

THEATRE

The Roman Tragedies

Barbican Theatre, London

Teneelgroep Amsterdam's non-stop production of *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* might have been expected to anger those who exalt the liveness of theatre. Most of the action, which takes place around a large, cluttered media lounge of a set, is visible on a video screen above the stage, where we also have to look for surtitles. Yet this is live action, and the audience becomes an integral part of it. For we are invited, during each of the brief scene changes that replace intervals, to come onstage for the next segment, sit on a sofa, get food and drink, even check our e-mail.

A number of productions of Shakespeare's Roman plays use the audience as the mob of plebeians at required moments, but director Ivo van Hove integrates us throughout as the *populus* of *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, among and amid whom these events take place. And even though we are, as it were, the arena, we still have to look at screens to get the full picture, for that is the condition of contemporary world events. And if that picture is confused, well, history is written by the winners, but rolling news has to cover all the bases. Indeed, some news bulletins are interpolated with the action, so that we see interviews with *Coriolanus*'s enemy Tullus Aufidius; moreover, an LED display above the video screen periodically ticks the day's real-life news past us.

It is a thrilling enactment of the way the modern citizen exists amid the multi-valued carnival of politics and media coverage. It is, however, far from faultless. Turning a number of main characters into women may make sense in contemporary terms, but it jars with the distinctly subordinating assumptions of the plays: how can a female Octavius Caesar conquer most of the known world and yet no one question her treatment of her own sister as a chattel? Some of the actuality footage shown on minor screens is specious: the implicit analogy between Julius Caesar and JFK does not stand up to scrutiny.

Above all, I found that the production had made all its presentational and structural points by its halfway mark. I am an aficionado of theatrical marathons, yet I found these six hours were enough to run me into the durational "wall" but not through it.

★★★★

Ian Shuttleworth

Chris Nietvelt
and Hans
Kesting in
'Antony and
Cleopatra'



MORE ARTS ONLINE

'King of Chu', Shanghai
Dirty Projectors, New York
www.ft.com/arts