



A Moveable Match: Troilus and Cressida

by Virginia Cooke. Written on 2016-12-04. Published in 2017 Issue 2.

For the production: *Troilus and Cressida* (2016, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

HOW DOES A DIRECTOR HIT THE RIGHT TONE WITH *TROILUS AND CRESSIDA*? CAN THE DEATHS OF Patroclus and Hector be given weight when balanced with the cynicism of Thersites and the comic hubris of the braggart soldier Ajax? Love and betrayal and war intermingle in *Troilus and Cressida*, but the play offers no resolution, no apparent respite. The Studio 58 production at Langara College in Vancouver (November 17-December 4, 2016), responded admirably to these challenges. Director Kevin Bennett, an alumnus of Studio 58 who has since studied at Stratford (Ontario) and worked as an assistant director at the Globe Theatre in London, was brought back to direct this student production. The result was a remarkable piece of theater, full of ingenuity and integrity, about which the ensemble can be deservedly proud.

The audience experience began a full half hour prior to the "opening" of the play, as the actors chatted with audience members, partly in character, but ranging widely in topics. Then, pretty seamlessly, the play started with a choreographed, heraldic call to the soldiers/actors to assemble. The flexible set, a credit to designer Shizuka Kai, consisted of movable platforms which could be pushed together to form a raised stage or pushed apart to create a sort of square "boxing ring" inside which both physical and verbal battles took place. Besides the usual audience seating, on two sides of the set, there were some seats suspended from hooks, placing those who sat there within the action. The large cast fully utilized both the set and the entire theater. What was created in both staging and direction was the feeling of various groups (soldiers and others) who were not disciplined or orderly, but who debated and carped and observed--commenting to audience members as well as each other, and bringing us all into the action of the play. At one point, when Ulysses' arguments had become convoluted, an exasperated Nestor retorted "You've completely lost me," and looked to the audience for confirmation. At another juncture, as the Trojans debated whether Helen was worth the price of war, Troilus, extremely well portrayed by Teo Saefkow, actually winked at me!

The costumes were hard to define, composed of casual contemporary clothes coupled with armor, and helmets cleverly created by placing crests atop baseball caps turned backwards. In

his notes, costume designer Christopher Gauthier commented that he wanted to follow the Elizabethan tradition of having actors wear contemporary clothing regardless of the time period of the play. Why Troilus wore pink socks remained a mystery to me.

Soldiers were of mixed gender, perhaps most surprisingly Ajax, played the "brawny Greek fighter" by Camille Legg. Ulysses and Thersites, too, were female and all were convincing; Emily Wilson handled Ulysses' dense language adroitly, and Chloe Richardson somehow managed the impossible role of Thersites. The casting did not suggest that women were "playing" men, but rather that the two armies simply and unsurprisingly contained both men and women soldiers (after all, it is/was 2016). This mixing of genders required few textual changes (apart from the occasional pronoun) except with respect to Cressida's father, who in this production became her mother, which raised the question of whether this woman would have had the power of demanding her daughter's transfer as payment for the release of the captured Trojan Antenor, especially in this setting where women are traded and "valued" or "devalued."

The actors portraying the Trojans were also strong. Zack Currie as Pandarus deserves special mention; his Pandarus was compelling and at times voyeuristic, yet very touching as fortunes declined. Conor O'Gorman's Hector proved both sympathetic and consistent, strong in his arguments to return Helen, fair in battle. If Shakespeare intended us to think "What a waste!" when Hector was killed, then this production fulfilled that intention.

Raylene Harewood understandably had more trouble in the role of Cressida. While Troilus exuberantly threw himself into the throes of love, Cressida needed to show restraint and caution (for fear of devaluation). Later in the Greek camp, as the unseen Troilus observes, she reluctantly betrays his love as she accepts the advances of Diomedes. Like Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Troilus is being coached to see what his enemy (in this case the wily Ulysses) wants him to see, and cannot hear Cressida's declaration of misery as she betrays Troilus, so he concludes the worst: that she is simply depraved. "This is and is not Cressid." In this production, however, I did not feel Cressida's pain; she came off as undecided. Perhaps if the chemistry between the lovers had been stronger in the earlier scenes, the shattering effect of the war on their love would have produced a greater impact. However, this balance is incredibly difficult to manage, and even professional actors struggle with the text. The Studio 58 production embraced the challenges of the play in solid, admirable work. It was hugely inventive and deserving of high praise. The night I attended, the audience only half filled a theater which should have been packed.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Troilus and Cressida
<i>Year</i>	2016
<i>Theaters</i>	Studio 58 (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2016-11-17
<i>End Date</i>	2016-12-04

Creatives

DIRECTOR	KEVIN BENNETT
COSTUME DESIGNER	CHRISTOPHER DAVID GAUTHIER
SET DESIGNER	SHIZUKA KAI
LIGHTING DESIGNER	DARREN BOQUIST
CHOREOGRAPHY	LISA GOEBEL
MUSIC	BENJAMIN ELLIOT