

First play, first row, first impressions.

Coriolanus, Robinson College Gardens, July 11th 2016

Here we go again! My first performance of the year and as I was sitting in the front row I did not want to take notes during it. This is, therefore, from memory so please forgive any errors or omissions as I am at the stage of life where remembering 1971 is considerably easier than remembering yesterday. I dictated some notes into my phone on the way home and have added whatever else I could remember.

I have always thought Coriolanus one of the most underrated of Shakespeare's plays. It's difficult to talk about 'underrated Shakespeare' given the reverence which we pay him, which he more than deserves, but nonetheless it is amazing how little attention has been paid, until relatively recently, to this outstanding play especially as it was written when Shakespeare was at such a magnificently productive period of his career. It follows soon after *Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, after all. This was its first outing at the CSF, so my anticipation was even keener than normal for my first performance of the year.

Those of you who have read me before will know that I take a dim view of biographical interpretations of art. This is for a variety of reasons, including that it seems an attempt to 'explain away' something that should be enjoyed on its own terms, and the impossibility of ever really knowing someone else's life with the inevitable result that the biography tells you more about the biographer than the subject of the biography. It is therefore usually a boon for me that we know so little about Shakespeare's life, which might seem an odd thing to say, but the beginning of *Coriolanus* gives a good illustration of why I think so.

The opening scene always makes me uncomfortable given that Shakespeare himself was a hoarder of grain to raise prices at a time of widespread hunger and subsequent rioting in his native Warwickshire. *Coriolanus* opens with the rioting citizenry complaining that:

*We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good.
What authority surfeits on would relieve us: if they
would yield us but the superfluity, while it were
wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely;
but they think we are too dear: the leanness that
afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an
inventory to particularise their abundance; our
sufferance is a gain to them Let us revenge this with
our pikes, ere we become rakes: for the gods know I
speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge.*

Try as I might, I cannot get the biography out of my head as I watch the scene and it is such a powerful one that I want to concentrate fully on all its many layers and insinuations. It is what it says about the play that is important, not what biographical significance may have been attached to it in

the author's mind as that is necessarily so speculative in nature that it could never be known with certainty.

The parts of Coriolanus and Volumnia are obviously crucial to any successful production of this play and I am delighted to report that they were carried off with aplomb here. I was obviously sure in advance that Tessa Hatts would be a perfect Volumnia, given her incredible work at the CSF over the years, but the gentleman playing Coriolanus was new to me. This was Angus Villiers-Stuart and it was his first appearance at the CSF (though not his first Shakespeare stint) and he was taking on what I think is one of the most difficult roles in Shakespeare.

Sometimes, presumably under directors' instructions, actors play him as a very one-dimensional character, only coldly calculating or a monster of one kind or another. That just does not work for me. Unquestionably, he is a single-minded warrior of proportions so vast that he seems cartoon-like, yet, at the same time, he is a very complicated man. Somehow an actor has to bring all of this out without the benefit of soliloquies. Coriolanus does not take the audience into his confidence any more than he pays heed to the plebeians. Yet, for the play to work properly, the actor has to be convincing whilst delivering what are, on the surface, contradictory messages as this noble character discovers his black and white view of things is fatal in a world of greys and equivocators.

Villiers-Stuart rose to the challenge and met it full on, thereby giving us a Coriolanus to remember. Physically imposing, he bestrode the stage like the warrior king he is supposed to be but he was much more than just that. Given that the dominant, fighting and imperious role is nearly ever present this is, as I alluded to above, no mean feat.

As you may have gathered, I am rather fond of Coriolanus for all that I abhor some of his beliefs. There is something very honourable and noble about him and I do not like him to lose his life in the end. Instead, I am very much on his side and the ending always affects me similarly to that of the film, *Angels With Dirty Faces* where I always want Jimmy Cagney not to pretend to be a coward. My dear departed dad used to patiently explain to me, from the age of ten onwards, that I was in the wrong and that the whole point of the film was that that Jimmy Cagney's character was a better man for pretending to be a coward. I could never accept it. Rationally it made sense but emotionally it made none. (I even held a sneaking suspicion my father really agreed with me.)

