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“I wish'd myself a man, / Or that we women had men's privilege”: *Troilus and Cressida* at the Royal Shakespeare Company

Directed by Gregory Doran

The Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK

Performance Date: November 10, 2018

Reviewed by MARCIA EPPICH-HARRIS

One would think that Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* is best enjoyed by audiences with encyclopedic knowledge of the Trojan War, medieval romance, and Renaissance history. With such credentials becoming less and less ubiquitous in our modern era, how could *Troilus* teach us anything new in the twenty-first century? And yet, within the past five years, *Troilus and Cressida* has had major productions at the Stratford Festival of Canada, the American Shakespeare Center, and now, the Royal Shakespeare Company.¹ Clearly purveyors of early modern theatre feel drawn to the play. Gregory Doran's 2018 RSC production of *Troilus* commented subtly on our contemporary world – so subtly that one might miss the point entirely without reflecting upon the symbolism behind casting and direction. Out of twenty-four major roles, twelve women played both female and male characters alike, filling parts such as Agamemnon (Suzanne Bertish), Ulysses (Adjoa Andoh), Aeneas (Amanda Harris), and Thersites (Sheila Reid), among others. Gender neutral casting is nothing new, and yet, both the Trojan War narrative and the romance plot between Troilus (Gavin Fowler) and Cressida (Amber James) are rife with hypermasculinity. Gender parity in the cast served to heighten the reality of the play – that Helen (Daisy Badger) and Cressida can never escape their roles as handmaids to masculine pleasure. Yet James's Cressida, unlike Helen, briefly resisted – resentful of the fact that her love for Troilus is practically commodified by her uncle Pandarus (Oliver Ford Davies).

Designed by Niki Turner, the set of the play took its inspiration from industrial globalization. Massive shipping containers lined the back of the stage and served as the Greek camp, with Achilles (Andy Apollo) and Patroclus (James Cooney) living like hedonistic hermits within. The shipping containers also provided a symbolic image of modern-day sex trafficking, an uncomfortable image within this tale of negotiated sexual encounters. Above the stage hung a circle of rusting metal materials, dangling in long strips like an oversized windchime made of junk. A massive cage, styled like an armillary sphere, lowered from the center

Reviews

of the windchime, and in it, Helen gave the prologue. Encasing Helen in a spherical astrolabe throughout the play illustrated her significance to this production's universe – the characters' conversations orbited around Helen, their stratagems imprisoning her. To further demonstrate Helen's lack of agency, Shakespeare gives her so few lines that the part comprises less than one percent of the total play. Having Helen deliver the prologue in the lowered armillary sphere, and her reappearance in the cage in act 3, allowed her imprisoned image to remain in our consciousness despite her silence. Other features of the set included a bridge, along with a connected staircase. The bridge lowered and raised as needed, spanning the entire stage. The stairs provided a lookout for Pandarus to introduce the Trojan warriors to Cressida, while the bridge allowed characters to watch events as if from the walls of Troy.



Figure 1: Helen (Daisy Badger) and Paris (Geoffrey Lumb) speak to Pandarus (Oliver Ford Davies) in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of *Troilus and Cressida*.
Photo by Helen Maybanks, courtesy of the RSC.

Accompanying the production, music by percussionist composer Evelyn Glennie and co-composer and sound designer Dave Price gave a mechanical, industrial tone to the play. Initially jolting, the music added rhythm and depth to the performances overall. Each camp had its own sound, as Glennie explained, "The Greeks have hard 'in your face' metal and drums (aggression, disorganisation, slightly fragmented and rough). The Trojans are slightly smoother and more stylish, depicted through resonant bells that are like sonorities and

Reviews

voices.”² As an audience member, I found the music and action moved too quickly to associate leitmotifs with specific characters; however, the soundscape always enhanced the action, rather than drawing attention away from it. Jarring though some of the music was, it supported the production’s thematic resonance with modernity.

Costumes, supervised by Jackie Orton, included an ancient-and-modern mashup. Male characters wore combinations that included leather vests and cargo pants, layered robes, or armor with pteruges – often with bandoliers strung across the chest – although some characters, such as Achilles and Patroclus, were barechested for much of the play.³ Menelaus (Andrew Langtree), a comic character throughout the play, wore a helmet with enormous horns, signifying his cuckolded status. Female characters wore ankle-length dresses and robes, Cressida wearing a semi-bridal style gown, fog-gray, with a keyhole bodice and tulle skirt. In contrast to her delicate attire, Cressida wore dark gray, fingerless gloves and combat boots, giving an edge to her appearance. Despite the costume references to modern warfare, combat scenes used spears, shields, and swords. Only once did a gun appear onstage – more on that later.



*Figure 2: Troilus (Gavin Fowler) and Cressida (Amber James) with Pandarus (Oliver Ford Davies), in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of *Troilus and Cressida*. Photo by Helen Maybanks, courtesy of the RSC*

Reviews



Figure 3: Troilus (Gavin Fowler) and Cressida (Amber James), in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of *Troilus and Cressida*. Photo by Helen Maybanks, courtesy of the RSC.

There were a number of stand-out performances in this version of the play; however, Gavin Fowler's Troilus was initially the most appealing character. Moment to moment, Fowler wore his heart on his sleeve – a true romantic – and there was never any doubt that Troilus was truly, incredibly in love with Cressida. When Pandarus introduced Troilus in the parade of warriors, Fowler's Troilus tried to impress Cressida, but he flubbed, dropping his helmet and making himself look adorably foolish. Alone with Cressida, Fowler became vulnerable and sympathetic. After watching Cressida and Diomed at the Greek camp, Fowler's heartbreak and desire for revenge were gripping. The problem with having such an appealing actor play Troilus is that it's hard to remember that the character didn't *have* to seduce Cressida out of wedlock and probably could have married her had he wanted to. A pseudo *de presenti* marriage conducted by Pandarus didn't imply commitment in the way an official marriage might have. Then again, with Paris and Helen vouching for them as Troilus and Cressida stole away to bed, it's not as if marriage guaranteed commitment – even less so in a time of war.

