

British Theatre Guide

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Coriolanus

Shakespeare
Sheffield Theatres
Crucible Theatre
6–28 March 2020

Robert Hastie's productions are distinguished by their clarity of exposition and this adapted version of *Coriolanus* sets out the broad parameters of the action with commendable economy.

The play is set initially in Rome where the plebeian underclass is rioting because food reserves have been withdrawn from them largely through the intervention of the much-hated and arrogant Caius Martius (Tom Bateman), who despises the sweaty multitude, is incapable of empathising with them and advocates repression of their protests in order to maintain the stability of the state.

Further conflict is avoided when a messenger announces that the Volscian general Aufidius (Theo Ogundite) is marching on Rome and Martius reverts to his more accustomed role of military hero, captures the city of Corioles and is rewarded with the new name of 'Coriolanus' to celebrate his victory.

A host of significant characters have been established by this stage in the action: the patricians include the statesman-like Menenius (Malcolm Sinclair), an admirer and mentor of Coriolanus, his mother Volumnia (Stella Gonet) and wife Virgilia (Hermon Berhane) played in this production as a mute; and, supporting the plebeians, two recently elected tribunes, Sicinius and Brutus (Remmie Milner and Alex Young) who stir up the crowd against Coriolanus when he refuses to demean himself by displaying his war wounds or humbly begging the people's support for his election as Consul.

When he is refused, Coriolanus's furious response leads in swift succession to violence against the people, banishment, a traitorous alliance with Aufidius in a new war against Rome and, despite attempted interventions, an inevitable downfall.

The play is largely composed of rhetorical speeches: addresses to the soldiers; to the discontented populace; to the Senate; to individuals, family members, supporters or opponents. Many of these speeches involve persuasion as in Coriolanus's exhortation of the victors of Corioles to follow him into a second battle, or his appeal to Aufidius to accept him as a partner in war.

Much persuasion is directed towards Coriolanus, by Menenius who urges him to control his angry outbursts, or Volumnia who entreats him to spare Rome. There is little opportunity for soliloquy in a play dominated by argument, particularly when the central character seems incapable of reflection. But Coriolanus is 'a part to tear a cat in' and Bateman rises to the complexity of the role and is particularly powerful in an incensed speech in which his uncontrolled fury is unleashed on the despised voters.

The relationship between Volumnia and Coriolanus is crucial to the action. He is a product of her adulation, a mother who would be content to see him carried dead from the battlefield if he had

acquitted himself bravely, who shares his expectation that he should be rewarded with the Consulship, but is a much wiler politician who realises that language must be controlled and compromise reached in order to achieve the desired end.

The production makes exciting use of the stage space. A huge metal fence is dragged on to represent the walls of Corioles and summons up images of the Berlin Wall or Trump's wall to keep out the Mexicans. The Senate with representatives seated around the edge of the large stage space equipped with desks and individual microphones is reminiscent of the UN chamber.

In the domestic scenes, when the silent Virgilia uses sign language to communicate with her husband, a block with relevant surtitles descends from above. This silent exchange is in significant contrast to the dominance of the spoken word and commands attention. It also provides an opportunity for inclusivity.

The crowd of rioting plebeians is represented by a large group from the Sheffield People's Theatre who are generally placed along walkways through the audience and don't have much opportunity to suggest a city beleaguered by revolutionary action.

This is a complex play with many layers of significance. There are strong performances from the cast with Malcolm Sinclair's urbane Menenius particularly memorable.

Reviewer: [Velda Harris](#)