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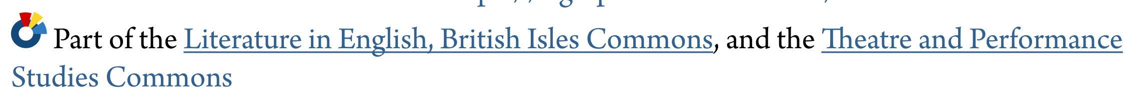
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The Public Theater's Free Shakespeare in the Park *Troilus and Cressida*

Directed by Daniel Sullivan
Delacorte Theater; Central Park, New York, NY
Performance Date: August 9, 2016

Reviewed by STEPHANIE PIETROS

The Public Theater's production of *Troilus and Cressida*, directed by Daniel Sullivan, brought to the forefront the world-weariness of protracted war that is at the heart of the play. Nothing, not even the brief romance of the titular characters, felt fresh and new, for even that was engineered by the sleazy Pandarus. The set, casting, parallels between Greeks and Trojans, jaded romances, and, ultimately, final battle between Hector and Achilles, all pointed to the conclusion Wilfred Owen drew three centuries after Shakespeare wrote his play: that Horace's famous dictum about it being sweet and fitting to die for one's country is not borne out by the realities of wartime.

The production's set was simple, with a few basic items of furniture used as appropriate in different scenes, such as lawn chairs that were brought from the perimeter to the center of the stage. Notably, the long war was indicated by the rubble that surrounded the stage.

Wearing a white suit and carrying a cane, Pandarus (John Glover) delivered the prologue holding a hand-held microphone, which reinforced that he, like an emcee, would always be playing a part. His manipulation of Troilus (Andrew Burnap) and Cressida's (Ismenia Mendes) rendezvous brought to mind all the unsavory associations inherent in his name. By the epilogue, even the sly and knowing Pandarus had fallen victim to the unrelenting war (and, presumably, venereal disease), as was reflected in his bedraggled appearance. Yet, the decision to have him not only end but begin the play, when the prologue's lines are not assigned to any particular character, underscored his role as pander in Troilus and Cressida's romance. Moreover, it reminded the audience that in wartime, everyone, even the great and brave, is but a pawn in service of someone else's greater design.

On the Greek side, Corey Stoll's Ulysses played a role similar to Pandarus, wearing a suit, even in battle. He used his best sales tactics, presenting a side show to his fellow Greek soldiers about how they could best convince Achilles (Louis Cancelmi), involved in an obviously homosexual relationship with Patroclus (Tom Pecinka), to return to battle. This performance of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus turned what is implicit in Shakespeare's play into something quite obvious. The production took an interesting liberty with the play by having the sly Ulysses kill his own countryman Patroclus in battle in order to motivate Achilles.

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If the manipulative actions of Pandarus and Ulysses suggested that neither side had some kind of moral imperative in the war, the color-blind casting among both Greeks and Trojans underlined the sameness of the two sides. There were some attempts to demarcate the two sides through differences in their clothing—Trojans in black and Greeks in camo—but despite these differences, it was hard to keep track of who belonged to which side.

The sameness of Greeks and Trojans was nowhere more evident than in their use of women as pawns. Certainly, the romance between Troilus and Cressida was believable, for even though Cressida tried to convey that she was a savvy, knowing figure, in control and able to be as manipulative as those around her, she could not hide her true feelings for Troilus. It did not take long, however, for that innocent relationship, initially a contrast to the jaded one of Paris and Helen, to sour. When Cressida was traded in exchange for the Trojan warrior Antenor, the Greek warriors surrounded her and kissed her in turn, a scene that felt as though it would soon become more violent and aggressive—or perhaps was a stylized portrayal of a gang rape—had not Diomedes interceded on her behalf. At this point, Cressida knew how to "play the game" in order to survive, and she thus fostered a relationship with Diomedes to the devastation of Troilus.

The relationship between Troilus and Cressida, indicated by the title as the focus of the play, receded into the background following the lovers' separation and Troilus's discovery of Cressida kissing Diomedes. Instead, the play concluded with the famous battle between Hector and Achilles, who had finally been motivated to battle by Ulysses's machinations. Achilles's actions were the antithesis of glorious, however. The battle, stylized and unrealistic up until this point, became shockingly violent as Achilles's soldiers surrounded the unarmed Hector and slaughtered him brutally before dragging his corpse around the battlefield. That this was not a glorious Greek victory was emphasized by Ajax's (Alex Breaux) obvious distress at the way it was carried out. Ajax, portrayed by Breaux not as a brawny meathead but rather as stupid and naïve, became the manifestation of the audience's own discomfort at the play's conclusion.

The Trojan defeat in the play, cast elsewhere in literature as the event that led to the foundation of Rome, did not feel here in the service of any greater good nor did the Greek victory feel glorious. Instead, the brutality of the ending reminded us that while war is manipulated by the Ulysseses of the world, it has devastating consequences in real life. Pandarus's epilogue, in which he attempted to revert to the bawdiness of earlier in the play, would have seemed at odds with the battle that had just ensued had it not been for his diseased appearance. Thus, instead of fostering the generic confusion inherent in the play, Pandarus's performance at the end drove home the point that war produces neither great tragedy nor great victory, but instead the degradation of all involved.

Stephanie Pietros is an Assistant Professor of English at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in the Bronx, NY, where she teaches the first-year writing sequence, early modern literature (including Shakespeare), poetry, and in the honors program. She has published on Anne Bradstreet and is currently working on a project on the Willow Song in Shakespeare's *Othello*.