CORIOLAN/US, BRECHT, SITE AND INTERVENTION

Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes are directing another wonderful and extraordinary site specific production of a classic dramatic text.

A couple of years ago it was Aeschylus's *Persians* set in a simulation of a German village used for military training in the Brecon Beacons of Wales [Link].

Currently running is Coriolan/us – a hybrid of Shakespeare and Brecht set in Hangar 858 at RAF St Athan, the air force base in the Vale of Glamorgan, south Wales.

(For the National Theatre of Wales. In association with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Commissioned for the World Shakespeare Festival, which is produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company for London 2012 Festival – [Link])

Again – this is the most powerful kind of energized and critical articulation of past and present – through performance.

Photograph: Mark Douet/National Theatre of Wales

Here is Michael Billington in *The Guardian* – [Link]

Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes have taken over a vast aircraft hangar, once used by the RAF, for a spectacularly immersive show that conflates Shakespeare's Roman tragedy and Brecht's adaptation of it. We absorb the text through headsets while following the action either as it erupts around us, or by watching it on two large video screens. What we are left with is the sensation of being caught up in a city in a state of chaotic, revolutionary turmoil.

It is the immediacy of the events that grabs you. As the senator Menenius tries to reason with the starving

citizens, they start to rock the campervan on which he is precariously perched. The war hero Coriolanus stands blindfolded on a chair soliciting popular votes for the consulship, and his palpable contempt for the process leads to ugly street fights. Best of all, for me, was when Coriolanus joins forces with Rome's enemy, Aufidius: the two men sit stony-faced in the front seats of a Volvo while Menenius ignominiously creeps into the back to plead for Rome to be spared.

This is a stark, unsentimental vision of the play that argues, as Brecht did, that no individual is indispensable: Coriolanus ends up shot full of lead and conspicuously unmourned. The play's topical urgency was no less vividly captured in the Ralph Fiennes movie, but this production has the merit of making us feel we are in the thick of events rather than detached bystanders.

Susannah Clapp in *The Observer* [Link]

They have produced an unforgettable political and personal drama: rich, tough and resonant.

The experience they offer is of being seized, overwhelmed and yet intimately spoken to. The audience

is adrift (this is a promenade performance) in a lofty, clamorous space, yet enclosed in a bubble of sound: you hear the speeches through headphones. Characters loom out of the crowd, at first indistinguishable from audience members; vans race around; in trailers on the periphery the actors not officially onstage become spectators, waiting for news and scanning the events, quietly intense. The action whirls through the building (divided only by one low wall of breezeblocks), sometimes wrongfooting an audience who may be looking elsewhere and don’t always know where the speakers, who are talking so urgently in the ears, actually are. Sometimes – a point about news coverage is made lightly but decisively – it’s easier to watch an event on the enormous video screens that dominate the back wall than to see the live event: things, after all, are clearer when confusion has been cropped.

The unyielding iron, concrete and cement of the hangar, where surfaces and sounds are harsh and rasping, are exactly right for the action and verse of a play summoned up succinctly in verse by TS Eliot and forensically in film last year by Ralph Fiennes. Fluorescent lighting intensifies the harshness; when

those strips are suddenly dimmed, the darkness, pricked only by the small red lights of the audience's headphones, is both soft and bewildering: how do we cope when not led by the flare of screens?

The speaking is so uniformly excellent – so intent, so spittingly clear, so totally natural – that it would be not only wrong but actually impossible to pick out one actor to blazon above another. Every line rings out, every argument about democracy, heroes, wheedling politicians hits home. Everyone plays together as if their lives depended on doing so.

The result is an outstanding production that makes several big points about the theatre today. First, site-specific theatre does not necessarily mean that speech is overwhelmed by visual awe: the delivery of words can be as exact in an exciting space as in a bland one. Second: we are in an era in which Shakespeare's sourest plays are sweetest to our ears. Coriolanus comes hot on the heels of the Olivier's glorious revival of Timon of Athens, a play whose exiled, snarling, hero is so similar to Coriolanus that the two dramas have been considered two parts of a whole. Third: these brilliant offerings from the

National Theatre of Wales (no one who saw it will ever forget The Passion) mean that we can no longer talk of “the National” and mean only the South Bank.

Sarah Hemming in *The Financial Times* [Link]

“What is the city but the people?” demands Sicinius at one point in Coriolanus – and National Theatre Wales makes the question the bedrock of this gripping promenade production. Here we, the audience, are the people – milling, drifting, scattering in alarm as the action plays out in our midst. Directors Mike Brookes and Mike Pearson splice Shakespeare’s tragedy with Brecht’s Coriolan, creating an urgent, muscular text. They neatly separate the “us” in the title to underscore their emphasis on the crowd and remind us that, despite the play’s original Roman setting, it has much to say to a world familiar with popular uprisings and violent political upheaval. And they stage the play in a disused aircraft hangar: a vast, chilly and alien space that feels both voluminous and claustrophobic. This is an unsettling, hermetically sealed world in which the volatile mood of the piece seems heightened.

Here the story of Coriolanus, his military zeal and his

proud, fatal reluctance to woo the crowd, unfolds in a succession of intense encounters dotted around the space, among burned-out vehicles, behind breezeblock walls. The modern dress and use of vans and cars give the piece a topical feel. The audience wear headphones and can also watch the action, relayed instantaneously, on giant video screens, adding to the contemporary resonance.

But Brookes and Pearson don’t draw specific parallels: this setting is a dramatic version of Rome, a young republic in which allegiances are fickle and febrile and there is a constant sense of simmering violence. The crowd here is both crucial and malleable, and, as the audience scuttles from one scene to another, the production creates a keen sense of the fluctuating support of the plebeians and the key characters’ responses to this

Also – The Telegraph [Link]; the BBC [Link]; The Stage [Link]

Photograph: Mark Douet/National Theatre Wales

See also my recent comments on site and intervention – [Link]