

Cultural Daily

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Colossal Coriolanus, Tepid Tempest at Stratford

David Sheward · Thursday, August 16th, 2018

Visionary Canadian director Robert LePage has been accused of stressing his technologically dazzling concepts at the expense of the text. In his magnificent staging of Shakespeare's infrequently performed saga of power and mass hysteria *Coriolanus* for the Stratford Festival in the province of Ontario, he gives the lie to that calumny. LePage's innovative and ultramodern effects are anything but gimmicky and serve the purpose of the Bard's theme of easy public manipulation, an especially relevant trope in this age of social media and governing by Twitter. This astonishing production combines elements of film and theater to create a third, hybrid form, moving with the speed of light yet still carrying the full weight of Shakespeare's dynamic and scathing indictment of thoughtless mob mentality.



Members of the company in the Stratford Festival production of *Coriolanus*.

Credit: David Hou

Through means of LePage's intricate set and Laurent Routhier's multidimensional lighting, the stage of Stratford's Avon Theater transforms into a dozen locations with fascinating fluidity. LePage, along with Steve Blanchet, listed as creative director and designer, has created individual box units which travel horizontally and vertically and can seem to shrink and expand through the use of black masking curtains. Thus, he delivers the theatrical equivalent of close-ups, dissolves and other cinematic tricks. He even begins the evening with movie-like titles credits. One particularly dazzling sequence features a transformation from a stylish, subdued cocktail lounge to a blaring airstrip complete with a landing plane in a matter of seconds.



Lucy Peacock and Andre Sills in *Coriolanus*.

Credit: David Hou

This filmic approach and totally modern setting (Mara Gottier created the sleek costumes) is perfect for the plot. *Coriolanus* is a proud Roman general refusing to stoop to court the public's good will in order to be elected to a civilian position in government. A pair of jealous tribunes stir the common people's ire against the arrogant military hero and he is banished. LePage updates the setting to our media-crazed present with plebeians phoning in to radio talk shows, soldiers exchanging texts projected on a giant screen, and the exiled *Coriolanus* driving what appears to be a real sports car through a video terrain of ruined cities and dense forests to his former enemy's encampment.



The cast of *Coriolanus* at the Stratford Festival.

Credit: David Hou

Fortunately the sterling performances of the Stratford cast are not overwhelmed by LePage's wizardry. In the title role, Andre Sills is a combination action hero and tragic towering figure. He employs his massive bulk to convey the sheer the power of this military man and his rich voice and precise diction to impart his intelligence and pride. Yet he becomes a churlish boy in the presence of his lioness of a mother Volumnia played with fiery intensity by Lucy Peacock. When these two collide, the stage explodes. Tom McManus makes a sagacious and sober Menenius, Coriolanus' trusted mentor, and Stephen Ouimette and Tom Rooney are suitably conniving and self-interested as the plotting tribunes. Graham Abbey brings the necessary macho swagger to Aufidius, Coriolanus' battlefield rival and nemesis, plus an intriguing tinge of gay sexuality, hinted at in Shakespeare's text and brought into the open by LePage. This is a perfect production and one that hopefully be brought to other stages outside of Stratford.



Martha Henry in *The Tempest*.

Credit: David Hou

While LePage perfectly combines all the elements of script, cast, and production, Stratford artistic director Antoni Cimolino comes up short with a tepid *Tempest*. His concept and several stage effects are arresting, but the beating heart of the play is missing. Bretta Gerecke's dazzling sets and costumes beautifully create a fanciful, magical world and Cimolino staged numerous effective sequences including a rousing initial storm scene and a truly terrifying tormenting of the villains featuring an impressive giant harpy.



Andre Morin and company members in *The Tempest*.

Credit: David Hou

There are also many fine individual performances, but the necessary connections between the makeshift island community created amid the shipwrecked magician Prospero, the daughter Miranda, the ethereal sprite Ariel and the resentful reptilian Caliban, were not credible. Stratford veteran Martha Henry makes Prospero into a wise, matriarchal figure, but her bond with Mamie Zwettler's energetic Miranda was perfunctory. Apart from Henry's occasional fussing with Zwettler's hair, there was no tenderness or spark between the two. Henry's approach to the role is more temperate and mild, lacking the usual explosive dynamism (lest I be accused of sexism, I have admired previous female Prosperos including Helen Mirren's interpretation in Julie Taymor's 2010 film version.) Andre Morin's Ariel was earthbound, while Michael Blake was muted in delivering Caliban's simmering rage. The only joy and liveliness is provided by Stephen Ouimette and Tom McCamus who inject a sense of reckless wiliness into the drunken clowns Trinculo and Stephano. More reaction from the Stratford and nearby Shaw Festivals will follow in upcoming reviews.

Coriolanus: June 22—Oct. 25. Stratford Festival at the Avon Theatre, 99 Downie St. Stratford, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 50 mins. including one intermission.

The Tempest: May 28—Oct. 26. Stratford Festival at the Festival Theatre, 55 Queen St., Stratford, Ontario. Running time: two hours and 40 mins. including one intermission.

All productions: repertory schedule; \$191.53—\$24.50 (Canadian); (800) 567-1600 or www.stratfordfestival.ca.

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