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Book Review

True Crime Voyeurs: *Arden of Faversham* at the RSC

The Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre, Stratford-on-Avon.
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In a [video interview](#) posted on the RSC's website, Director Polly Findlay commented that *Arden of Faversham* "really is about the quality of life on the street in that period, what the texture of their day-to-day life was about." The "texture" of this production, formed by Merle Hensel's design, was striking. However, the meaning behind the design was not fully clear.

Entering the theatre, I found myself looking into the Arden Industries factory. An imposing desk was placed center stage, and behind it sat Arden himself (Ian Redford), poring over ledgers. Arrayed downstage, four actors dressed in green coveralls stood in quadrants marked out by yellow tape on the stage floor, packaging the Arden Industries product: small, gold cat toys. The kitschy toy is a familiar Japanese icon: the *Maneki-neko*, or the beckoning cat, whose left paw waves perpetually, beckoning the viewer in. These small cats were packed into boxes bearing "Arden of Faversham" labels, featuring a color photo of Alice Arden

smiling out at the audience. The boxes were stacked on dollies and raised above the stage into the catwalks, where they were unloaded and the empty dollies were lowered again. The repetitive work, echoing the repetitive motion of the cats' waving paws, continued from the moment the house opened to the moment the show began. It was as mesmerizing as it was disturbing.



As I entered the house early, I spent a good fifteen minutes staring at the repetitive scene in front of me, trying to decide what relation it bore to the play itself. Leafing through the program yielded some clues: Piers Wehner's essay on the commodification of common land suggested a connection between the problem of enclosure, which haunts the play, and our contemporary consumer-driven culture. But, as promising as this may sound, that

connection was not clearly borne out on stage. Doing some post-show research, I learned that the *Maneki-neko* is also called the “money cat” or the “fortune cat” in English, and so, perhaps, their presence as a pre-show prop set the audience expectation for a money-hungry, fortune-chasing show. But again, this connection was not entirely clear. And, in the case of the factory workers, the “texture of their day-to-day life” seemed monotonous and boring, but not particularly relevant to the main action of the play.

That said, the monotony of the preset stage highlighted the intensity of the action once it began: the life of the Ardens (and their affiliates) appeared flashy and loud by contrast. Even the costuming expressed a gaudy *nouveau riche* character, with Arden wearing a bright blue suit and his wife Alice (Sharon Small) in a too-tight pencil skirt and brightly patterned silk blouse. Her excessive jewelry and the high sheen of her clothes were echoed in her lover Mosby’s costume. Mosby (Keir Charles) appeared slick and greasy, dressed in high-gloss tracksuits and sunglasses, smacking gum. Together, the Ardens and Mosby presented a kind of showy suburban wealth that suited the plot and cast their lives as well as their affair in a tawdry light.

One of the most interesting choices Findlay made was to feature Susan, Mosby’s sister and Alice’s maid, onstage throughout most of the play. While in the text she does not enter until the end of Scene 1, hand-in-hand with Clarke, the painter, to whom she’s been promised, in Findlay’s production, Susan (Elsbeth Brodie) was onstage from the moment the house opened, dressed in a faded, dowdy housecoat and apron, carrying a duster, broom, and mop. She cleaned the factory floor during the preset and the Arden household as the show opened. From her position as cleaner, outfitted with knee pads and rubber gloves, she

remained onstage through much of the play, witnessing the liaisons between Mosby and Alice Arden.



She was also privy to their use of her as a bargaining chip with the various male conspirators, and their initial nefarious plotting to eliminate Arden. Her silent reactions provided a great deal of physical comedy: she hid her face when Alice and Mosby were kissing, attempting to sweep around them without either watching or disrupting them; and, cleaning beneath Arden's desk when Mosby cavalierly decided to renege on his promise to Michael and offer Susan to Clark instead, she jerked upright, smacking her head against the underside of the desk.

Brodie played Susan as a bit dense and very timid. Physically, she was hunched, awkward and unsure of herself, but fairly tenacious in her devotion to her duty—cleaning up, whether that be the remaining packing material after the day's work ended, the poisoned

broth rejected by Arden, or Arden's blood. Her singular focus highlighted the careless cruelty of Mosby and Alice's willingness to use her in their pursuit of Arden's death. And in the play's close, she was the most moving innocent victim of Alice's criminal failures.

