

Minimal Set has Maximum Effect on Shakespeare Virgin

Though seemingly simple, the set by David P. Gordon is most impressive and highly effective in both form and function. What appear to be no more than strategically placed walls in a space lightly adorned with a few key pieces of furniture and props actually creates the perfect backdrop for a Shakespearian tragedy as epic as Antony and Cleopatra.

The Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre presents Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra at the Stephen Foster Memorial. This tragedy by William Shakespeare, directed by James Christy, is based on historical truth. The production surpasses the expectations of one who has only read such works. The performance gives way to the realization that being human inevitably brings us to internal and external conflict as love versus loyalty, emotion versus reason, duty versus pleasure, pride versus humility, and even being male versus being female.

The play hinges upon such opposing forces building in tension, evoking contradictory emotion among both characters and audience alike. Death seems the only way to be free from the struggle but even this seems to raise new contradictions of emotion.

The contrast of ideas is visually expressed as the scenes easily go from a room lavish with brightly colored, oversized pillows and candles to a place much more subdued by a few wooden benches. Rome versus Egypt is marked brilliantly with these few minor changes in set pieces yet both sceneries somehow give the illusion of grandeur as much of the play takes place in the abodes of royalty. Even the entrances and exits in precisely the right places give the feel of movement from Egypt to Rome and from battlefield to bedchamber.

The story of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra centers around Octavius Caesar (Marks) and Mark Antony (Sam Tsoutsouvas), two of three rulers of the Roman Empire. Antony has met and fallen hard for Cleopatra (Helena Ruoti), Queen of Egypt and decides to stay there. The result, Antony shirks his responsibilities as a Roman soldier causing a rift between he and Octavius and soon battle ensues.

Initially the costumes donned by the first male characters to appear seem oddly close to clothing that could be seen today. This made it difficult to put things in the perspective of the setting but as the play progresses this is soon forgotten. The costumes of the principle players give the expected visual for the time and place in which the play is set.

Sound designer David Huber uses very specific music at celebrations for instance, like that of Antony's marriage for example, to augment the feeling of being part of the celebration. The sound effects used during the battles aided in suspending the belief that very intense war was taking place though we could not see it. The sound filled in the visual left to the imagination.

The character of Cleopatra (Ruoti) is high drama all by herself. She may be intentionally exaggerated to the point of behaving much like the female stereotype that still exists today- Swooning over a man one minute then in a jealous rage the next, blissfully in love and then suddenly depressed, perfectly fine one moment then inconsolable and completely irrational the next. This does however make the Queen very human, almost ridiculously so.

Octavius is well played by Leo Marks. Glimpses of his emotional side come through at interesting moments but not so much that he appears weak. The final scene is a great example of this. His enemy to be, Antony (Tsoutsouvas), is also well played as the acting affords us the opportunity to hear, see, and feel the torment of being caught between two worlds. Tsoutsouvas effortlessly moves between victory and defeat, joy and anger, strength and weakness.

The ensemble work is remarkable, most notably between the Queen and her female attendants. They had to be very comfortable with each other to believably pull off their farewell.

This production leaves a lasting impression with nice work by the principle players, great ensemble work, and amazing use of the set. It is a wonderful introduction to Shakespeare and the world of ancient Rome and Egypt.