



The Roman Actor

Two-Tone Theater and One Great Speech

By Phillip Massinger

[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.

Saturday, April 3, 2010, C 6&7 (center stalls)

Actors' Renaissance Season

That this production was just mildly entertaining was a credit to the cast. Massinger wrote this homily against tyrannical rule in broad brushstrokes, with characters so extreme that graphic novelists or even Jerry Bruckheimer would cringe.

The main character, Domitianus Caesar, was so cruel and despotic as to be comical. His one "failing" was that his lust for Domitia was so strong he could not be cruel to her. Come on, a guy this inhumane would have easily quenched his lustful thirst elsewhere. Granted, Denice Burbach, costumed as Domitia, looked so good I could understand Caesar's consuming infatuation, but Sarah Fallon, costumed as Domitilla, his incestuous cousin, was just as appealing.

The plot was somewhat intriguing up until the last third of the play, whereupon it first became too obvious and finally stopped unspooling altogether. One wonders how delectable this story would have been in the hands of a Cyril Tourner or an Oliver Goldsmith, let alone Shakespeare who at least would have infused some gray tones in the moral palette.

Ironically, one character in this play, the title character Paris, is a masterpiece of shaded rendering, whose profession is an honest sham, whose very existence hinges on a dilemma in which any choice he makes is sure death (and he lives the dilemma twice, both times choosing the same course that, both times on two levels, result in death). Paris also has a set-piece speech on the role of theater that, alone, merits this play's existence.

Gregory Jon Phelps played Paris and, given his performance as Suffolk in *Henry VI, Part Two*, earlier in the day, we saw an actor of incredibly wide emotional and physical range. John Harrell played the tyrant Caesar and used his droll delivery to play up what comedy one can eke out of this play. This is only pointing out two parts of a solid ensemble that once again brought life to lines they received only days before performing without direction as part of ASC's Actors' Renaissance Season.

*Eric Minton
April 5, 2010*

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WILL POWER ON STAGE

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