

THEATER REVIEW

# A ‘Roman Tragedies’ for the History Books

The International Theater Amsterdam presented Ivo van Hove’s exhilarating Shakespeare marathon in a one-off, livestreamed production.

By Matt Wolf

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Six hours have rarely passed so quickly, or been so smart.

That was the immediate take-away from the livestream last Sunday of the director Ivo van Hove’s “Roman Tragedies,” an exhilarating distillation of Shakespeare’s three Roman plays performed throughout an afternoon and into the evening as part of the International Theater Amsterdam’s ITALive program.

This marathon, modern-dress sequence of “Coriolanus,” “Julius Caesar” and “Antony and Cleopatra,” first performed in the Netherlands in 2007 and widely toured since, was revived for one mid-pandemic performance. And where similar offerings often remain online for later viewing, in this instance live meant live. If you blinked last weekend, you missed it — though six hours, to be fair, is quite a long blink.

Van Hove wasn’t yet a Broadway and West End favorite when “Roman Tragedies” was first produced, but the Belgian maverick has since moved into the mainstream, winning Olivier and Tony Awards for his searing reappraisal of Arthur Miller’s “A View From the Bridge.” Now as much of a star as the actors he draws to him, van Hove had just overseen the opening of his first Broadway musical, a production of “West Side Story,” when the pandemic shut down New York theaters almost a year ago.

Despite van Hove’s gathering renown, I can’t think of a later production than “Roman Tragedies” that better exemplifies his skill for eliding past and present so that centuries-old texts acquire a hurtling immediacy. Precarious governments rocked by political infighting are common to all three plays, and van Hove links those machinations to our current age by playing video footage of contemporary world leaders in the background.

The stage is set in van Hove’s signature anonymous style, with no time for period detail. And there are cameras at the ready — another favorite van Hove device. (At one point in “Antony and Cleopatra,” Bart Slegers’s anxious Enobarbus broke the fourth wall to bolt outside into Amsterdam’s wintry streets, catching dismayed passers-by unaware.) But what has perhaps become predictable about his aesthetic over time works stirring here, as does his insistence on the timelessness of the plays, which seem more apposite now, perhaps, than ever.



The stage for “Roman Tragedies” is set in van Hove’s signature anonymous style, with no time for period detail. Jan Versweyveld

He could never have guessed, in 2007, that talk of advancing upon the Capitol in “Julius Caesar” would link the death throes of the Roman Republic to events in Washington last month. When Hans Kesting’s bearish Mark Antony in the third and longest of the plays spoke of “a sudden passion for mutiny,” you couldn’t help but think of assaults on democracy then and now, from the classical world to modern-day Myanmar.

The smoothed-out rendering of Shakespeare's text — Sunday's streaming was presented in Dutch, with English and French subtitles — dispensed with Elizabethan archaisms, allowing the plays' meanings to emerge afresh. Key lines remained intact — woe betide anyone who messes with "Et tu, Brute?" — but elsewhere Tom Kleijn's translation streamlined and brought clarity to the proceedings, highlighting themes that connect the plays without letting the obfuscations of language get in the way.

Only in Cleopatra's death scene did I miss the luxuriant wordplay of the original, which contains some of Shakespeare's most ravishing verse. And yet that cavil fell away with Chris Nietvelt's piercing performance as an Egyptian queen so poleaxed by the death of her Roman lover that she let rip with a series of screams. Could this have been the same actress from the opening play, "Coriolanus," where she embodied a TV anchorwoman always smiling, no matter how grievous the news she had to report? Nietvelt completed a tremendous theatrical hat trick with her performance in "Julius Caesar" as a Casca full of foreboding about the chaos to come.

If Nietvelt stood out amid an astonishing cast of players from the International Theater Amsterdam's ensemble, no praise is too high, either, for Gijs Scholten van Aschat as Coriolanus. He played the Roman leader not as some blood-spattered action movie hero but as a graying figure of great volatility who won't be reined in by a jacket and tie when his natural habitat is the battlefield.

Both Cassius and Octavius Caesar were played by women, and a neat reordering of the scenes in "Coriolanus" allowed a determinedly macho play to begin with a conversation between the mother and wife of the prideful general of the title: Van Hove, in a clever touch, grants these women voices well before the play's surrender to toxic masculinity.

How thrilling, too, to see a large cast onstage, unfettered by the constraints of social distancing. (The theater said in a statement that Sunday's show "complied with all current governmental measurements surrounding the regulation of livestreaming for cultural institutions in the Netherlands.") Shakespeare demands intimacy, but I've never seen such a hyper-affectionate "Antony and Cleopatra," with so many lingering smooches, and not just between the title characters.

And yet it's the countdown toward extinction and death, whether politically or individually, that unites these three plays. "Roman Tragedies" began and ended to the strains of Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are a-Changin'," a song that looks forward to a waiting calamity. The implication, as van Hove made plain, is that the times haven't really changed at all.