

## **Antony and Cleopatra @ Centro Cultural Vila Flor, Guimarães, Portugal, 2015**

Directed and adapted by Tiago Rodrigues, based on a translation by Rui Carvalho Homen.

Performers: Sofia Dias and Victor Roriz

Date seen: 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2015

Within the Shakespeare canon, *Antony and Cleopatra* has been entirely absent from Portuguese theatre history. In fact, the only performance registered at all is a 1987 adaptation by the Belgian Needcompany, directed by Jan Lauwers. The reasons for this lack of interest include the limited range of Shakespeare plays studied in acting schools and universities, a tendency to follow performance fads when it comes to choosing plays to perform, the complexities of staging such a monumental play and a somewhat moralistic sense of these two lovers as more flawed in comparison with other Shakespearean lovers. As Sarah Olive's review of the 2015 York Theatre Royal reading of the play suggests, Manciewicz's sumptuous 1963 *Cleopatra* also tends to function as a production standard that theatre performances find hard to match.

Tiago Rodrigues' adaptation of the play embraced rather than ignored these challenges, basing itself on a 2001 translation of the play by Rui Carvalho Homen. It centred on the transgressive power of love to reshape the lover through the eyes of the other but also to recast the way lovers see the world. When Antony returned to Rome, for instance, and negotiated with Caesar, his need to consolidate his status in Rome was consistently undercut by the literal shadow of Cleopatra, whose point of view he adopted on events in Rome. As this episode suggests, the adaptation narrowed the focus of the Shakespearean play. The language was pared down to simple phrases that narrated and commented on the action, but which nevertheless retained the play's poetic intensity. As the performance developed, the two lovers become so proficient in seeing the world through the eyes of the other that they were themselves transformed. The adaptation illustrated this in a beautifully-crafted sequence towards the end of the performance when Cleopatra desperately tried to rope a mortally-wounded Antony into her monument. The constantly mutating flow of words between them played phonetically with notions of similarity and difference and suggested the way in which the two fuse both physically and semantically at the moment of death. The length of time spent on Antony's death and sidelining of Cleopatra's own suicide might be questioned, but the way in which the dialogue between the two slowly faded into a monologue as Antony died was intensely moving.

Sofia Dias and Victor Roriz, dressed in casual T-shirts and jeans, played Antony and Cleopatra as a young couple alternately fascinated and appalled by their growing intimacy and its public implications. The offstage relationship of the two and the fact that Sofia Dias is noticeably pregnant added an extra layer of interest to this sense that the personal was always staged in public and threw in the intriguing suggestion that Cleopatra might be carrying Antony's child. However, the central performative trope was that Victor Roriz narrated Cleopatra's thoughts and feelings, while Sofia Dias provided access to Antony. As such, the play's gender-bending was extended throughout the performance as a whole. This keyed into the ways in which the two occupied each other's thoughts and feelings and framed the notion of character itself as something of a performative conceit within a welcome affirmation of the text's plurivocality.

As might be expected from a couple who have moved from dance into spoken performance, there was a clear grounding here in the experience of the body. The performers moved around the stage space with arms outstretched, alternately searching for or distancing themselves from each other. This centrality of the experience of the body was reinforced in the text, where repeated actions like breathing in and out or simple actions like walking or looking at the clouds punctuated the development of the narrative and located the passion between the two in a present which was always slightly out of time. The emotional range of Antony and Cleopatra was also explored as a positive rather than negative feature of the play, from Antony's humiliation when he leaves the battle to pursue a fleeing Cleopatra to Cleopatra's sexual and political desire for Antony's sword.

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Cleopatra rails against the prospect of being paraded through Rome while "Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness /I'the posture of a whore" (5,2) but this adult couple explored their intimacy onstage without a hint of moral judgement. This lack of judgment owed much to the clear and clean direction of Tiago Rodrigues which foregrounded the performers and the text against a simple white background. At the back of the stage there was a large circular mobile that added to the sense of movement being at the heart of this performance. The only other onstage presence was a record player that occasionally played music from the score of Mankiewicz's 1963 *Cleopatra* as if to deliberately provoke a comparison. The stage minimalism focused the action almost exclusively on the grace and agility of the two performers and the equally clear lines of the text.

This was a performance that took some of the best elements of contemporary creation, particularly the embodiment of a text based on the sonority of the spoken word in the materiality of the body, to create a powerful love story that not only emphasized the ability of two very different characters to see the world through each other's eyes but also the ability of theatre audiences to see themselves reflected in these experiences. In a period where the demonization of sexual and cultural difference predominates over attempts to view difference in a positive light, the affirmation of the complex experience of putting oneself in the place of others became a personal act with strong political overtones.