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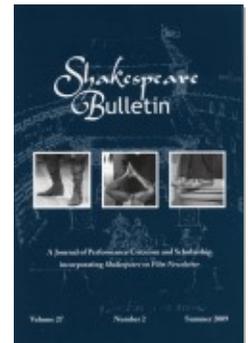
Measure for Measure (review)

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Film Review

Measure for Measure. Dir. Bob Komar. Lucky Strike Productions. Color. 2006 (DVD 2007). 72 minutes. Produced by Simon Phillips. Directed by Bob Komar. Cinematography by Bob Komar, Richard Muhammad, and Alan Ronald. Edited by Paula Baker and Trevor Hughes. Adapted by Wendy Atwell, Lucy Richardson, and Gian Carlo Rossi. Music by Lindsay Bridgwater. With Daniel Roberts (Angelo), Josephine Rogers (Isabelle), Simon Phillips (Duke), Emma Ager (Marianna), Leah Grayson (Pompey), Hanne Steen (Overdone), Robert Anderson (Froth), Kristopher Milnes (Provost), Simon Nuckley (Claudio), Kate Sullington (Juliet), Dawn Murphy (Escalus), Luke Leeves (Lucio), Piers Pereira (Elbow), and Roberto Argenti (Priest)

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Set within the contemporary British army, this is a provocative version of a Shakespeare play that has rarely been filmed; the only other version of which I'm aware is the 1979 Desmond Davis production for the BBC. The film's press materials indicate that it was designed for a student audience and heavily cut to keep the narrative pace "punchy." The majority of these cuts were to the comic scenes, with the character of Lucio nearly eliminated altogether. In keeping with this emphasis on the play's darkness, Komar cultivates a grainy, verite-style aesthetic—nothing here of the cinematic sweep and color of, say, a Branagh *As You Like It* or *Love's Labour*. I thought Komar made creative use of diegetic sound: all scenes that took place out of doors featured the whirr of a helicopter heard but not seen, whereas interior shots within the army buildings contained the repetitive (and strangely anachronistic) clack of typewriters.

The play's concern with the lawful regulation of appetite translates beautifully to this army setting. The opening montage shows a barracks club in which uniformed soldiers—men and women—gamble, snort coke, drink heavily, and grope one another. One of these men leaves to engage in a sordid tryst in a bathroom; perhaps surprisingly, this turns out to be the Duke Vincentio (Simon Philips), whose growing self-disgust and obvious inability to control his regiment at least partially explains his transfer of power to the more continent Angelo (Daniel Roberts; see Figure 1). It is impossible not to see the film as commenting on Britain's involvement in the Iraq war. Like their American counterparts, in the early 2000s the British army faced a series of scandals when evidence of soldiers'



Figure 1. “Lord Angelo is precise” (Daniel Roberts as Angelo). Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Sheldon. alivemindededucation.com

gross misconduct—in particular, the alleged sexual and physical abuse of prisoners—began to circulate in the media. The film initially invites us to see rampant sex and drunkenness as inimical to good order and discipline within the military: fraternization leads to poor morale, poor morale leads to corruption.

Claudio may have impregnated his girlfriend, but what happens to him cannot be seen to restore proper discipline—quite the opposite. Upon his arrest he is stripped of his shirt and forced to do push-ups as different soldiers throw buckets of water on him (see Figure 2) . This public humiliation explains his complaint “fellow, why do you thus show me to the world.” Once in jail, Claudio takes a more serious beating from a female prison guard. In this scene Claudio’s facial bruises were represented with oddly lurid pinks and reds. These streaks of makeup are more noticeable given the film’s generally dark and grainy tones and given the absence elsewhere of similarly stylized effects. Claudio’s runny makeup,



Figure 2. “Thus can the demigod Authority” (Simon Nuckley as Claudio). Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Sheldon.

snot, tears, and blood therefore provide one of the film’s few flashes of color. The makeup feminizes him, making his face appear vulnerable and injured and also evoking some sort of emasculating hazing ritual. Although all the transgressive sex in the film is heterosexual (and granting the absence of an equivalent policy in the UK) the film also suggested to me the consequences of “don’t ask, don’t tell” and the harassment of soldiers suspected for being gay.

Given her brother’s battered condition, Isabelle’s rejection of Claudio’s plea to let him live is particularly hard to watch. One of the film’s strongest moments, the scene begins with Isabelle comforting Claudio in a dark, shadowed prison cell. Once she comes to understand that he does indeed want her to sleep with Angelo, she strikes him, stridently denounces him, and then leaves. That she has just been assaulted by Angelo partially mitigates the coldness of her response. Angelo and Isabelle’s encounter in 2.4 is depicted as a meeting in an antiseptic



Figure 3. “He shall not, Isabel, if you give me love” (Roberts and Josephine Rogers). Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Sheldon.

board room, where Angelo’s rather pathetic plea for Isabelle’s “love” quickly turns into a graphic attempted rape (see Figure 3). Two soldiers stand guard outside the entire time, overhearing what’s going on but choosing not to intervene (“to whom should I complain?”). Despite this violence I did not get the sense that we were meant to dismiss Angelo as a one-dimensional villain. A series of close-up shots on his troubled face clearly establish his sense of surprise and horror at what he’s doing (most notably we see him in a post-assault shower scene, usually the province of victims and not perpetrators). I thought Komar’s choice to represent the bed-trick also worked very well. In a fleeting but surprisingly erotically charged flashback we see a blindfolded (and reluctant?) Angelo seated on bed, Mariana behind him.

Critics of the play have long debated how to view the character of the Duke. The film takes a clear stance on this issue, totally disallowing any possibility to read the Duke as a force for “providential mercy” or, worse yet, as a surrogate for Shakespeare’s own dramatic authority. This Duke has no authority; at every turn he is shown improvising or scrambling to keep up with events beyond his control but caused by his scheming. To realize his disguise the Duke assumes the habit of a Friar—Komar’s twist is that the Duke also puts on sunglasses and pretends to be blind. This blindness allows him far more intimacy with Isabelle than otherwise would be warranted; when they speak to each other he

touches her face and lips as if to read her expressions. That we know he can indeed actually see her makes their interaction disturbing to watch (especially in conjunction with Angelo's more direct assault), although it paves the way for us to see the Duke's zero-hour proposal of marriage as somewhat credible: we know he's attracted to her.

Brilliantly, I think, the film imposes some coherence on the play's final scene. I've always thought that 5.1 works poorly in performance, requiring as it does the Duke credibly to shift from his own persona (the Duke with a master plan) to the Duke-as-actor (the Duke who has only just returned from abroad), to the Duke-as-Friar. Here, however, we see an increasingly frantic Duke unable to orchestrate people or events as he wishes, including the moment of his own undisguising (the Duke is unmasked when Angelo recognizes the ring he's wearing). Everyone in the scene reacts to the revelation that Claudio is alive as indeed they should: with shock, disgust, and embarrassment at the Duke's pointlessly cruel deception. Isabella decisively rejects the Duke's proposal of marriage, walking away from the assembled group presumably in the direction of her convent. The last shot of the film is of her back. I found this very satisfying.