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ASF PRODUCTION MEETS CHALLENGE OF STAGING 42 SCENES

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In a magical finale to its season, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival Friday night opened a sumptuous "The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra." The production manages to suggest complex spectacle without embroiling its action in spectacular complexities. At the behest of Kent Thompson's acute direction, the forty-two scenes of this tragedy of love and politics flash rapidly across Charles Caldwell's ingenious set.

Taking up where "Julius Caesar" ended, Shakespeare in this sequel tells the tale of a Roman empire divided into three parts among Caesar's heirs, the second triumvirate: Octavius Caesar, the first Caesar's nephew and adopted son; Mark Antony, the great general who defeated the cabal that assassinated his friend Caesar; and the negligible Lepidus.

Having received the rich eastern provinces, among them Ptolemaic Egypt, as his portion, Antony meets and falls madly in love with the enchanting Cleopatra. This affair brings about their tragic destruction at the hands of the calculating, manipulative Octavius.

Epic in all its aspects (The forty-two scenes are set "in several parts of the Roman Empire") and peopled by some of the playwright's most complex characters, "Antony and Cleopatra" challenges its actors, director and every member of its artistic staff. In terms of production, the basic challenge is to present all those scenes at a workable pace and not keep the audience until dawn.

Caldwell's visually monumental set meets the requirement for a highly fluid acting space while not disappointing our desire for an epic scene. The versatile space allows Thompson to orchestrate the production's pace so that emotionally it builds quickly to its tragic conclusion; his is a pacing that reveals the play's awesome architectonics.

In his cast the director is particularly blessed. From title characters to the smallest role, there are only momentary weaknesses here. Brian Herndon's Eros, Antony's squire, for instance, is almost lineless but has one scene (Antony's suicide) where he reaches out to clutch the audience's hearts. And Donald Christopher's Rural Fellow, who supplies Cleopatra with the asp, is a masterpiece of macabre humor. Octavia is a study of pathos and sweetness, an often unpalatable confection, which Kathleen McCall makes attractive.

Among the larger roles, Greg Thornton is an almost painfully moving Enobarbus, an intricately cynical character who functions as a chorus, a dear friend of Antony and has some of the play's most glorious poetry -- poetry that gets its due in this actor's mouth.

Harry Carnahan finds more layers in Octavius than is often the case. He gives the audience a chilling and chilled character who yet can be truly warm toward his sister.

John Woodson's vigorous, forceful but past-his-prime Antony, an Antony capable of grand passion and pettiness, of greatness and puerility, is a revealing examination of the legendary general. Greta Lambert's Cleopatra -- imperious and mercurial, sexy and grief-stricken, tigerish and kittenish -- is a wonder to behold, as awe-inspiring as the pyramids. **She is, indeed, "Royal Egypt." Her death scene is operatic in its magnitude and grandeur.**

Among the production's excellences, one finds unfortunately some absurdity, but minor absurdities they are, overpowered by the main impact of this mounting. At one point on opening night, an actor referred to AntHony, yet Napoleonic visual references -- Octavius even has Bonaparte's retreating hairdo -- such as costumes scarcely intrude on the audience's consciousness except when they war with each other.

It is, for instance, ludicrous to see a 19th century admiral on an oared galley or, in one production, a mixture of rifles and quarterstaves (although those quarterstaves are used to magnificent effect in a stylized battle scene). And the precise period of Cleopatra's costumes is difficult to pinpoint. One concludes only that it must have been quite a brief period.

Notes 1: Allan Swafford has reviewed local theater for more than 15 years.

Notes 2: With Photo / ASF/Carsbrook

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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