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Agrippina

THEATRE

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OPENED

October 15, 2004

CLOSED

October 23, 2004

PERFORMANCES

Thu - Sat at 8pm; Sun at 2pm

RUNNING TIME

2 hours, 10 minutes

TICKETS

\$15

203-882-3173

CAST

Beth McKenzie, Craig A. Brown, Natalie C. Bridges, Brad Caswell, Michael Catangay, Jina Curtis, David Holt, Miral Kotb, Jedidiah McProud, Sara MontBlanc, Ridley Parson, Tim Shestak, Jason Shoulders, Lindsay Kitt Wiebe

AUTHOR

A. Giovanni Affinito

DIRECTOR

Alexis M. Hadsall

SETS

Alexis M. Hadsall

LIGHTING

Lance Darcy

COSTUMES

Brad Caswell, Alexis M. Hadsall, Sara MontBlanc

Agrippina is a new play by A. Giovanni Affinito about the Roman emperor Nero and his ascension to power and struggle to keep it from his enemies, from his lovers, and especially from Rome's most powerful woman, his mother Agrippina. The play blends elements of classical tragedy, contemporary satire, music, and dance.

nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton October 16, 2004

If Theatre Rats' production of *Agrippina*, A. Giovanni Affinito's sexy new play about power and Oedipal complexes, seems to be as compellingly watchable as a soap opera, well, that's because that's what it is. With Craig A. Brown delivering a terrific performance as a likeably twisted young Emperor Nero, this drama of ancient Rome is the theatrical equivalent of a page-turner, and just as much fun. Affinito picks up the story where *I, Claudius* leaves off, recounting the behind-the-scenes maneuvering that pitted Nero against his domineering mother Agrippina in a battle to—dare I say it—the death.

The play begins with a 20-minute dance sequence, written by director Alexis M. Hadsall and choreographed by Natalie Neckyfarow, in which the events preceding the main story are (more or less) depicted. (Some of these events are also recounted during the play proper, in flashback.) Agrippina, the daughter of Germanicus and



SOUND

Anthony Valerio & Alexis M. Hadsall

CHOREOGRAPHER

Natalie Neckyfarow

FIGHT DIRECTOR

Dan Renkin & Brad Lemons

STAGE MANAGER

J. Ryan Kirk

PRODUCING COMPANY

TheatreRats

great-granddaughter of Augustus Caesar, is desperate to place her son Nero at the head of the Roman Empire. To this end, she marries the emperor Claudius, who is her uncle (necessitating a change in the incest laws); she then maneuvers to have Nero declared Claudius's successor (instead of the more likely choice, Claudius's own son, Britannicus). Agrippina knows that a prophecy from her youth foretold her own death at Nero's hand once he came to the throne. Her journey toward that destiny is detailed in the play.

Affinito gives us a Nero far different from the gross fathead we've met in other accounts. Apparently long before he fiddled while Rome burned, he longed for freedom and a kind of reform, for himself and his people. Which is not to say that Affinito's Nero is wise or even capable—he's a bit of a flake, actually; but especially in Craig A. Brown's lovable portrayal, he seems well-intentioned if high-spirited. His central dilemma is how to deal with his feelings for his mother: he knows he's stuck under her thumb but he's also aware of ambiguous longings to surrender to another woman. When one of his chief ministers, the devious Otho, sends his own wife Poppaea to lie with Nero, it appears that Agrippina has met her match.

Treachery, betrayals, and murders follow. I don't want to give too much away, so I'll just say that most of the characters in this drama are untrustworthy, and the few who are seemingly too innocent to survive in this sea of sharks probably won't. Affinito keeps the action moving as *Agrippina* moves toward a bloody, if not quite tragic, conclusion.

That qualification—not quite tragic—suggests my main quibble with this work, by the way. Though the play is called *Agrippina*, it is Nero who sits squarely at its center: he's by far the more complicated (and therefore interesting) character, as well as the protagonist of the action. Agrippina merely schemes from the sidelines. Though she gets a last-minute monologue in which she summarizes her sad history in a few minutes, it amounts to too little, too late; we just don't care enough about her to justify giving over the play to her. And Brown's ingratiating and energetic turn, contrasted with a miscast (and

much too young) Beth McKenzie's less effective portrayal of the title character, tips the scale even farther away from Agrippina.

The large ensemble does generally fine work, with Ridley Parson (as Burrus, Nero's former tutor), Michael Catangay (Pallas, Agrippina's lover), Brad Caswell (Herculeius, one of Nero's councilors), Sarah MontBlanc (Poppaea), and David Holt (Britannicus) particularly noteworthy. Hadsall's staging is a little florid; the dance sequence at the opening of the piece, though excitingly choreographed and very well-executed, is just too big for this off-off-Broadway space, and there are other indications of a kind of directorial self-indulgence throughout. The most jarring of these excesses is the costume design, which is credited to Hadsall, Caswell, and MontBlanc—not really true to period, it puts the men in Egyptian-style skirts (they are almost always bare-chested) and the two leading ladies into filmy transparent garments that reveal, as often as not, the absence of anything underneath. It's a Bob Guccione touch that the play doesn't need and can't support—Affinito is going for *Masterpiece Theatre*-like intrigue, but the skimpy outfits and abundant pulchritude threaten to reduce it to soft porn.

Nevertheless, I had a fun time at *Agrippina*, and I suspect a lot of people will, too: it's a grand, passionate yarn that's easy to lose yourself inside of for a couple of hours.

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