



Troilus and Cressida: for Cheek by Jowl at the Barbican Theater

by Peter Smith. Written on 2008-06-30. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Troilus and Cressida (2008, Cheek by Jowl, UK).

VERY LITTLE, INSISTED DECLAN DONNELLAN'S TROILUS AND CRESSIDA, SEPARATES BEAUTY AND the beast. Perhaps the most heavily symbolic scene in the entire production was the battle between Greek soldiers (in black vests and body armour) and Trojans (dressed equivalently in white). In their midst, as the ignorant armies clashed around her, proudly gesturing from her pedestal, was the visually stunning Helen of Troy (Marianne Oldham) in a long, brilliant-white, Grace Kelly, décolleté ball-gown which ended in a fish-tail of gathered lace, complete with diamond choker and long, silk, elbow-length gloves: "For every false drop in her bawdy veins / A Grecian's life hath shrunk; for every scruple / Of her contaminated carrion weight / A Trojan hath been slain" (IV.1.70-3). In giving Helen the prologue to speak, Donnellan allowed an apparently neutral account of the action thus far (for the play, we are told, is "Beginning in the middle" [28]) to be inflected by Helen's own viewpoint. She glided gracefully in and out of a column of Greek warriors, who stood frozen, poised with swords erect and bearing full-length shields. As she listed, in epic catalogue, the gates of Troy (16-17), she giggled at the calamity of which she was the origin. As she spoke of the "instruments / Of cruel war" (4-5), she prick-teasingly touched the tip of a sword and smiled at the sway she held over masculine desire and brutality.

This was as much a production about the violence performed by belligerent nations as the story of two star-crossed lovers. Indeed, in magnifying the Capulets and the Montagues to the scale of the Trojans and the Greeks, Shakespeare inflates the internecine feuding of Verona to the proportions of classical epic. In so doing the playwright makes the balancing act between the domestic love story (Cressida and Troilus) and the larger military frame that surrounds it, all the more difficult, and this is likely to be a contributing reason for the paucity of the play's performance history.

Donnellan's solution was as ingenious as it was successful – he allowed the worlds of Pandarus and the lovers to intersect repeatedly with the military sphere of the action. This was achieved not merely by literal overlapping (beginning the next scene while the current one is still winding up – something of a Cheek by Jowl trademark in any case) but through a series of ingenious parallels between the story of the lovers and the larger epic surround. For instance, he had all four lovers (the eponymous pair and Paris and Helen) on stage together wrapped in white sheets; as Helen and Paris rose from their bed (a low central platform), it was almost immediately occupied by Cressida and Troilus; the courtship of the lovers took place across the full width of the traverse – a kind of wooing tennis match – which anticipated similar use of the stage during Diomedes' fatal seduction of Cressida. But perhaps most effective was the repeated use of Pandarus' erotic song, "Love, love, nothing but love, still love, still more!" (III.1.107f). This he sang to Helen to the accompaniment of an His Master's Voice gramophone. She took up the lyric before quixotically breaking down into tears at the realisation of the carnage which had followed her and Paris' assignation. While the lyrics unashamedly describe the grunting actuality of sexual climax, the musical setting, a mellifluous thirties waltz (music by Catherine Jayes), seemed to insist on the innocence of the relationship between Cressida and Troilus – played by Lucy Briggs-Owen and Alex Waldmann as callow virgins. The song reappeared as Thersites entertained the troops who, Trojans and Greeks, danced together in a pre-battle truce, and again, though spoken, during Pandarus' spluttering epilogue where the consequences of sexual greed were incarnate in his aching bones and respiratory faltering. David Collings was a perfect combination of the sleazy and the pathetic.

The pairing of beauty and the beast also underpinned a short sequence in which we watched a photo-shoot of the gorgeous Helen draped sexually around Paris (Oliver Coleman) who, a Trojan James Bond, wore black tie. As the shoot continued with her alone, primped and fluffed by a couple of coiffeurs, he changed into military combats complete with helmet and took his place next to her again: the proximity of erotic fantasy and the brutality of its military consequences could not have been more clear.

