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'A&C' stretches, but not with enough passion for its ambition

The News Leader - Staunton, Va.

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Author: Albrecht, Frank

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Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra" opened at the Blackfriars Playhouse two weeks ago. It will run in repertory with "Romeo and Juliet," "The Winter's Tale" and "Love's Labour's Lost" until early December.

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My standard advice to Blackfriars playgoers who are not familiar with Shakespeare is to avoid reading the play or reading about the play before seeing it. Just go and see what impression it makes.

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But I am forced to change that advice for this production.

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I recommend anyone seeing it, whether familiar with the play or not, to read Ralph Cohen's essay on it in his book "ShakesFear and How to Cure It."

>>

That will tell you what the director of this performance, Jim Warren, is trying to accomplish.

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Cohen makes an excellent case for his belief that "Antony and Cleopatra" is "the most sublime work of the hand of man"; that it embraces and resolves the opposites of "man and woman, East and West, work and play, sex and love, fortune and happiness, life and death," and that "using laughter, it sneaks all this wisdom past every obstacle our society has raised against it."

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Warren, Cohen's longterm associate and the Blackfriars' artistic director since its founding, tries to carry out this vision -- with, unfortunately, only partial success.

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Bluntly, Antony (played by Jan Knightley) never seems a name capable of being "the triple pillar of the world," nor does Cleopatra seem a woman of "infinite variety." Antony struck me in the conventional way as filled with infatuated lust, and Cleopatra (Elisabeth S. Rodgers) as a narcissistic and rather histrionic woman who used her sex appeal to shore up a crumbling social position. I also, particularly in the early parts of the show, had trouble understanding her words.

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She and Antony showed me plenty of very convincing lust and dissipation but little if any passion. Rodgers' Cleopatra was extremely sexy but not alluring, while Knightley's Antony was strong but lacked the subtlety of mind we find in his oration of "Julius Caesar."

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Their best scenes weren't with each other but with others: Antony in conference with Octavius Caesar, Cleopatra with her servants (ably played by Susan Heyward and Allison Glenzer) and with the messenger (not named in the program) who brings word of Antony's marriage to Caesar's sister.

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The drunken party scene on Pompey's ship struck me as overdone. It reminded me of frat parties in the '50s, as did the initial scene between Antony and Cleopatra.

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John Harrell as Caesar wonderfully portrays the kind of cold and poisonous politician who always has the right words for the public with no regard for truth or his real inner opinions -- it's rather a relief to see that our generation didn't invent such people. Rene Thornton Jr. was an excellent Pompey. There was extensive doubling -- David Loar, for instance, played five parts named in the program. Effective costuming kept this from being confusing.

>>

I do not really mean this as a bad review. The audience liked the play better than I did, and for a reason.

> >

The acting, timing, costumes -- everything was quite good and made for an enjoyable evening in the theater. It is only when measured against its ambition that the production is not a full success. Even there I must qualify: The production is funny, as Cohen says it should be, even as Antony is dying.

> >

In addition, ASC actors keep working to improve each show through its run.

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Their productions tend, like good wine, to improve with age, and so "Antony and Cleopatra" may yet exemplify Cohen's vision of it as the best of Shakespeare's plays.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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