

## Theatre Roman Tragedies

Barbican

★★★★☆

Benedict Nightingale

Every inch of the vast Barbican stage had been transformed into a mix of open-plan office, conference centre and café. We spectators were asked to slump on its sofas, eat, drink or do a bit of everything, watching actors who were simultaneously live and projected on to screens. The much-praised six hours of modernised and condensed *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* that Toneelgroep Amsterdam brought to London last weekend was clearly meant to suggest that politics haven't dated too much since Shakespeare's era or, indeed, Roman times.

In many ways Ivo van Hove's highly original production succeeded in that aim. A reactionary soldier turned politician can't accept what the surtitles call "a two-party system" and violently opposes it. A principled democrat assassinates an aspiring dictator, but can't see that the result will be riot, civil war and new varieties of tyranny. Another military politico puts his own needs above those of the state and doesn't destroy only himself and his mistress but brings about centuries of one-man rule. People sit at tables to debate, quarrel and fight, with newscasters interrupting the proceedings to report disasters or battles. At times I thought I

was watching Sky News or BBC World.

Did that justify the one thing that got me down: those English surtitles? Aufidius to waverers: "Why don't you just get a life?" Coriolanus of the Roman plebs: "We scatter trouble when we allow them to mingle with us nobles." Brutus to Cassius: "Be as angry as you please, let it out; you only scold when you're in a bad mood." Cleopatra: "It's hard work wearing frivolity so close to the heart as I do." Ditto to messenger: "Get out, you horrible scum, or I will play football with your eyes." Shakespeare did surface but mostly he was submerged in the downbeat lingo of today, which may have been the point.

Much was missing, most damagingly the Roman mob and, from *Antony and Cleo*, Pompey. A bit was added, including an Egyptian singsong that went "doop bop bump de hump". The place of women was much emphasised, with the anxieties of Caesar's Calpurnia and Brutus's Portia pointedly juxtaposed and Octavius called "he" but played by a female, Hadewych Minis. Still, she was wonderfully frosty. Fedja van Huêt's Coriolanus ferocious, Hans Kesting's Antony magisterial, Chris Nietvelt's Cleopatra a narcissistic harriidan with a screech to raise the roof. But would I sit or slump through those six hours again? Probably not.