

## A VERSE EPIC, UNEVEN YET UNNERVING

'Rape of Lucrece' Receives A Thought-Provoking Rewrite

By Celia Wren

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The Shakespearean standards are for wimps. "Romeo and Juliet"? "Hamlet"? "A Midsummer Night's Dream"? Tedious old chestnuts. They've been thrust upon the public so often, there can be less glory in staging them these days.

Mounting one of Shakespeare's narrative poems -- now that takes a bit of nerve.

You can only admire the Washington Shakespeare Company for presenting "Shakespeare's 'Rape of Lucrece,'" local playwright Callie Kimball's adaptation of the Bard's verse epic. Not only is "Rape of Lucrece" one of Shakespeare's lesser-read texts, but it deals with a subject that makes your typical audience member extremely uncomfortable.

Kimball and director Sarah Denhardt cannily exploit the discomfort factor in this ambitious and thought-provoking, if not wholly successful, production, which unfurls on an unnervingly intimate scale on an arena-style stage.

As the toga-draped action courses remorselessly toward the central act of violence -- culminating in a wrenching scene of darkness, torn by screams -- it raises feminist arguments about the exploitation of women by men. Such somber themes mesh easily with Kimball's stately, poetic and occasionally slightly fustian dialogue, which weaves in and out of passages borrowed from Shakespeare's poem.



(Ray Gniewek - Washington Shakespeare Company)

There's also a broader political point that emanates from the story's historical context. "Rape of Lucrece" recounts how, in ancient Rome, an arrogant prince named Tarquin (the Tarquin whose "ravishing strides" are invoked in a famous speech of Macbeth's, incidentally) violated Lucrece, the virtuous wife of his fellow soldier Collatinus. Convinced that she was irrevocably tainted, Lucrece committed suicide, prompting one of Collatinus's relatives to lead a rebellion against Tarquin's tyrannical father -- an act that eventually led to the founding of the Roman Republic.

Lucrece's suffering, in other words, paved the way for political change -- a tale disturbing and resonant in our modern world.

Mining this conceptual lode, Kimball sets her first and last scenes in the years of the Roman Republic, during a public commemoration of Lucrece's life. The production's seven performers, standing on set designer Lea Umberger's elegant flagstone flooring, launch into an auditory mosaic of Shakespearean and Kimballian lines evoking Tarquin's crime. And then, suddenly, we're watching the story replay.

It's melodramatic stuff, and Denhardt deserves credit for maintaining a tone that's dignified but, where needed, emotionally intense. The moment in which the fluttering white drapes of Lucrece's bed fall, one by one, leaving her vulnerable to Tarquin's advances, is particularly harrowing. Denhardt gets an invaluable assist from composer/sound designer Aaron M. Forbes, whose eerily shivering minimalist music lends an atmosphere of foreboding to the scenes it underscores.

The acting ranges from competent to stiff and hokey. In her early scenes as Lucrece, Betsy Rosen is appealingly demure, and she looks beautiful in her turquoise robes (Umberger's costumes suggest a Cecil B. De Mille movie). But when she is portraying strong emotion, her delivery becomes muddy. Theo

Hadjimichael displays an adequate amount of stage presence as Collatinus, and Colin Smith manages not to be too cartoonish as Tarquin.

The performers with the hardest row to hoe are Denman C. Anderson and Abby Wood, who play Lucrece's maids and also -- in a device that probably works better on paper than in the flesh -- the two halves of the god Janus.

Sandwiched as it is between Shakespearean passages, the maids' gossip (written by Kimball) can sound a tad ridiculous -- there's a lot of talk about some heartthrob of a charioteer -- and the casting of a male as one of the maids yields an unfortunate campiness (Anderson's mincing interpretation doesn't help). The modern dance -- like the moves of the two Januses -- feels overwrought, although it's presumably meant as a visual correlative to the script's more incantatory sections.

And there is much that is incantatory, because Kimball has ingeniously appropriated some of the most stirring lines from Shakespeare's poem, redistributing them among the characters, turning narration to speech and vice versa. You could hardly ask for an achievement that contrasted more with her 2005 play "Lulu Fabulous," a hip spoof about modern singles.

No one would call Kimball's "Lucrece" flawless, but it's bold and provocative -- and it's certainly a change from Shakespeare's usual suspects.

Shakespeare's 'Rape of Lucrece,' by Callie Kimball, adapted from Shakespeare. Directed by Sarah Denhardt. With Robert Lavery and Parker Dixon. About 1 hour. Through March 11 at the Clark Street Playhouse, 601 S. Clark St., Crystal City. Call 800-494-8497 or visit <http://www.washingtonshakespeare.org>.