

THEATRE REVIEWS

Roman Tragedies

Presented by **Toneelgroep Amsterdam** at the **Barbican International Theatre Events 2009**, London, England. November 20–22, 2010. Directed by Ivo van Hove. Translated by Tom Kleijn. Scenography and Lighting by Jan Versweyveld. Video by Tal Yarden. Music and Sound by Eric Sleichim. Costumes by Lies van Assche.

Coriolanus

Roeland Fernhout (Cominius), Renée Fokker (Tribune of the People), Fred Goessens (Menenius), Janni Goslinga (Virgilia), Marieke Heebink (First Senator), Fedja van Huêt (Coriolanus), Chico Kenzari (Aufidius), Chris Nietvelt (Anchorman), Frieda Pittoors (Volumnia), Alwin Pulinckx (Brutus), and Eelco Smits (Sicinius).

Julius Caesar

Roeland Fernhout (Brutus/Lucius), Renée Fokker (Cassius), Fred Goessens (Lepidus), Janni Goslinga (Calpurnia), Marieke Heebink (Casca), Chico Kenzari (Anchorman), Hans Kesting (Antony), Hugo Koolschijn (Julius Caesar), Hadewych Minis (Octavius Caesar), Eelco Smits (Decius), and Karina Smulders (Portia, Lucius).

Antony and Cleopatra

Roeland Fernhout (Thidias), Fred Goessens (Lepidus), Janni Goslinga (Diomedes), Marieke Heebink (Charmian), Fedja van Huêt (Agrippa), Chico Kenzari (Enobarbus), Hans Kesting (Antony), Hugo Koolschijn (Proculeius), Hadewych Minis (Octavius Caesar), Chris Nietvelt (Cleopatra), Frieda Pittoors (Iras), Alwin Pulinckx (Dolabella), Eelco Smits (Ventidius), and Karina Smulders (Octavia).

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Toneelgroep Amsterdam's *Roman Tragedies*, part of the Barbican International Theatre Events (BITE) 2009 season, was a provocative, ambitious production conflating and reimagining Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* to create a chronicle of emerging populist Roman rule which traced public and private forms of ambition and power. Premiering in Amsterdam in 2007 and staged a year later at



Chris Nietvelt as Cleopatra and Hans Kesting as Antony (above), with (from left to right) Eelco Smits as Ventidius, Christ Nietvelt as Cleopatra, Marieke Heebink as Charmian, Jacob Derwig as Thidias, Hans Kesting as Antony, Janni Goslinga as Diomedes, Frieda Pittoors as Iras, Alwin Pulinckx as Dolabella, Barry Atsma as Enobarbus, Fedja van Huêt as Agrippa, and Hadewych Minis as Octavius Caesar (below) in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, directed by Ivo van Hove. Photo courtesy of Jan Versweyveld.

the 2008 Avignon Festival, the London staging of the play was the Dutch company's Barbican debut and its first production in London after a ten-year absence. The smart set-design, modern-dress costuming, and brilliant music complimented superb ensemble acting and a carefully crafted script to produce a deftly layered, visually stimulating study that vitalized the historical past by depicting, somewhat chaotically, political clashes of the present. Running time was approximately five-and-a-half hours with brief scene changes of three to ten minutes in lieu of an intermission. Actors delivered dialogue in Dutch.

A sleek, visually impressive contemporary set design used the entire Barbican stage to create an open-plan modern conference center. The audience was invited to watch the action on the stage amongst barrel-shaded accent lights, mushroom-colored modular sofas and stuffed chairs, coffee tables, and office planters. Numerous plasma-screen televisions delivered live and recorded images. Additional common areas were located to the far sides of the set, including makeup and first aid stations, a Toneelgroep



Fedja van Huêt as Coriolanus (above), with (from left to right) Marieke Heebink as First Senator, Renée Fokker as Tribune of the People, Barry Atsma as Aufidius, and Jacob Derwig as Cominius (below) in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Coriolanus*, directed by Ivo van Hove. Photo courtesy of Jan Verweyfeld.

Amsterdam information area, and a bar and café serving London Pride and Pad Thai, among other fare. A space was also dedicated to a computer that was connected to a red LED display that ran English surtitles underneath the screen above the proscenium. The audience was invited to type messages that were then transmitted to the display, which meant that a good amount of jocular commentary was delivered when the surtitles were not running. Such messages, often distracting and gratuitous, included the following: "Apparently all Dutch men are gorgeous. I'm moving to Amsterdam" and "Take off your shirt Aufidius."

