

Marcus Chapman

Dr. James Bell

Production Dramaturgy

14 December 2020

Final Critical Analysis on *Ernest Maltravers*

Melodrama was the most popular form of theatre in the late 19th century through the early-middle of the twentieth century and has largely influenced every aspect of the 21st-century entertainment industry. The Cambridge text does a great job of pointing out that film, the most popular modern form of visual art, is in itself melodramatic. Film almost always comes with underscoring, large bits of spectacle, and some notion of good vs. evil. Modern audiences are most captivated by stories where a favorable character has to overcome something, whether it be a supervillain like the Marvel or DC Cinematic Universes or life-decisions like accepting a job that could tear apart their relationship. This concept of good vs. evil is embedded in sports entertainment. When you watch a sports game, the audience's job is to mentally and sometimes physically pick a side, believing that their team or player is inherently good and the other inherently evil. In Louisa Medina's adaptation of *Ernest Maltravers*, we see this clear divide of good vs. evil as well. In a captivating story that revolves around a young woman, Alice, who struggles with her relationships with multiple men throughout the play, including her father, Darvil, her lover, Ernest, and the masculine world in which she resides.

Ernest Maltravers is a great representation of melodrama because although it was written towards the beginning of the melodramatic era, before the genre's peak, it still contains the majority of elements the audience expects. However, the show also carries

over some of the depth from before. The music and fight scenes are the key elements in this show that give it that melodramatic flare. There are numerous parts where the stage directions indicate there should be music playing to accent the scene. Additionally, there are parts that music is not annotated that could also call for it at the director's discretion. The multiple fight scenes throughout the script will no doubt be exciting moments for the audience. There are multiple uses of large spectacle fighting that could easily cover the entire stage, given that enough people are cast for that. It will be interesting to see how the fight scenes are staged if there are still limitations to the cast size and how many people will be allowed on stage at a time due to social distancing. Many climax moments rely on touch -- the grabbing of a wrist to stop a blade, the dragging to a chair but the neck, etc. If touch is limited, fight choreography will be nearly impossible without some intense innovation and creativity.

My perception of this show changed drastically since the first time I read it in Winter 2020. I didn't care for the script originally. I thought it was dated, didn't have very relevant themes, and I struggled with the concept of adding a full new cast in Act Three. However, after reading it again at the beginning of this semester, I gained a new appreciation for it, Alice and Darvil, especially. I probably read it a bit more intensely knowing we would be focusing on it for an entire semester, and it helped. I enjoyed the script and gained a whole new appreciation for Darvil's depth and redemption. My perception of Alice changed as well, particularly in Act Three, when she is disheveled and beaten down, and she fights for the right to protect that baby girl from all the men. She is so powerful. In my third reading of it, towards the end of the semester, I was actually thankful to be reading it again after reading so many melodramas that were not quite as

good as this one. It felt like a breath of fresh air. In this reading, I was able to focus on some of the smaller roles and understand them a little bit better. The primary example being Ferrers and my irrational hatred for that man. He plays a small but incredibly crucial role that is marvelously written. He evokes so much emotion from the audience, and he has somewhat of a redemption arch, but his death remains a glorious victory.

I do have a couple of recommendations for the director. First and foremost, I think there should be some type of warning passage that acts as a trigger warning for Domestic Abuse. It may seem irrelevant, but even the smallest things can set some people off if they are not prepared for them. Furthermore, I think there should be more opportunities for women or non-binary folks throughout the script. As we mentioned in discussion, Armstrong offers a great chance for a powerful actress and adds a new power dynamic to the show. Additionally, I think making Armstrong a woman opens up the opportunity for more of the thieves to be women. It would make sense that a group of women would respond the way they do to Armstrong rather than a group of men who may try to denounce her for her femininity. Of course, this is just my advice and all of that is up to the director. My last recommendation deals with costumes, obviously depending on the time period this is placed in, I think Alice's costumes should directly reflect her situation throughout the play. I think it would be incredibly effective to have her wear the same dress/garments but have them in different stages of disarray. And then, in the last act, keep it completely distraught, to show what she has been through to get to where she is, dying (or not dying) in the arms of the one she loves.

Overall, I am incredibly excited to see what GVSU can do with this production. It will be unique, given the circumstances, but I do not think that limits its potential to be just

as exciting and evoking as it can be. I leave this course with questions that can only be answered by the director. For example, "what parts are they going to cut?" and "where will they set the world of the play?" etc. Needless to say, I am on the edge of my seat, and I am looking forward to working on or at the very least seeing this show come April.