

THEATER REVIEWS

A Review of *Sejanus his Fall* by Ben Jonson, directed by Dr. Brent Griffin, Resurgens Theatre Company, Atlanta Shakespeare Tavern Theatre, 14–18 November 2016.

Atlanta Georgia's Resurgens Theatre Company, led by Artistic Director Dr. Brent Griffin, performs works by Shakespeare contemporaries – Christopher Marlow, John Webster, Francis Middleton, John Fletcher, among others. For its year-long "Quadracentennial" commemoration of the groundbreaking folio edition of Ben Jonson's *Works*, printed in 1616, the company offered a season of Jonson plays, beginning with the spring production of *The Alchemist* (1610), reprised in early fall along with a newly mounted production of *Volpone* (1606). These coincided with a September 23–24 Ben Jonson Conference, organized by Dr. Griffin and co-hosted by the Atlanta Shakespeare Company and the University of North Georgia, which featured a host of distinguished Ben Jonson scholars including Dr. David Gants, Dr. Fran Teague, Dr. Fran Chalfant, and Dr. James Hirsh. The company's 2016 season concluded with Jonson's rarely produced play under review, *Sejanus his Fall* (1605). According to Dr. Griffin, Resurgens Theatre Company's production of *Sejanus his Fall* stands as the first known professional production of the play on this side of the Atlantic.

This production also shares pride of place with very few English predecessors. Philip Ayers, in his Introduction to his edition of the play, finds “no record of any performance of *Sejanus* between its [1604] Globe production and that by William Poel in 1928.”¹ Between Poel’s 1928 London production and the 2005 RSC production of *Sejanus* under the direction of Gregory Doran,² the *Cambridge Works of Ben Jonson Online Performance Archive* records only seven full productions of the play, and these do not begin until the year 1973.

Such puzzling neglect may originate with the play’s vexed initial reception. Following an initial 1603 performance at Court, due to theatre closures, the King’s Men’s 1604 Globe Theatre audience apparently hissed the play off the stage. Yet, Jonson’s 1605 Quarto edition of the play and the version printed in his 1616 *Works* reflect high praise among “wits of gentry” in contrast to the unrefined “scurvy jaws” that marred its premiere.

The curiously limited professional interest in staging *Sejanus* in the years since the play’s checkered initial reception partly results from two challenges, both ably addressed by Griffin’s Resurgens Theatre production. First, Griffin treats the play’s approximate four-hour running length and its withering array of some thirty-four speaking character parts, plus countless “extras,” such as retainers, guards, priests, attendants, heralds, and the like, to his Resurgens Theatre “original practices” approach, a principal component of which is “judicious editing.” This results in both a continuous two hour running length and a lean ten-member cast for thirteen essential roles.

A second difficulty lies in the lingering misperception of purpose, which the playwright may have incidentally helped foster. Jonson’s “apologetical Dialogue” that follows the 1602 printed edition of his comedy *Poetaster* contemplates his prospective foray into the genre of tragedy. Although unproduced on the stage, *Sejanus* received the critical attention due the work of the English playwright second only to Shakespeare. Unfortunately, this resulted in the misperceived conclusion that the expected tragedy lacks “tragic passion.”³ The Resurgens production avoids the expectation of tragic passion where none exists. Instead, Griffin and his cast capture the essence of the playwright’s developing social satire perspective – the dark vision of corrupted human

nature where the ignoble, rather than the noble, reigns untethered with no redeeming values in sight.

Notwithstanding Griffin's extensive excision of Jonson's meticulously documented text, the central spine of this story remains intact, focused, and even compelling. The principle thrust of the "judiciously" edited play-text delivers the riot of ironies that drive home the often painful turns of Jonson's social satire. That Griffin achieves this amongst the profusion of original speaking parts and the extensive poetry, at which Jonson worked for perhaps as much as two years prior to the 1603 premier of the play, stands as quite an accomplishment.

Instead of a larger than life tragic hero, Resurgens regular Thom Gillott offers the perfect picture of a credulous Sejanus fortuitously brought into Tiberius's circle as a soldier of rank, but one who remains stiffly out of his depth among the resentful old line stoic patrician elites. At the same time he misinterprets his bureaucratic advancement under Tiberius as an opportunity to assume a place among the Roman ruling elite families – a presumption for which he pays dearly.

Kyle Crew delivers a commanding Tiberias who stands remote, inscrutable, and clearly dangerous to both allies and enemies. Far from the distracted voluptuary Sejanus assumes him to be, Tiberius remains clearly in control both in the course of his speeches to the Senate and in intimate but guarded conversation with Sejanus.

As the play begins with haunting strains of Matt Trautwein's lute, heard along with vocal arrangements, intermittently in the course of the play, the stage becomes quickly populated by the competing factions that often appear simultaneously in vignette throughout. In these discrete and shifting faction groupings, the audience can see that Sejanus from the outset stands somewhat out of place in the league within which his ambitions prompt him to contend.