The production favored the use of technology and media over the presentation of psychological theatre, creating what van Hove likens to an X-ray image. Multiple playing spaces that offered varied points of view gave a lucid, postmodern quality to the chronological unfolding of dramatic events. Van Hove incorporated a range of media forms almost continuously into the performance, including loops of UK and US news stories as well as live feed of the stage action delivered by a hand-held camera. At some moments, up to four separate video images ran simultaneously to create a fractured world. Footage of current events, such as

the Middle East conflict, President Bush's charm offensive, reports of the war in Afghanistan, Olympic swimming, an interview with John Edwards discussing his involvement with Rielle Hunter, and video of the audience on the stage and in the auditorium provided ironic, poignant perspectives not only of ourselves but also of these Roman stories through which we identify elements of our Western tradition. Van Hove pushed the boundaries of theatrical convention by blurring audience and actor, watcher and watched, actor and bystander by presenting an all-too-often disturbing portrait of twenty-first century witnesses to world politics.

The production constantly gave the audience an uneasy sense of everyday people watching difficult personal and political events unfold from the comfort of an elegant hotel bar or home media room. Actors in sharply tailored business suits turned pages of newspapers while waiting for their cues in *Coriolanus*; an audience member on the stage casually texted messages from his phone between sips of red wine during *Antony and Cleopatra*; an actor quickly consumed a banana and some water during a scene change. The production repeatedly interrogated the fine line between fiction and reality in the performance itself. One could not help but think of lonely military spouses awaiting the return of their loved ones from Afghanistan when the play opened with Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'" as Virgilia, dressed in jeans and a button-down blouse and seated on a sofa, impatiently thumbed through a magazine and Volumnia anticipated her next political move. The clash between Coriolanus and the tribunes resembled a recent violent fight on the floor of the Greek parliament. As actors playing tribunes read newspapers to pass the time before performing their manipulations, video of presidential candidate John McCain streamed on upstage plasma screens. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Egyptian queen and her servants partied wildly, drinking champagne and dancing erotically to the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Hump de Bump (Yo Body)." Later, Cleopatra dressed Antony to kill in the modern armor of a button-down shirt, jacket, and tie.

For the majority of spectators who were paying careful attention to the main action, many strained to maintain an uninterrupted focus, which was clearly part of van Hove's plan to provide an experience of living in an information age of 24/7 news. I wanted to become enveloped by the acting in front of me, but my best intentions were often thwarted by the provocative flashing of the mass media images. At other times the images deepened the portraits of politicians—portraits that proved neither skeptical nor cynical. The large screen above the proscenium (and the English surtitles running beneath it) created the greatest distraction to



Chris Nietvelt as Cleopatra (left) and Marieke Heebink as Charmian (right) in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, directed by Ivo van Hove. Photo courtesy of Jan Versweyveld.

watching the stage action, even as it offered a privileged and otherwise unattainable close focus. A vivid and disturbingly beautiful operatic narrative played out in dual perspective both live before audience members' eyes and as filtered through something resembling CNN or Sky News. It was impossible to ignore the message that present-day politics is delivered through the media—and mostly through television screens—even, strangely, when one is there in person.

One of several highly successful uses of media occurred during the forum scene of *Julius Caesar*. Camera close-ups delivered intimate details, such as the anguished confusion signaled by the commingling of sweat and welling tears, or the throbbing of veins in an actor's neck. The live feed showed subtle alterations in the lineaments of Brutus's face, revealing the emotion that belied the restraint of his formal speech. During Antony's impassioned funeral speech, delivered downstage, a camerawoman followed his movements closely as he spoke into a handheld microphone, marked a photograph of Caesar's dead body in red slashes to signal the stab wounds, and spoke directly to the audience. The effect forced the audience to become the crowd, entirely absorbed. As the camera pulled back to enlarge the scene, Brutus's back entered the picture while Antony the victor stared us straight in the face. The composition of the entire



(From left to right) Chris Nietvelt as [character], Renée Fokker as Cassius, Jacob Derwig as Brutus/Lucius, Hugo Koolschijn as Julius Caesar, Eelco Smits as Decius, and Marieke Heebink as Casca in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Julius Caesar*, directed by Ivo van Hove. Photo courtesy of Jan Versweyveld.

stage picture skillfully juxtaposed the two speeches in a singular expression. This sequence formed one of the finest of the production, and it reminded us that we are the SPQR, always complicit in the action, albeit helplessly so.

