



[Coriolanus](#) directed by Ralph Fiennes

Screened at [Cornerhouse, Manchester](#)

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) January 2012

Ralph Fiennes is a great stage actor and a generation of frightened children can now attest to his skills on screen as Harry Potter's arch enemy. In ***Coriolanus*** we have a chance to judge his talents as a director. Olivier and Branagh both produced straight versions of Shakespeare's heroic plays, Fiennes has chosen to tackle a more complicated leading role and a notoriously difficult play.

For those not familiar with the play Coriolanus is a Roman general at odds with his fellow citizens who is forced to ingratiate himself with the masses to secure power. The play is the story of the violent consequences of democracy and the relationship between the military and the people. Mirroring this public struggle is the dynamic between Coriolanus and his ambitious

mother Volumnia.

The cast is full of magnificent actors from Shakespearean veterans like Brian Cox and Vanessa Redgrave, to the unexpected in Gerard Butler and James Nesbitt, and the previously unknown Jessica Chastain – who has appeared in virtually every big Hollywood movie of 2011.



Among this starry cast Redgrave is magnificent, the verse is in her DNA, and you feel that she speaks like this off-camera as well, as she makes the most un-motherly of mothers totally believable. This is what war can do to people, it can make a woman glory in her son's bloody wounds.

Also, of great note is Gerard Butler performance, an actor I have always felt had the qualities of

a well seasoned piece of teak, and in this he is a revelation. Who knew? Ralph Fiennes, also directing, has some of the most dramatic scenes, but surrounded by such talent he never hogs the limelight.

Fiennes sets the play in a modern state reminiscent of the Balkans and uses news channel inserts, with Channel 4's Jon Snow, to update the action. He is of course confident in handling the text, but his triumph is in making the action completely credible as a depiction of a society torn apart by civil war.

In choosing to film **Coriolanus**, Fiennes has chosen a very filmic subject – war and politics, and the insertion of TV news segments is very effective. He has also chosen one of Shakespeare's least known plays, and one most of the audience, like myself, will really want to know what happens next. Watching Coriolanus challenge the mob and lose power, one wonders if he is following an inevitable path to violence and death.

The fight scenes are frankly shattering and filmed, appropriately by Barry Acronym of ***The Hurt Locker*** fame. This is hand to hand bloody combat with scenes of gruesome torture – the echoes of the Balkans and Iraq are there, but are not laboured.

This is an exciting film and a stunning debut for Fiennes, and a definite recommendation!