

## **Measure for Measure**

By William Shakespeare

Produced by The College of the Holy Cross

1996-1997 Season

Directed by Edward Isser

### *Director's Notes: Pre-Rehearsal*

#### **First Response**

In the final months of the twentieth century, *Measure* provides us with a searing allegory about a society that is divided severely along economic and social lines. The ubiquitous moral rot of Shakespeare's play parallels our contemporary world. The political and social hypocrisy of rulers who abuse power for personal gain while criticizing and punishing the lower classes comes right out of the evening news. Some issues of the play hit home harder today and in a radically different manner than they would have in Shakespeare's day. Ideas such as sexual harassment and immorality connote wildly different things to a contemporary audience, particularly in light of recent current events.

#### **Talking Points**

**I.** *Measure for Measure* is a play about power--political, economic, and sexual power--and how these three interrelated phenomena intersect with catastrophic consequences when they are abused by an inadequate leader. But it is essential to note that the play is not against the use of power per se, because the entire crisis is instigated by the failure of a rightful ruler to exercise properly his responsibilities of office. Indeed, the entire arc of the

play is about how this ruler--Duke Vincentio--learns about the nature of power and the necessity of its public demonstration. It can be argued that, in many respects, the play is a primer about effective leadership and must be viewed as a humanistic revision of Machievelli's *The Prince*.

**II.** Political power must be exercised correctly and sexual desires must be pursued properly. Without sex there is no propagation of the species and without political restraint there is no maintenance of the social order. Political responsibility cannot be avoided and neither can the fundamental need of humans to fornicate. Without restraint, however, the pursuit of these intersecting fundamental drives will undermine the stability of society. *Measure for Measure* argues that political power must be exercised in a principled manner and sexual intercourse must occur under the sanction of marriage.

**III.** A recurring theme in the plays of Shakespeare is the nature of effective leadership. In *Richard II*, for example, a strong contrast is made between Richard who exercises power in an arbitrary and abusive manner and his successor, Bolingbroke, who is decisive and self-assured. Bolingbroke does not hesitate when strong action is demanded, but yet, as a merciful Christian monarch, he is willing to demonstrate forgiveness. The forceful yet merciful ruler is a paragon of leadership and this is clearly the model embraced by Shakespeare. A fundamental issue in *Measure for Measure* (as implied in its title) is the quality of mercy. All human frailty is forgiven by the end of the play, save the act of slander which is considered the most odious abuse because it is not for personal gain, but is merely meddling and undermines the institutions of the State.

**IV.** All the major characters in *Measure for Measure* are isolated, repressed, and forced to dwell in prison-like purgatories of their own creation. The Duke, essentially asexual, leads the life of an intellectual ascetic, separated from his people. This separation, which he attempts to bridge artificially, prevents him from being the effective and loved leader he wishes to be. Angelo, a deeply religious person, believes in a rigid notion of morality and leadership that is impossible for any individual to maintain. His downfall is ordained by the inflexible positions he has locked himself into. Isabella, naive, immature, and innocent, enters the prison of a convent in a moment of ecstatic/religious desire without any notion of serving God by serving her fellow man. For all the selfishness of these characters, there is a shocking lack of self-knowledge. By the end of the play, all have gained self-awareness, but fail to escape from their separate prisons. The Duke returns--alone--to his Court. Isabel, mature, and deeply committed, returns to the convent from whence she came. Angelo, forced to marry a woman he does not love, learns morality and the nature of mercy. Society is restored, justice prevails, but individual happiness is not achieved.

**V.** A major motif of the play that must be realized in production is the physical assumption of identity through disguise. Angelo puts on the robes and rhetoric of justice even as he betrays the law. The Duke puts on the robes of a Friar to minister to his people when it was his duty to do so all along. Isabel puts on the dress of a novice nun while protesting that the Sisters do not sacrifice enough--only to learn the true meaning of suffering upon leaving the convent. Mariana wears a veil when confronting Angelo. Claudio enters in the fifth act muffled. Each of the characters sheds his or

her disguise both physically and figuratively by the conclusion of the play.