A sense of the inevitability of death unified the performance, and became increasingly poignant as the body count increased. In a highly stylized, ritualized manner, from the death of Coriolanus to Cleopatra's suicide, the director dramatized the art of dying and the problem of grieving in worlds completely consumed by politics. All of those who met their end did so on an *ekkyklema* that was bound by two Plexiglas sheets in the "dead" center of the center stage—a space accessible only to the deceased. Cameras projected shots of the lifeless bodies in cold, antiseptic light on the large center screen creating images resembling those of a hospital morgue. This killing zone was also used effectively in the war scenes in *Julius Caesar*: the plastic walls, outlined with maps in white crayon, separated the two camps. The area was perhaps used most stunningly when an utterly astonished Cleopatra grieved for the death of Antony. After dragging her fingers through the map's smeared remains, she committed suicide using a live snake. This recurring focus on dying



(From left to right) Eelco Smits as Venitidius, Hans Kesting as Antony, Barry Atsma as Enobarbus, Hugo Koolschijn as Proculeius, Fred Goessens as Lepidus, Jacob Derwig as Thidias, Alwin Pulinckx as Dolabella, Hadewych Minis as Octavius Caesar, as Fedja van Huêt as Agrippa in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, directed by Ivo van Hove. Photo courtesy of Jan Versweyveld.

might have become too heavy, given the duration of the performance and the accumulating body count. Van Hove was aware of this. At one point, in a welcome moment of dark humor, a message ran across the main screen announcing death countdowns: in 5 minutes, Cassius; 15, Brutus; 120, Antony; and in 140, Cleopatra.

Tom Kleijn's double translation into Dutch and modern English produced clear and coherent surtitles, yet significantly diminished the beauty and precision of Shakespeare's language, an intriguing yet distracting aspect of the performance. One noteworthy example came from the Messenger in *Antony and Cleopatra*: "Get out, you horrible scum, or I will play football with your eyes." Combined with the mode of delivery via the LED display, one realized almost immediately that reading the surtitles and text messages meant diverting one's attention away from the superb acting that made the play so successful. The stunning style of the set, costuming, and lighting, though, compensated for the linguistic shortcomings. The modern translation particularly complemented other contemporary aspects of the production, such as Eric Sleichim's deft



(From left to right) Fred Goessens as Menenius, Fedja van Huêt as Coriolanus, Eelco Smits as Sicinius, Alwin Pulinckx as Brutus, and Jacob Derwig as Cominius in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Coriolanus*, directed by Ivo van Hove. Photo courtesy of Jan Versweyveld.

handling of music and sound. From the banal elevator music that played during scene changes to the singularly haunting effect of an on-stage musician rubbing two wood blocks together, Sleichim created a beautiful, idiosyncratic, and masterful soundscape.

Van Hove made several adaptations and reconfigurations. He substituted battle scenes with artfully orchestrated music, including compositions of thunderous barrel drums and strobe lighting, which created highly effective moments of danger. The removal of plebeians from *Coriolanus* and the crowd from *Julius Caesar* forced the audience to focus more clearly on the lives of politicians rather than on their interaction with the public. The Clown in *Antony and Cleopatra* was sadly absent, which could have lent some lightness at such a profound moment. In some cases, women performed male parts, such as Hadewych Minis as Octavius and René Fokker as Cassius. Although this decision complicated their relationships with Brutus and Antony, it allowed van Hove to approximate something like a present-day political reality. The overall effect of these omissions and substitutions, when joined with the media-saturated staging, was to convey the thesis that politicians use democracy solely as a tool to manipulate people into believing that they have a voice.



(From left to right) Frieda Pittoors as Iras, Chris Neitvelt as Cleopatra, Hans Kesting as Antony, and Eelco Smits as Ventidius in Toneelgroep Amsterdam's production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, directed by Ivo van Hove. Photo courtesy of Jan Versweyveld.

Following the production, which received a standing ovation, van Hove projected onto the large screen one hundred questions that had arisen out of rehearsals. These questions presented lines of inquiry pertaining to the nature and state of the Western political world. Although not much of the audience stayed to read them in their entirety, these questions were very likely provoked in any case by the deeply visual, intellectual, and emotional experience we had just been a part of. The performance interrogated so much about our condition that van Hove's passionate study will surely leave a deep impression for years to come.



Titus Andronicus, A Comedy of Blood

Presented by the **Olympique Dramatique** at the **Toneelhuis Theatre**, Antwerp, Belgium. November 5–December 19, 2009. Directed by Olympique Dramatique. Scenography by Herman Sorgeloos. Costumes by Ilse Vandebussche. Lighting by Harry Cole. Sound... With Willy Thomas (Titus), Mieke Verdin (Tamora), Greet Verstraete (Lavinia), Geert Van Rampelberg (Saturninus), Ben Segers (Bassianus), Koon de Graeve (Martius, Mutius, Alarbus, and Chiron), Wouter Hendrickx (Aaron), Stijn van Opstal (Dem-