



*Coriolanus*, The Globe, London.  
Jonathan Cake (Coriolanus), Mo Sesay (Aufidius).  
Photograph courtesy of John Tramper.

*Titus Andronicus*, The Globe, London.  
Photograph courtesy of John Tramper.



## PLAY REVIEWS

### UK Spring/Summer Season 2006

Please note that reviews of RSC and guest company productions for the 2006-2007 Complete Works Festival at Stratford-upon-Avon will be published in a special issue (see p. 88 for details and subscription)

*Coriolanus*, directed by Dominic Dromgoole, The Globe, London, 10 May 2006, first gallery, stage centre.

Appointed in March 2006 as the Artistic Director of the Globe, Dominic Dromgoole (formerly of Oxford Stage Company) directed *Coriolanus* as his inaugural production in a season labelled with Globish modishness, "The Edges of Rome". Why Dromgoole has decided to continue Mark Rylance's idea of a themed season is anyone's guess – though the RSC has also been culpable in its stagings of histories (2000), tragedies (2004) and comedies (2005), which probably explains why the Globe plumped for the Roman plays. In a piece of ingenious special pleading in the programme, Dromgoole writes, "The narrative of the Roman Empire – its violent opening, its apogee of civility, and its decline into confusion – throws up any number of parallels with the world of today" – at once both anodyne and vague. Why, one wondered, had the production lacked the



courage to set its *Coriolanus* in the modern world? The answer, I fear (and it is a tendency that this new director may take some time to turn around) is an inbuilt resistance to modernity in this most conspicuously archaeological of theatres. As R. A.

Foakes recently lamented, the reconstructed Globe "is not the kind of experimental theatre some of us hoped for [and yet it continues to establish] for thousands of visitors a fixed idea of an Elizabethan stage that may well be erroneous in many respects".<sup>1</sup>

Dromgoole's *Coriolanus* typified exactly the paralysis of a theatre hamstrung by the need to look Jacobean even while attempting to make connections between a Roman world and the twenty-first century. Iconic of this uncomfortable compromise were the costumes (designed by Mike Britton): Elizabethan doublets (with ruffs) and hose over which was draped a Caesarean swag. As far as the design was concerned, there was no reference or gesture towards the contemporary scene which Dromgoole insists resonates throughout Shakespeare's play.

Clearly it is unfair to castigate a production on its failure to acknowledge or conform to the programme notes; the production should stand or fall on its own merits. That said, the reason for starting with Dromgoole's stated intentions is compelling because they may be responsible for exacerbating an uncomfortable effect produced by *this* production in *this* theatre, an effect which if left unchallenged will jeopardise not just this *Coriolanus* but future productions directed in the same vein. I want to suggest that this production typified the tendency towards what I shall call "Globe parallax". *Parallax* is defined as "the apparent difference in the position or direction of an object caused when the observer's position is changed" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*). In using this term which is derived from astronomy, I am referring not to the physical shifting of viewpoint offered to the "groundlings" as they peregrinate voluntarily around the pit, or even as they are manoeuvred by the acting company (see below). Rather, I am referring to the distortion of the play's internal distribution of weight – the manner in which its configuration of tragedy, violence, levity, lamentation, combat or comedy is shaken up by its presentation and the

*Coriolanus*, The Globe, London.  
Jonathan Cake (*Coriolanus*).  
Photograph courtesy of John Trampler.

degree to which audience response is surprisingly at odds with its textual (as opposed to performative) effects. The production repeatedly manoeuvred the audience into seeing things as comic when the text seems to suggest the reverse so that in this way the position of the audience redefined the play. For instance, when Coriolanus (Jonathan Cake) enters after his combat with the Volscians, he is, as demanded by the stage direction, "bleeding". Much is made in the subsequent speeches of his bloody wounds and we expect to see him "total gules" (*Hamlet*, II.2.448). But something shocking happened here: as Coriolanus entered with blood on face and armour, his weapons dripping, the audience burst into laughter. Compare this to the entry of Peter Woodward as Posthumus in Peter Hall's *Cymbeline* at the National Theatre in 1988, similarly caked in blood and gore: an audible gasp from those in the audience.<sup>2</sup> Nor was this aberration a single moment. While there might be some wry humour in the hypocritical back-tracking of the third citizen, recanting his complicity with the banishment of the heroic Coriolanus – "though we willingly consented to his banishment, yet it was against our will" (IV.6.145) – here the grudging speech was greeted by gleeful howls of laughter. Later, the women entered in sackcloth and Coriolanus, overcome with grief, uttered: "Like a dull actor now / I have forgot my part" (V.3.40-41). This is not Polonius who forgets where he is in the middle of advising Reynoldo how to conduct a prurient surveillance of his own son ("what was I about to say?", II.1.49), which more often than not causes an audience to smirk at his sanctimony and incompetence. Rather, this is an aristocrat rendered speechless by the sight of his mother and wife abasing themselves in rags in order to sue for mercy. Yet for the Globe audience, this was a prompt for further hysteria. As she concludes her long and moving speech beseeching his pardon of ingrateful Rome, Volumnia, on her knees, concludes with "This is the last" (V.3.172). All talked out, this is the ultimate test of her maternal puissance and her son's emotional fidelity; for the Globe audience, it was one of the funniest lines of the evening. It cannot be right to reprimand an audience for responding inappropriately to Shakespeare's text – why should my own response be any more appropriate than theirs? However, when one of Shakespeare's most fraught and violently emotional plays is rendered as little more than stand-up comedy, one is entitled to demand an inquest.

