

REVIEW: *Coriolanus/ Post-Coriolanus/ Counter-Coriolanus/ DCoriolanus?*

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DCoriolanus: directed by Myer Taub. Masker Theatre (University of Pretoria). 28 March to 1 April 2017.

In his essay “Sing of the new invasion”, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests that “the way to test a great work of art is to ask how it survives decontextualization, transposition into a new context.” He claims that “one good definition of a classic is that it functions like the eyes of God in an Orthodox icon: no matter where you stand in the room, they seem to be looking at you.”¹

Judged by this criterion, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* is undoubtedly a classic. The play establishes an exquisite tension between the competing demands of the Roman proletariat and the ambitions of their aristocratic masters. The result, as Michael Dobson points out, is that the play continually tempts “its theatrical interpreters to intervene on one side or the other in order to make their own political sympathies unambiguously clear.”² Stuart apologist Nahum Tate, for instance, rewrote the play in 1681 to glorify Coriolanus and make his opponents appear to be entirely cynical and self-serving. Yet only thirty years later John Dennis produced *The Invader of his Country*, in which a power-mad Coriolanus is contrasted with freedom-loving tribunes. These oscillations have continued even into the twentieth century. Thus in 1934, the Comédie-Française was induced to stage a version of the play which represented it as nothing less than an attack on democracy itself, while only a few years later, the Nazis celebrated the work as a hymn to strong leadership. Even Bertolt Brecht adapted *Coriolanus* for his Berliner Ensemble in ways that emphasised its sympathy for the common people.

Given the chameleon-like nature of the text and the political turbulence currently rocking both South African universities and the foundations of our constitutional democracy, I was intrigued, though not entirely surprised to find the play reinventing itself yet again on the campus of the University of Pretoria. In this production, a cast of drama students under the direction of Myer Taub joined to deconstruct not only Shakespeare’s text, but theatrical conventions themselves, using the shadowy remnants of the play to voice the rage, distrust, hope and uncertainty triggered by the FeesMustFall protests. Significantly in *DCoriolanus* the traditional opposition between strong leadership and democratic accountability was replaced by a void that could be filled by neither the crawling, dehumanised crowds nor the flickering and contradictory appearances of the eponymous central figure. In this context, the repeated cry, “Where is Coriolanus?” gained terrible resonance as it became clear that neither the fictional character nor a

1 Slavoj Žižek, “Sing of the new invasion”, *The New Statesman*, 12 December 2011.

2 Michael Dobson, “An introduction to *Coriolanus*”, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/an-introduction-to-coriolanus> (accessed 28 May 2017).

local replacement for him was ever going to emerge. In this production “the eyes of God” in Žižek’s imagined orthodox icon were undoubtedly fixed on the local and the contemporary.

The unsettling nature of *DCoriolanus* was also emphasised by its radical challenges to dramatic conventions. Throughout the performance, audience, actors and technical crew were forced to navigate uncertain spaces and undefined relationships. Rather than beginning on cue as house lights dimmed and the audience settled into their seats, the performance started with the arrival of a flustered director-wannabe, Marriane (Danielle Britz), who meandered through the uneasy crowd gathered in front of the locked theatre doors, giving every appearance of talking to herself while searching dispiritedly for her keys. Denying the production even the possibility of performance status, she thanked the audience for coming to audition, before leading them into a repurposed theatrical space, in which the left and right wings of the theatre, the balcony, the foyer and even one of the aisles challenged the traditional dominance of the stage.

The ticket holders were then divided into numbered groups, so that anxious watchers were deprived even of the affirmation provided by familiar companions as they were led from performance area to performance area within the theatre. Dialogue erupted without warning from within each group in ways that turned both actors and observers into participants. The expansion of narrative space was in inverse proportion to the loss of personal space, engendering an uncomfortable sense of both helplessness and complicity. Those members of the audience who clung to the map on their programmes in an anxious attempt to maintain control within this unfamiliar arena, found their desire for the illusion of order frustrated by a document in a childlike hand, in which even the name of the central character was misspelled. The presence of eleven actors of both genders playing Volumnia and ten playing Coriolanus further undermined any possibility of establishing prior awareness of who was likely to speak, how they would interact with those around them and what they were likely to say.

