

THE WHIP. By Juliet Gilkes Romero. Directed by Kimberley Sykes. Royal Shakespeare Company YouTube Channel. 17 December 2020.

Kimberley Sykes's production of Juliet Gilkes Romero's *The Whip* was forced by COVID to close before the end of its run at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. At the time, no one knew just how topical the questions of the play would become over the following months. But during the summer of 2020, as statues of slave owners toppled and mobs fiercely protected a government-approved, selective version of British history, the early-nineteenth-century events of Romero's play became increasingly relevant.

Accordingly, the cast and creative team quickly reassembled virtually from their respective places of isolation to record an audio version of the piece. This recording was then made available on the RSC's YouTube channel as a video augmented by production photographs of the same cast taken during the shortened Stratford run of the play. The immersive nature of the audio-drama format, necessarily paired with audience members' physical circumstances while listening, created an imagined space that drew attention to the continuation of nineteenth-century racialized violence, gender inequality, and police brutality in the contemporary world.

The Whip examines intersecting marginalizations in 1830s England and its empire, focalized through a series of parliamentary bills supported by Whig Party Chief Whip Alexander Boyd. In the opening scenes, Boyd fights for the rights of English workers, campaigning to limit the hours children are allowed to work in factories--a campaign which led to the passage of the 1833 Factory Act. Attention to this bill is quickly superseded by the introduction of the Slavery Abolition Bill, which slave-owning parliamentarians composed to support their own interests while avoiding further unrest in England's colonies (the bill's proposal followed the 1831

uprising of enslaved people in British-held Jamaica). Connecting these campaigns at the heart of the play are Mercy Pryce, a runaway enslaved person and popular public speaker, and Horatia Poskitt, a Lancashire millworker whose daughter was a victim of unregulated child labor. In Romero's presentation, these two highlight the intertwined positions of marginalized individuals in the nineteenth century. Focusing on Mercy and Horatia, the play looks ahead to the campaign for women's suffrage at the other end of the century, and implicitly notes the roots of that pursuit in these earlier moments of advocacy. The play ends looking to a future of non-violent and necessary protest under the leadership of Black women, supported by white women.

Introducing the play at the beginning of the YouTube production, Romero argued that the events of 2020 are intimately tied to the debate at the centre of the play over the monetary value of an enslaved person's life. *The Whip* exposed this little-known history to a wider public, many of whom were likely unaware of the compensation scheme to benefit slave-holders deprived of their "property" by emancipation (a bailout which Romero notes, in the introductory text and the play's penultimate scene, was only paid off by British taxpayers in 2015), and the audio drama highlighted parallels between historical and modern treatments of marginalized groups. In choosing an audio format for the production, the creative team exploited both the affordances and the pitfalls of the medium to emphasize this topicality more completely than had the original. For audience members of the audio drama, the production was necessarily augmented by the ambient noises of the listening environment and its potential distractions, locating the historical events of the piece firmly amongst modern-day realities.

Some of the most affective (and effective) moments of the play in its in-person format came in quiet scenes where enslaved persons, Mercy and Edmund, shared their stories. These scenes relied on narrated horrors which compelled the in-person audience to a moment of

collective breath-holding. The audio drama format limited the pathos of these scenes, though none of their horror. In Mercy's act-one description of her sister's death, for example, the scene lost the visceral impact of seeing her relive the memory even while Debbie Korley's voice retained the affective power it had in person.

In contrast, the scenes of physical violence depicted on stage gained in horror in the audio version by relying on the imagination of audience members to fill visual gaps. At the end of act two, a policeman beats Horatia for speaking in public; as in person, the insistent drumbeat and thunder soundscape heightened the tension. But with the only visual a still of Horatia's bloody face, the audio drama encouraged audience members to picture the worst possible violence: informed by the soundscape, Horatia's anguished cries for help, and the policeman's violent grunts. What on stage was a horrifying but fairly conventional scene of violence became, in the audio drama, a nightmarish moment.

Throughout, the production relied heavily on soundscape elements, adapted from those composed by Akintayo Akinbode for the in-person production. Rapid drumbeats underscoring the violence of this act-two moment grew out of the steadier beats which drove Mercy and Horatia's respective soapbox speeches. Soundscape merged with interjections from the heckling crowd to create an atmosphere of tension and suspended violence, anticipating the actual violence to come and recalling the violence against enslaved persons and factory workers that Mercy and Horatia speak against. Musical cues which marked scene changes served in turn to add an element of Georgian stateliness to transitions, while also serving to create the atmosphere audience members might otherwise lack while physically separated from the performance. In that sense, the musical transitions and underscoring, while adapted from those composed for the

in-person production, formed a more intrinsic element of the audio drama, creating a sense of a physical environment to frame the characters' words.

This imagined physical space was key to the effectiveness of the audio production. Rather than removing the audience from the real world by placing them in a theatre space and asking them to suspend disbelief, the audio drama positioned characters' voices amidst the soundscape and circumstances of audience members' everyday lives. The sounds of Horatia's cries for help merged, in my listening experience, with the sound of twenty-first century sirens, creating a stark reminder of the continued violence of police during peaceful protests. The individual immersion provided by the audio drama format emphasized the continued relevance of the campaigns being fought by each character. Romero's centering of Mercy and Horatia in what might otherwise be a prosaic political drama looked ahead to the leading voices of modern campaigns: as Mercy warns Edmund in act three: "You underestimate womenkind at your own considerable peril."

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