

Coriolanus

Country UK
Year 2010
Director Ralph Fiennes
Photography Barry Ackroyd
Cast Ralph Fiennes, Vanessa Redgrave
Brian Cox, Ashraf Barhom, Gerard Butler,
James Nesbitt, Jessica Chasain,
Paul Jesson.

'Modern dress' Shakespeare has been with us for nearly a century on stage and screen so is no longer a novelty or needing justification. For instance, in the 1920s Barry Jackson cast *Cymbeline* in 1st World War uniforms at the Birmingham Rep. At another level, this writer appeared on stage in 1963 as a 'mod', complete with Lambretta and mohair suit, in a student production of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In fact, Shakespeare in traditional dress, however we define it, is still rather rare though Hollywood tends to go for it when doing Roman epics: think of Charlton Heston in a toga in *Julius Caesar* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*, as well as Burton and Taylor! Interestingly, a recent movie dealing with one of the Roman plays was Richard Linklater's 2008 *Me and Orson Welles*, about the controversy surrounding Welles's 1937 anti-fascist modern-dress production of *Julius Caesar* in New York.

Then there was Roman Polanski's critically controversial *Macbeth* in 1971, taking liberties with the 'precious poetry' by chopping and re-configuring the verse, even giving speeches to the 'wrong' characters. But what Polanski did was put cinema first, creating a wonderfully filmic experience and depicting some of the rawness and brutality of Medieval life. The reaction against this trend, arguably, came with Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*, Tudor dress and adherence to the Folio text.

Ralph Fiennes's bloody and bold directorial debut, *Coriolanus*, is magnificently filmed in a modern-day setting, the first time Shakespeare's last tragedy has been brought to the screen. (Though Phillip French in *The Observer* draws attention to a memorable reference in Cole Porter's 'Brush Up Your Shakespeare' in *Kiss Me, Kate*: 'If she says your behaviour is heinous/Kick her right up the Coriolanus'). It's a tough, uningratiating play that has fascinated writers as different as T. S. Eliot and Bertolt Brecht: 'a deeply, divisively political work, devoid of comic relief and short on endearing characters, while its complex moral conflicts are as knotty as the verse' (Phillip French again).

So, although audiences may not appear to demand it, Fiennes seems to feel that the play's themes are more than relevant for addressing the problems surrounding modern political life. Shot in Serbia and reeking of the recent wars in the former Yugoslavia, the film is as up to date as today's news and it opens as if we'd just switched on the TV to watch the latest bulletin from a state torn by civil strife - Lybia or Syria. Here is Jon Snow himself as a newscaster, speaking Shakespeare's blank verse turned into breaking news and interviewing Roman experts on the current situation for Fidelis TV. The hungry 'plebeians' (no insult meant to police officers guarding the gates to Downing Street!), in jeans and bomber jackets, are staging an uprising, demanding that the greedy, overfed patricians (not necessarily riding bikes with their suit trousers tucked into pink socks) release corn from their warehouses (for 'corn' read 'pay your taxes' or 'give me a loan for my small business'). The reasonable, emollient senator Menenius (Brian Cox is superb as the modern, liberal-seeming career politician) urges restraint but Caius Martius (Fiennes) gives them a tongue-lashing, suggesting they should be ashamed of themselves. Honest, but not likely to win votes.

As with modern politics and economic/social crises, it takes a war, against the Volscian enemy, to divert the masses from internal concerns. After the successful battle at Corioles, Caius Martius is given the honorific title of "Coriolanus". For Corioles one might read 'The Falklands', 'Afghanistan', 'Iraq' or 'Chechnya'. Barry Ackroyd's documentary-style realism echoes his cinematography for Ken Loach and Paul Greengrass and for Kathryn Bigelow in *The Hurt Locker*.

As a national hero Coriolanus is encouraged by his advisers to become a political leader. He fails because he cannot woo the public due to his honesty, disdain for flattery and inability to compromise. This, of course, tells us more about the public and what it demands of its political leaders than it does of Coriolanus, particularly appropriate for Shakespeare's times when the 'London mob' or 'York mob', say, had to be carefully watched. But what of today's world, a 'democratic' age based on universal suffrage and over a hundred years of compulsory State education? The craven, opportunistic tribunes of the people, admirably played by Paul Jesson and James Nesbitt, are made to appear as typical contemporary politicians rather than Shakespearean characters.

Yes, as with Polanski's *Macbeth*, the text of our rightly treasured bard is chopped and obscurer passages are removed, but lucidity and eloquence is more than preserved. Coriolanus is still a noble and tragic figure, demanding no pity from us except, perhaps, when yielding to the demands of his fiercely ambitious mother, played at her glorious and brilliant best by Vanessa Redgrave, the very woman who has turned him into an uncompromising warrior.

More from Phillip French: 'Visceral, intelligent, vividly staged and beautifully acted, this film brings a powerful, challenging honesty to bear on class, political life and the demands we make on our leaders, reaching out in ways that Shakespeare could never have imagined. For instance, the great South African actor, John Kani, major exponent of Athol Fugard's plays and for decades a victim of apartheid, is cast as General Cominius, ready to fight but always an advocate of peaceful means, and reminding us of Nelson Mandela. Again, a title eloquently announces itself as "A Place Calling Itself Rome". This is the title of John Osborne's 1972 reworking of *Coriolanus*, a play that remains unproduced. Osborne, feeling himself rejected by the British theatre, identified himself with the banished Roman general and brought his own angry, intransigent protagonists – Jimmy Porter, Archie Rice, Martin Luther, Bill Maitland – into the same band of misfits'.