

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Sejanus: His Fall

Ben Jonson

RSC at the People's Theatre, Newcastle

(2005)

Sejanus was first performed in 1603, after *Everyman in His Humour* and before *Volpone*, *Epicoene*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholemew Fair*. He began work on it in 1601 after the failure of his satire *The Poetaster* which led him to declare that he was giving up comedy.

It is a very political play, dangerously so for one who was a Catholic and a friend of three of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, and, indeed, he was questioned about it. Hardly surprising, given the atmosphere after the abortive rebellion of the Earl of Essex and the attempts by Guido Fawkes and his co-conspirators.

It is also a very wordy play: inevitably, for it is a play of ideas rather than emotions, full of political intrigue and focusing on freedom and tyranny and the duties of a citizen in a state ruled by an unjust prince. As one would expect, given the period, obedience is upheld as the citizen's highest duty and the only protest one can make is that made by the senator and former general Silius who falls on his sword. What also comes over clearly is the fickleness of the masses. And could there be a reference to Jonson himself in the treatment of the historian Cordus whose history of Brutus and Cassius is considered to be subversive?

Dealing with Sejanus' rise from Praetorian Prefect to Tiberius' deputy when the latter retires to Capri, his aiming for higher office still and his downfall, it would seem to be a story of "vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself", but, in spite of a nod in the direction of Sejanus' contempt for religion and his rejection by the goddess Fortuna, there is no supernatural or religious underpinning here - it is simply a story of political machinations of the Machiavellian kind, not just of Sejanus but also of his successor Macro, of Caligula and of the Emperor Tiberius himself.

So although Jonson turned away, as he said, from comedy, it was not to write a tragedy, for there is nothing of the truly tragic here: Sejanus is not a tragic hero and there is no restoration of balance or sense of a new beginning at the end. We are left in no doubt that Macro, the instrument of Sejanus' downfall, is just another of the same type, as, indeed, historically he was.

Director Greg Doran gives us some lovely moments - the falling away "like leaves" of Sejanus' supporters as Tiberius' cleverly worded condemnation letter is read out, the very simple but effective set by Robert Jones, the atmospheric lighting (Wayne Dowdeswell) and the cleverly integrated music (Paul Englishby) and soundscape (Martin Slavin) - but the play fails to grip, partly it is a little too long and partly because few of the characters engage our sympathies. Those who do are essentially powerless: Agrippina (Ishia Benson), Silius (Geoffrey Freshwater), Sabinus (James Hayes) and Arruntius (Nigel Cooke).

William Houston plays Sejanus with tremendous energy and passion, but it is one energy and one passion. The clarity of his diction is superb - it is clipped and precise, somewhat reminiscent of

Olivier's Richard III - but there is no subtlety in the performance and little variation of pace and dynamic. There were moments, particularly towards the end, which cry out for a slowing, a different kind of intensity, but Houston maintained the pace and intensity he had set, and so they were missed. He - and, of course, director Greg Doran - gives us a Sejanus who is a such a monster of ambition that all other feelings have been killed in him. It is a justifiable (if, I suspect, a little oversimplified) reading of the play but it does make for tiring watching!

Sejanus: His Fall is not Jonson's best play. He is more effective in his satirical comedies, but it is worth reviving, and who better to revive it than the RSC?

Philip Fisher [reviewed](#) this production on its transfer to the Trafalgar Studios

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)