The Duchess of Malfi (dir. Dominic Dromgoole)
The Knight of the Burning Pestle (dir. Adele Thomas)
Sam Wanamaker Playhouse

Just as developments in shooting at low light levels influenced the aesthetic of 1940s cinema, so the candlelight indoor theatres in the Jacobean period produced their own noir. Much of the anticipatory interest in this opening season at the Globe’s Sam Wanamaker indoor theatre has been in the apparent fit between its meticulously built claustrophobia and Webster’s murky domestic tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*. Webster’s language, like his characterization, is alive with chiaroscuro: ‘Cover her face, mine eyes dazzle’; ‘this gloomy world’, ‘deep pit of darkness’. Some of its more baroque moments – when Ferdinand gives his sister a severed hand in grisly parody of her secret handfasting with her husband and children – might be expected to be more creepily effective on a dimly lit stage. In fact Dominic Dromgoole’s production rather resists these expectations: the surprise is that candles can provide a full stage light not noticeably different from modern illumination, and often the scenes are brightly and warmly lit, aided by the open shutters around the gallery. This is a world where ‘apricocks’ might indeed fruit. In the event, the candles, in sconces on the pillars and in hanging candelabra as well as carried by individuals, are less consistently striking as illumination than for their effect on pace. Candles slow the production down, and candelabra lowered to waist height constrict the already small stage to some paths along the front and sides. Those carrying candles sometimes snuff them out inadvertently by moving too quickly – this is a particular problem when the intelligencer Bosola tries to change tempo - and thus a stately pace draws the play’s terrible inexorability out over a full three hours.

For much of the production the lighting, like the direction, produces a familiar, lucid *Duchess of Malfi*. Gemma Arterton brings to the title role televusional restraint and glamour. She is kittenish in her wooing: Antonio (Alex Waldmann), a tousled Hillyard miniature, is quick to intuit her playfully cryptic proposal. While she gains in noble hauteur, her famous line ‘I am Duchess of Malfi still’ is tinged with anxiety. She is surrounded by solid performances on an often crowded stage: her brother the Cardinal (James Garnon) is cynical and world-weary, his mistress Julia (Denise Gough) is vampishly self-interested, Bosola (Sean Gilder) is bluff and galley-hardened. Only Ferdinand (David Dawson) stands out. His is a large-scale performance marked from the outset by an unpredictable brittleness on the edge of hysteria and some clever touches including the fluffed line ‘I am to be - to bespeak a husband for you’. When Ferdinand presents the dead hand, the absolute darkness falls for a moment, substituting existential incomprehension for any attempt at verisimilitude, and while the empty black brings out the play’s latent panic, it also cheats us of any real empathy with the Duchess’s horror. His febrile scene as he sets out to ‘hunt the badger’, graphically underlit by a candle, lank-haired and wild-eyed, is pure gothic excess: he seems to be in a different world, theatrically and generically as well as psychologically, from his restrained twin sister.
The second production of the opening season is, from the outset, a striking tonal, and physical counterpart. Where Malfi’s candles are tended with almost liturgical seriousness, the opening business of The Knight of the Burning Pestle involves comically smoking breeches as a character inadvertently brushes his backside against flame. This redirects audience anxiety as slapstick, and thus the production immediately conveys a more comfortable and less reverential sense of the new theatre. Here, the experimental focus of the production is on the vertical and horizontal spaces of the new stage and on interaction with the audience.

Francis Beaumont’s 1607 play is a good-humoured, energetic mash-up: a citizen comedy called ‘The London Merchant’ spliced with Spamelot, directed with naïve literalism by Beaumont’s grocer equivalents of the Muppets’ balcony commentators Statler and Waldorf. Unconvinced by the play that is proposed – and which is, indeed, here presented as dull – a theatre-going citizen (Phil Daniels) and his neophyte wife (Pauline McLynn) bundle their servant Rafe (Matthew Needham) onto the stage to act out a Don-Quixote-esque romance through Waltham Forest. Rafe’s bravura performance is marked by intense earnestness, beginning with an audition piece of Hotspur’s doomed chivalry and moving via Olivier’s Henry V in quartered fleur-de-lys tabard and fake chainmail on the parade-ground at Mile End, to a heroic death, an arrow through his head, as a version of Andrea’s Ghost from The Spanish Tragedy. The audience-citizens become increasingly intrusive: the wife is so keen to see Rafe’s next adventure that she refuses a character from the other plot who has entered for her scene. Rustling packets of sweets and readily vocalizing apprehension, disapproval, and enjoyment, she is at once the ideally engaged and participatory spectator and the nightmare theatre customer, as she and her indulgent husband both interrupt the action and shape it into classical five-act contours.

The Duchess of Malfi production struggles sometimes with tone: the Globe’s propensity for broad comedy combined with Webster’s own uneven ‘horrid laughter’ (in Nicholas Brooke’s phrase) produce some awkward moments of mirth. The Knight cast is able to manage the tone of that play with more discipline. The first half is almost wearily funny – everything, from popinjay outfits to emphatically lame rhyming couplets, from a horse worn like a large skirt with braces to the bathetically illuminated sacrosanct pestle prompts hilarity – but the second half is more nuanced. The scene in which the crafty young lover Jasper (Alex Waldmann) is brought in a coffin to his unsuspecting beloved Luce (Sarah MacRae) sustains an effectively sombre tone rather better than the equivalent, and visually similar, scene in Malfi. The production creates as the play’s most extravagantly funny scene the combat between grocer errant Rafe and the terrifying Barbarosa (Brendan O’Hea), played with wonderful inventiveness as a nightmarish Edward Scissorhands on stilts dressed as a bloodstained barber’s pole. There are other memorable images which effectively exploit the theatre’s vertical planes. Merrythought (Paul Rider), an unnervingly jovial fellow who avoids intimacy through perpetual singing, directs from the musicians’ gallery a perverse Greek chorus all dressed like him, in pale soiled babygro, trademark red beard and rubicund cheeks. They writhe like erotically
possessed caryatids against the theatre pillars in a more playful, troubling and theatrically memorable version of the madmen's dance in Malfi. The sequence captures and externalizes Merrythought's baleful mirth. The gallery serves again for a finely comic set-piece with Rafe addressing the amorous bearded princess of Moldavia, aka his squire (Dennis Herdman) in a tinseled wimple and come-hither accent.

Beaumont’s satire of the aspirant middling sorts is presented kindly and with a generally inclusive warmth. When the waspish Boy (Samuel Hargreaves) suggests that ‘it will show ill-favouredly to have a grocer’s apprentice to court a king’s daughter’, there is a short shocked pause: the play has already established its values of communality and Merrythought’s philosophy that ‘tis mirth that fills the veins with blood’ is its resounding anthem. At the end, the citizens are left on an empty stage, inviting us all home to wine and tobacco. Beaumont’s publisher suggests the play was not originally a stage success because its audience did not recognize ‘the privy mark of irony about it’: Adele Thomas's production works by downplaying that irony in favour of simpler, more nostalgic evocations of good fellowship. Perhaps surprisingly, then, the great discovery of these first plays in the new theatre is not the morbid intimacy of the diseased court of Malfi. Rather, it’s the unruly, expansive Knight of the Burning Pestle, spreading laterally across the audience and up into the gallery, that best explores the potential of this precise and enclosed space.