

SHAKESPEARE'S ROMAN PLAYS AS A POLITICAL TRILOGY

Jozef De Vos

Abstract:

The paper discusses an interesting theatrical experiment carried out by director Ivo van Hove in 2007, staging in one performance Shakespeare's three Roman tragedies *Coriolanus* (1608), *Julius Caesar* (1599) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-1607), in a veritable *tour de force* for the company Toneelgroep Amsterdam and the audience. It looks at the use of theatrical space and sets and actors to make the three, almost simultaneous performances work together or against one another, forcing the viewers to constantly make the connection between the related plots, trying to understand the director's concept of the production and fully enjoying the spectacle.

Keywords: *performance, Roman tragedy, experimentation*

Of Shakespeare's four Roman tragedies, *Titus Andronicus* is clearly the odd one out. It is a gruesome Senecan tragedy, which has hardly any grounds in history. The three other plays, *Coriolanus* (1608), *Julius Caesar* (1599) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-1607), although classified in the First Folio as tragedies, are in a sense also history plays. All three are closely based on North's translation of Plutarch's *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (1579) and are profoundly political plays. *Coriolanus* depicts the conflict between republicanism and absolutism and this is continued in *Julius Caesar*. *Antony and Cleopatra* is different from the two other Roman plays in that it focuses much more on the personal tragedy of the lovers but it also deals with the power struggle which directly results from the murder of Julius Caesar. The play concludes with the establishment of an efficient, rational, authoritarian regime which has defeated the realm of the senses and emotions.

The three plays dramatize fierce conflicts and show how personal lives are connected with and become victims in the process of political change. However different they are, there is a certain continuity and even cohesion to be found in them. It is therefore interesting that one of Europe's foremost directors, Ivo van Hove, has staged the plays together in a magnificent six hour production

under the title *Romeinse tragedies*.¹ Van Hove made this production, which broke new ground in several respects, together with Jan Versweyveld, the scenographer with whom he has collaborated throughout his career and with the company Toneelgroep Amsterdam, of which he is artistic leader.

Bringing the three plays together in an all but uninterrupted six hour show implied that Van Hove had to cut as much as possible the purely anecdotal matters as well as the military events, which he nevertheless managed to include in a clever way. The spectator thus witnessed the development of the political debate and its consequences throughout the trilogy. Moreover the production succeeded in rendering a sense of the sweep of history in a masterly way. The latter effect was largely created by the over-all scenographic concept.

The large space of the platform which could easily and quickly be modified in the course of the show, looked like a big newsroom or a conference center. Modern design benches and tables created separate units within the large hall which was mainly characterized by the presence of monitors and screens. The setting may also have suggested the lounge of an airport. Whatever the associations, it was a huge public place within which certain more private spaces could be used which, typically, were never completely separated from the whole. A central and crucial place in the setting was given to a large screen on which the spectators got news flashes in the style of CNN or on which they could watch certain scenes that would otherwise have remained obscured or that took place in a part of the stage too far removed from them. In addition to this large screen there was also an illuminated news trailer on which historical information about the context, the military events etc. was given. It also announced the death of the historical figures, each time one of them was about to be killed. This ingenious concept had several advantages. First, it allowed Van Hove to make the story more compact, to cut all the military events which were thus quickly reported. Second, it certainly contributed to suggesting the

¹ *Romeinse Tragedies* by Toneelgroep Amsterdam. Director: Ivo Van Hove; Translation: Tom Kleijn; Dramaturgy: Bart Van den Eynde, Jan Peter Gerrits, Alexander Schreuder; Music: Eric Sleichim; Costumes: Lies van Assche; Scenography & lighting: Jan Versweyveld.

Cast: Barry Atsma (Aufidius, anchorman, Enobarbus); Jacob Derwig (Cominius, Brutus/Lucius, Thidias); Renée Fokker (tribune, Cassius); Fred Goessens (Menenius, Lepidus); Janni Goslinga (Virgilia, Calpurnia, Diomedes); Marieke Heebinck (senator, Casca, Charmian); Fedja van Huêt (Coriolanus, Agrippa), Hans Kesting (Antony), Hugo Koolschijn (Julius Caesar, Proculeius); Hadewych Minis (Octavius Caesar); Chris Nietvelt (anchorman, Cleopatra); Frieda Pittoors (Volumnia, Iras); Alwin Pulinckx (Brutus, Dolabella); Eelco Smits (Sicinius, Decius, Ventidius); Karina Smulders (Portia, Lucius, Octavia)

