

PRINCE HARMING

By Bob Mondello
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Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece

By Callie Kimball

Directed by Sarah Denhardt

Produced by Washington Shakespeare Company

At Clark Street Playhouse to March 11

You'd have to be a little nuts to go where Washington Shakespeare Company has traipsed so adventurously with its world premiere of *Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece*. Unsavory subject matter, an unfamiliar historical period, togas, gods, mandatory triple-casting, and the rhymed couplets of an 1,800-line epic poem that the Bard pointedly did *not* write for the stage, might all be said to militate against theatrical success. Throw in an abbreviated production schedule (the show was a last-minute replacement for a *King Lear* left suddenly Learless by illness), and WSC's risk-taking seems all but suicidal.

So it's gratifying to report that while all is not absolutely ideal at the Clark Street Playhouse, the troupe's gamble is paying off pretty handsomely, complete with gasp-inducing theatrics and even a laugh or two. There's also an abuse-of-power subtext sure to warm the hearts of the politics-minded: Lucrece's rape in 510 B.C. by Prince Tarquin was not just a vicious crime of sexual predation—it was so infuriating to Rome's monarchy-weary populace that it led indirectly to the formation of the Roman Republic and the election of Lucrece's hubby Collatinus as Rome's first First Consul. Lucrece, in short, cast such a dramatic shadow on the world stage that it's reasonable to expect her to cast one on the theatrical stage as well.

Not that a "Don't Try This at Home" sticker wouldn't be appropriate on any program handed to a would-be playwright during the Clark Street run. Callie Kimball's skill at matching the Bard's couplets with her own is impressive, as is her facility for delineating ancient politics, but it's her literary wit that sets *Rape of Lucrece* apart.

Not content to lend a freshly feminist sensibility to a 400-year-old account of a then 2,100-year-old rape, Kimball has also graced her play's language with references to many of Shakespeare's better-known works. With a central figure named Brutus (a real-life ancestor of the one who would later stab Julius Caesar), it perhaps makes sense that Lucrece's story should inspire the author to create a script that's a treasure trove of in-jokes and homages. Sarah Denhardt's staging expands upon the text with visual quotes as well—a character-turned-statue, a la *Winter's Tale*, and a frantic, Lady Macbethnish scrubbing away of impurity.

None of which would be worth much if the horrified shock that consumes Collatinus (Theo Hadjimichael) at the play's climax didn't leap across the footlights so effectively. Lucrece (Betsy Rosen) has by then recounted her ravishment in terms vivid enough to render her husband speechless but has not yet said who did the deed. When she finally tells him it was Tarquin (Colin Smith), Collatinus reels, his eyes glazed, and then he spots his dagger in his wife's hand a split-second before she uses it. His lunge is too late, his grief palpable enough to banish any remaining doubts about the stageworthiness of this hybrid *Rape of Lucrece*.



Virtue, Reality: Lucrece is forced into another world.

It's not unreasonable, however, that there should be a few doubts in the play's early going. Kimball has provided a prologue to provide historical exposition—a memorial attended by Collatinus, his friend Brutus (Parker Dixon) and Lucrece's father (Robert Lavery), at which they look back from a distance of several years on events that will be dramatized in the play's seven scenes. But to use the Bard's poetry without too many alterations, the playwright has come up with a narrative scheme in which the principal characters are joined at nearly every moment by servants and gods played by Denman C. Anderson and Abby Wood. This allows Kimball to blend Shakespeare's poetic couplets with her own, both as dialogue and description, not always seamlessly but with considerable grace. The servants tend to lounge and gossip, the gods to pose and proclaim, but they all function as a sort of chorus.

The principals, meanwhile, wrestle both with one another and with what's expected of them. Hadjimichael makes Collatinus a competitive sort, and both he and Dixon's Brutus have a sexist streak that leads them into an ill-advised bet with the Prince about the loyalty of the women in their lives. Collatinus is clearly enamored of his wife but also sees her as a bauble. Rosen's spunky, appealingly radiant Lucrece lives up to his rapturous description, so it's easy to understand why. She's also as outspoken and assertive as any Shakespearean heroine, which makes her appear feisty enough to match Smith's manipulative, arrogant Tarquin in a fight, so it's no surprise when the royal creep resorts to blackmail in forcing her submission.

Denhardt's mostly dignified staging—the wrestling looks a little silly, but she brings gravity to the gods—graduates from ceremonial formality to a surprising intimacy during domestic scenes. And for the titular sexual assault, the director comes up with some startlingly simple effects to represent the collapse of Lucrece's defenses—long white curtains ripped from their moorings by Tarquin, screams piercing a terrible darkness when he has his way with her.

To modern ears, the punishment meted out to this princely predator feels insufficient, however historically accurate it might be, and Kimball's attempt to beef it up with the suggestion that pro-Republic sentiment soon swept the Roman monarchy from power feels awfully detached from the crime we want avenged. But if the evening's final moments seem a trifle anticlimactic, well...this unexpectedly *Shakespearean* premiere gets so much right—after being written in just a few days and rehearsed in not too many more—that it's hard to fault the author for not overruling both history and the Bard.