

# Mom's a monster in obscure Shakespeare offering

BY PETER BIRNIE FEBRUARY 25, 2009



Ilan Butcher and Anna Cummer star in Coriolanus.

Photograph by: Handout, Files

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## Coriolanus

A Coriolanus Co-op production at the Jericho Arts Centre, 1675 Discovery, to March 14

Tickets \$20/18, go to [bardatjac.com](http://bardatjac.com) or call 604-224-8007

VANCOUVER - Lady Macbeth? A bloody push-over. Regan and Goneril? The sweetest of siblings.

None of the nasty gals who pepper Shakespeare's canon can hold a candle to Volumnia, mother to Coriolanus and a monster of brutal ambition. Even if she never set foot on stage, this wicked character's ruinous effect on her kill-crazy kid would still be obvious in his petty and violent actions.

Gwynth Walsh gets to sink her teeth into the role of Volumnia (with Ian Butcher as Coriolanus) as director Jack Paterson once again dares to take on one of the Bard's toughest plays to stage. How tough? Paterson learned from local theatre scholar Malcolm Page that there's no evidence Coriolanus has been performed in Vancouver since the 19th Century.

Paterson's staging of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus in 2006 was so successful that, rumour has it, Bard on the Beach then felt ennobled to tackle the mighty Titus (doing its own bang-up job in 2008).

"I do like to think that's true," says Paterson with a chuckle. He loves a challenge, and Coriolanus begs the question - why haven't we seen it performed here in so long?

"Because it's big," Paterson says matter-of-factly. Thus is born the Coriolanus Co-op, which will allow an enormous cast to present the play on a wing and a prayer - and the hope that sufficient bums in seats will bring in enough at the box office to stave off starvation.

Paterson's analysis of Coriolanus with his cast has him feeling that the play, dated 1607, is "frighteningly relevant" to today's audiences.

"It's an extremely exciting script," Paterson notes, "but a very hard read, and I suspect that a number of people are put off by reading it."

In lifting page to stage, however, he has uncovered a wealth of opportunity in the story of a Roman general who foolishly tries to take on the citizens of his city.

"It's a city under siege, a Vietnam War film, then a political film, then a family betrayal, all ending with conspiracy and murder," Paterson says. "We spent an awful lot of time just trying to figure out what was going on."

The title character is a cold man who has invited centuries of speculation about Shakespeare's reasons for creating him. Scholar Harold Bloom sees a dramatist at the end of his career, having just given the world Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth and Anthony and Cleopatra, turning away from the wildly willful (and all too human) characters he created - "We feel," Bloom asserts, "that Coriolanus does exactly what Shakespeare wants him to do."

Paterson is fascinated by the play's heavy emphasis on mob rule.

"The mob, the general public, is a huge character in this play," he notes. "The mob seems to operate just as we do in real life - when they're together on an issue, they're hugely powerful; as soon as the mob gets fractured, it becomes kind of useless, it's all just individuals."

With politicians playing their oily games and the crowd "making decisions and choices without necessarily having all the facts," Paterson felt no hesitation in seeing modern parallels, and placing Coriolanus in the here and now. Cellphones and text-messaging now help foment unrest - sound familiar?

Sun Theatre Critic

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