

Theater: 'Antony And Cleopatra' Doomed Love, Dumb Setting

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ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA ** out of ****

PUBLIC THEATER

What to do with all those Playbills? I was moving and debated: should I really keep every single one? Well, no. First, I got rid of the ones for shows I didn't like. Then I pulled out the innards (everything but the show credits) for the ones I was keeping. Then, being an obsessive sort, I used this as an opportunity to create [a master list of my theater going](#). It wouldn't be comprehensive: what about shows I didn't save the Playbill on; what about shows before I moved to New York City? Still, it was a start and [you can find the results on my blog](#).

Going over all the plays and musicals and operas and theatrical events I've seen, naturally some patterns jumped out. I've seen a lot of Shakespeare. And yet...not as much as I imagined. Have I really not seen eight of his plays? The Merry Wives Of Windsor didn't surprise me, somehow. But four King Lear's and no King John? Four Henry Vs (with Jude Law hopefully making it five Vs soon enough if he brings it to New York) but no Henry VIII? No Antony and Cleopatra? Really? Clearly, I would have to jump whenever any of these were mounted and fill up my resume.

Lo and behold, The Public puts on Antony and Cleopatra so it was with a certain eagerness I ventured out to see uncharted Shakespearean territory (for me) and witness one of his most acclaimed female characters. This production combines an American and UK cast, setting the tale in Haiti around the time of Napoleon. In a poor production, the setting and costumes often seem an afterthought. But if the setting and costumes are arbitrary, then the results of the play are sure to feel arbitrary as well. Here, the setting informs how the play is performed and seen a great deal; unfortunately, it's all to the worse.

The original play is rather malleable. One could think of it as a Tragedy, a Romance or a History play with ease. Certainly, the doomed romance of Antony and Cleopatra is at its heart. But it's also dominated by shifting alliances and major battles and one clear choice. Cleopatra's Egyptian world is sensual and exciting; Rome's business-like air is cold and haughty. Where would you rather reside?

When the show begins, Antony (Jonathan Cake) is lingering with his new love, forgetting the wife he's left behind rather easily. They're crazy about each other and his indifference to the world he's helped conquer is rather beguiling. That's meant literally, by the way: he and Lepidus (Henry Stram) and the coldly calculating Octavius Caesar (Samuel Collings) have every known empire under their thumbs.

Such an alliance cannot last, especially with Cake playing hooky with Cleopatra (Joaquina Kalukango). Betrayals are made, loyalties shift and Antony finally springs into action...not to battle but to marry Caesar's sister Octavia (Charise Castro Smith) after his wife dies, placating his erstwhile partner in the process. It's quite easy to let Cleopatra be the emotional, changeable woman but clearly a case can be made that Antony is the feckless one while Cleopatra remains consistent, wise and loyal. If awfully quick to anger, she has reason to be and just as quickly calms down. Numerous battles are waged, fortune is fickle and one thing is clear for anyone who remembers something vague about Cleopatra and an asp: it won't end well.

Cake has an easily imperious manner and is a perfect foil for both the reserved and much smaller Caesar

assayed by Collings as well as the unreserved and fiery but also much smaller Cleopatra (convincingly drawn by the melodiously named Kalukango). Indeed, the acting is solid throughout (when not led astray by the directing) from Chukwudi Iwuji as the compelling narrator/Enobarbus to Henry Stram in multiple parts.

But the editing and direction of the play by Tarell Alvin McCraney is fatally misguided. The story -- with its confusing off-stage battles and ever-changing alliances -- is hard enough to track, especially without compelling emotional and dramatic reasons for why Cleopatra and Antony behave as they do. Once you decide if Antony is led by his nether regions rather than his military brain, all else can follow. Is Cleopatra regal, self-serving or also blinded by passion? Unfortunately, this production can't make up its mind. (And no, it doesn't make them more complex by combining all of these possibilities; no clear character for either one emerges.)

The setting of Haiti is especially unfortunate. It allows the chance for all sorts of scene-setting, like voodoo and some strong music by Michael Thurber. But to what point? Is Cleopatra the queen of Egypt, a ruler of a major empire as mighty and worthy of Antony as any in the world? Or is she a slave, fighting for freedom and respect? One major battle scene is staged as a slave revolt, complete with machete weapons; this makes a hash of what is actually going on, not to mention the time-wasting scenes where bodies are raised up as zombies and sent off to limbo (or perhaps they're just souls headed to the afterworld; who knows, who cares?). This adds nothing to the drama, detracts from Cleopatra's majestic air and confuses the power plays actually taking place in the story Shakespeare wrote.

The confusion extends down to individual moments. In one early scene that's brilliant as written and ripe with humor and the threat of violence, Cleopatra greets a messenger but fears he will tell her terrible news about Antony. Instead of playing it with the fickle air of royalty (anyone entering the presence of royalty is both getting noticed and risking their neck), it's played purely for laughs with the servant in particular (Stram, otherwise good), encouraged to goof it up.

A similar scene later in the play has Cleopatra grilling a messenger about the appearance of Antony's new wife. She could knowingly appreciate the servant running down the woman's appearance, with everyone in on the joke and yet still wary of their queen. Instead, Cleopatra is seen as a silly child ready to believe Antony has wedded some stunted, hairy monstrosity. Again and again, these choices detract from her imperious nature. This would be fine if Cleopatra was always seen as a spoiled, silly child (though that's probably the least interesting tack one could take) but the play doesn't do this at all. Most of the time, she's an able foil for her love both in her passion and her wits.

Worse is the doubling and tripling up. Chivas Michael is fine as Cleopatra's fey eunuch. But then he's similarly fey as the Soothsayer and then -- very confusingly -- just as fey when he's playing Eros, a compatriot in Antony's army. For a while, one assumes the eunuch has for some reason joined up to fight. When you realize he's supposed to be playing someone else, the decision to have him just as girlish in that context is absurd.

And what of Caesar? Collings is very good, but again the show can't make up its mind about him. He's very, very fond of his sister but he's also more drawn to Antony than he'd like to admit, the cold exterior every once in a while cracking to reveal the roiling emotions underneath. But which is it? Incest? Gay leanings? A frustrated bromance? If the director doesn't know, neither will Collings and neither will we.

By the end, it's no surprise to see the ludicrous stage choice for dealing with the asp, surely a tricky proposition since one doesn't use a live snake and rubber ones simply droop. Their solution? To put the rubber snakes in a giant glass jar some two feet tall with an open mouth that Cleopatra will press against her breast. The presumably poisonous creatures simply sink to the bottom, but Cleopatra gamely tilts the contraption towards herself and talks with increasing fervor about how the vicious asp is now clasped to her breast. But Olivier himself couldn't get us to ignore our eyes, which can see the bits of rubber floating around, nowhere near her chest despite Kalukango's game attempts to swirl the water. Why anyone thought this absurd prop was a good

idea, or the pointless zombies or the voodoo or anything else about this take on the play is beyond me. Perhaps it's because a director -- like Cleopatra -- is a near-god and no one dared to question.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.