Première: Holland Festival Amsterdam: 17 June 2007. Since then, the production has been presented in Brussels, Antwerp, Vienna, Avignon.

sweep of history. The audience felt they were involved in the action. Third, it was part of updating as it were the events. Everything had a contemporary outlook: the furniture, the screens, the costumes etc. The spectators were even allowed to take seats on the stage. Those who did so admittedly had only a limited view but could watch everything on one of the screens. During the short five minute breaks the audience could buy a drink or a snack, or check their e-mail on the stage. All this was of course meant to create the sense of being part of the events in a completely mediatized world. That sense of witnessing important historical events and changes was suggested from the moment the spectators entered the auditorium and heard Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin".

A central position on the stage was given to a kind of rectangular platform where all the great protagonists from history fell when they were killed. In *Antony and Cleopatra* this was modified into a glass cage suggesting Cleopatra's monument. Immediately after their death a photograph of the politician's slain body was shown on the central screen, which, incidentally, reminded audiences in the Low Countries of the assassination of the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. It is important, I think, to stress the fact that the killing of Coriolanus and Julius Caesar as well as the death of those who die in the later developments, were presented without any spectacular action. No blood was seen in these episodes. The assassins simply closed in on the victim who was then laid down on the central platform. These were cold, business-like political eliminations. Paradoxically perhaps, the murders seemed no less cruel for that. They were quickly carried out and the media immediately reported them. The way Van Hove staged the killings left little room for false rhetoric. Brutus' attempts to describe the murder of Julius Caesar as a ritual in which Caesar is sacrificed – "a dish fit for the gods" - became all the more hypocritical.

But Van Hove's grand narrative begins of course with *Coriolanus*. It is a measure of Shakespeare's subtlety and impartiality that this play has often been interpreted in conformity with the ideological frame of mind of the interpreter. Brecht was particularly fascinated by the good arguments Shakespeare gave to the tribunes.¹ But the play has also been hijacked by the extreme right, as in the notorious production in France in 1933-34 by the Comédie Française that sparked off violent political demonstrations.²

Van Hove took care not to impose any particular view or prejudice and he was supported in this by the wonderfully subtle acting of his company. Fedja

¹ Cf. Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater*, (Berlin & Frankfurt am Main; Suhrkamp Verlag, 1962), 174-197.

² Cf. Isabelle Schwarz-Gastine, "Coriolanus in France from 1933 to 1977: Two Extreme Interpretations", *Shakespeare and European Politics*, ed. D. Delabastita, J. De Vos & P. Franssen, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 124-142.

van Huêt's Coriolanus clearly was a strong personality, marked by stubbornness no doubt, but also emanating honesty and personal integrity.

The director concentrated on the major conflict between the patricians and Coriolanus on the one hand and the plebeians on the other. In both *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar* the people are an important presence. They typically disappear in *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is a far more personal tragedy. This difference was a major problem for Van Hove's project of staging the three plays in one production. The whole scenographic concept necessarily became less relevant here, which was perhaps exacerbated by the fact that after watching two parts, the excitement it created from the beginning had somehow worn off. In *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar* the people's role was emphasized by integrating the audience in the performance. The tribunes sometimes spoke from and emerged from the auditorium.

The long discussions with Coriolanus, senators, the compromise-seeking Menenius versus the tribunes were staged as an impressive political conference. All participants were sitting behind tables with microphones, arranged in a semi-circle center stage. Coriolanus' outbursts here were overwhelming and unstoppable. The fierce verbal confrontations eventually led to Coriolanus' scuffle with the tribunes.

A crucial factor in the constitution of Coriolanus' character and in the tragedy itself is the role of his mother Volumnia. Frieda Pittoors, dressed in black, was a stern rational woman. In the domestic scene in the beginning (I,3) in which Volumnia goes so far as to imagine herself as her son's wife, Pittoors sat matron-like at the back of the stage on a higher level, sat matron-like at the back of the stage on a higher platform, while Virgilia (Janni Goslinga), more human, vulnerable and quiet, anxiously awaited her husband's return from the war. Pittoors had a harsh voice and a determined look throughout the performance. In the supplication scene Coriolanus' surrender to the pleas of his mother who had taught him the very steadfastness she asks him now to give up. This tragic irony was pointed up by reducing the role of Virgilia to virtual silence and leaving out the boy as well as Valeria.