Between these poles of sexual indulgence and Homeric slaughter was the cross-dressed Thersites. Richard Cant's barbed jester was reminiscent of Corporal Klinger from the seventies television series, *M*A*S*H*, set during the Korean war. Eager to be discharged, Klinger spent his time at the front in a series of alluring feminine dresses in an effort to demonstrate that he was unfit for military duty. Cant's Thersites started out as a domestic char-woman in rubber gloves, long red plait and full face make-up. S/he brandished a spray bottle of household cleaner and obsessively polished the camp's furniture. At one point s/he used her spray as a weapon and attacked a surprised Patroclus (David Ononokpono) in a fit of pique. But during the cease-fire

dance, Thersites entered in blonde wig, wearing an exact copy of Helen's ball gown and, in the manner of a chanteuse, crooned to the troops, "Love, love, nothing but love". Movingly each took a partner from the other army and waltzed to the tune. But Thersites' Edith Piaf rapidly degenerated into Lilly Savage (a scabrous Scouse slut, the television alter-ego of comedian Paul O'Grady) as s/he made a series of blow-job and wanker gestures at those around him to emphasise the depraved and sordid quality as well as the inseparability of their military and sexual ambitions.

Thersites rails against what he identifies around him as "Nothing but lechery!" (V.1.93) and this despairing tone was close to the surface in the production's condemnation of masculine lust. In IV.5, Cressida is introduced to the Greek generals by Diomedes (Mark Holgate) and each of them begs or takes a kiss. The scene is uncomfortable: a group of older men sexually abuse a young woman (whose erotic naivety we have just seen in her touching submission to Troilus' tentative love-making) in the most predatory of ways. Ingeniously, Donnellan turned the tables here. With disingenuous obeisance, Ulysses (Ryan Kiggell) asked, "May I, sweet lady, beg a kiss of you?" (47). Imperiously, Cressida retorted, "You may" and gestured for Ulysses to drop to his knees. As he did so, he lifted his hands, palms down and fingers bent, in the manner of a begging dog and augmented the joke with canine panting. She backed away from him across the width of the traverse and he followed her on all fours, mimicking the huffing and wagging tail of a dog being offered a biscuit. At one point she rotated her finger in a command for him to roll over which he obediently did. Only at the point when she had him totally under her spell did she look up and gesture to the assembled Greeks who looked on in a mixture of incredulity and hysterical delight at his stupidity. Pulling himself suddenly together, he was furious at his self-imposed humiliation and barked, "Fie, fie upon her! / [...] her wanton spirits look out / At every joint and motive of her body" (54-7) in an effort to shift the blame for his lapse of discipline onto her lasciviousness but he stood exposed – a personification of masculine hypocrisy.

Shakespeare's theatre is full of despicable killings – Lady Macduff and her children, and (though offstage) the Princes in Richard III and Cordelia. The slaughter of Hector who is after all a soldier ought to worry us less than these. However, Donnellan had gone to some trouble to emphasise the ruthless quality of the episode by having five Myrmidons severally materialise at Achilles' bidding and lie, while Hector disarmed, as though corpses scattered around him. In full combat gear and sporting gas masks, they resembled the sinister Darth Vader-like henchmen under Richard's command at the beginning of Richard Loncraine's film of Richard III. Stripped of his armour, Hector was surrounded by the Myrmidons who crushed him between their shields before stabbing him. Fatally wounded and kneeling, Achilles stood behind him and ran him through vertically between the shoulder blades in a vivid tableau which

illustrated the codes of honour yielding to the exigencies of war. As his death was subsequently reported, a low white cross-beam threw silhouettes across the stage. While some actors stood near the light source, others were further from it so that the effect was of life-size shadows conversing with those of giants – “O, the difference of man and man!” (Tragedy of King Lear, IV.2.27).

Hitherto in dapper double-breasted suit and Panama hat, Pandarus entered, sweat stained and coughing into a handkerchief. Regarding what was presumably a spot of blood, he stuffed it quickly back into his pocket but, as he balefully turned to the audience on each side during his final speech to “bequeath [us his] diseases” (V.10.55), the full company assembled on stage and stared at him with contempt. His final defiance of us was tempered by their disdain for him and we were reminded that, just as the play began in medias res, so the horrors of the Trojan war were far from over.