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The cult of personality

Shakespeare Festival elects lesser-known 'Coriolanus' as its election year play

BY AMY STUMPF
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As the nation prepares to elect its next president, the Nashville Shakespeare Festival and Naked Stages have teamed up to present one of the Bard's most political — though lesser known — tragedies.

And NSF could scarcely have chosen a more suitable running mate. Known for his thoughtful and often unadorned stage work, Naked Stages' Mark Cabus directs this production with a clear vision and plenty of action.

Coriolanus weaves a provocative and often brutal tale of a war hero thrust into Rome's political spotlight as a reluctant candidate for a high-ranking office.

Unable to kowtow to the populace he so despises, Coriolanus eventually is destroyed by the very media-like machine that built him up.

It's hard to miss the obvious modern-day parallels.

But beyond the astounding timeliness of this 400-plus-year-old story, *Coriolanus* proves to be a natural fit for this venue.

With the audience in full view and players forced to dash in and out among "the masses," the setting surely enhances the play's driving theme of social class.

Jonathan Hammel's stripped down set is designed to signify Rome's status as an empire in the making (a de-

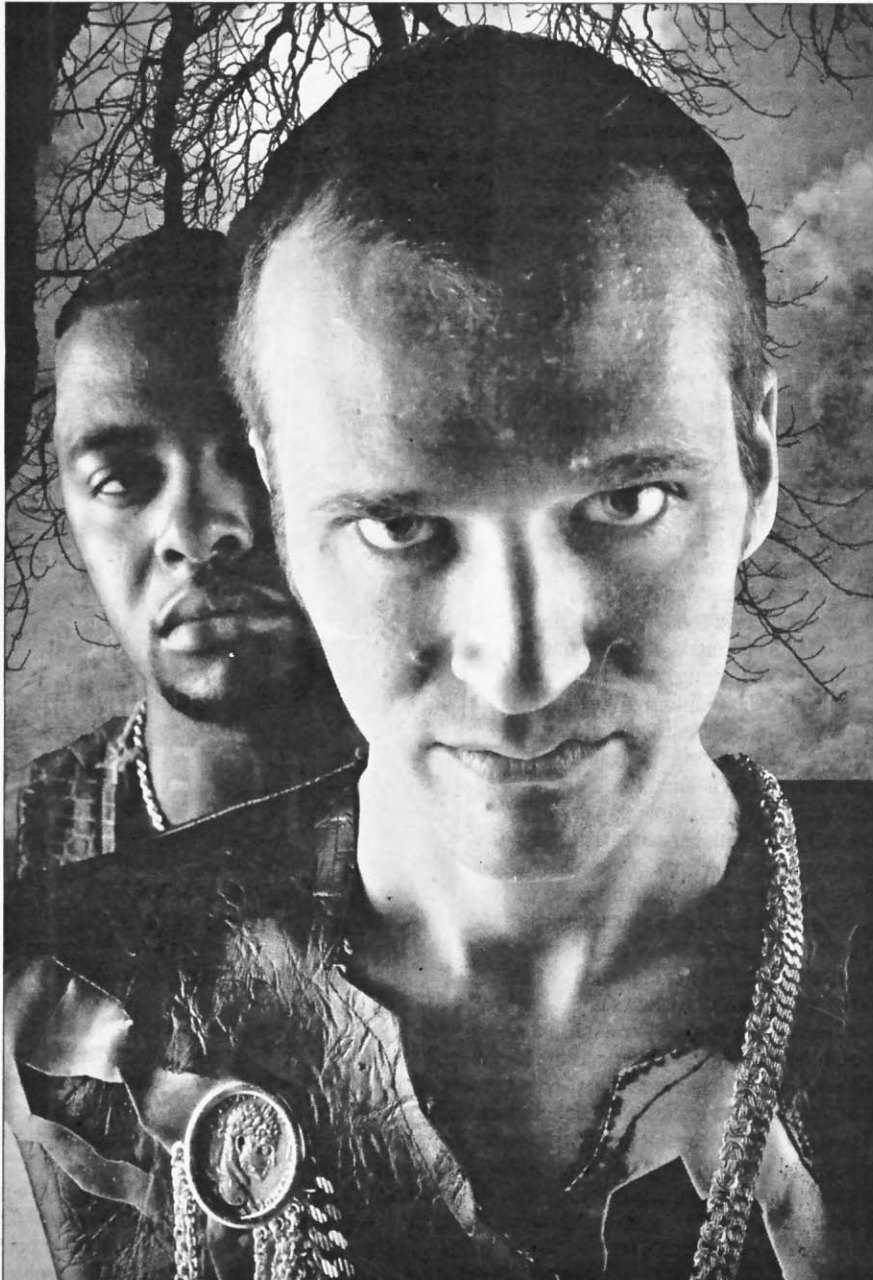
tail that most audience members will miss unless they read the program). More effective is the center-stage sand pit, which symbolizes power and plays host to battles, both physical and verbal.

Roy Cox's fight choreography is outstanding, complemented by Anne

Willingham's smart lighting.

And Billy Ditty lends his considerable talents to the production's costume design, which evokes a delightful blend of ancient Rome meets punk rock.

Christopher Brown (a Belmont graduate and member of Chicago's



www.jeffrazier.com

Christopher Brown stars as Coriolanus, shown with co-star Kamal Bolden (background) as Aufidius, in the Nashville Shakespeare Festival's production of *Coriolanus*, running through Sept. 7.

(and
politics)

Blue Man Group) is excellent as the brooding Coriolanus, full of bluster and bravado.

But this is no one-note performance.

Just watch as Brown's impenetrable he-man is reduced to petulant schoolboy by a domineering mother — played with equal gusto by Rona Carter.

Other standouts include a strapping Kamal Bolden as Coriolanus' rival Aufidius and Rodrikus Springfield as the elder statesman Menenius.

But Brenda Sparks (Junius Brutus) and Jessejames Locorriere (Sicinius Velutus) are especially riveting as the conniving tribunes hell-bent on bringing Coriolanus down.

Early on, Coriolanus mocks the

'Coriolanus'

When: 7:30 p.m. (with pre-show entertainment at 6:30 p.m.) Thursday-Sunday through Sept. 7.

Where: Centennial Park Bandshell, 2600 West End Ave.

Cost: free, with suggested donation of \$5

Info: 255-2273, nashvilleshakes.org

• Bleacher seating available or bring a blanket or lawn chair. Picnics welcome, but food and drink are available on site.

tribunes as merely "tongues of the common mouth," but he underestimates their power.

Like contemporary pundits, they play on people's fears, plotting and manipulating in the name of national security.

And like many of our modern candidates, Coriolanus discovers too late that ignoring "the voice of the people" is the surest road to tragedy. **CP**