Foiling Fowler's appeal, Amber James played Cressida with a chip on her shoulder, seeming to have little chemistry with her partner at all. And yet, James's annoyance was justified, especially with Oliver Ford Davies, who played Pandarus

Reviews



Figure 4: (Charlotte Arrowsmith) and Hector (Daniel Hawksford), in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of *Troilus and Cressida*. Photo by Helen Maybanks, courtesy of the RSC.

much like the creep he is. Having thought about the production for a long time, I was irritated with myself that I didn't appreciate James's performance much when I saw the show. It took time for me to digest the idea that James's performance illustrated Cressida's frustration, and her frustration is all too familiar. Cressida cannot act on her feelings without her perverse intermediary, and in fulfilling her desire for Troilus, she consented to being used. Nothing could be more frustrating. Modern hook-up culture is alarmingly similar, except that instead of "panders," we have smartphone

apps, and if consequence-free pleasure is the goal, women have no guarantee of obtaining it. What becomes startlingly clear in the RSC *Troilus and Cressida* is that women's authentic desires are of no concern to anyone. Instead, society's desire for women to conform to men's pleasure and men's narratives becomes all important – and still is. Never is this conformity better shown than when Cressida refused to go to the Greek camp and was forced to go anyway. Then, Cressida's introduction to the Greek camp, each of the characters kissing her, reinforced her inability to refuse men's desires. The scene was sexual harassment eerily on display. An additional character who displayed the depth of women's frustration and impotence was Cassandra (Charlotte Arrowsmith). Arrowsmith, a deaf actor, signed Cassandra's prophecies, screaming and crying, while her signs were interpreted for the Trojans. Arrowsmith's performance hammered home the maddening impediments to women's truths – disbelief and dismissal. Cassandra seemed insane to the Trojans, and yet, they lacked the insight to understand that their own refusal to believe her was what drove her to madness.

Doran altered gender pronouns when referring to a woman in a male role; however, the gender parity made no woman particularly powerful in Shakespeare's version of events – except for Ulysses. Adjoa Andoh performed the role solidly, but she often delivered her speeches as if Ulysses were *pretending* to be authentic and sincere, while she simply manipulated people. The stroke of genius with this characterization, however, was how Ulysses, not Hector (Daniel Hawksford), finally managed to rake Achilles back into the flame of war. In *The Iliad* Hector

Reviews

kills Patroclus, inspiring Achilles to avenge his death. In Doran's *Troilus*, Agamemnon called for reinforcements, and at that moment, Ulysses stood on top of the shipping containers, brandishing a gun. She aimed and shot Patroclus, murdering him. Achilles, mad with rage at his lover's death, assumed Hector was to blame and raced onto the scene to fight. Ulysses's attempts to make Achilles jealous of Ajax, while entertaining, fell flat, and Doran's choice to have her kill Patroclus showed that Ulysses's frustrated calculations bowed in the end to expediency. Of course, Shakespeare altered Hector's death quite stunningly in *Troilus*, too. In this production, Achilles, unable to kill Hector in single combat, had his Myrmidons – disguised in beaked plague masks – ambush Hector while he was unarmed. Hawksford's Hector was a stereotypical "good guy," and good guys simply don't survive in wars like this one. After the Myrmidons were through with Hector, Andy Apollo's Achilles made sure to stab Hector in the thigh, too, recalling Falstaff's new wound on the already dead Hotspur in *Henry IV, Part One*. The parallel made Achilles look brilliantly foolish.



Figure 5: Ulysses (Adjoa Andoh) and Agamemnon (Suzanne Bertish) in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2018 production of *Troilus and Cressida*. Photo by Helen Maybanks, courtesy of the RSC.

Reviews

After Hector's murder, Troilus entered to announce Hector's death. Fowler played the scene almost as if he were drunk and bitterly cynical. As he spoke, the astrolabe ball lowered again on the scene, this time containing Cressida. The new Helen, Cressida, too, became imprisoned by her lack of agency as the Greeks made her the new center of gravity. Pandarus attempted to speak to Troilus as she stared down at them, haunting the scene like a wounded conscience. Troilus spit at Pandarus, who looked dirty and beaten up. Davies's Pandarus sang a bit of the ending speech, as if crazed.

Bequeathing his diseases on the audience, Pandarus cursed us with the consequences resulting from *his* actions. However, the real disease that infects this version of *Troilus and Cressida* is the feverish realization that, for women, the Trojan War has never really ended. We still fight to be agents in our own lives. We still argue that our visions are true. Women may be the center of the universe for the Greeks and Trojans, but what that also means is that they are surrounded. Cressida's wish that she, herself, were a man, "Or that we women had men's privilege," is as much a battle cry in 2019 as it was in Shakespeare's lifetime – or Homer's.

Notes

1. For more on major performances of *Troilus and Cressida*, see Internet Shakespeare Editions: http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/Texts/Tro/#sip_p. Accessed 30 November 2018.

2. "Into the Soundscape," Program for *Troilus and Cressida*, Royal Shakespeare Company, p. 10

3. Female actors who played male characters dressed in stereotypically male attire.

Marcia Eppich-Harris is an independent scholar whose research focuses on Shakespeare and dramatic literature. Her published scholarship includes work on Shakespeare, as well as contemporary playwright, Nina Raine. Marcia is also an active creative writer and freelance editor.