

Mesmerizing *Coriolanus* is a Triumph



David DeSantos stars as Coriolanus. Photo courtesy Theatricum Botanicum

BY CLAIRE FORDHAM

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum's 2018 Summer Season is off to a cracking start with William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

David DeSantos shines brightly in the starring role of Coriolanus, thoroughly deserving his standing ovation from the sizeable opening night audience on June 2.

DeSantos is truly mesmerizing as the Roman soldier, Caius Marcius Coriolanus, whose love of power and complete disregard for the needs of his starving people, along with a willingness to lie and manipulate is a cautionary tale and an allegory for today's tumultuous times.

Theatricum is famed for its productions that frame contemporary social issues through the lens of classic literature.

Ellen Geer, Theatricum's Artistic Director and co-director of *Coriolanus* with her sister, Melora Marshall, said in the program notes, "In this play, there are no heroes. It's really just like today."

In all fairness to our current President, in case anyone's thinking of comparing him to Coriolanus, he hasn't killed any babies (with his bare hand) and is not the brave and courageous soldier that Coriolanus is.

Coriolanus bears grudges and is a killing machine but he does love and respect his mother, wife and son. And he is courageous in battle in a time when those things were revered.

There are so many performances to single out for praise in *Coriolanus* that it's hard to know where to begin, so I shall start by saying the entire production is a triumph.

Kudos to co-directors Geer and Marshall who achieved something memorable here with their vision and direction. Actors appeared from

everywhere. Not a square inch of the spectacular outdoor setting was wasted.

The actors all spoke clearly and made easy work of Shakespeare's words.

As well as directing, Geer and Marshall had big parts. Geer as Coriolanus' mother, Volumnia, was, as ever, astonishing. Geer is the gift that keeps giving.

Melora Marshall was marvelous as Menenius Agrippa, the scheming and powerful Roman senator.

For Theatricum history buffs, Ellen Geer's nine-year-old granddaughter Quinnlyn Scheppner played the role of Coriolanus' son, Young Martius. She didn't have much to do or say but the fact that this is the fourth generation of Geers treading the boards at Theatricum is worth mentioning and something for her to be proud of.

Quinnlyn has some big shoes to step into but there was no sign of nerves that night and her acting career is off to a promising start.

Franc Ross is outstanding as Cominius, friend of Coriolanus and a general who helped lead Rome to victory over the Volscians. Ross is a big man with a commanding stage presence and a voice that was born to speak Shakespeare.

Max Lawrence is terrific as Aufidius, Volscian general and Coriolanus' main rival. This is Lawrence's eighth season at Theatricum and he never disappoints. He and DeSantos share some scintillating scenes as actors and fighters.

The sweat on Lawrence's and DeSantos' brows was well earned.

Powerful performances, too, from Volscian Fabian Cook Jr., as well as Holly Hawk, listed as Citizen 2 in the playbill, who had much to say and said it so well that she deserves a mention.

There are no weak links on stage here. And the costumes were the best I've seen in a Theatricum production for a while. I haven't seen them all, of course, but I doubt a costume designer has achieved a better sense of period, fit and authenticity than Robert Merkel does in *Coriolanus*. Geer and Marshall's hair looked authentic, too. This all helps make the audience believe they are in the 6th Century BC.

Coriolanus is a play about political manipulation and revenge. Set in Rome, a city where the one-percenters rule, led by a populist general who has nothing but contempt for the common people and is unable to reconcile his disdain for the citizens with his love of country.

Even if the plot gets slightly confusing in places with switches of allegiance, hearing Shakespeare's words spoken so beautifully and acted so passionately in this stunning setting is well worth the ticket price.

A great night for David DeSantos, a great night for Theatricum, a great night for Shakespeare, and a great night for theater.

Original music and sound design for *Coriolanus* are by Marshall McDaniel; costume design is by Robert Merkel; lighting design by Zach Moore; props by Sydney Russell; and the fantastic fight choreography is by Aaron Hendry and Dane Oliver. Jordann Zbylski assistant directs; and Elna Kordijan is the production stage manager.

Co-directed by Ellen Geer and Melora Marshall, *Coriolanus* runs through September 23. ■

For tickets: (310) 455-3723 or www.theatricum.com; Adults: \$38.50 (lower tier); \$25 (upper tier); Seniors (65+); Students, Military Veterans, Teachers, AEA Members: \$25/\$15; Children (5-15): \$10; Children 4 and under: Free

Will Geer's Theatricum Botanicum is located at 1419 N. Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga CA 90290. The outdoor amphitheaters are terraced into the hillside of the rustic canyon. Audience members are advised to dress casually (warmly for evenings) and bring cushions for bench seating. Patrons are welcome to arrive early and picnic before a performance.