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Star-crossed lovers in stylish 'The Broken Heart'

By JENNIFER FARRAR, Associated Press

NEW YORK, (AP) --

If the idea of a posthumous wedding onstage is intriguing, then John Ford's 17th century, darkly-humored drama "The Broken Heart" will have immense appeal.

The classy production presented by Theatre for a New Audience, currently performing at The Duke on 42nd Street, has an expressive, talented cast, and a rather high body count, though only one of them gets (tastefully) married as a corpse.

Before everything turns Gothically gory and "revenge proves its own executioner," there are a couple of engrossing hours of human tragedy, tinged with comic moments that are energetic and smoothly paced.

Ford, whose best-known play is "'Tis Pity She's A Whore," is considered to be the last great dramatist of the English Renaissance. The timelessness of his characters' emotions enables director Selina Cartmell, in her American debut, to make the work completely accessible to a modern audience.

The play is set in ancient Sparta, where most of the characters remain stoic when bad things happen, befitting the legendary toughness of that society. The plot threads are somewhat complicated, but there's a nice synopsis in the Playbill, plus a helpful family tree. Briefly, there are several tragically star-crossed lovers, plus wise elders who attempt to set things straight, though a couple of the lovers go mad anyhow, and things don't end well for most of them.

Cartmell, making her American debut, stylishly stages the proceedings amid a brooding atmosphere enhanced by haunting music and shadowy, hazy lighting. Ominous, hooded figures in black robes prowl silently about, and as five of the major characters either wish for death or embrace it when it comes, these specters seem well-advised to stick around.

The story centers on beautiful, unhappy Penthea, who loves Orgilus and was engaged to him, but instead was married off by her ambitious twin brother Ithocles to Bassanes, a rich but delusionally jealous old fool. Annika Boras, outstanding as Lady Macbeth in TFANA's

production of "Macbeth" last year, again shines in her moving interpretation of the despairing Penthea, whose rigid stoicism eventually breaks down in a dramatic mad scene.

Jacob Fishel is appealing and intense as lovesick Orgilus, driven slowly mad by his thwarted love and Penthea's increasing grief. Saxon Palmer is swashbuckling and conflicted as the heroic warrior, Ithocles, who comes to regret his cruelty to his sister Penthea but can't undo it. Andrew Weems lightens things up with his comically pompous portrayal of the extremely possessive Bassanes.

Meanwhile, King Amyclas, imbued with regal elderly frailty by Philip Goodwin, has a beautiful daughter, Calantha, whom Ithocles secretly loves. She's portrayed with restraint and grace by Bianca Amato, who notably leads a lively wedding dance during which, beset with tragic news, she gives new meaning to the phrase "putting on a brave face."

The darkness of this revenge play is brightened by another pair of hopeful young lovers, charmingly portrayed by Margaret Loesser Robinson as Orgilus' sister, Euphrania, and Ian Holcomb as Ithocles' close friend Prophilus.

Among the older generation is Olwen Fouere as Grausis, a servant who watches over Penthea while sparring with Bassanes, and a resolute Robert Langdon Lloyd as Crotolon, father to Orgilus and Euphrania. John Keating, noted for his comedic skills, plays both a wacky servant and a serious role, as Penthea's uncle Armostes, a court official. Tom Nelis gives gravitas to Tecnicus, the prophet who interprets messages from the Oracle of Delphos, and Justin Blanchard rounds out the cast as hot-headed Nearchus, royal cousin and suitor of Calantha.

Aside from a gruesome excess of black bloodletting near the finale, TFANA's "The Broken Heart" is a sophisticated, insightful presentation.