


<also released>

**The Mandrake Root**  tbc

★★★☆☆

Previously adapted in 1965 by Italian director Alberto Lattuada, Niccolo Machiavelli's 1512 Renaissance comedy La Mandragola has been revived by Birmingham producer (original UB40 manager and former Birmingham School of Acting chief exec) as the debut production for European Network Drama, a new company dedicated to turning classic plays into modern movies for home cinema on demand downloads.

For those unfamiliar with the 16th century Italian political philosopher's alternative career as playwright, the plot entails an attempt by young Callimaco (Jason Nicoli) to bed Lucrezia (Chara Jackson), the virtuous wife of gullible buffoon Sardinian lawyer Nicia (Geoffrey Bateman). Assisted by servant Siro (Craig Painting) and local fixer Liguro (Mike Rogers), posing as a doctor Callimaco persuades Nicia, who's desperate to have kids, that if his wife drinks a Mandrake root potion she'll conceive. The downside is that the first person she has sex with will die. Of course, once she's been talked into it by her lascivious mother (Den Woods) and venal priest (Jonathan Owen), they'll arrange for her to sleep with some unsuspecting - wink wink - victim. Suffice to say everyone gets what they bargained on, and more.

The first feature by award winning stage director Malachi Bogdanov (who also provides the modernised screenplay), shot in Sardinia on HD it makes the most of a low budget and largely single location, acknowledging its roots with bookended addresses to a theatre audience and knowing asides to camera.

The cast have a nice line in sly humour and keep the pace brisk with some sharp comic timing while a pair of roadsweepers (Mario Olivieri, Andrea Foddai) supply amusing subtitled Black Adderish inter-scene banter about such matters as why Michaelangelo painted in water colours rather than oils. It might not be Kenneth Branagh, but it is playful fun that, at 75 minutes, does the job without outstaying its welcome. Prior to home cinema release it's getting an outdoor premiere at Curzon Street Car Park (Sat 21) with short films by local film makers.



*The morning after the Conservative Party Conference celebrations was always an interesting affair*