In fact, the peculiarity of the audience response aside, this was a workman-like, though uninspired production. There was good use of the curved ramps that ran down from either side of the stage into the pit. The citizenry were able to utilise members of the standing audience to swell their own ranks and marshalled them into something like the rebellious crowd which so offends Coriolanus' brittle

sensibilities. As the warrior displayed his wounds – his "gown of humility" (II.3.41) was a tatty cream smock – he circulated among the audience in the pit and was jostled by the crowd. At one point he shook hands in the manner of a modern politician on walkabout ("pressing the flesh" in the parlance of cynical public relations) though nicely wiped his hand on his smock as though to try and rid himself of the plebes' contaminating sweat. Brilliantly, for all their expressed solidarity with the common sort, the Tribunes remained on stage to direct the crowd's dissent, never daring to move among them. In this way the configuration of the theatre was purposefully employed and this accomplishment was outrageously effective in the closing moments. As Aufidius stabbed Coriolanus from behind, the latter stood facing the audience on the edge of the stage. He toppled forwards (reminiscent of the fall of Saddam's statue), quite stiff, into the arms of the waiting citizens who proceeded to butcher him. Cake is an extremely big man – taller and of larger frame than anyone else in the production, and this collapse and the deft catch must have demanded strength, timing and not a little courage. Most ingenious was the dragging downstage of a large black veil which was extended out to cover the whole of the pit. As it was withdrawn, so the butchered corpse of Coriolanus was neatly ghosted away.

Worthy of mention were Margot Leicester's Volumnia whose powerful voice made her excessive gesturing unnecessary. Perhaps the best performance of the evening was the quietly understated John Dougall as Junius Brutus. This was an extremely *sotto voce* performance without the histrionics that usually accompany outdoor performances. Dougall precisely rendered Brutus' cynical plotting and politic one-upmanship. There was a quiet determination to his contempt for Coriolanus, coupled with an instinctive sense that the warrior's ascendance marked the Tribunes' own marginalisation: "All tongues speak of him, and the bleared sights / Are spectacted to see him. Your prattling nurse / Into a rapture lets her baby cry / While she chats him" (II.1.203-06). Mo Sesay's Aufidius was disappointingly unequal to the physical and vocal magnitude of Cake's Coriolanus, and the play's symmetry was thrown askew as a result. He had one supremely egregious moment (symptomatic of the parallax effect described above) as during what is usually an intensely homosocial meeting with his old enemy, the play has him express adoration for Coriolanus in heterosexual terms: "I lov'd the maid I married; never man / Sigh'd truer breath; but that I see thee here, / Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart / Than when I first my wedded mistress saw / Bestride my threshold" (IV.5.115-19). The play's flirtation with a homoerotic relationship between the mighty adversaries was given short and comic shrift here. As Coriolanus moved to embrace

Aufidius, the latter, panic stricken, blurted out, "I lov'd the maid I married" — as though he were saying, "I'm not gay... though some of my best friends are!" While such a moment offered light comic relief from the intensity of the passionate language, it was nowhere near justifying the total collapse of the audience into laughter. Whether future productions under Dromgoole's directorship will be holed below the water-line by the appearance of "Globe parallax" remains to be seen.

Peter J. SMITH

#### NOTES

1. "Henslowe's Rose / Shakespeare's Globe", in *From Script to Stage in Early Modern England*, eds. Peter Holland and Stephen Orgel (London: Palgrave, 2004), 11-31, 29.

