

'Coriolanus: Fight Like a Bitch' Is Shakespeare by Women

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'Coriolanus: Fight Like a Bitch' Is Shakespeare by Women

All-female cast interprets play about power, politics and pride

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PHOTO: Credit: John Ulman

The **bottom line** is that I highly recommend this show... with several caveats. In art, flexibility is one proof of greatness, as Shakespeare's plays demonstrate. Whether in fair Verona we lay our scene or in the halls of the U.S. Senate, Shakespeare's works lend themselves to wildly imaginative interpretations without losing any of their power — if the actors can support the weight of Shakespeare's language. [Rebel Kat Productions](#)' original-language, all-female interpretation of "[Coriolanus](#)" is the latest in a long tradition of reimagined Shakespeare plays.

"[Coriolanus](#)" is one of the last plays Shakespeare wrote, and its pointed political commentary has guaranteed its place throughout the centuries as one of the least performed. **The tragic story of Rome's most famous badass warrior who returns home from war to enter politics has few true heroes.** From the nonconformist title character who refuses to play the political game, to the conniving politicians to the "sheeple" in the marketplace, Shakespeare is generous with his criticism.

All female cast

When first staged, every character in "[Coriolanus](#)" was performed by a male actor; in this staging every actor and character is female. I expected my review of "[Coriolanus: Fight Like a Bitch](#)" to focus on the feminist ramifications of its all-female cast. But as the subtitle implies, [whether you fight like a man or fight like a bitch](#)

implies, whether you might like a man or might like a bitch, Shakespeare's play about politics, power and pride remains the same. In most cases the gender of an actor or their character is incidental. Now as then, the value of a production depends on the actors' ability to interpret their characters.

Communicating character is the strength of "Fight Like a Bitch". The actors in this production bring so much more depth to the characters than I found when I studied the play in college. Nike Imoru, with her lean build and larger-than-life action, is completely credible as **Coriolanus**, the honor-bound warrior whose arrogance makes her completely unfit for public office. **Coriolanus** has more respect for the opposing army's general Aufidius than she has for the citizens she is supposed to protect. I almost couldn't blame her. Colleen Carey's tough-as-nails Aufidius, who fights for a cause greater than glory, but always falls short of victory, deserves to be a protagonist.

The scheming tribunes (Katherine Jett and Yadira Duarte) are petty and ambitious, but even in their smear campaign against **Coriolanus**, they are defending democracy. Wendy Robie as **Coriolanus**' mother (one of the few roles originally written as female) is the best "bitch" of them all. She makes Volumnia's flag-waving speeches sound like genuine parenting philosophy, and her exhortations to **Coriolanus** are so powerfully manipulative. When **Coriolanus** finally gives in with "Oh mother," we all felt the weight of their complicated relationship.

The production was authentically Shakespearean, with minimal props and a stage almost in the round. Instead of auditorium style seating, three rows of elevated seats lined two sides of a long

rectangular stage. Just as Shakespeare's own troupe did, the actors appeared in contemporary dress, which gives the audience more useful information than period costumes would. Example: My daughters recognized the tribunes as bad guys by their shoes — how could they be anything but mean in those painful stilettos? The Roman soldiers' crisp blues contrasted with the Burning Man browns and braided hair of the tribal Volsci said all we needed to know about superior organization and firepower.



Credit: John Ulman

Parents should know

I highly recommend "Coriolanus: Fight Like a Bitch." However, the recommendation comes with quite a few caveats. The producers themselves recommend this show for ages 16 and up, and Brown Paper Tickets states a minimum age of 14. My daughters (ages 13 and 8) both enjoyed it and said they would go again, but they are into theater and drama, and they were almost the only kids in the audience on the night we attended. In general, the show is better for teens than younger kids, and some previous exposure to live theater is probably helpful.

The production uses a fog machine, flashing lights and loud noises, including recorded artillery fire. There is also loud music (my 8-year-old highly approved of the musical choices and their integration into the production). With no curtain to drop, the loud noises often signal a scene change. This is useful for some kids, but those with sensory issues or kids who startle easily will find it unsettling.

There are a couple old-Hollywood style kisses and Coriolanus does appear in her underwear in one nonsexual scene. In the second act, several characters carry liquor bottles and appear inebriated.

Coriolanus is a story of war. Characters carry guns and knives, and engage in hand to hand combat. In one scene Coriolanus physically attacks a civilian. The highly stylized violence is in balletic slow-motion. My daughters (who both study martial arts) were disappointed that it didn't look more real, but families who are strongly opposed to all demonstrations of violence won't want to see this play.

For many families these are all non-issues, but for all families, the greatest barrier is also the play's greatest beauty —

Shakespeare's language. Pronouns have been feminized and

Shakespeare's language. If concerns have been minimized and judicious cutting has kept the play to a reasonable 2.5 hours (including a 10-minute intermission), but the dialogue is original. Even professional actors sometimes stumble over the elaborate verse, and kids today inevitably have a hard time following it. This cast avoids the common Shakespeare fail of standing still and woodenly shouting lines, offering instead the rhythms of natural speech, emotional delivery and physical acting that conveys almost as much information as the words do. Thanks to quality acting, my 13-year-old caught the gist of most scenes. But my 8-year-old was often lost. But both girls particularly looked forward to scenes involving Menenius (Kate Witt), whose plain-spoken insults inspired my teen to whisper, "Get wrecked!" in delight.



Credit: John Ulman

Parent tips

Prepare. Prepare. Prepare. **If you want to introduce your kids to Shakespeare, you couldn't do better than this production of "Coriolanus."** But do not walk in cold. Review a plot summary with your kids to make sure they know the characters and what happens in each scene.

Consider watching Baz Luhrman's "Romeo and Juliet" (the most modern and engaging of the Shakespeare film adaptations that use the original language) to see how they handle those long sentences. Reading the whole play would probably be overkill, but pick a few scenes to read together and help them parse the sentences. Unless you have a very theater-savvy kid, they are probably not ready to sit through the play if reading some of the text in advance isn't an option.

If you go...

When: Wednesday–Saturday, through Nov. 18 (ASL-interpreted show on Nov. 16)

Where: [12th Avenue Arts](#) on Capitol Hill.

Tickets: \$35; [buy online](#).

Parking: 12th Avenue Arts does not have a parking garage or lot. Metered street parking is available as well as parking lots in the neighborhood (Parkopedia lists all the lots around the

area). Give yourself plenty of time to find parking, or consider taking the bus.

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