

# British Theatre Guide

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## Britannicus

Jean Racine, in a new translation by Timberlake Wertenbaker  
Wilton's Music Hall and Natural Perspective Theatre Company  
Wilton's Music Hall  
(2011)

English audiences used to think Racine coldly classical and rather intimidating. Jonathan Kent's Almeida productions of this play and *Phèdre* showed how theatrically effective they could be and this elegant modern dress production directed by Irina Brown is another demonstration of how his words can leap off the page with great dramatic power when they are played with passion and intensity.

It is helped by Timberlake Wertenbaker's very natural sounding translation. She has abandoned Racine's rhymes and alexandrines for a more English verse form that has the richness and resonance of poetry without seeming artificial: ideas and information come through clearly but they are carried on the sheer energy of the performers.

This play is not just about the eponymous Britannicus but equally about his adoptive-brother Nero, the Emperor who inherited the throne that should have been Britannicus', and Agrippina, widow of dead Emperor Claudius and Nero's mother and step-mother of Britannicus, along with the young men's former tutors who are caught up in court strategy and intrigue. It is a nest of worms - or rather of vicious vipers.

Irina Brown has chosen the flat floor of the auditorium to play on, placing the audience on a ramp of seats that descends from above the stage below the proscenium arch with some set along the sides of the okaying space and designer Chloe Lamford provides as setting a bare stone-flagged floor with a few clear Perspex chairs. Behind is an arc of clear plastic curtain, glittering glamorously when lit blue, with what at a distance looks like classical debris revealed behind it, along with criss-crossed fluorescent tubes. No gilt, no plush to indicate the imperial, instead a stylishness that suggests the greatest luxury in its simplicity yet, at the same time, a place for meetings and encounters out of any one person's environment that while gives no privacy and with the sense of possible surveillance from behind the curtains when they are closed.

The well-spoken production moves swiftly onward revealing its characters' Byzantine scheming, scenes sometimes separated by Sarah Lewellyn and Paul Kizintas cacophonous music and sound effects that stridently sustain its momentum

On the one hand this is a political story complete with its own spin-doctors in the part played by former tutors, Jude Akuwudike's suave Burrhus and Christopher Colquhoun's calm Narcissus, on the other it is a family conflict.

Sian Thomas, elegantly dressed in white trouser suit or strikingly gowned in red or turquoise, gives a full throttle performance as Agrippina that never runs out of fuel, even when the dowager empress's power is weakened. This impression of spontaneous rage is not just bravura but

vituperative and impassioned playing by an actress totally in control of her pace and timing - she has to be or she could not sustain it.

The playing of her son and stepson are not far behind, though they have their calmer moments. There is a petulant innocence about Alexander Vlahos's Britannicus. He has already been deprived of the imperial diadem by his step-mother's scheming but, still trusting, he now discovered his fiancée Junia has been snatched away by Nero who has suddenly decided that *he* is in love with her.

As Nero, Matthew Needham already has the arrogance and sadistic ruthlessness of the despot but as he describes seeing Junia arriving at the palace lifting "her tear-filled eyes to the skies,/ tears that glinted more brightly than weapons, flames --/ Lovely, without ornaments, and simply/ dressed with the beauty of one still asleep' you feel he may be truly love struck, but it is a man who, if he can't get gratification in one way, will find it in the opposite. He is a chameleon growing into a monster.

Trapped in this scheming is Junia: Hara Yannas makes her another innocent, her love and loyalty strong despite her fear and confusion. It is her action that ends the play but reported by Agrippina's attendant Albine, a role that is mainly a feed to her mistress but which is strongly personified by this translation and Zoë Aldrich's performance.

This is an evening of strong acting that Irina Brown has allowed to flower while welding them into a gripping but balanced production.

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)