In fact the production as a whole was powerfully shaped by the subversive use of language. Fragments of Shakespearean blank verse cut like shards through screams and murmurings, repetitive cries and restless susurrations of discontent. The cast also moved effortlessly from English to Zulu and other South African languages in ways that firmly undermined the primacy of English, while simultaneously supporting the emotional intensity of the dramatic experience. The difficulty inherent in understanding Shakespeare’s language was therefore matched by the incomprehensibility of some of the other contemporary but just-as-alien words being used. Ultimately words and script were stripped of all but vestigial meaning and simply floated on a dark current of inchoate and despairing need.

The repurposing of theatrical space posed enormous theatrical challenges since the theatre lighting and acoustics did not fully support the new demands being placed on them. Moving the groups about smoothly also required split-second timing from the young performers. At times the intrusion of sounds from other spaces made it difficult to focus on activity in one’s own, but the way in which sound travelled between acting areas arguably also highlighted the difficulty of categorising any action as more important than or as fixed in sequential relationship to any other. Lighting was more of a problem. While dimness was atmospheric in the wings of the theatre, some of the most powerful performances were on the balcony and the inability to fully exploit the potential of stage lighting to enhance these was felt. An initially comforting performance area was provided in the foyer of the theatre where the incompetent director from the opening scenes sat in a full-length robe applying makeup in a well-lit alcove. The temptation to relax into a less-demanding audience role here was overwhelming, but within moments of doing so, watchers’ complacency was again destabilised by anachronistic asides, videos about Shakespeare on Robben Island and a demand that one of them should read a speech from Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*.

The key question, I suppose, is whether the production succeeded in decolonising *Coriolanus* as the title teasingly suggests it was attempting to do. Certainly the linguistic range of the script, the contemporary flexibility of most of the costumes, and the appearance of graffiti celebrating Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandela tore the play loose from its historical roots and enriched it with African resonances. Yet, as I watched, I found myself irresistibly reminded of the great European Modernists. In its despairing abandonment of any possibility of truth or epiphany, the production evoked nothing so much as T.S. Eliot’s *Waste Land*:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water.

(ll. 19–24)

Therefore while *DCoriolanus* undoubtedly resisted Shakespearean tropes and conventions, it seems to me to have done so not by resisting Europe but rather by engaging with Brechtian concepts of “alienation”, with Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty” which required performers to assault the senses of the audience in order to break down the barriers preventing them from accessing the repressed emotional currents of the subconscious, and with Grotowski’s vision of “poor theatre” stripped of the artifice and resources supposedly crucial to the maintenance of illusion. Like Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon I too found myself waiting for Godot/Coriolaniot and waiting in vain.

Does this mean that the performance was unsuccessful? Not at all. The choice of interacting with Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* seems to me to have been made in full awareness that decolonisation is a doomed project if it is envisaged as the eradication of Western influence and ideas. What is known cannot become unknown. What has been experienced cannot be denied. Given this, the haunting and often-repeated question of the play, “Should we be silent and not speak?”, becomes immensely important.

Ultimately, it seems to me that in this production, Taub and his students produced not a decolonised *Coriolanus* but what the great African scholar Ali Al’amin Mazrui might have recognised as a counter-penetrating one. The performance allowed Africa to enter into a global dialogue in such a way that our voices were neither subordinated nor disregarded. In using twentieth-century tools to unpack an Elizabethan text and allow it to speak both to and from an African context, Myer Taub and his students engaged confidently in a complex exploration of art, power and the dynamics of the relationship between them. I look forward to seeing where the conversation takes them next.

Professor Molly Brown (molly.brown@up.ac.za) is currently the head of the English Department at the University of Pretoria where, among other things, she manages a postgraduate course in medieval and early modern Romance and supervises research students working in this field. Her particular research interest is in early modern literature as well as its later incarnations in popular fantasy and literature for younger readers. She has also worked on the role of so-called indigenous fantasy in the children’s literature produced by postcolonial societies. She is fascinated by adaptation and the ways in which individual readers and reading communities actively engage with texts to create new meanings. Recently this led her to publish an opinion piece titled “Shaking off Shakespeare” in response to the Minister of Basic Education’s suggestion that Shakespeare should no longer be studied in South African schools. She has also published academic articles in a number of journals including *The Lion and the Unicorn, Papers: Explorations in Children’s Literature, Mousaion* and *The English Academy Review* and reviews for *Medievally Speaking* and *Literature and History*. Longer ago than she likes to admit, she studied Drama at Rhodes and she remains hopelessly addicted to theatre.