

# Theater Review: 'The Malcontent' by Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre

**The surprisingly lighthearted tale of political corruption and betrayal showing at the Deaf West Theatre.**

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John Marston's tale about political corruption, adultery, and seething revenge, has received many comparisons to a Shakespearean tragedy. It's easy to see why: before I saw its adaptation by the double-casted Antaeus Company at the Deaf West Theatre, I had to page through the program several times to figure out who was who and make notes in the margins denoting a character as good or bad. It was reminiscent of the marginalia that filled my first copy of Hamlet.

The play opens to Duke Pietro (Mark Doerr) in his court in the 1600s, receiving witty blows and humorous criticisms to his current regime by Malevole (Bo Foxworth), the banished Duke Altofront in disguise. We aren't told why Duke Altofront was banished, only that he has returned with a plot of revenge in mind. Ramon De Ocampo plays the cunning villain Mendoza humorously; he addressed women in the audience during the show I attended to accentuate his philandering persona. Old, young, attached, single: he approached them all, singing accolades in the isles. After, he ran off to write a love poem to Pietro's wife Aurelia (Jules Willcox), sealing himself as an unsavory character.

And so it goes for the other characters of Malcontent. They act in a way that denotes them as good or bad in the first act. Altofront is the idealistic protagonist; he's sharp, clever, and has a loyal, determined wife Maria (Ann Noble, spot on) waiting for him in prison to boot. In a play where everyone is seen as beneath the intellectual level of Altofront, it is engaging to see him

locked in conversation with his ally Celso (Joe Holt), who is strong-willed and wears a composed expression on his face throughout the play, never giving anything away. But Pietro is the unlikely hero of the play; his internal struggle after seeing his wife seduce other men is gripping and honest. His seemingly weak character at the start of the play changes as the story progresses. He is a complicated soul, not simple and unaffected like the men that serve him.

On the outset, *The Malcontent* is a drama: there are knives, adultery, betrayals, and backstabbing politicians. But comparing it to a Shakespearean tragedy would be wrong. There is a light, comical air in the dialogue that makes it easier to digest than the brutal plot lines of *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet*.

Lynn Milgram's *Maquerelle* helps bring lightness to the darker elements of the play. In one scene, she encourages bored wives to digest a concoction that promises to fix all mental and physical flaws. It is this playfulness that breaks up the nuances of the plot. Doerr's Pietro is earnest and naïve, a quality that is usually associated with a secondary character or overshadowed by a bold, fearless hero. Here, he evolves at the end of the play and the characteristics that once halted his success become charming idiosyncrasies. Like Pietro, Altofront is a complex character; he uses his quick wit and critical sarcasm to hide his pain and embarrassment from being unseated and separated from his wife. Foxworth is sharp-tongued and hilarious as Malevole, but the moments when he removes his disguise and becomes the disheartened Altofront are riveting. It is easy to forget that he is acting and not simply portraying a modern man who lost everything to a corrupt government.

In this city, it's believable.