

Dissecting Faustus: A Radical Approach to Marlowe's Mighty Line

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Abstract: This paper explores the techniques and devices implemented in restaging and re-imagining *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe. At the American University of Sharjah in spring of 2024, a production was mounted that sought to re-explore the classic tragedy in a new and significant manner. Utilizing radical avant-garde movement techniques, dance, and colloquial speech, the play was brought to life for an audience previously unaware of the tragedy's existence, or if aware, never having viewed it on stage. In some cases, a balance, or dynamic play between iambic pentameter and colloquial language was utilized. The goal of the production was to reinvent the piece for the modern audience, while remaining faithful to the playwright's thematic intentions. By selectively examining pieces of key adapted text used in this radical approach to the staging of the four-hundred-year-old masterpiece, now simply entitled *Faustus*, it will be determined whether or not the director's conceptualization adhered to the original thematic intent of the playwright.

Keywords: Devising, Drama, Elizabethan, Theatre, Tragedy

Introduction

When the Performing Arts Program at the American University of Sharjah decided to stage *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe for our 2023-2024 theatre season, I was tasked with conceptualizing the piece in a manner that would befit a modern audience on the Arabian Peninsula. As creating a concept is the first order of business for any theatre director, it began with a full exploration of themes and ideas contained within the original text. The ultimate goal of Doctor Faustus is supreme knowledge of all things within the universe, great and small. A boundless goal to say the least, but that is what he desires. He is a man possessed with an overwhelming egoism that leads him to sell his soul to attain this knowledge.

The primary theme is an exploration of the eventual downfall of the tragic hero due to his own hubris and overwhelming ambition. Another major theme is the role of sin and redemption in damnation. "...Doctor Faustus could be teaching a lesson to human beings, not to go against God or nature (Dewan, 2023, p. 4)." Whatever the case, a director should always be faithful to a playwright's themes, even when reinventing the words of a dramatic work more than four hundred years old.

Body

In pursuing this goal, my immediate task was to adapt a text which is exciting and profound in the majority of Acts I and V, but nothing more than nonsensical sketch comedy in between; the majority of the actions performed in Acts II, III, and IV, do not lead Faustus towards his primary objective. They are nothing more than sophomoric escapades that detract from the primary line of action. Lily B. Campbell (1952, p. 219) states that they are, "undergraduate pranks on his fellowmen until it is time to pay his horrible debt."

In order to consolidate the dramatic action of the play, I decided to compact the drama into Faustus' final speech alone. It begins with:

Ah, Faustus,
Now you have only one hour to live,
And then you will be damned perpetually!

His speech ends with:

My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!
Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while!

Ugly Hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer!
I promise I'll burn my books!
Ah, Mephistophilis!

It is commonly accepted that Marlowe “reformed and we may say reshaped the blank verse to be a mighty vehicle of passion and vigorous romanticism of ambitions, of soaring ideas: he made poetry the hand maiden of dramatic expression” (Raj, 2021, p. 937). For this reason, keeping the essence of “Marlowe’s mighty line” intact was essential, yet I divided this speech up into five sections. Each section was utilized to begin a new act. This allowed the production to take place solely on Faustus’ final night on earth, and be conveyed through flashbacks and memories, each of which were employed to highlight his choices to “abjure” the black arts and find his way back towards redemption, or succumb to the dangers within his own primary objective. This choice altered the structure of the play, but did not diverge from its thematic core.

I also determined that the Choral sections could be utilized to serve as the voice of a panel of twelve black-robed judges who would oversee his case on that fateful final night. Each of the actors playing these roles would serve as a member of the chorus and a character from his past. These robed figures began the performance by entering from the rear of the house carrying candles, then were seated at both right and left on benches in front of Escher-inspired bookshelves. The judges served as eye-witnesses to his actions and deeds, told in memory. Again, not diverging from the author’s original intent in terms of theme or messaging.



Source: Photo by Tony Sam Noel

The newfound structure gave the production the ability to bounce back and forth in time, made it more exciting and accessible for a modern audience, and made the essence of his struggle the primary factor. This in no way damaged the overriding themes of the Marlowe text.

Another directorial decision I made was to modernize the production. Faustus became a modern professor on his final night, while the judges and other supernatural characters maintained a timelessness throughout. The words of Faustus himself were adapted into a modern colloquial form. Many scholars will deride this decision, but, again, my primary function as a conceptualizing director of this classic work, is to help it find its way to a modern audience. Although this sacrificed some elements of Marlowe’s blank verse, the thematic elements and strength of the lines themselves were kept intact whenever possible.

One can also argue in favor of Artaud’s belief that there should be No more masterpieces. He argues against “...the idolatry of fixed masterpieces which is one of the aspects of bourgeois conformism” (Artaud, 1958, p. 76). A classic text is merely a vehicle whereby an artist can extract traditional themes in a new, exciting manner. For this reason, I have always believed that reinventing classic texts is the best way of bringing them into the modern world. Mephistopheles, on the other hand, being a creature as old as time itself, seemed perfectly fit to maintain every ounce of the original blank verse, so his text was kept un-butchered. The

contradiction between the classic iambic pentameter and the colloquial nature of the modern dialogue created a curious contradiction between the fated professor and his foe.

When dealing with the staging of the piece itself, because it was now being told through memory and Faustus' own perception of the last twenty-four years, the production employed the works of M.C. Escher as inspiration for its scenic elements. Two bookshelves aligning stage right and left were misshapen and distorted, filled with books that were hanging from all directions, sometimes suspended upside-down. At the center was Faustus' own office, a floating desk made of clear plexiglass, on a platform raked to one side towards a descending staircase. Behind all of this was a massive rear wall with diagonal and distorted brickwork. Each of the scenic pieces was easily rolled and spun about in order to transform into Hell for the descent scene, as well as the final Hell-Mouthed spiral into Hell. The overall feel was intended to be a claustrophobic collage of memories and dreams that could transform at will.