Banished from Rome, Coriolanus seeks refuge with the enemy. In this production "Breaking News" announced that he had "sought political asylum" with the Volsci. The meeting between Coriolanus and Afidius was staged in a subtle way. Both men were sitting on chairs on a centrally placed platform. Although both military men were wearing ordinary contemporary suits, they both had a bandage on the wrist, suggesting that, as warriors, they were somehow kindred spirits. They even embraced and the homo-erotic implications of the text were felt in the delicate acting of both.

The third part of the production began with the announcement for the audience that "in three minutes' time they were to witness the death of Coriolanus". This announcement (a similar one was made in *Julius Caesar*)

paradoxically heightened the tension and the spectator's concentration on that tragic end, which happened quickly and efficiently. The show uninterruptedly moved on to *Julius Caesar*, viz. the scene where Casca tells Brutus about the people offering Caesar a crown. Immediately the spectators found themselves in the midst of the political game.

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* continues the struggle between republicanism and constituted authority. As in *Coriolanus*, Brutus' personal morality is incompatible with concrete politics. Interpretations of this play too have often tended to side either with Caesar or the conspirators. Van Hove's view seemed to be free from prejudice. His production aimed at a balanced treatment of the political conflict. He saw Caesar as a charismatic leader who succeeds in taking into account the needs of the people and who does not shrink from admitting his own flaws, which makes him even more attractive. Caesar's policy is one with a human face but pretty hard-hearted at the same time.¹ Hugo Koolschijn's interpretation of the role perfectly combined an impressive stature (the "colossus") with a pleasing "bonhomie". Koolschijn's tall figure and bald head contribute to the former aspect, while his at times jocular tone and his appearance in undershirt suggested the latter.

This very human appearance of Julius Caesar made Brutus' false arguments for the murder seem all the more self-deluding. Ironically Jacob Derwig's Brutus, though he perfectly rendered the intellectual and Stoic aspects of the character, acted in an all but dictatorial manner when rejecting the arguments of Cassius.

It is sometimes said that *Julius Caesar* is very much a play of men. Yet, both Brutus' wife Portia and Caesar's wife Calpurnia are interesting roles and their respective relationships with their husbands also shed light on the men. Director Van Hove recognized the parallelism between the scene in which Portia complains to her husband that he does not share his plans and worries with her and the scene in which Caesar first gives in to Calpurnia's request not to go to the Capitol but then breaks his promise after hearing Decius' explanation of her dream. Van Hove had the actors play both scenes simultaneously. Whatever the differences in their relationships, in both cases the wife's arguments and concerns were overruled. The parallelism also allowed Van Hove to introduce a fine touch at the end, when the two actresses briefly met and Calpurnia just touched Portia for a moment, suggesting a kind of solidarity between the two women.

As already mentioned the murder itself took place quickly: the conspirators surrounded Caesar, took his body and put it down on the central platform. Deliberately Van Hove avoided all elements - the blood, the dramatic

¹ Cf. Ivo Van Hove in the programme brochure for the performances in de Singel, Antwerp

confrontation (“Et tu Brute”) - that could suggest a ritualization of the event. Far more important were the political speeches that followed.

Brutus was business-like and stuck to the words he had prepared on paper. Hans Kesting as Antony wonderfully combined genuine emotion with rhetorical manipulation of the masses. In the beginning he stood, like Brutus, behind the lectern that had been prepared for the speakers but he soon threw away his paper and exchanged this formal position for a more natural, seated one in front of the lectern so that he could reach out directly to the spectators. When talking about Caesar’s will, he even stepped down to mingle with them. Throughout his performance he was followed by a camera-man and when he showed Caesar’s mantle he himself grabbed the camera to focus on it. Antony’s talent for manipulating the people was thus directly linked with the media society which provided the over-all framework of the show.

An interesting aspect of the staging of Antony’s oration was the position of Brutus and some of his partisans during the speech. Initially they stood confidently behind the speaker as if to emphasize their being united in the same cause. Typically it was Cassius who first got irritated and saw the danger of Anthony’s rhetoric. He whispered something to Brutus who still tried to ignore it. One after the other the conspirators left the stage in anger.

