

The Guardian

Coriolanus

Shakespeare's Globe, London



It's early days, but I detect a new spirit at Shakespeare's Globe. For a start there is an intellectual coherence about Dominic Dromgoole's opening season, with its stress on Shakespeare's Roman plays. Even more significantly, this Coriolanus is a strongly cast, ensemble affair rather than the kind of star-driven, Wolfitesque spectacle often seen at this address.

Dromgoole's approach to the play is clear, sensible and practical. He stages it in Jacobean costume, reminding us that Shakespeare's confrontation of a patrician class with a hungry, rioting mob has an urgent topicality.

Mike Britton's design extends the stage into the courtyard area, which allows the standing spectators, representing the hydra-headed multitude, to be embraced by the action. Even the Globe's basic design heightens the play's contradictory comedy: when the blood-hungry hero rushes through the upper doors, symbolising Corioli, and leaves his timorous followers behind, laughter instinctively erupts.

I have no problem with that. But I find Jonathan Cake's Coriolanus takes time to grow in power. There should be something awesome about Shakespeare's martial hero, defined by images of solitude. Initially, however, Cake seems less lonely monster than arrogant captain of the first 11. Where he comes into his own is in his crumbling, little-boy-lost deference to Volumnia. "Mother, I am going to the market place" has the right sulky capitulation. Cake is excellent in the later stages as if, having fatally sacrificed his integrity in Rome, he were once more striving to be "author of himself".

The production's strength lies in its casting. Robin Soans's Menenius is the "humorous patrician": wily, cunning and capable of commanding the house, as in his opening, downstage address about the body's mutiny against the belly. Margot Leicester's Volumnia avoids the marble-statue approach to give us a hungrily possessive mother dismissing her daughter-in-law with ironic disdain. John Dougall and Frank McCusker avoid the easy option of playing the tribunes as demagogic agitators by investing them with a legitimate gravitas.

Admittedly, Dromgoole ducks the homoerotic aspects: strangely, Mo Sesay's Aufidius backs off from Coriolanus's embrace before himself lapsing into the most fiercely sexual imagery. And, after Cake's spectacular death fall, Sesay's triumphant display of his severed heart strikes me as a mistake. But this is a clear-spoken, intelligent production that suggests the Globe is starting to shed its image of whimsical eccentricity.

· In rep until August 13. Box office: 020-7401 9919.