions.

Freestone, in the longest interview, emerges as a shrewd, articulate and passionate critic of the play. In her description, the play ends on 'a load of men saying: 'what on earth have we done in these tragic events that have led to this appalling death of this remarkable, forward-thinking, brilliant young woman?'. We can be glad that, thanks to Stage on Screen's DVD, Webster's remarkable, forward-thinking, brilliant Duchess can be brought to life once more.

Dr Pascale Aebischer

Senior Lecturer in Renaissance Studies, University of Exeter and author of *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance* (Cambridge University Press) and editor, with Kathryn Prince, of *Performing Early Modern Drama Today* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

the performance of the play at all. SoS aims to faithfully record the live performance and not to change or corrupt it for the cameras and this is the overriding concept that drives the company.

A few weeks into rehearsal, Chris and Richard go and look at a scale model of the set, and from this and a detailed recce of the theatre, they are able to plot the number of cameras and their positions in the auditorium to give them the cover they need to shoot the performance. They of course have to bear in mind that when they record the shows there will be a full house, and of course they don't want any audience member to have their sight lines impeded, so a certain amount of seats have to be lost in order to make way for some of the cameras.

Once the play has started its run in the theatre, the sound supervisor is brought in to plan the positioning of the microphones. This is quite a complex operation requiring a mixture of hidden radio mics on actors where costume and action allow it, and a large number of float mics in and around the set and stage. These give the multiple audio tracks needed to create the 5.1 surround sound on the finished DVD. During the play's run Chris Cowey and the script supervisor will sit through a number of performances noting and logging the action so that they are thoroughly familiar with it and ready for the filming day.

On filming day itself, a state of the art Outside Broadcast (OB) Unit is brought to the theatre, the centre of which is the big OB truck containing all the routers, monitors and mixers, both vision and sound, and all the recording decks. This requires tender and support vehicles including an extremely powerful but totally silent generator, all



Chris Cowey in the Outside Broadcast Truck.



Guy Burgess as the knight in DR FAUSTUS.

of which requires some twenty-five crew, comprising floor manager, cameramen, vision engineers, sound engineers, electricians and riggers to make it all work. The High Definition cameras used, seven used in all of the productions so far, are able to capture images of broadcast quality using just the theatrical lighting design, so there is no compromise with the presentation of the show for the filming.

From 8 o'clock the crew begins rigging in all the cables, cameras, microphones and talkback systems to the theatre and by midday everything is

Chris Cowey in the OB truck so that he can direct them to frame the shots he needs. This way, by the time the show is over, Chris has created a live mix of the play sitting at the OB mixing desk in the outside the theatre.

After the recording is over all the master HD tapes, some 24 hours worth, are taken to a post-production facility in Soho to polish and tweak until they are totally happy with the picture. Then it's off to an audio suite to mix the 5.1 surround sound track from the forty-eight separate audio tracks they have captured at the theatre. Finally, when

the problem by approaching Chris Cowey whose background is in live music, but who has his roots in theatre. Chris is a virtuoso of live multi-camera shooting, and has a CV that includes filming most of the major rock bands and a long stint as Exec Producer/Director of Top of the Pops. He has risen to this challenge magnificently as you will see from these productions, and as a result SoS is now regularly consulted by leading theatre companies keen to benefit from it's expertise in bringing live theatre to the screen.

... all the plays chosen by Stage on Screen appear as set texts on many UK and international curricula

checked and ready to record. The matinee is shot as a camera rehearsal and to iron out any technical or other glitches which may occur, but it's the evening performance that is the main event. All seven of the camera operators are in communication via headsets with

everything is exactly as we wish it to be, the DVD replication process is started. One of the difficulties facing any television production company wishing to shoot live drama is finding an experienced OB Director, because it is an art that is no longer practised. SoS solved

Education

Importantly, all the plays chosen by SoS appear as set texts on many UK and international curricula: so will appeal especially to lecturers and students of English, Drama or Theatre Studies. They really are an innovative, entertaining and enjoyable way to motivate learning and help maximise grades.

