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Compte rendu de la mise en scène de Gregory Doran

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C*oriolanus*, directed by Gregory Doran for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Complete Works Festival, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 28 and 30 March 2007, front stalls.

The RSC production of *Coriolanus* presented in Stratford this spring was doubly set to bring a sense of closure. Scheduled at the end of the year-long Complete Works Festival which took place in Stratford, it was also destined to stage the last performance in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre before it is torn down and then transformed during the next five years. Starring William Houston, whose acclaimed performance as Ben Jonson's Sejanus in 2005 had seemed already to mark him as a self-evident choice for Coriolanus, and Janet Suzman, returning to the RSC in style to play Volumnia, this production was directed by Gregory Doran whose *Antony and Cleopatra* reaped many praises at the opening of the festival the year before. Therefore it had a lot of expectations to live up to.

The play started with a bang: as the audience was settled in a comfortable pre-show chatter, the roar of an angry mob was heard while the lights went abruptly off in the house; and down the aisles – from among the spectators as it were – poured the dissenting crowd of the opening scene. This entrance gave an interesting double meaning to the phrase *in medias res* as the staging suggested a form of mimesis between the rumbling of the disgruntled citizens and the chattering of the spectators from whose ranks they seemed to spring. The audience was interrupted *in medias res*, then the play opened *in medias res*, or was it more continuity than rupture?

This opening set the course for the rest of the play which was generally fast-paced, putting into greater relief the few moments of pause. With the movement of the crowd, the spectators' eyes turned toward the stage where a street of Rome was represented by a large wall which acted as a backdrop, with opened gates revealing diagonal rows of columns behind it. A short flight of steps led onto the stage and was used throughout the

performance for the exits and entrances of the characters and as a meeting place for the citizens of Rome. The walls and columns were covered with red brushstrokes which was open to several interpretations: the strokes of colour on the stone grey wall produced a sort of marble effect which could point to the wealth and grandeur of Rome while the colour could evoke the wars and bloodshed to come. In both cases, the setting fitted into a cohesive colour pattern which also included the costumes and props in a whole range of earthy shades, from ochre to blood red. Quite simply, the colours of the costumes helped the spectator distinguish between the Romans (in reddish garments) and the Volsces (in blue-grey costumes).

The costumes themselves spanned different periods and styles. Presumably – though loosely – based on Roman garb, they varied in accordance with the different strata of Roman society. Each of the patricians was draped into a semblance of toga while the plebeians wore long gowns. The warriors' costumes, which were a mixture of a sixteenth-century doublet and a Roman hitched-up tunic, harked back both to Shakespeare's day and Roman Antiquity. Martius/Coriolanus's costumes almost always included a sword, either drawn in battle, or actually sewn to his doublet, but askance, as though ready to be drawn, his right hand typically resting on the pommel. Even out of the battlefield, he therefore seemed to be always on the verge of battle which, along with William Houston's supremely sarcastic and scornful tone of voice, contributed to portray him as perpetually aggressive and antagonistic. At some point, he even became himself a sword (I.viii.77): "make you a sword of me". Gregory Doran took those words to heart and interpreted them on the stage to strong visual effect as Martius was lifted above the heads of the Roman soldiers and with his outstretched hands grabbed two long spears they held up to him, literally representing a sword with his body, ready to pierce the defences of Aufidius's army. The only scenes where he appeared without a sword were moments of extreme vulnerability: wearing the gown of humility, he was at the mercy of the people's good will (II.iii); wearing a long red cloak, his face hidden by a hood, he threw himself on Aufidius's mercy at Antium (IV.v).

Interestingly enough, while fighting his favourite enemy Aufidius (I.viii), Coriolanus soon discarded his sword as they engaged in wrestling with their bare hands. This interpretation certainly went a long way to explain why in their four previous encounters neither had been killed by the other. It also suggested that in their ongoing feud, both Martius and Aufidius enjoyed the pleasure of a balanced fight, of finding their match in battle and trying to outdo him ("He is a lion / That I am proud to hunt", I.i.233-4). This is why, when Martius sought out Aufidius after the battle of Corioles, their wrestling aimed at measuring the other's physical strength rather than killing him, in blatant contrast with their words of hatred. This first onstage confrontation of the two foes also foreshadowed their final one and the unusual way in which this production interpreted the last scenes of the play.

In the opening scene, after they had invested the stage, the citizens argued about taking action against Martius. The "first citizen" (a tall bald man) led the attack on Martius's character, while the "second citizen" (a short portly woman) defended him. Those two characters thus stood out against the rest of the crowd by being opposed both verbally and physically. This visual identification served to emphasise the reversal of the roles in a later crowd scene (II.iii) where the man defended Coriolanus from the woman's attacks. It probably also meant to render visible the inconstancy of a fickle, changing crowd, easily moved to passion and anger by the manipulations of the two tribunes.