**VI.** A fundamental problem of this play for a modern, sensitive audience is not Isabel's refusal to fornicate to save her brother (this can be understood if Isabel's religious faith is truly sincere), but rather, it is her decision to marry the Duke. No matter how well staged, this conclusion strains credulity and is inherently sexist. One can argue that Isabel has learned to love, that her horizons have grown, but this is facile, particularly in light of the Duke's unconscionable behavior. The Duke lies to Isabel by telling her that Claudio is dead in order to test the depth of her Christian faith. Once she jumps this hurdle by forgiving Angelo, he reveals that Claudio still lives and proposes. In most productions, she accepts. This contrived "happy" ending, however, undermines the sincerity of Isabel's faith and her commitment to Christ. In our contemporary world--where women are autonomous, self-actualizing beings-- such an ending is inherently retrograde. Yes, Isabel must grow during the course of the play--she must have her own character arc. A more appealing modern reading would argue that she has grown from a naive, repressed girl who enters the convent at the beginning of the play to a mature woman who decides freely to serve Christ. She must reject the Duke and return to the convent. Both Deborah Warner and John Barton--in their productions--have made similar choices and it is perfectly rational and contemporary. Furthermore, it forces the Duke--who has hitherto been the stage manager--to finally make the ultimate realization--that he is not omnipotent. The Duke is as alone and isolated at the end as he was at the beginning, but because of his journey, he is completely different. Now he will be an effective, merciful leader. Yes, this undermines the "happy" ending, but so what? Society is reintegrated, order is restored; the play

remains --a comedy.

### **Fable**

*Measure for Measure* is about a Duke who is cerebral and ineffectual. Confronting a disintegrating social order, he abdicates the responsibilities of his office because he is unwilling to incur the wrath of the populace by enforcing edicts he knows are both necessary and unpopular. Instead, he forces his cousin--Angelo--to take on this onerous task. The Duke, intellectually curious and unable to effect power on a general level, decides to go among the populace disguised as a member of a religious order so that he may administer to his people on an individual basis. Unexpectedly, Angelo not only enforces the law, but by acting as a demagogue, is hailed as a populist. Angelo, however, abuses his office for personal gain and attempts to sexually blackmail the sister of a man he has condemned to die for moral offenses.

But for a mere coincidence, Angelo's perfidy would never have come to light. But fortunately, the Duke, in his guise as a Friar, becomes privy to the immoral and improper behavior of his deputy. The Duke, believing himself intellectually superior to his cousin, thinks he can surreptitiously correct the situation by utilizing a "bed-trick." The machinations of the Duke, however, are thwarted by the unexpected depths of Angelo's nefarious behavior. Finally, the Duke has no choice but to publicly resume the mantle of his office to unmask Angelo and reintegrate society.

### **Concept**

The Fenwick production was set in *fin de siecle* Vienna. This period suits the

play well for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, it allowed us to locate the play in the city designated by the author. Why Vienna? Clearly, Shakespeare wrote the play as a parable fable about contemporary England. James I had recently ascended the throne and issues about the duties and responsibilities of a monarch were of paramount importance. In addition, Shakespeare continued to be obsessed by the tensions between the socially conservative, severe Puritans and the more liberal Anglicans and Catholics. He correctly foresaw where such repressive ideas might lead.

Some directors have forsaken Vienna (opting for England, America and even outer space), but this decision seems arbitrary and unnecessary. In fact, historical events make Vienna even more appropriate today as a setting for this play than it was during Shakespeare's time. Vienna at the end of the 19th century is frighteningly similar to the world of the play. A former glorious state is rotten to the core--Obtensibly a religious, Catholic nation, the country is rife with licentiousness (see Schnitzler's *La Ronde*). Torn by outward propriety and inward desires, the society is neurotically repressed--fertile ground for the rise of Sigmund Freud. Politically, the weakness of the Empire and the aging of its ruler, encourages the rise of proto-facist and antisemitic parties. The arts in Vienna reflect these conflicting currents--from the beautiful strains of a Straus waltz to the discordant atonality of Schoenberg. In painting, beautiful landscapes stand side-by-side with the intensely erotic pre-expressionistic drawings of Klimt. Vienna is a society torn by dissension and conflicting emotions, political parties, and social groups. Unfortunately, no Duke emerges to make it whole. The Hapsburg Empire will implode on the battlefields of the First World War and the neurosis of the populace will be played out by the next generation who will

join Hitler's S.S. in greater percentages than their German cousins. This is a fecund yet sick world--breeding ground for a psychotic Angelo, a repressed Isabel, and an ineffectual intellectual such as the Duke.