

Making Shakespeare Useful: A pared-down, portable *Coriolanus*

TANYA VAN DER WALT

Coriolanus: directed by Rohan Quince and Nicola Pilkington. National Children's Theatre (National School Tour). February-June 2016.

In his book *The Shifting Point*, the great British director Peter Brook likens Shakespeare's work to coal:

Shakespeare doesn't belong to the past. If his material is valid, it is valid now. It is like coal. ...the meaningfulness of a piece of coal to us starts and finishes with it in combustion, giving out the light and heat that we want. And that to me is Shakespeare. Shakespeare is a piece of coal that is inert. I could write books and give public lectures about where coal comes from – but I'm really interested in coal on a cold evening, when I need to be warm and I put it on the fire and it becomes itself. Then it relives its virtue.¹

In viewing the National Children's Theatre's recent touring production of *Coriolanus*, I was reminded of this idea of Shakespeare's work as something that only becomes itself when we put it into action and make it useful; as something that we use, in order to understand our present through his view of the past.

The decision to make *Coriolanus* a Grade 12 set work for IEB (Independent Examinations Board) schools in South African in 2016 is a brave one. This is by no means an easy play, and in many ways it defies definition or categorisation. For the discerning reader, the parallels to the drama of contemporary South African politics are clear, but whether these will be as easy to grasp for the average Grade 12 learner remains to be seen. However, the play offers a range of learning opportunities for learners and teachers alike, and I was thrilled to find that IEB schools had the chance to see the play in performance. I fervently believe that Shakespeare's work needs to be taught in a manner that engages with the texts performatively, and my own experience of teaching Shakespeare has always been that a practical, performative engagement with the text almost always engenders a far greater understanding of the play – and a clearer sense of how

1. Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point: Forty years of theatrical exploration 1946 – 1987* (London: Methuen, 1988), pp.95-96.

these 400-year-old plays can still be relevant to young South Africans today. Engaging with the play performatively, we can indeed use Shakespeare's work like coal, to bring light and warmth to our understanding both of the texts themselves, and of our own very contested present. This production of *Coriolanus* demonstrated a slick, well-rehearsed and thoughtful treatment of the play, and was very well received by the learners present at the performance I saw. While offering a considerably shortened version of the play, the production worked well to communicate the key plot developments and the relationships between central characters; these were clear and easy to understand, even for the most jaded and uninterested member of the learner audience. Performed in a highly physicalised style, by an energetic and committed young cast, the performance sought to break the fourth wall and make the learners part of the action, bringing them into the debates of the play in a physical and vocal way. I was impressed by the confidence with which the cast dealt with the demands of the text, despite the poor acoustics of the school hall in which they were performing. Their natural and grounded delivery of the text was convincing, and I think would have been very useful in helping the learners to grapple with Shakespeare's language.

The way in which the production engaged the text in action was also pleasing, with the cast making good use of the stage space through the use of different performance levels, tableaux and strong visual images. Sarah Roberts' design was excellent, and worked extremely well in a touring context. The set consisted of a few simple, portable and adaptable elements, such as a large trunk, a set of camp stools, and a very versatile set of wooden staffs, that were used cleverly throughout the performance. The costume designs were also simple, but the use of colour, and elements such as scarves and drapes to delineate different characters and roles, worked extremely well. I was particularly impressed by the seamless integration of the design elements into the directorial approach. While the design was deceptively simple, in performance it functioned as a complex system of signs which helped the learner audience to navigate the shifts in locale and character that are so hard to indicate with a limited set and a small cast.

The direction of the play, by Rohan Quince and Nicola Pilkington, carried strong echoes for me of the work of Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Berthold Brecht: paring the play down to its essentials, and presenting it in a very clear, physicalised and ritualised way. It was interesting to note that at least one other audience member read these echoes very clearly, commenting after the performance that he could see how they had used ideas from Brecht's "Epic Theatre" and Grotowski's "Poor Theatre" in the production. The use of this stripped-down approach, along with the level of ritualisation of the action, served the play very well, in that it allowed the directors to present the text in a clear and sharply defined manner. An enormous amount of attention was paid to the fine details of the action, which served to make every moment of the performance 'readable' to the audience.

The cast worked very well as an ensemble, with no particular performer standing out above the others. Pilkington, in discussion with me after the performance, mentioned that they had worked hard to achieve this, even down to synchronising their breathing at times – which was evident in the effective use of breath and chant to punctuate the action of the play. All the cast members delivered confident and sincere performances, and I was impressed by their level of commitment and focus. This extended to the question-and-answer session afterwards, where the cast were able to discuss the text intelligently and thoughtfully with the audience. I thought that the cast and directors' excellent handling of questions added enormously to the educative value of the production, as they were able to elicit a large number of responses from the audience, which allowed them to probe the learners' understanding of both the text and the performance itself.

One thing that did bother me somewhat was that the extensive cutting of the play sometimes removed scenes which allowed us to appreciate the motivation for characters' actions. This arose during the question-and-answer session when some audience members, who were clearly already well-versed in the play, questioned why certain scenes were cut, as they felt that these omissions had interfered with their understanding of why characters were behaving as they did. For me, the clearest example of this was the way that the edited script presented

Volumnia; because of the cutting of some earlier scenes between her and Coriolanus, her later actions towards her son seemed at times almost contradictory, and certainly puzzling. That said, I completely understand the necessity for cutting the text, which is far too long and unwieldy for performance in a school setting.

Towards the end of the performance, I did feel that the rhythm became a bit unsettled, and some of the later scenes seemed to lose their focus slightly. This was not helped by the poor acoustics of the hall, which made the more heightened dialogue of the final scenes harder to hear. However, despite this, the performers held the attention of the learners (not always an easy feat) admirably.

This was only the second time I had seen this particular play in production, having seen Debbie Lutge's version at the Durban University of Technology in 2009. There was a very clear contrast between the two productions; while Lutge's version was much more lavish, with huge sets, many set changes and a very large cast, in many ways I found the National Children's Theatre production to be more watchable in its simplicity and pared-down approach. I suppose it appealed to the Brook scholar in me – I seek to find the essence of a text, and communicate that clearly and simply to an audience. I thoroughly enjoyed this version of *Coriolanus*, as a school touring production and as an interpretation of a very difficult play, and I believe that it makes a valuable contribution not only to the field of Educational Theatre but also to the scope of Shakespearean productions in South Africa.

Tanya van der Walt is a freelance researcher and theatre maker. Her primary research interests are in the areas of directing, acting, and drama- and theatre-in-education. She is currently pursuing doctoral research using self-study methodologies to investigate the co-construction of knowledge in the process of theatre making. Her undergraduate studies were conducted at the University of Natal (Durban) and she holds an MA in Drama from Rhodes University. Her career in theatre has included stage management, lighting design, arts administration, marketing/publicity, acting, directing, writing and teaching.