In I.i, the arrival of Menenius (Timothy West) offered the opportunity to reconcile all parties. Significantly, throughout the play, Menenius delivered his conciliatory speeches

centre stage. At that moment he stood in the middle of the crowd, explaining the metaphor of the body's members and the belly. Later on, in II.i, he was found sitting against the wall, in the middle of the stage by the two tribunes and answered their criticisms of Coriolanus. In III.i, he once again served as a buffer between Coriolanus and the tribunes, this time physically as well as verbally, and once again found himself in the middle. In that same scene, after Brutus came back bringing the angry crowd in tow, Menenius stood alone between the two opposing groups: the indignant patricians and Coriolanus stage right, the incensed citizens and tribunes stage left – “On both sides more respect” (III.i.182). In a very simple way, the staging proclaimed him the middleman. Indeed, when his powers of persuasion became no longer effective, he was relegated to the margin of the stage and silenced. Sent by Rome to try his influence on Coriolanus and plead for his mercy, he was thwarted by the Volscian guards: “go back” (V.ii.2). In that scene, the guards, armed with spears, stood centre stage. Menenius, stage right, tried to move toward them – to regain the lost ground, so to speak – but was made to back off repeatedly by their weapons and sneers (“Therefore, go back”, V.ii.28). When Coriolanus appeared and added his rebuke (“Away”, V.ii.78) to theirs, Menenius did back off and fall silent. After reading Coriolanus's letter, he opened his mouth several times as if to speak and then closed it, defeated. From then on, he abandoned his role as mediator and pleaded no more.

Generally speaking in this production, the positioning of the characters onstage revealed a lot about their role in the social relationships, their power and importance, or lack thereof. For instance, the first glimpse the spectators got of Volumnia and Virgilia (I.iii) was very telling in terms of their respective positions in the family. They each sat at one end of the stage, the distance between them already a clue of their estrangement from one another. Young Martius, who was not supposed to appear in this scene, stood at his grandmother's side, clearly under her guidance and influence and far removed from his mother. This influence appeared to even greater effect when, during Volumnia's description of Martius on the battlefield, Young Martius actually spoke the words she ascribed to her son (“Come on, you cowards! You were got in fear, / Though you were born in Rome”, I.iii.34-35). This unexpected adaptation of the scene could be received by the audience in several ways. First, it was noticeable that Young Martius spoke what normally were Volumnia's lines: he took his cue from her. Then again, those were words that she put in her son's mouth while she imagined him on the battlefield. It followed therefore that this boy could either be understood to stand for Martius himself as a young boy, educated and influenced by his mother and precociously sent by her into battle (“When yet he was but tender-bodied [...] To a cruel war I sent him”, I.iii.5-14), or indeed be Martius's son (“O' my word, the father's son”, I.iii.60) and a promising future warrior (“He had rather see the swords and hear a drum than look upon his schoolmaster”, I.iii.58-59). It was a glimpse into the past (Martius's childhood) or a hint at what the future could hold – possibly both. In any case, Volumnia appeared to have the upper hand while Virgilia was reduced to a silent, distant role (“Away, you fool”, I.iii.40).

Into this symmetrical yet imbalanced setting, Valeria appeared centre stage and gave the news of the impending battle. While she was speaking, Martius then Aufidius in arms entered from the wings on either side of the stage. When the women left at the end of the scene, the battlefield was set. The clash of the armies did not occur from the sides however. While the wall of Corioles descended from the fly tower to the sound of drums and music, the perspective shifted and Martius and the Roman soldiers faced the audience, on the lookout for news from Cominius. From then onward, the movements of charge and retreat, the communications to and from either part of the Roman army took place through

the house's centre aisle, virtually dragging the audience onto the battlefield. Indeed, the wall protecting Corioles cut the stage almost in half, dramatically reducing the acting space and pushing most of the action downstage. The movements of the actors running and yelling, brushing past them effectively conveyed the sense of a raging battle to the spectators.

The production laid a strong emphasis on the attitude of the Roman soldiers who did not seem very eager to fight. When Martius raged at their cowardice and went into Corioles on his own, the soldiers reluctantly made as if to follow him. As soon as the gate shut behind him though, they just dropped to the ground with a sigh of relief and declared him dead only to jump to their feet in a salute immediately afterwards as Lartius appeared onstage asking about Martius. This comic episode was echoed later on when Martius asked for volunteers to go after Aufidius's army: all the soldiers looked up, down or away, hoping not to be chosen until Martius's inspiring speech seemed either to move or shame them into action. By contrast, Martius appeared larger-than-life, the epitome of the warrior, a truly heroic figure. Conversely, Coriolanus's own reluctance to go and make amends in front of the people of Rome was ridiculed and presented as a childish tantrum. Vanquished by his mother's and friends' arguments he churlishly agreed ("Well, I will do't [...] To th'market-place", III.ii.103-106), went off the stage and came back running and yelling a few seconds later ("I will not do't", III.ii.122), sulking, stamping his foot. Then after some upbraiding from his mother, he conceded ("Pray be content [...] Look, I am going", III.ii.132-136), dragged his feet across the stage, stopped and looked back at her, whining. His hesitations mirrored the stalling tactics of his men in battle and their comic dumb show in a burlesque way.