The deep, multi-level set both allows Tiberius and others to speak from on high and exploits a depth perspective that lends itself to the bread and butter of Machiavellian calculation, critique, and intrigue – with both spying and eavesdropping over the breadth of the stage, as well as disclosure of plots that unfold in the soliloquizing actors' minds in the intimate foreground of audience space. This staging helps humanize the clumsily

calculating Sejanus with his fears, aspirations, and discomfitures without disturbing the public array of the senate proceedings or Tiberius's public speeches delivered from high overlook. Sejanus never mounts the imperial dias. Indeed at the end he lies flat upon the stage floor as he is dragged off to be torn to pieces by the capricious mob. Here the audience becomes pressed into service as the silent bystanders as Sejanus pleads to those to whom a few short scenes before shared his private thoughts: "Have I no friends here? Have I no friends here?" This opens an avenue of empathy for an otherwise ignominious "fall" which a vast onstage cast would not.

A fine trio represents the patrician stoics who resent Tiberius and his protégé – Caius Silius (Stuart McDaniel), the military general; Titius Sabinus (Bryan Davis), the embodiment of classic temperament; and Lucius Arruntius (Winslow Thomas), *ieron* curmudgeon commentator. These stand for the old Republican virtues represented by the late Emperor Germanicus and his widow, Agrippina (Ty Autry), all supplanted by the Tiberian pragmatists whose values reside solely in the power of the monarchy. These individuals all chafe at the coarsening of life wrought by both the loss of the old Roman virtues, as well as their own power.

Thomas in particular delivers an outstanding performance as the marginalized Arruntius, the voice of democratic dissent, both to his fellows and in numerous asides, persistently disaffected, ineffectual, and complaining throughout. Perceptive but impotent, he remains spared as Silius and Sabinus succumb to show trials and consequent death for speaking slander of Tiberius. His discourse throughout underscores the playwright's perspective of a morally bankrupt society.

Two actors that help highlight this production's sense of Jonson's satire deserve special mention. Jim Wall is outstanding as Machiavellian aid-de-camp Eudemus, the delightfully duplicitous physician to the elites, played with an infectious sense of irony and humor, particularly as he schemes with the sensual Livia (Ty Autry), Tiberius's daughter-in-law, and her paramour, Sejanus, to assassinate her husband, Drusus (also played by Autry). In addition, to the role of Livia, whose wanton opportunism reflects the corrupted values on display, Autry also plays the matriarch

Agrippina, the aging widow of Germanicus, an older sense of propriety and decency who can only serve as sad and fearful witness to the corruption of the old Roman virtues, as to the restoration of which she has lost hope. In addition, Autry performs two male roles. One of Drusus, Tiberius's son poisoned by his unfaithful wife Livia and her conspiring paramour, Sejanus. In the other he assumes the imperial dias in the role of Regulus, the Tiberian toady who announces Tiberius's fatal condemnation of Sejanus.

Griffin's reading of the play emphasizes the bitter irony throughout. In addition to the fatal trial proceedings of Silius and Sabinus, and the above described lighthearted conspiracy of preparation of poison, enabling of adultery, and murder between Livia and Eudemus, there stands the fatal "turn" as Sejanus overreaches his place to petition Tiberius for marriage to the now widowed Livia. Tiberius's ominous "Humph" (3.515) prompts Sejanus to improvidently exult to the audience with fatally misplaced confidence, while Tiberius has already summoned the pure, understated menace personified, Sertorius Macro, chillingly played by Brent Griffin. In contrast to the self-deluded Sejanus, Macro understands perfectly his role as an obedient, methodical functionary of the Emperor Tiberius:

We whom he works by are dumb instruments,
 To do but not enquire

 If then it be the lust of Caesar's power
 To have raised Sejanus up, and in an hour
 O'erturn him, tumbling down, from height of all,
 We are his ready engine; and his fall
 May be our rise.

(3.718–19, 744–48)

Thus, everything Sejanus proclaims thereafter stands deeply ironic, as in

Swell, swell, my joys

 I did not live, till now; this is my first hour,
 Wherein I see my thoughts reached by my power.
 (5.1, 3–4)

Macro's role as harbinger of doom, stands juxtaposed with Sejanus's ignorance of his impending fall.

If a tragedy, the production presents Jonson's ironic vision of tragedy with no heroes, no justice, and with few tears shed. The better model lies in its tendency toward the satire of *Volpone* with central characters whose pretensions undo themselves. The production reveals Jonson's view of humanity which, while pessimistic, is purposeful. Its purpose, as Jonson makes clear in subsequent work, is to instruct and warn.

In short, this revival of Jonson's underappreciated play is a rousing success and reveals important and rewarding insight into the playwright's development that can only expand the appreciation of this giant of English theatre.

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NOTES

1. Philip J. Ayers, "Introduction," In *Sejanus his Fall* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 38.
2. Ali Chetwynd, "Review of *Sejanus his Fall*, Royal Shakespeare Company, Swan Stratford, August–November 2005, Trafalgar Studios London, 17–28 January 2006," *Ben Jonson Journal* 14 (2007): 97–100.
3. Ayers, 1–44. See also biographies by G. Gregory Smith, *Ben Jonson* (London, 1919) and John Palmer, *Ben Jonson* (New York, 1934), 24, nn. 67–68.