

"Troilus and Cressida" gives theatre goers a fresh look at an old play

Theatre Talk

By FRED LIPPINCOTT

A reminder: The new community group, "a theatre," continues their production of "Prelude To A Kiss" this weekend. Call Theatre AUM, 244-3632 for details. Also the classic musical "Annie Get Your Gun" continues at Faulkner University Dinner Theatre, June 11-13 and June 18-19. For information and reservations, which are required, call 386-7190.

Alabama Shakespeare Festival has hit the jackpot twice this season doing what it does best, producing Shakespeare's plays, first with "Richard III" and now with "Troilus and Cressida," which joined the repertory last week. It's a pleasure to salute the superlative work of the Festival's new associate artistic director Kent Gash who had energized a top-flight cast.

But a word of warning. Don't go to the play expecting a romantic tale of young love and heroic warriors out of the Trojan War. **This is mature Shakespeare, confronting "pansexual" characters and all too human warriors, that comes**

from the same time period as "Hamlet" and "Othello." The play may have been considered over the top even in Shakespeare's time, because there's no record of the play's being given then, but it's prime Shakespeare none the less.

Yet as the very good director's notes point out, there's really nothing here to shock a post Monicagate America that is also engaged in a war many believe unwinnable. I recently took a copy of the play with me on vacation, and I was grateful to get to know it better before seeing it.

At least try to get the characters down pat (the program has a good family tree). The Trojans, black Nehru jackets, are the home boys, defending their city against the besieging Greeks (tan field uniforms). We start in the middle of the campaign at a time when the war is at a standstill on both sides, and we go on, not to the Trojan Horse and the end of the war — that would make the play too long — but only to another midpoint. Thus a suspenseful plot is not as important here as in other plays.

Women are a spoil of war, so we get to see Helen of Troy

(remember she started as a Greek) — that's Monica Bell — and Paris (Brian Kurlander) lolling in their lustful bed. We see once great Achilles (indolent Ray Chambers) and his sidekick Patroclus (chilling Sam Wellington) lolling in their tent. Here are two poles of sexual behavior against which the title characters work out their fate. These lovers are both Trojans, but halfway through, Cressida is traded to the Greeks for a political prisoner, thus terminating the relationship. Unlike the usual Shakespearean comedy, the lovers are not reunited at the end.

This production gives tremendous unity to what could be a sprawling play. Instead of a canned sound track, one device for unity is the use of a live, master percussionist (Sheffield Chastair) with his drums and cymbals, who accompanies the play, manipulating our response to almost every scene.

The brilliant effect is probably not far from what went on in Shakespeare's time.

The second device for unity is to confront the problem of Cressida straight on. In her best work here, Kathleen McCall gives us a skeptical, passionate, yet very young woman not always sure of herself, caught up in events not of her own making. No sooner is she pushed into a relationship with Prince Troilus (Paul Whitthorne), boyish and little more mature than she, than she finds herself transported to the Greek camp. In a famous scene she kisses all the Greek generals full on the mouth. Shocking, say the older critics, for this to happen to our young lover; this must be a bad play.

But as Mr. Gash has staged the scene, with enormous tension, Cressida clearly doesn't want to be kissed, so that in these days of date rape, each of the general's kisses becomes a kind of violation. In Shake-

peare's day Cressida was thought of as a tramp, so at this point she's playing against type, salvaging some sympathy for her relation with Troilus.

The third device for unity is Paul Hebrons' leering, degenerate Pandarus, played in white face and lipstick, like the emcee in the musical "Cabaret" (the play is set roughly in the Weimar Republic). He's a naughty boy, yet his is one of the longest roles in the play, manipulating the action throughout and shocking us into reaction. We often see this fine actor in support roles, but it's a great treat finally to have him center stage.

ASF's new associate artistic director has given us a fresh look at a play many have thought unplayable. Kudos to Kent Gash and to this motivated, outstanding cast.

The reviewer teaches French and English at Alabama State University.



Paul Whitthorne and Kathleen McCall in the title roles in Alabama Shakespeare Festival's 1999 production of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, on stage in the Octagon of the Carolyn Blount Theatre through July 24.

Photo by ASF/Scarsbrook