



The Duchess of Malfi

by John Webster

Film Script by Alice de Sousa and Bruce Jamieson

The Duchess of Malfi provides epic cinematic scope for great acting, thrilling plot lines and breathtakingly beautiful settings. It is an unforgettable love story and intensely psychological tale of Machiavellian corruption, incest, madness and uncontrollable carnal passion.

John Webster (1580-1634), a predecessor of William Shakespeare, was an English playwright whose considerable literary reputation rests entirely on two plays: **The White Devil** and **The Duchess of Malfi** and in the category of Jacobean drama, the beauty of Webster's poetry and language remains unchallenged. Almost nothing is known of his life, which was so amusingly portrayed in the feature *'Shakespeare in Love'* as the black dressed boy with a penchant for mice and hanging around Shakespeare's Globe Theatre to soak up the exhilarating atmosphere of the time. Of all the major English dramatists, John Webster has provoked the sharpest and most persistent controversy. Certainly, he can be macabre and melodramatic, often exploiting the full theatrical possibilities of cruelty and violent death. Although Webster was writing at a time of considerable social confusion and pessimism, his poetry is superb and the craftsmanship of his plays truly excellent. His writing has long been appreciated and the dramatic power of his characters universally recognised. **The Duchess of Malfi** is his greatest tragedy and is certainly one of the most extraordinary plays ever written. It has over many centuries been acclaimed for its richness of language, imagery and verse.

In **The Duchess of Malfi** Webster creates a world where the powerful are poisoned with greed and lies, and consumed by suspicion and perversion. He found inspiration for his masterpiece in a true Italian story which took place in Amalfi in the century previous to his own. The story follows the ill-fated and prematurely widowed Duchess of Malfi who falls in love with Antonio, a commoner and her major-domo. In blatant defiance of her brothers wishes for her not to remarry - she secretly weds Antonio. The marriage is concealed for several years, but when the Duchess gives birth to a second child, gossip reaches her siblings and they send spies to watch her. Following the birth of yet another child, her brother's suspicions are finally confirmed. Meanwhile, convinced that they will not personally harm her, the Duchess sends Antonio with two of their children into hiding. Her mistaken belief is painfully shattered when her brothers have her imprisoned, psychologically tortured and finally, mercilessly executed. Her prison scenes boast some of the most beautiful poetry to be found in a play written in the English language.

The story resumes itself by following the conventions of a revenge tragedy and as characters brutally turn on each other to avenge suffered wrongs; the play powerfully concludes with a blood bath. Webster's world is both shocking and extraordinary: it is inhabited by individuals who are blindly and ruinously driven by animalistic instincts to madness, incest and murder. They kill, love and torture one another without moral or human hesitation and with intense and unquenchable relish.

Galleon proposes to film this magnificent masterpiece with a script lasting approximately two hours and involving a main cast of eleven. The look of the film will be a mixture between a Peter Greenaway's *'The Cook the Thief his Wife & her Lover'* and *'Prospero's Books'*; therefore, hinting at period with a vibrancy of colour and with a less than clean and rather dusty feel of Neal Jordan's *'Interview with the Vampire'*. Although the text is classic in origin, the film will be as accessible and relevant as Baz Luhrmann's *'Romeo & Juliet'* and most of the filmed Shakespearean adaptations of the last fifteen years.

The financial scope and critical success envisaged for this film can be exemplified by all of Kenneth Branagh's directed films, particularly *'Hamlet'*, *'Mary Shelly's Frankenstein'* and *'Henry V'*; Julie Taymor's *'Titus'* and the colourful 'art look' and fast cutting of *'Frida'*. Other films of relevance are Richard Loncraine's *'Richard III'*, Zeffirelli's *'Hamlet'* with Mel Gibson, and *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'* directed by Michael Hoffman.

It is planned to secure box office success and critic appraisal for this film by the casting of both 'hollywood names' and established British stage actors. Moreover, **Galleon's** film of **The Duchess of Malfi** will be appealing to the same international audience who faithfully follow all of Tarantino's work but equally delight in Stephen Sommer's block-buster adventure *'Van Helsing'*. Ultimately, the audience base of **Galleon's** film of **The Duchess of Malfi** will experience great writing delivered by an extremely talented and respected cast.

- **Films of reference:**
- **Style:**
 - *The Cook the Thief his Wife & her Lover*
 - *Prospero's Books*
 - *Interview with the Vampire*
 - *Sleepy Hollow*
- **Direction & Cinematography:**
 - *From Hell*
 - *Bram Stoker's Dracula*
- **Casting:**
 - *Mary Shelly's Frankenstein*
 - *Hamlet*

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A full script is available on request