

British Theatre Guide

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Roman Tragedies

Based on William Shakespeare

Toneelgroep Amsterdam

Barbican Theatre

17–19 March 2017

Three Shakespeare tragedies played without break makes big demands of its audience, let alone of the company. Even when filleted, as they are here, they last for a continuous six hours—but it is worth it.

For this Dutch production (with English sur- or subtitles) *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* have been cut to place the emphasis on the political power game as it continues through Roman history.

They are presented in a modern world in a setting that seems a cross between a plush hotel and an airport: sofas and potted palms in a huge waiting area fringed by counters that offer refreshments, information, even first aid and make-up (though the last two are mainly there to assist the actors). Downstage either side are musicians with a kitchenful of percussion and a tape machine.

Once the first play has got started until halfway through the last one the audience are free to leave their seats in the auditorium and join the actors on stage, buy a drink, get some food, or they can nip out to the loo (could you last six hours without needing to?).

At eight points during the proceedings, there is a hiatus for a scene change, moving a rostrum or setting up equipment, allowing a timed break of 5+ minutes when you can move around without missing anything from the performance.

Ancient Roman women exerted their influence privately. In this modern Rome, they are politically active and some leading roles have changed gender. Cassius is now female, so is Cinna, and Octavius Caesar (later to rule as the Emperor Augustus) is also a female power seeker. It is not cross-gender casting: they are women politicians.

Although many of these plays' protagonists are generals, there isn't a uniform in sight and, as for battles, there is not even one of Shakespeare "vile and ragged foils". Battle scenes have become a symbolic barrage of noise and lights, war a political tool, though *Coriolanus* and Aufidius, Brutus, Cassius and Mark Antony are still fighters who risk their own lives and pay service to Roman traditions of honour.

It is a world where I wouldn't have been surprised to see a drone picking on someone in the stalls as a target, but perhaps back in 2007 when director Ivo van Hove first mounted this production for Toneelgroep Amsterdam we were less aware of them.

Deaths, apart from that of Cleopatra (for which there is a live snake), are symbolic too. No actual daggers, no pistol shots, but the corpse collapsed on a kind of catafalque, the deceased's dates

displayed as a red newsflash—indeed we are often warned they are coming well ahead with similar news-style announcements.

The action throughout is played out both live and on multiple televisions screens, in addition to those which may be showing all kinds of programming, including political interviews and news reports, sometimes contemporary, which could be part of the story, and sometimes historical. From the auditorium, there is a huge screen above the stage, if you are onstage yourself, there is always a monitor in sight plus extra English text projections if that is too small or part-masked by a plant or a person.

Going by the subtitles (the performance text translated, not Shakespeare's original), the plays have been very freely translated but it supports very impassioned performances. When they are at the front of the stage, they are big, matched to the theatre, yet don't seem exaggerated on screen in close-up and whether they are played on a part of the stage you can't see or by someone sitting right next to you they still seem well-matched to both media. Everyone is miked, but sound is excellent.

At first, we see Volumnia (Frieda Pittoors), Coriolanus's mother, on a rostrum upstage looking at a computer and talking to her daughter-in-law Virgilia lying on a sofa right downstage, apparently talking on Skype or something similar. Or are they? Later, other conversations will be carried on across much wider spaces than necessary, perhaps they should be assumed in the same room, soon it doesn't seem to matter.

This production is a considerable achievement on the part of director van Hove, his collaborators, technicians and a high calibre cast who play a different role in each play, with the exception of Hans Kesting whose Mark Antony continues in two. This isn't the good-looking favourite of Caesar we've often seen but a serious, already quite grizzled operator who knows exactly what he is up to whatever his hedonistic excesses.

Gijs Scholten as Ascham's Coriolanus isn't a young warrior and there is no suggestion of the homoerotic bond with his Volsci opponent Aufidius as was seen with Ian McKellen and Greg Hicks or more recently with Tom Hiddleston and Hadley Fraser. This older Coriolanus has almost no patience and a violent temper; Bart Slegers makes Aufidius calm and controlled in contrast.

Scenes are sometimes intercut, very effectively: Calpurnia (Janni Foslinga) trying to talk Caesar (Hugo Koolschijn) out of going to the Capitol and Portia (Hélène Devos) asking Brutus (Eelco Smits) to share what he is planning are played out simultaneously. This is a young Brutus who really does seem to earn being called "the noblest" and he appears remarkably forgiving. In the scene where he accuses Marieke Heebink's Cassius of corruption, you get the sense that he accepts that is what can be expected of politicians, all of them opportunists—it's just he thought Cassius was a better woman.

Brutus's speech to the people at Caesar's funeral is from notes but honest. Hans Kesting's Mark Antony throws his notes away, grabs one of the row of microphones to get closer to the people, and sinks to the ground with emotion but his display of spontaneity is belied by the photo of Caesar he has in his pocket ready to mark with his wounds with a marker pen, which he caps by then rushing off to carry on Caesar's body.

This is a man who knows just how to handle the masses and the media (what a contrast to Coriolanus) but the energy is instinctive, never more so than in his response to Cleopatra in the next play, though tactical opportunism still makes him take up the marriage to Octavius's sister.

Maria Kroatmanis a cool Octavius. The respect she shows for deceased Brutus, acknowledging his virtue, could be seen as political PR, but her feelings for Octavia and the alliance with Antony seem genuine, though in retrospect calculation: would she have abandoned him anyway as she does other allies?

Chris Nietvelt is a flighty, high-spirited Cleopatra. She and her handmaids aren't youngsters; hers is a middle-aged romance and in close-up she looks much more than the age that the newsflash gives her. Her concern about the attractiveness of her competition for Antony is a reminder that she had used her sex to gain the support of Julius Caesar. Yet, as with Antony, along with the romantic irrationality there is still a suggestion of someone who once knew how to play the game of diplomacy.

With the audience all over the stage and some scenes played in the auditorium (and the cameras follow Bart Siegers's fine Enobarbus out onto the Barbican's service ramps), this has been described as an immersive production. In a way it is the exact opposite for, though the actors as themselves may ask you to move up on a sofa, the characters don't involve the audience except in the forum scenes—which they would in any production.

The proximity to the action actually emphasises the way in which these politicians ignore the public. Although *Coriolanus* shows the people expressing their views through their representatives, those in power pander to them only to keep power and make it easier to manipulate them.

Ironically, the evening ends with a newsflash reminder that Octavius Caesar, later the Emperor Augustus, brought in a long period of peace and stability and prosperous empire for the Romans. What does this say about which politicians make things best for the rest of us?

This is a landmark production, ten years old but still fresh and powerful, though in the years since it was first mounted some of its innovations have become more common. It sustains six hours engaging almost constant attention, allowing for relief and refreshment without losing momentum, and supports a feast of fine acting.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)