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Duchess of Malfi Production Aims to Promote Awareness of Domestic Violence

Nov. 16, 2023

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — The Illinois Wesleyan School of Theatre Arts is presenting *The Duchess of Malfi*, a performance about domestic violence that encourages societal change and reflection.

[The production runs through Nov. 19](#) at IWU's Jerome Mirza Theatre, with 7:30 p.m. showings through Saturday and at 2 p.m. on Sunday.

Directed by Assistant Professor of Theatre Arts Michelle Cowin Gibbs, *The Duchess of Malfi* is a Jacobean revenge tragedy. The Duchess is a young widow who is forced by her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, to refuse marriage. When the

Duchess asserts her power as head of her household and marries and has children with her steward, the two brothers undertake revenge against her and her young family.

"We took great pains to produce a production that is thoughtful and relevant to the concerns of a complicated world," said Gibbs. "This play is a sociopolitical commentary about the dangers and violence that can occur when absolute power is left unchecked."

Written and produced by English dramatist John Webster in 1623, around the same time as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), Gibbs said the genre of revenge plays "reflect a growing discontent with the world as Shakespeare and Webster knew it."

"In their time, the theatre served as a vibrant outlet for the challenging expression of dissenting ideologies and disagreeable world views. Our production does not shy away from Webster's worldview. Instead, our production explores just how similar Webster's world is to our current moment with some augmentation," she said.

Reset into the near dystopian future in Italy, the production highlights the fallout of a global climate crisis worsened by a lack of societal compassion. Gibbs said the costumes and lighting design reflect the opulence of unbridled wealth and privilege.

"With one foot in the past (sword fighting) and one foot in the present (technology), the creative team and I worked to visually and viscerally imagine elements of the past and present fusing to create a dark and gritty future world," said Gibbs.

One of the most dynamic changes made to the production style, according to Gibbs, was how women are represented. In Webster's original screenplay, women were portrayed as being powerless. The IWU production instead highlights women's efforts to face sexism and misogyny head on.



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To account for the difficult theme of domestic violence exhibited in the play, Gibbs said the production crew worked closely with other campus departments and individuals to ensure the play is presented mindfully. Staff and faculty from the Dean of Students Office, School of Theatre Arts and Counseling & Consultation Services provided guidance and education regarding awareness of domestic violence, the history of revenge tragedies and how to ensure student wellness throughout production. An open rehearsal was also held for audiences to preview the intentions and tone of the play. Gibbs added that the cast and crew of the show invested in each other's mental health during rehearsals.

"With this information, I was able to craft a very informed and educational rehearsal process that gave students a solid understanding of what we were doing in the production and what was the effect of our work," said Gibbs.

In the director's notes listed in the program, Gibbs concludes, "Theatre serves as a catalyst for dialogue and introspection, ultimately pushing society to evolve and progress. Its ability to illuminate the human condition and provoke critical thinking makes it an essential art form that continually contributes to our collective understanding of society. Producing theatre in an unjust world is a gift for everyone."

The registered student organization Masquers is partnering with the production crew to fundraise in support of the local non-profit Mid Central Community Action, which counters domestic violence, combats homelessness and offers financial stability. During each show, students will collect donations from audience members. All proceeds will be donated to MCCA's goal of building a new shelter. Audience members are also encouraged to wear purple to bring awareness and recognition to people affected by domestic violence.

By Julia Perez