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## ***Coriolanus* at The Stratford Festival**

Directed by Robert Lepage  
The Avon Theatre, Stratford, Ontario  
Performance Date: July 31, 2018

Reviewed by SUSAN ROJAS

Robert Lepage's production of *Coriolanus* was creative fusion, blurring and melding the lines that separate live theatre from cinema. Much like a film producer, Lepage employed plentiful computer and video effects to attract and direct audience attention as well as to situate and amuse: a video projection of opening credits with title, author, and cast/artistic; location information at the start of each scene; texting soldiers, complete with emoji. Although this could easily have fallen into the realm of gimmick and show, Lepage's incorporation of technology enhanced, rather than detracted from, the essence of Shakespeare's text. Often, the effects backgrounded the action, clarifying what was happening on stage and challenging the audience to consider a scene more deeply. Far from simply being a display of the latest special effects, Lepage's production was a rich exploration of themes such as loyalty, pride, honor, and friendship.

As the house filled, the curtain was open, revealing a Roman piazza projected to the rear of the stage. A large bust of Coriolanus was downstage, and the play began with this seemingly-marble bust speaking the character's disdain for the common people. The piazza and bust suggested a setting in antiquity, but the production was contemporary dress, with the men wearing fatigues, Class A uniforms, or suits and ties, and the women clothed in a fashionable modern style. Despite the costuming, the scene's aura of ancient Rome hung over the production, bringing to mind the old adage "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Props and scenery were also contemporary, and included computers, cell phones, hotel bars, and an airport tarmac. There were scrims for video projection at both the front and back of the stage. The front scrim was transparent, but like a cinema screen had thick black bars at top and bottom; these could expand and meet like an aperture, sometimes forming a frame around a particular character. Sets often changed by sliding into place from one side of the stage or the other, and some changed by morphing from one location to the next, transitioning like a PowerPoint slide. The ingenuity and fluidity of these changes helped hold the audience's attention and made it easier to follow the plot, as it strengthened the relationship between the scenes. To signal a more complete break in the storyline or total location change, the aforementioned aperture effect was used.

Act One, Scene One took place in a call-in broadcast booth, a brilliant choice of contemporary setting. Menenius (Tom McCamus), a Citizen (E.B.

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Smith), and the Host (Wayne Best) were seated around a table, monitors and windows behind them revealing as-it-happens protests and riots. Banter between the on-air trio and a concerned caller provided the plot exposition, and led to Menenius telling his “belly” tale and calling the Citizen “the great toe of this assembly.” Situating this as a call-in show was an excellent match for the trajectory of Shakespeare’s scene. It kept the backstory interesting, the action relatable, and underscored parallels between current and centuries-old social and political concerns.

The next scene literally slid into place; two box sets fitted like government offices moved from stage right and left to meet in the middle. Placing the opposing factions in offices next to each other allowed the audience to observe and contrast each. Stephen Ouimette (Junius Brutus) and Tom Rooney (Sicinius Velutus) were excellent as the tribunes, their scheming and schmoozing playing off the more circumspect Menenius. The adjacent offices made it possible for the three to quickly pop in and out for comedic bursts of insults, but the most effective use was the sight of Rooney kicked back in an office chair, aiming darts at a target hanging above his desk. In the neighboring office, Coriolanus (André Sills) leaned up against the same wall, giving the illusion of the tribune directing small knives into his back.

For Valeria’s (Brigit Wilson) visit to Volumnia (Lucy Peacock) and Virgilia (Alexis Gordon), the front scrim became a mostly transparent tapestry of what appeared to be battles and conquests. The women remained behind it, Virgilia sitting apart and continuing to sew on said tapestry throughout Valeria and Volumnia’s gossip session. Besides giving Virgilia an air of domesticity and fidelity, this suggested that perhaps she alone considered the reality of her husband’s military experiences. When the scene ended, the black boundaries of the front scrim came together and framed the now-weeping Virgilia. This isolation of a character via a blacked-out stage was at odds with the fluidity of the previous scene changes and their ready blending of action from one into the next. It directed the audience’s focus to her anguish, and implied that in her concern for Coriolanus’s safety over his gaining glory, Virgilia was entirely alone.