Effects such as magic tricks for burning books, or bursts of burning flash paper exploding from Mephistopheles' hands, were implemented. Items from the supernatural world, such books ordered by Mephistopheles and Lucifer, were suspended from an overstage truss via pulleys; paper "made from the grinded bones of new-born babes" fell in pieces from overhead upon Mephistopheles command and were reconstituted in Faustus' hand for writing paper. Themes intact: If nothing else, only heightened by the magnification of his struggle on his final night on earth.



Source: Photo by Tony Sam Noel

Extreme movement, physical gesture, and dance were also utilized in the production. The good and evil angels were played by one actor behind a clear hand-held and stretchable scrim. She was able to transform instantly from one spirit to another. Her body contorted from one form to another behind the device to explore each respective voice. This allowed the audience to imagine these were either voices in Faustus' head or possibly messengers from God. That was left to the audience to decide. The Chorus, which became dancing demons at a moment's notice, also employed bizarre, often grotesque, Grotowski-inspired movement to deliver their choral passages. "The essential concern is finding the specific spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the decision in physical arrangements" (Grotowski, 2022, p. 20). For this reason, the audience became a living spectator and magistrate; Faustus and Mephistopheles were both able to speak and interact directly with them, sit with them, and share with them. This guiding principle served as a hallmark for the production.

The most exciting development was the exploration of Faustus' descent into Hell, in which he is hosted by Lucifer and allowed to see the seven deadly sins in all their glory. The

scene began with Mephistopheles suffering a seizure and transforming into Lucifer himself. It was then followed by the appearance of Beelzebub in a burst of smoke, and his descent from atop Faustus' very own office. Lucifer was given a chain that was bound to Beelzebub's neck to demonstrate his authority over all creatures within his realm. Beelzebub became a silent and zombie-like figure, suffering all the imaginable ills of eternal damnation. He thereby served as a mirror into Faustus' own future. The grandeur of the scene-shift and subsequent dances only served to affirm themes, as well as Faustus' primary goal, the pursuit of all knowledge.



Source: Photo by Tony Sam Noel

The sins themselves were silent, modern-dancing creatures. Each one was inspired by an animal to reinforce its visceral appeal; each had its own specific choreography to explore individual pleasures, as well as current suffering. Behind the dancers was an Escher-inspired wall painting of the gateway into hell with limbs of damned souls protruding three-dimensionally from the façade. This wall was constructed on the back of the bookshelves which were smoothly spun around and brought together to form the entrance to Hell.



Source: Photo by Tony Sam Noel

Finally, for Faustus' ultimate descent into Hell, the Medieval effect of the Hell-Mouth was utilized in all its harrowing glory. Historically, the “(Hell-Mouth) ...seemed to swallow those who entered there. Fire, smoke, noise, and the cries of the damned issued from Hell, and devils sallied forth from it to seize sinners and thrust them into eternal damnation” (Brockett, 1991, p. 106). This Hell-Mouth was no-less disturbing. The center-stage office, skewed and misshapen, in accordance with the

design concept, easily rolled offstage, while up-center the back wall opened in the middle, revealing a spiraling portal into Hell. Fog and burning lights emitted from the portal, while the bands of enrobed judges transformed into demons who dragged a kicking and screaming Faustus through the portal. The scene ended with Mephistopheles strolling casually through the closing rear wall, turning towards the audience, and flashing a little smile before disappearing into the abyss.

The play then closed with the final choral speech delivered by the robed chorus members, now fully transformed back into judges, and they exited carrying their candles through the rear of the house. This final choral speech, re-emphasized the primary themes of the original text and guided the production towards its conclusion.

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,
And burned is Apollo's laurel-bough,
That sometime grew within this learned man.
Faustus is gone. Regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise.
Only to wonder at unlawful things.
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits
To practice more than Heavenly power permits.

The music of the piece was an original classical style score with a dissonant and percussive feel to it. There were repetitious melodies and refrains that assisted in heightening Faustus' augmented and distorted vision of the past. Thundering drums and heavy contemporary rhythms were utilized in delivering the movement of the demons and the appearances of supernatural figures. "These supernatural elements served to create a sense of mystery and wonder, and to explore the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural" (Sheikh, 2023, a363). The music was utilized to highlight this reality.

As Artaud states in *The Theatre and the Plague*, "...the theatre is a formidable call to the forces that impel the mind by example to the source of its conflicts (Artaud 30)." Ultimately, audience members seemed called upon to have a shared experience of horror and dread. "Through empathy, the same hamartia that the spectator may possess is stimulated, developed, activated" (Boal, 1993, p. 36). In the end, as a director, my hope is that they experienced true cathartic pity and fear in the moment of Faustus' final unwilling descent, and learned the moral lesson housed within the original text from his failed attempt to sell his soul for all knowledge contained within the universe.

Conclusions

In conclusion, a director's job is to conceptualize. Regarding classical texts, that often requires reinventing and reimagining, so as to make the work accessible for today's audiences. It often requires more visual elements, more direct and precise dialogue, as well as dance and movement pieces to replace archaic chunks of dialogue. This should, however, not replace the original intended themes, and should instead adhere faithfully to the moral lessons upon which the playwright is expounding.

Acknowledgments

Production photographs by Tony Sam Noel.

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