

PROSCENIUM

Antony and Cleopatra

By William Shakespeare

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Wednesday 25th March to Saturday 28th March 2009
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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The Characters in History

Cleopatra VII was queen of the richest country in the Mediterranean, and learned early the hardships of power in a court riddled with corruption, family violence and murder (she herself was responsible for the murder of her brother, co-ruler – and probably husband). The Ptolemaic dynasty was threatened with extinction by the encroaching Roman Empire: her weak, dissolute father, caused to flee Egypt by a restive populace, had been re-instated by Roman forces (led by a brilliant young cavalry officer, Mark Antony who was said - even then - to be impressed by the 14-year-old Cleopatra's wit and beauty). Once queen, she too was in exile, when Julius Caesar, conqueror of half the world, arrived in the East. She became his mistress, bore him a son, and followed him to Rome – potential empress of the world. When he was assassinated she returned to Egypt. Antony summoned her to Taurus. She became his mistress and he visited her at Alexandria, where he treated her, not as a Roman client-queen but as an independent monarch. She bore him three children.

Mark Antony, the finest Roman general after Caesar, had been with him in Gaul and supported him against Pompey the Great. The archetypal hardened soldier, loved by his men and the common people for his open nature and generosity, he was also extravagant, a great womaniser and excessive drinker. He had the emotional, political and military control of Rome at Caesar's death. But the latter's will named his great-nephew, Octavius, as heir. To avoid civil war, a Triumvirate was formed of Antony and Octavius, with Lepidus as buffer between their conflicting ambitions.

Octavius was recognised, at the opening of Julius Caesar's will, as Caesar's adopted son. When the Triumvirate was appointed their rule was divided so that Octavius ruled Italy, Lepidus the West and Antony the East. With the death of Pompey and the downfall of Lepidus, the West was in his hands. His opposition to Antony and Cleopatra reinforced his position at a time when the consciousness of a united Italy was just formed. Antony's callousness towards Octavia added a family justification for the war against Antony. In the campaign of

Actium, Octavius overthrew Antony and became master of Egypt and its treasure.

Pompey was the younger son of Pompey the Great. After the murder of his father he joined his brothers in Spain, raised an army and won appreciable successes against the governors of Further Spain. He was outlawed, occupied Sicily and used it as a base for raiding and blockading the Italian coast.

Shakespeare's treatment of history

Shakespeare based his plot and, in part, characterisation on North's 1579 translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*. Although he compressed some ten years of history within the compass of the play he remained remarkably faithful to Plutarch's account of events. However, the two main political conflicts in the play have resonance and application far beyond the Roman Empire and Jacobean England: a ruthless world power – Rome, nineteenth century Great Britain, twentieth century America – determined to expand its Empire and protect its interests, to colonise states less powerful but with economic riches; and on a personal level a young, intelligent, manipulative and overwhelmingly ambitious man, determined to take power solely into his hands in conflict with an older man, more relaxed and contented with the status quo and relying on his past glories and reputation.

Staging

Antony speaks of the *wide arch of the ranged empire* and Antony and Cleopatra ranges further and has more changes of scene than any of Shakespeare's other plays – Alexandria, Rome, Athens, Actium, Misenum. However, Harley Granville Barker points out that in presenting these the Jacobean theatre has an advantage over the modern stage: "For Shakespeare's audience the actors were very plainly on the stage, but the characters might, half the time, be nowhere in particular. It was, for the dramatist of the day, a privilege akin to the novelist's, who may, if he chooses, detach characters, through page after page, from fixed surroundings. It was a freedom which the promise of the scenic stage

gradually sapped; but Shakespeare, at least, never surrendered it, and we here find him in the maturity of his craftsmanship, enjoying and exploiting it to the full.”

The Critics - On The Play

Dr Johnson thought: “This play keeps curiosity always busy, and the passions always interested. The continual hurry of the action, the variety of incidents, and the quick succession of one personage to another, call the mind forward without intermission from the first Act to the last.” Though he found the “feminine arts which distinguish Cleopatra” were “too low”.

Coleridge found: “of all perhaps of Shakespeare’s plays the most wonderful is the Antony and Cleopatra. There are scarcely any in which he has followed history more minutely, and yet few in which he impresses the notion of giant strength so much, none in which he impresses it more strongly.”

Hazlitt is also an admirer: “This is a very noble play...the finest of his historical plays in which he made poetry the organ of history. It presents a fine picture of Roman pride and Eastern magnificence; and in the struggle between the two, the empire of the world seems suspended.”

The Critics - On The Characters

*Let him go for ever – let him not, Charmian -
Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon,
The other way’s a Mars.*

Anne Barton: “There are two contradictory Antony’s, impossible to contemplate simultaneously, but equally real: a monster and a god. The theatre audience shares Cleopatra’s dilemma. Our own search for a fixed and stable view of this man – *pillar of the world or strumpet’s fool, of infinite virtue or abstract of all faults* – is like that of every character who confronts him. Judgment seems imperative, but it is impossible to achieve. The same ambivalence characterises Antony’s, and our own view of Cleopatra: *great Egypt, day of the world*, but also a *morsel cold*

upon dead Caesar’s trencher and a triple-turn’d whore. In a play whose other characters – Pompey, Charmian, even Octavius Caesar – seem remarkably simple and clear-cut, Cleopatra and Antony alone possess not only the grandeur, but something of the complexity of that far-flung Mediterranean world through which the tragedy ranges so restlessly.”

Other commentators have been dazzled by this complexity. Hazlitt found “Cleopatra’s whole character the triumph of the voluptuous, of the love of pleasure and the power of giving it, over every other consideration. She has great and unpardonable faults, but the grandeur of her death almost redeems them.” Similarly A.C. Bradley: “many unpleasant things can be said about Cleopatra and the more that are said the more wonderful she appears.”

Nahum Tate is struck by the variety in Antony’s character: “You find his Antony in all the defects and excellences of his mind, a soldier, a reveller, amorous, sometimes rash, sometimes considerate, with all the various emotions of his mind.” And Harley Granville Barker thinks his decision – *I will to Egypt ... in the east my pleasure lies* to be “the nemesis of the sensual man. Till now Antony’s appetites have not fatally played him false, but now that judgment pulls one way and appetite another there is neither struggle nor dispute. Appetite wins.”

Caesar is altogether simpler: “Like many people who are born with a weak constitution Octavius Caesar looks after himself very carefully, while Antony squandered the gifts of his splendid physique and constitution in a senseless round of over-indulgence. Octavius was superior to Antony in that he knew exactly what it was he wanted – power.”

Finally, Anne Barton looks at the great climax of the play – Cleopatra’s flawlessly staged suicide: “Sweeping away lingering doubts about her loyalty to Antony, it blots out the memory of his own bungled death, leaving us to contemplate, not the strumpet or the gorgon, but Venus, the ‘lass unparalleled’ who ‘pursed up’ Antony’s heart on the river Cydnus.”

Our Next Production

Home

By David Storey

Home - by award winning playwright, novelist and rugby player, David Storey - takes place on a sunny day in a picturesque park where two mild-mannered gentlemen meet. Soon joined by two amiable women, they discuss their worldly-wise opinions about everything under the sun, but something not immediately apparent lies behind their jokes, card games and jovial banter.

Directed by Crystal Anthony

Wednesday 10th June to Saturday 13th June 2009

7.45pm Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 020 8866 7075

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