In addition, as well as creating the single DVD of the disc, a special

INTERVIEW

Education Pack has also been made available for educational establishments, with a wealth of extra resources specially designed for lecturers and teachers. The Education Pack comprises three separate elements:

- The main DVD of the play – with optional subtitles, plus scene selection, so you can play and replay key scenes as you wish.
- An extras DVD – including interviews with the director, production designer, costume designer and key actors. This helps the teacher and their students really get a feel for the play and the production.
- Mastershot DVD – this is the complete play filmed from the point of view of a single camera mastershot. It allows the viewer to see all the lighting and scene changes, as well as all entrances and exits of the actors.

And there's even more material available on the company website, www.stageonscreen.com. Further support for lecturers and students is to be found in the free members' area 'The Green Room', extras that will help bring the texts and productions to life. There are galleries of production photos, design drawings and further video clips. There's also the opportunity to download free study aids on each play – a must for students, teachers and lecturers alike.

The study aids have been devised by Tom Barnes, Head of English Faculty at Portland Place School in London, and the intention is that they are thought-provoking rather than heavily academic, putting the plays in a social and cultural context, and guiding those interested towards some sources, inspirations and common themes in the play that students may or may not have discovered for themselves.

SoS is also very keen to receive essays or short pieces from lecturers, academics or indeed students, to add to this study area. They can agree or disagree with, complement, enhance or offer alternative views – all they ask is that they're relevant and interesting and they'll add any which they feel are particularly useful to the site.

Phil Reese

Stage on Screen

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In October 2010 we spoke with Richard Adams (RA) and Phil Reese (PR) of Stage on Screen at their London offices.

How did 'Stage on Screen' come about?

RA: It's an idea that had been lurking around for some years. We've all got a great love of theatre and there's a great shortage of recorded classic plays – television doesn't do it anymore and when they do it's more of an adaptation rather than the real text. We wanted to produce top quality drama and record it at least to BBC production values.

PR: We came together in late 2007 – the idea initially was to film live plays from the West End but that proved too difficult so we decided to set our own company with actors and creative team signing dual contracts for the performance and recording rights. We then spent the best part of a year to get the investment to put on the first four productions.

How are the plays selected?

PR: We start with AQA, OCR, Edexcel and increasingly the Cambridge International GCSE as well as looking at the International Baccalaureates that are going out as well as canvassing teachers. There are twenty to thirty titles that keep turning up on the syllabus ... and of course whether it has been recorded before. Also, because we stage the plays in pairs we have to make sure that we can cross-cast and rehearse the pair together. We had originally planned to do *Lady Windemere's Fan* with *Volpone* but there was too great a casting mismatch so we did *Duchess of Malfi* instead. But we don't just follow the set texts – we are planning *The Spanish Tragedy* and that will feed directly in for those studying *Hamlet* as well.

Are you planning to release Blu-ray versions?

RA: We have not gone to Blu-ray as yet but all the materials are on High Definition, so when it becomes more generally used, especially in academic institutions, we will then conform a high definition master.

Your productions are all filmed and presented as live?

RA: Live TV drama is starting to come back funnily enough. *Sky Arts* recently screened a season of thirty-minute live shows which I think is great because 'live' is always more interesting than recorded because you're seeing actors putting their neck on the block every time they do it (to put it politely), which is one of the joys of going to the theatre. What we are producing is the nearest thing you can get to the live experience of going to the theatre. The tapes in the cameras last long enough to get to the interval and at half time you change tapes. Our whole purpose is to take the stage production as it is and we will adjust to it ... with the new generation of HD cameras we are able to use the original stage lighting.

PR: The actors disregard the cameras but bounce off the audience, especially when it is a comedy – recent BBC productions filmed without an audience are a bit flat and cold.

How important is the feedback you receive from teachers?

PR: The method and style have been wholeheartedly endorsed on the whole. The choice of play is affected by the feedback ... in terms of the background materials, teachers always want more interviews and the Stage Management Association got in touch as their members never get enough recognition so we have interviewed the team and we may film university lecturers for the next one ... As part of the extras they all have optional subtitles which follow the text exactly which I think is very helpful.

What is coming next?

PR: Hopefully the next season will include *The Recruiting Officer*, *The Rover* by Aphra Behn, *The Spanish Tragedy* and probably *The White Devil* though it could change ... *The Changeling* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* are also very popular. They will be available in time for the autumn 2011 term.