

Shotgun Players' version of
SHAKESPEARE'S *TROILUS AND CRESSIDA*

Hinkel Park

AUGUST 25, 2002



Before scampering off to the mountains, the Significant Other and I took in the Shotgun Players' version of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. The company has never turned aside from difficult tasks in the some twelve to fifteen

years we have been following their progress, from the humble stage origins in the basement of La Val's pizza to their present home in Berkeley and this luxurious outdoor setting at the John Hinkel Park amphitheatre. Hinkel Park nestles in North Berkeley in that area where the streets get all twisty and devious, but taking I80 North and then the Albany-Buchanan exit will get you there. Remember to wait at the traffic signal before swinging around to go uphill.

The amphitheater sits at the base of a natural cleft between two hills and fronting a little stream that plashes down from waterfalls -- tofu-dogs and ships are available, but picnic baskets are encouraged as well as good pillows and sleeves for the action decays just as the light fails and the breezes become chill.

Chances are, you have not seen this most unwieldy of Shakespeare's plays, which not only was not performed at all for 300 years, but which had even the academics scratching their heads over just what this cynical, savage play presenting over 60 characters really was. Far too bleak to be a comedy, and taking every liberty with known facts and fables to prevent a history label, yet without a single redeeming character to grant it tragedy status, the play, like the vitriolic character of Thersites, remains a prickly condemnation of all of war and the nonsense of war as well as supposed heroism. Written shortly after a failed rebellion by the Earl of Essex against the ailing Queen Elizabeth, Shakespeare and his company had just come out from under a very serious investigation on account of having performed before Essex the day before the attempted putsch. The official response was as draconian as the rebellion foolish -- all principals were beheaded and hangers-on banished. Shakespeare, clearly came out of it

with no conciliatory mood and the result is a play that has none of the comfortable restoration of harmony found in most of his other "dark" plays. Pandarus, the man whose name gave us the lovely word "pander" with all of its associations, concludes the play with ". . . in two months hence I'll make my will . . . but until that time I'll sweat and seek about for eases / and at that time bequeath you my diseases." Ta dum, the end.

Troilus and Cressida completes Shotgun Players artistic director Patrick Dooley's personal trilogy of dramas about the Trojan War - from the moment before the ships left Greece in Euripides *Iphigenia in Aulis*, to Giraudous's anti-war satire, *There Will Be No Trojan War*, with the Greeks landing on the beaches, to, now, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, a world where good intentions and hope are infected by fear, greed and jealousy. "This is one of Shakespeare's slipperiest plays," notes Dooley. "It is neither comedy nor tragedy, history or love story. It's an ironic and satirical play, perhaps more meaningful to contemporary audiences than when it was written. Audiences today are more savvy about the politics of gender and war that Shakespeare put on display here. We're conscious of how screwed up our world is and we can really appreciate the humor and tragedy of the play."

It's hardly the high-flying poetry for which Mr. S. is well known, and he seems to be saying that here the time remains "out of joint" and that the myths and legends of yore are all based on the basest of behaviors for the basest of reasons. Even Hector, who appears the sole center of principle value by embodying honor, loyalty and truth votes to continue a ruinous war largely out of

self-interest and who dies while gloating over a piece of captured armor obtained by killing a man engaged only in running away. As for the other characters, the great Homeric "heroes", Ajax is presented as a muscle-bound lunkhead, Achilles as an indolent fool, Ulysses a political diplomat mouthing platitudes in which he does not believe. Agammemnon is presented as a moderately capable bureaucrat and Menelaus appears as a bulb in need of a few more watts to shine. As for the Trojans, portrayed essentially as peaceful folk -- given the opportunity -- Priam, the king of Troy, vacillates as a splendid nonentity between fighting and simply giving up this costly Helen, orders Hector and Troilus not to take the field -- and is ignored. Calchas, and possibly Antenor, both defect to the Greeks and Paris shows up as a dandified prettyboy unwilling to give up his tarnished bauble in form of Helen.



And for the title characters, Troilus has little other than his professed "love" for his Cressida, who yields all too readily to the demands of Diomedes when given the chance. And so Troilus damns her -- also rather quickly -- with, "From now on and forever may all inconstants be termed after her -- Cressid!"

In fact the only honest man in the play may be the bilious character of Thersites, and oh, what a tongue of honesty the man possesses! He snarls, capers, hisses, spits and gnashes the truth as a kind of diabolical chorus of one, a fool whose truth is proof against -- and far sharper than -- swords and arrows. When Patrocles attempts to match wits against him, the Greek winds up backing away with his hands in front as if to shield himself against the vitriol. It may be said that Thersites is Mr. S's most corrosive fool, a kind of monkey-cum-viper creeping along the doomed walls of Troy with condemnation falling equally on both sides. He is also one of Shakespeare's most direct of fools, for there is no mad equivocation when he calls Ajax "... thou beef-witted Lord! . . . thou hast no more brains than I in my elbows!" Then again we see him galloping across the stage, spanking his rear while howling, "Lechery! Lechery! Lechery! It's all lechery!" This is his comment on the seduction scene between Diomedes and Cressida.

Clearly, the highest aims ascribed to wars are no more than dull-witted bestial urges and all our heroes stem from misconception and clever rewrites of bad behavior. Perhaps this play describing a hopelessly sick society enthralled with obnoxious action and stupid deeds may just be a timely thing. Certainly it is a good choice for this burgeoning company, for the scope of this production

forces every member of the company to stretch quite a bit in performing several roles.

Performances begin at five pm and will continue into the end of November at the same outdoor location. Price is based on ability to pay -- there is no gate.

CAST

Cressida: Frieda Naphsica de Lackner

Troilus: Tyler Fazakerley

Cassandra: Kimberly Wilday

Pandarus: Reid Davis

Helen: Rica Anderson

Thersites: Clive Worsley

Directed by Patrick Dooley