

Lifestyle



Wednesday
June 2, 1999

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ASF production of difficult 'Troilus' a triumph

By Allan Swafford
Special to the Advertiser

In its more than a quarter-century span, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival has avoided producing about half of its eponymous playwright's canon. It is a situation that can only be seen as curious.

Among the avoided has been the difficult-to-pigeonhole but supremely rewarding, "Troilus and Cressida," a play that's peculiar but abundant pleasures went largely unrecognized until our own century. Indeed, it has been argued that this masterpiece was never actually staged until about 90 years ago.

"Troilus" calls into question accepted ideas about the glories of war and the nature of love. Further, it raises these questions with a mordant skepticism that many will find offputting. Nonetheless, these questions un-



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Heather Robison, Reese Phillip Purser and Paul Whitthorne perform a scene in the Alabama Shakespeare Festival's production of 'Troilus and Cressida.'

flinchingly reflect contemporary sensibilities.

Always cogent, Shakespeare is nowhere more cogent for our times than in "Troilus and Cressida."

But historically, the play has been subject to academic misreadings and poor production because the playwright in this period of his writing chose to give us less insight

into the interior motivations of his characters than was his normal practice. Thus, Cressida has been dismissed as a slut and Troilus as a callow whiner, no more sensitive than the brutish Greek and Trojan "heroes" who surround him. The ultimate realist, Thersites, has been called "half-human," a "nihilist," a "foul-mouthed fool," and so on. None of these dismissive epithets begin to probe the complexities of these or other characters in this rich play.

A major glory of ASF's premier production, so perceptively directed by Kent Gash, is Gash's insightful and cohesive revelation of motive in his characters. Gash, who is the newly appointed associate artistic director of ASF, is ably abetted by a breathtaking cast.

His decisions have solved the seemingly insurmountable problems that have

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REVIEW

■ **What:** William Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida"

■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. today and Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. June 10, 8 p.m. June 18 and 19, 7:30 p.m. June 23, 2 p.m. June 26 and 27, 8 p.m. July 2 and 3, 7:30 p.m. July 8, 8 p.m. July 9, 2 p.m. July 10 and 11, 2 p.m. July 16 and 18, 7:30 p.m. July 22, 2 p.m. July 24

■ **Where:** Alabama Shakespeare Festival, Blount Cultural Park off Woodmere Boulevard

■ **Admission:** \$22-\$26 until June 14, \$23-\$27 until July 4, \$25-\$29 until July 24; discounts for military personnel, groups of 10 or more

■ **Information:** 271-5353 or (800) 841-4273

'Troilus': Acting, direction make ASF production a success

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usually stood between an audience and a clear view of these characters.

Here, Cressida, exquisitely played by Kathleen McCall, is a heartbroken girl who is compelled to fight for her very existence.

Here, Troilus, in Paul Whit-

thorne's mercurial portrayal, is a lover somewhere between Romeo and Othello. And in Conan McCarty's adroit hands, Thersites can be admired as a close kinsman of that equally flawed realist, Falstaff, who had an equally foul mouth.

In their excellence these actors are matched by the entire cast. For the first time at ASF, Paul Hebron, as an unforgettable Pandarus, has a role that gives scope to his talents. Greg Thornton chills as the calculating Ulysses with some of the play's most memorable speeches. Somehow, John Preston endows Ajax with qualities both thuggish and endearing. Ray Chambers' Achilles, at once murderous and effete, is uniformly re-

pugnant opposite the oafish, thick-skulled but compelling Hector of John Woodson.

The often goofy concept of the production is that the men are costumed in what appears to be a four-millennial, visual history of military uniforms, and we see sets ranging from Bronze Age chic to Art Deco corrupt.

And although ASF shares in the current theory that audiences are incapable of perceiving cogency (relevance is the buzz word) without being bludgeoned over the head with it, you may ignore the bombs, airplanes and battlefield floodlights and revel in the densely poetic language and revealingly contemporary characters of this neglected masterpiece.