I feel the same way about Coriolanus' end and Aufidius final triumph. So much so that it was probably the first time I have ever wanted Tessa Hatts to lose an argument, but of course she did not. Truth be told it was unimaginable that she would after showing her mettle throughout the play, never more so than when she thundered: 'Anger's my meat' stalking off the stage, Juno-like:

*Anger's my meat; I sup upon myself,
And so shall starve with feeding. Come, let's go:
Leave this faint puling and lament as I do,
In anger, Juno-like.*

Of course the play has many more characters and apologies if I do not do justice to them all. Tim Atkinson is a very believable Aufidius, another difficult part undertaken with convincing confidence and another one that needs this level of portrayal for the whole thing to succeed. Cominius (Malcolm Davies) could not have been more aptly portrayed. He is a figure of authority saddened and frustrated by weaker men and you could feel at alternating moments this worthy man's impatience, scorn and steadfastness and loyalty. Adam Elms' extremely mannered Menenius worked an absolute treat. He is just a delight and even at his most pompous it is impossible to dislike him. Virgilia (Emma Longthorne) captured the role of the wife so very well that one felt heavily for her in

the face of all she had to put up with, even from those on 'her' side. Valeria (Scarlett Barrett) swept into the play with overwhelming panache and provided a strikingly contrasting demeanour in the scene where the women plead for Rome to be spared.



Malcolm Davies as Cominius – not a man with whom to trifle!

I do not wish to be offensive, but I really wanted to slap Scott Westoby and Matthew Stewart's faces! This is a compliment as they are meant to rile one's blood as they play the smirking, treacherous tribunes. All the doubling/tripling characters were excellent, and I can see Joseph Tregear, tearing across the stage in at least two different roles, in my mind's eye as I sit here typing this and it would be unfair to conclude this review without also applauding Evangeline Beaven, Andrew Skipper and William LaCour.

The last named here is very well worth keeping your eye on as Aufidius's lieutenant. The expression on his face and his extremely eloquent glances are like a stream of unspoken asides if not soliloquies. I realise this is impossible to convey in words. You have to see it for yourselves, but, trust me, he 'says' so much without speaking that it adds substantially to key scenes. Actually, now I come to think of it, amidst Menenius's mannerisms he also 'speaks' eloquently with his glances as others are speaking and he is out of the main action. Aufidius, more centrally, observes the final Volumnia-Coriolanus confrontation with a look that speaks volumes. Maybe everyone is doing it all the time – I will have to check when I next see it.

I do have a section in my book about the costumes used at the Festival but I never seem to get around to mentioning this in my reviews. I have to this time as they were tremendous. The way the Volscians and the Romans were very well set off against each other and the detail in the costumes

suggests a great deal of thought and work went into it. Aufidius was brilliantly attired, as was everyone in fact.

There seemed to be some uncertainty in the audience as to whether the interval music was the start of the second half. About midway through the interval some very beautifully played music by a variety of the cast was a nice touch (though I had to struggle with seeing a tribune, who I had just wanted to slap, playing a soothing violin). The music segued into the play resuming some time after the first notes were struck which brought the audience rushing back to their seats early. 'No bad thing' I thought to myself when it happened but I hadn't realised how much of the interval was still to go. I am not sure now that getting everyone to hurry back was the intention; maybe that will become clearer in future performances.

It was, after all, a first night and so there were some minor hiccups. A few lines, but only a very few, were lost to the night wind as actors turned to confide in whoever they were addressing. No matter how much you rehearse, it is never quite the same as performing for real and I am sure that these moments will not be repeated. I feel churlish even mentioning them but I do as otherwise I will be ticked off for being too enthusiastic and positive in my reviews. I know that I am but that is because I like the festival so much that I naturally accentuate the positive. It seems the only thing to do after such a wonderful night out.

Well done, folks and hats off to the director, David Salter.

Andrew Muir

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