

BARD AND FAST

Callie Kimball's Quick Adaptation of 'Rape of Lucrece'

By Jane Horwitz

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Actress-playwright Callie Kimball doesn't kid around when she takes on a project. Adapt an epic poem by Shakespeare for the stage in three marathon writing days? No biggie.

And so it has come to pass that Washington Shakespeare Company, on very short notice (having canceled its "King Lear" due to a cast member's health scare), is presenting Kimball's brand-new adaptation of "The Rape of Lucrece" at the Clark Street Playhouse through March 11.

Over the course of one long weekend last month, Kimball dove into the 1594 poem and wrote a first draft, which then had a read-through at Washington Shakespeare. She made changes just as quickly, and the rehearsal script was ready. Kimball was surprised it took her three days to get that first draft out.



Betsey Rosen is part of the cast of WSC's production of "The Rape of Lucrece," an adaptation by Callie Kimball. (By Ray Gniewek -- Washington Shakespeare Company)

"I completely underestimated how long it would take to craft and tend the verse . . . pruning things away and nurturing the things you want to keep," she says. A longtime dabbler in iambic pentameter, Kimball found it easier to create her own additions to the Bard's work, "because I do write quickly and I knew the scenes I wanted to write that were just pure invention on my part." Although she didn't try to match Shakespeare's seven-line stanzas, Kimball says, she used "a lot of internal rhyme and rhyming couplets" so the additions wouldn't be jarring.

Lucretia, whose tale has been told or commented upon by Livy, Ovid, Augustine, Chaucer and many others, was a Roman aristocrat, circa 510 B.C. The son of Rome's tyrant ruler insinuated himself into her home and raped her. Lucretia told her husband and father of the outrage, then killed herself as a matter of honor.

"I had to sort of get my arms around that" and set aside modern views about rape victims, Kimball says. She came to admire Lucretia's pure heart -- "an honorable woman, known for her virtue and her standing in society . . . The choices became to just tell the story and take it on faith that she was exactly what she seems to be -- just a wonderful, wonderful woman."

A self-avowed Shakespeare freak, Kimball says working with Shakespeare made her feel "really special. I felt like he and I were in on some kind of game together and it was a really cool feeling."

Sarah Denhardt has directed "The Rape of Lucrece," and three of the seven cast members come from the canceled "Lear." Artistic Director Christopher Henley had been desperate to fill the company's suddenly empty winter slot with something meaningful rather than "just grabbing some play that was easy to cast," or throwing together an evening of favorite Shakespeare scenes. Most of all, he wanted WSC to be in the swim during these early days of the six-month-long Shakespeare in Washington festival, along with such current shows as the Shakespeare Theatre Company's "Richard III," the Classical Theatre of Harlem's "Lear" at the Folger, Synetic's wordless "Macbeth" and Keegan's "Tempest," plus Rorschach's "Tempest"-tossed "Rough Magic."

WSC, says Henley, is "taking one of the few Shakespeare pieces that aren't well known and forging a theatrical evening out of it . . . so it ended up being a really nice kind of thing to offer the festival [and] as elegant as possible a solution to a really difficult dilemma."