

Theatre: Roman Tragedies at the Barbican

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★★★★☆

So the idea of six hours of Shakespeare at his most political, performed in Dutch, strikes you as a bit much, does it? Well then, how could the director Ivo van Hove — in this hugely influential collation of *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* — sweeten the deal?

How about an electronic display above the stage that offers political context as these Roman politicians strut, strategise and scheme in Jan Versweyveld's sprawling conference-centre set below? How about that same display giving tips for how to manage your expectations — “395 minutes until Cleopatra's death”, say? How about onstage percussionists whose dins replace any time-consuming war scenes?

How about, once you get itchy in your seat, being allowed to stroll on stage and sit or stand there for a while instead? You can buy a drink or a meal from one of the stands in the wings, next to the actors adjusting their make-up or checking their phones. You will still be able to see the subtitles and you will be cheek to cheek with the dynamic but intimate, miked-up performances by Van Hove's Toneelgroep Amsterdam ensemble.

Because all these devices are only there to help to make this politicking feel real. We appreciate anew the unabashed elitism of Coriolanus, a warrior who can't pitch it right for peace-time despite — or because of — his terrifyingly smart mother. And as we segue into *Julius Caesar*, we get a Brutus full of career-politician pragmatism, bonding with the female Cassius.

Sorry, because there are no weak links in the cast, it's hard to single out performances. Even so, when Hans Kesting is on stage as Mark Antony, the emotional temperature soars. Butch but cuddly, like a Dutch Mickey Rourke, he gives a phenomenal “friends, Romans, countrymen . . .” speech, slumped on the floor, before showing desperate, suspicious passion towards Chris Nietvelt's Cleopatra. The riveting final third shows, in the most personal way, the way all political lives end in failure.

Without Kesting it's a treat more for the head than the heart; I found this stint in ancient Rome rarely moving. I was, however, always absorbed, often wowed, and left with a head buzzing with ideas about elitism and populism, about the eternal need for passion and pragmatism to temper each other.