2. A photo of this entrance is reproduced as Plate 3 in, as well as on the cover of, Roger Warren's *Staging Shakespeare's Late Plays* (Clarendon Press, 1990).

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*Titus Andronicus*, directed by Lucy Bailey, The Globe, London, 31 May 2006, middle gallery centre, 11 July 2006, the yard.

Crossing from Bankside into the darkened world of the Globe's 2006 *Titus Andronicus* has a disorienting effect. Black hangings wrap the stage-posts and tiring-house façade, transforming the stage-doors into dim chasms, and a glance skywards reveals the celebrated black roof covering. The Globe's publicity claims that the roof "will create a dark and funereal setting for Shakespeare's earliest and most macabre tragedy, echoing the play's themes of war and death". This "roof" — a thin netting cut into slivers that radiate from the bell-house to the eaves — has little impact upon light levels: yardlings still find themselves squinting and keeling over under the blazing sun during matinees. But it does heighten the theatre's claustrophobia, and the sense of having been drawn into a contained, other world — a world to which Lucy Bailey has paid close attention, and which pervades all the senses. Discordant music combined with the sound of scraping metal emits eerily from back-stage, whilst sinister clouds of smoke rise intermittently from beneath the yardlings' feet, and cloying incense fills the air. The roof gives the impression of holding in the thick, cloggy air, whilst the ribbons of sunlight that it lets in cut down through the haze in atmospheric beams during matinees.

In fitting the stage for this tragedy, Bailey has lost the use of the "above" or upper stage, which is concealed behind drapes, and challenges the opening stage direction of the play: "Enter the Tribunes and Senators aloft". Instead, Bailey makes innovative use of the yard and galleries. As the audience enters, they close in around two metal-framed tower structures

positioned within the yard. Upon these structures, grim-faced attendants perch, clothed in multi-coloured, bohemian-style shirts into which metal rings and mirrors are sewn, and grasping metal batons in hands clad with fingerless, leather gloves (the first of a string of unconvincing costume choices, which include the Goths' resemblance to *Braveheart* extras as long-haired, face-painted heathens dressed in heathery-hued checked robes, and the decision to dress the Romans in elasticated smocks draped over cycling shorts). They emanate a ferocity that springs into life once the action begins as, clanging their batons and shouting "get out of the way", they wheel the towers through the bewildered audience to allow Saturninus and Bassianus to climb into the structures. From this vantage point, the opening scene's address is delivered. Douglas Hodges's entrance as Titus is appropriately spectacular (if prolonged), carried in on a bier by Tamora, Aaron, Chiron, Demetrius and others, whilst smoke pours from the ground and black confetti rains from above. In contrast, Patrick Moy's gleefully optimistic Saturninus is wheeled out on a tower, showered with coloured confetti. This boisterous beginning sets expectations for the rest of the play, and prepares the yardlings for a further two and a half hours of bemused disruption, including the alarmingly chaotic hunt scene (II.1) in which actors struggle to beat their helter-skelter way through the audience whilst baying and barking through unwieldy, dog-shaped horns. Entertaining as all of this audience-shifting is, it is also time-consuming and, at times, interruptive of pace. Placing the interval after Act III Scene 1, the perceived necessity of creating some kind of distance between Act III Scene 2 (the fly scene), and Act IV Scene 1, in which Lavinia writes in the sand, was answered by wheeling Saturninus across the yard in one tower, and Tamora and Aaron in the other, prompting considerable commotion without perceptible benefits.

Moy's upbeat Emperor — soon to teeter into manic paranoia — is matched by the girlish glee of Tamora, played by Geraldine Alexander, who is animated, saccharine and coy, to the pride of Chiron and Demetrius. Unlike Yukio Ninagawa's production of *Titus* for the RSC's Complete Works Festival [review in forthcoming special issue: see order form on p. 88], there is no hint of sexual jealousy here when she retires with Saturninus in Act I Scene 1: as the sons exit, they raise a triumphant fist in self-congratulation, and a laugh from the audience. Richard Riddell (Chiron) and Sam Alexander (Demetrius) perfect their roles as juvenile delinquents with a dead-pan gormlessness that becomes horrifically sinister in the capturing of Bassianus (Simon Wilson) and Lavinia (Laura Rees). In contrast, it is here that Geraldine Alexander's relatively humane Tamora begins to emerge, as she exhibits near-panic in response to Lavinia's pleas. The capture itself is effected with