

Theater and tyranny merge in 'The Roman Actor'

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Written by
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footlights and spotlights

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While "The Roman Actor" by Phillip Massinger (1583-1640) isn't obscure by any stretch of the imagination — in fact, it is considered by many to be the playwright's finest work — it isn't as widely produced as some other plays of the era. Which is a shame, because it is a blistering and highly entertaining look at tyranny, politics and morality in the days of the Roman Empire that also provides performers with great prospects for strutting their stuff.

And at the Blackfriars Playhouse, they do, gleefully mining the dramatic possibilities that lie in characters such as a popular tragedian, a despotic emperor, a duplicitous sexpot and a gutless, sycophantic senator (if you can imagine that).

"The Roman Actor" marks the final new entry in this year's Actors' Renaissance Season and stands as a testament to how exhilarating theater can be when the directors are chained to a stanchion in the basement and the performers take on all production and directorial duties.

The story centers on the ruthless emperor Domitian, who forces one of his senators to divorce his wife so that she can become one of the emperor's concubines. Domitia gleefully hops into the emperor's bed and then turns her amorous attentions to Paris, a well-known actor that has captured her fancy. What follows is a smorgasbord of intrigue, dishonesty, executions, torture, pandemonium and plays-within-a-play.

According to Ralph Alan Cohen, ASC's director of mission, the work was, in its time, a thinly veiled warning to the new King Charles against despotism.

I've never seen Gregory Jon Phelps give anything other than a full artistic accounting of himself, and he does so again as Paris, the popular actor who catches the randy eye of Domitia. Thoroughly engaging throughout, he is at his best when he orates about the glories of being an actor (in a now-famous soliloquy) and in the uncomfortable aftermath of being caught in Domitia's arms by the

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what: "The Roman Actor"

where: Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton

when: Playing through April 3

tickets: \$10 to \$40

more info: 851-1733 or www.americanshakespearecenter.com

emperor. It's good, solid work by a thoughtful, talented actor.

While Denise Burbach has had a number of good roles this season, the part of the hot-to-trot Domitia has provided her with more opportunities to demonstrate what she can do as an actress, which is considerable. Deliciously sensual as the queen of situational ethics, Burbach deftly adds and removes personality traits to fit the moment or the lover, giving us a layered performance that is charming, disturbing and mesmerizing, all in a single play.

And John Harrell. It's worth the price of a ticket just to see him breathe cruel, oily, outrageous and sometimes funny life into Domitianus Caesar, one of the Roman Empire's most brutal, but effective, rulers. Only Harrell could do it with such aplomb.

"The Roman Actor" also features Miriam Donald, Sarah Fallon, Benjamin Curns, Chris Johnston, Allison Glenzer, Tyler Moss, Rene Thornton Jr., Daniel Kennedy and J. Colleen Kelly.

E-mail Go! columnist Charles Culbertson at mail@stauntonhistory.com.

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