Another moment of silent comedy, where the occupation of space was linked to social posturing, occurred after the victorious return of Coriolanus to Rome where he would be offered a consulship (II.ii). The patricians and the tribunes were to meet in the Capitol where two officers laid out seats in a semi-circle, in preparation for their coming. Brutus and Sicinius arrived first and sat down in the middle of the semi-circle (facing the audience). The two officers ushering in the patricians hurried to whisper something in the tribunes' ears, the effect of which became immediately apparent as the two tribunes grudgingly removed themselves to the furthest extremities of the semi-circle, making way for Coriolanus. The stage directions for this passage only indicate that the tribunes sit apart from the rest: "*Sicinius and Brutus take their places by themselves*". Gregory Doran chose to make Coriolanus's arrival the reason for their sitting apart. This scene, coming as it did after Brutus and Sicinius had discussed their defiance of Coriolanus, their fear of his growing power and his threat to get rid of the people's tribunes if he became consul, further enlightened the audience about the political stakes. It paved the way for Coriolanus's banishment which by then had become a matter of survival for the tribunes: they had to cast him out in order not to become outcasts.

The first part of the performance closed after Coriolanus's banishment and Volumnia's confrontation of Sicinius and Brutus (IV.ii). Menenius was left alone on the stage, frowning worriedly at the audience in ominous silence. Whereas Menenius dreaded events to come, the tribunes rejoiced in their success (IV.vi). Between these two scenes, the spectators witnessed Coriolanus's alliance with Aufidius and were privy to their plans against Rome. Therefore the tribunes' blissful ignorance of the imminent threat came as a particularly successful moment of dramatic irony. Gregory Doran played on this false sense of security with delectation. At the opening of IV.vi, the tribunes and a few Roman citizens appeared, holding white balloons, to the sound of twittering birds. The sharp contrast with

the preceding scenes caused laughter to erupt in the audience. While enjoying the peaceful atmosphere, Sicinius played with one of the white balloons. Upon hearing the news that the Volscies were marching on Rome, led by Coriolanus, he then grabbed the balloon firmly in his hands and, pressing it too hard, made it burst. The explosion of the balloon silenced the twittering birds and effectively burst the Romans' happy bubble. As a result, Brutus's reaction ("I do not like this news", IV.vi.166) which he stated with a stricken expression on his face, came as a staggering understatement and provoked even more laughter. The silent communication between the two tribunes as they exchanged a panicked look was much more eloquent.

Throughout the performance, silence was used to great effect to reflect moments of tension. Three occurrences come to mind particularly. When Volumnia, Virgilia and Young Martius came to plead for Coriolanus's mercy, Aufidius had a very interesting silent gesture. While Coriolanus had used a "speechless hand" (V.i.67) to dismiss Cominius, Aufidius extended a speechless hand to take hold of Coriolanus's garment and held on to it during Volumnia's speech as if in fear of what her influence could do (V.iii). After hearing his mother speak, Coriolanus fell into a deep silence while his resolution crumbled. It seemed to stretch forever (depending on the performance, it could last up to one and a half minute – a small eternity) and very dramatically emphasised the greatness both of the struggle and of the concession made by Coriolanus. Finally, on her return to Rome (V.5), Volumnia tried to address the Roman citizens. She moved downstage, faced the audience, raised her hands and opened her mouth several times but could not utter a word. She dropped her arms and head in defeat and walked away.

The ending of the play and Coriolanus's death were presented in an unexpected way in this production. Throughout the performance, the complex relationship between Coriolanus and Aufidius was explored (wrestling with their bare hands in I.viii, kissing and embracing in IV.v, linked by Aufidius's possessive gesture in V.iii). It took an intriguing final turn in the last scene. When Coriolanus was surrounded by Aufidius and his men, he deliberately made his way toward Aufidius and threw himself onto his sword. Only then did the others draw their swords to kill him. Thus it seemed as if Coriolanus had decided to die at the hands of Aufidius. In this purposeful suicidal gesture he chose the only sword he deemed worthy of ending his life – Aufidius's, in accordance with his first mention of him ("I sin in envying his nobility, / And were I anything but what I am, / I would wish me only he", I.i.228-30). In the confusion that ensued, Coriolanus disappeared from the spectators' view as his enemies huddled around him. When they stepped back, Aufidius was stamping on his dead body and then he stepped down, awe-struck: "My rage is gone" (V.vi.147). He knelt down beside the corpse and took it in his arms, almost wrapping himself around the dead body for a last embrace as the other characters left the stage and the lighting was reduced to a fading halo. In the growing darkness and solitude, Aufidius's last word ("Assist", V.vi.154) resounded like a cry for help, his helplessness emphasised by the desertion of his men. There were no soldiers to carry the body away, Aufidius and Coriolanus remained onstage as the lights went out – an unconventional ending.

Probably inspired by the unique occasion (the last performances in the RST), this production made use of the whole theatre (the stage and the house) before it disappeared and thus included the audience in the acting space quite a lot. It gave a clear – sometimes original – representation of the play. The effects were generally quite simple but efficient: a fitting way to bring the curtain down.

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