The production shone in its detailed attention to minor characters like Susan. Shakebag (Tony Jayawardena) and Black Will (Jay Simpson) were critics' favorites (see linked reviews below), and their comically inept violence played like a scene from *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels*. Lord Cheyne (Joe Bannister) was portrayed as a fitness-obsessed jogger, with a personal assistant to help him stretch out and massage his thigh muscles. And Clark (Christopher Middleton), the painter, was deliciously weird in the vein of Jane Austen's uber-creep, Mr. Collins.

The show's conclusion was brilliant. When the lovers finally killed Arden, terrified at the prospect of discovery, Alice and Mosby, with the help of Michael (Ian Bonar), Greene (Tom Padley), and Susan, rolled his not inconsiderable bulk into a large shipping box, branded with the brightly colored Arden of Faversham logo. Using the pulley system in place from the pre-set, they raised the box over the stage. It didn't go all the way up into the catwalks, but remained visible, hanging over the action. As the scene progressed with Franklin (Geoffrey Freshwater) and Bradshaw (Colin Anthony Brown) sitting down to dinner, one corner of the cardboard box turned dark red and began to drip blood onto the stage—a horrifying spectacle, especially when Susan sought to remedy it by placing a glass of champagne under the drip—a glass which quickly turned a garish ruby.

During an interruption in the dinner party, after Bradshaw has come and left, but before the arrival of Lord Cheyne, the conspirators lowered the shipping box, removed Arden's body, and carried it outside, attempting to hide it in the gathering snow. Arden's

bloody body remained downstage throughout the tense dinner party as Alice and Mosby rapidly unspooled and their murderous actions were discovered. Altering the text, Findlay had Alice speak her confession from Scene 16, (“Arden, sweet husband, what shall I say?”) alone onstage, directly to Arden’s body. This allowed Alice a moment alone with her dead husband—the only time we see true remorse from her. As she crouched over his corpse and wept in the lightly falling snow, the painted screen at the back of the stage lifted to reveal a wall of giant (2-3 feet tall) *Maneki-nekos*. They appeared menacing and jarringly out of place, turning the entire scene into some nightmare carnival. While none of the characters onstage acknowledged the sudden change, it completely shifted the tone of the play for the final fifteen minutes. The statues looked on while Cheyne passed judgment on the gathered conspirators and they mourned their involvement in Arden’s death. Was this Alice (and Arden) being haunted by the specter of their wealth? Or perhaps we, the audience, were the ones being haunted—after greedily devouring the macabre events of the play, our voyeurism was recognized and called out by a horrifying assemblage of waving felines. While I cannot claim to understand precisely what Findlay and the design team were trying to communicate with this choice, it shockingly underscored an already surreal moment in the production.

Ultimately, this was my chief complaint about the production: the design was compelling, but its function was unclear. And when the play itself trots along at race-pace—the entire performance lasted ninety minutes with no interval—the design *must* be cohesive and its meaning clear to ground the production. In the same video interview cited above, Findlay revealed that she thinks of the play as a Coen Brothers movie: “There’s that same sense of a completely bewildering, slipping moral framework, with nobody really sure who exactly is in charge of anything at any given moment. It’s very, very funny, but it’s slapstick

with an incredibly dark heart, and there's something about that that feels to me absolutely of the present-day moment." While I agree with the sentiment and admire the comparison, this production of *Arden of Faversham* did not quite deliver in the way *Fargo* does. It rang hollow, lacking the unifying message that would lend weight to its main characters. But, judging from the [many other positive reviews](#), the production's excellent strengths—the superb cast and brilliant moments of direction—are more than enough to justify the cost of the ticket. And, even without the emotional weight delivered in the fabulous romp that is Jo Davies' *The Roaring Girl*, running in rep at the Swan this summer, *Arden of Faversham* does close with an excellent parting shot: in a stroke of evil genius, Simon Baker's sound design featured Joe Cocker's "Up Where We Belong" as the post-show music accompanying our exit from the theatre.

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