The siege of Corioles was recreated by Coriolanus’ son with his toys, a production choice both entertaining and thought-provoking. After setting out GI Joes, a plastic German Shepherd dog, and model buildings, the boy “filmed” the battle with a GoPro camera while pushing a miniature Jeep across the stage. The fight was projected on the front stage scrim, the boy supplying the necessary weapon sounds and shouting. This mix of child’s play and recounting of battle was both disorienting and effective, while having Coriolanus’s son reenact the siege gestured to Coriolanus himself as man-child. This theme underpinned all his interactions with Volumnia, who was portrayed as a wealthy, well-dressed woman fond of martinis. Swanning about the stage like the ultimate stage mother, she often related to Coriolanus as if he were a youth (after a disagreement with him, she tickled his stomach and sides until he laughed). Her need to monopolize his attention and get as close to him as possible, however, held an unsettling hint of physical attraction. After the banishment scene, her strong personality and need for control were given free rein as she ranted and raved at the tribunes in a posh

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restaurant, infuriated with the men who interfered with her son's success. Spent after her tirade, she sat slumped in a chair as the scrim aperture closed to frame her. As before, the aperture directed and focused the audience's attention, emphasizing Volumnia's isolation, frustration, and sheer intensity.

During the scenes related to Coriolanus' banishment, Lepage's use of technology was spot on, enhancing the text. The actors were center stage for the actual confrontation, but the surrounding arch and wings showed raw-video monitors playing the scene from different angles, digital timers counting down. This made clear that there was more going on than met the eye and many ways to view and interpret the situation. After his banishment, Coriolanus sped away from Rome in a sportscar, chugging coffee and slapping his cheeks to stay awake. The effects in this particular sequence were astounding and realistic: rain fell on the car, which seemed to become wet; landscapes changed; night changed to day and back again.

In contrast to the scenes of plenty in Rome, Volscia was a place of ruin with dirty, war-damaged buildings. Aufidius (Graham Abbey) and his troops had the air of a people beaten, their violence borne of desperation. Lepage did not shy from hints of same-sex attraction between Coriolanus and Aufidius; after Coriolanus's arrival at Aufidius's lodgings, the pair wrestled and tangled with glee. This and earlier suggestions of a physical relationship between Aufidius and his Lieutenant (Johnathan Sousa) were brought to bear in the final scene, which opened with Aufidius and his Lieutenant alone in a hotel room near a tousled bed. As others knocked at the door, Aufidius pulled the Lieutenant's shirt from the mussed sheets and hastily threw it at the Lieutenant's chest. A subsequent confrontation in the room, in which Aufidius's taunting of Coriolanus by calling him "boy" took on an additional, racially charged aspect (Sills is African-American), ended with Aufidius and Coriolanus fighting and grappling on the bed and the death of Coriolanus, shot by the Lieutenant. The Lieutenant's reaction, however, was more fraught and emotional than expected from a soldier protecting his commander; after Coriolanus's death he left the room unsteady and shaken. Was he jealous? Concerned for his lover's life? The scene was visceral, complex, and challenged the audience to reconsider perceived boundaries between honor and pride, physical attraction and admiration, desperation and valor, and loyalty and dereliction of duty.

Even without the use of technology, this would have been a fine production. The contemporary settings made the political aspects of the text more accessible while gesturing to the idea that history is cyclical, which helped the audience follow the details of the plot and kept them engaged. André Sills was strong and stolid as Coriolanus, and Tom McCamus's Menenius had the right blend of humor and world-weariness. The other actors were just as well cast, but based on her curtain call reception, Lucy Peacock's Volumnia was the favorite. All in all, Lepage's challenge to the boundary between live theatre and cinema was a success, bringing meaning, entertainment, and relevance together in just the right measure.

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**Susan Rojas** received her MA in English from Florida Gulf Coast University, and she is currently an independent scholar. Her research focuses on the representation of existential boundaries in early modern drama.