In contrast to this grand public performance, the scene in which the triumvirs are plotting together and cynically deciding on the list of those to be eliminated and the famous quarrel scene between Brutus and Cassius were shown upstage, more removed from the audience.

It was predictable that it would be hard to integrate *Antony and Cleopatra* in the general concept of the production. For one thing, the people, the crowd that has an important role in the preceding plays, is no longer present here. It is almost as if Antony’s Machiavellian manipulation has put an end to their impact. From now on, we watch the great men making war and defining politics among themselves. Since the play focuses mainly on the love relationship between Antony and Cleopatra, it is a far more personal drama. It did not come as a surprise, therefore, that in the last part of the show, Van Hove no longer allowed spectators on the stage. A more sensual atmosphere characterized the setting which now contained a number of sofas. In the opening scene, Antony, on one of them was lazily whiling away time with a videogame. Cleopatra sat together with Charmian on another one. Drinking champagne marked the way of living in Egypt. Even at the very end a bottle was uncorked.

Chris Nietvelt, who played Cleopatra, succeeded in rendering the “infinite variety” of the role. Fickleness, sensuality, jealousy, cunning and a girlish playfulness characterized her performance. But she also brought to the role a certain vulgarity. At one point, for instance, she even licked Enobarbus. On top of that, she exaggerated so much in her fierce outbursts of upbraiding

that she turned into a veritable shrew. These aspects unfortunately detracted from the tragic stature she was to attain at the end.

One particular scene which marvellously synthesized the mood of the play as well as the conflicting forces within the lovers was V,4, the morning when Antony prepares for battle and Cleopatra, after first suggesting to "Sleep a little" helps him put on his armour. Putting on the armour almost became an erotic game and at the same time both lovers seemed to express a sense of doom. This was aptly punctuated by Bob Dylan's great song "Not Dark Yet", which was to be heard at this point.

Antony's decline is reinforced by the fact that even a loyal partisan such as Enobarbus leaves him. When he learns that Antony has sent his possessions after him, he is overwhelmed by grief and remorse and dies of a broken heart. Van Hove highlighted Enobarbus' individual drama by having him commit suicide in an agonizing way. Desperately Barry Atsma, who played the part, ran out of the theatre. A few moments later the spectators could see on the central screen that he had run to his death on the bridge of the nearby motorway.¹ This was a shocking episode in which Van Hove expanded the theatrical space into the real world outside.

Antony's great opponent in the play, the incarnation of victorious efficiency, is of course Octavius. Van Hove had an actress, Hadewych Minis, play this part. This strikingly blonde woman was extremely hard, passionless, almost literally "unmovable". Yet, a long French kiss with Octavia on the occasion of her farewell suggested an incestuous relationship, which made the use of her as a pawn all the more painful.

Antony and Cleopatra is a long play and Van Hove obviously had to cut a great deal to make it fit in the over-all design of the production. It is therefore all the more striking that he did not make any concessions in the final death scenes. Both lovers were given time and space to transcend their worldly concerns, pleasures and differences to be perfectly united in and after death. The central platform where all the protagonists had died was now transformed into a glass cage, functioning as Cleopatra's monument. When the Romans arrived on the scene of death, they still tried to resuscitate Cleopatra. The last words in honour of this "pair so famous" are of course spoken by the victorious Octavius Caesar. The last announcement on the news trailer informed the audience that he was to establish eventually a period of peace and stability. The spirit of Caesar seemed to triumph after all.

And yet, the enormous weight given to the grand death scenes as well as the useless attempts to resuscitate Cleopatra suggest that the lovers' self-chosen death but also their choice for what they considered "the nobleness of life" is a kind of triumph over the extreme callousness and efficiency of Caesar.

¹ This was the case in de Singel, Antwerp, where I saw the production.

The magnificent concept of the production which in a seemingly effortless way transposed the historical events in a media-dominated and globalized world also demonstrated the coherence of the plays as political dramas. Barbara L. Parker¹ has argued that the Roman plays collectively show a constitutional decline which even resembles that defined in Plato's *Republic*. Ivo Van Hove has sharply recognised this historical process in the three plays while at the same time doing justice to the interaction of politics and human behaviour.

¹ Barbara L. Parker, "From Monarchy to Tyranny. *Julius Caesar*, Among Shakespeare's Roman Works", "*Julius Caesar*". *New Critical Essays*, ed. Horst Zander, (New York & London: Routledge), 2005.