

Lyric

Welcome to this introduction to *Britannicus* by Jean Racine, translated and adapted by Timberlake Wertenbaker. It is a Lyric Hammersmith Theatre production and has been directed by Atri Banerjee.

The audio described performance at the Lyric will be on Saturday 11 June at 7.30pm. There will be a touch tour at 6pm and the introductory notes will start at 7.15pm. The production lasts for approximately 1 hour and 35 minutes without an interval.

Please note that *Britannicus* features the smoking of cigarettes and makes use of smoke and haze. There are also descriptions of violence and mentions of suicide.

The live audio description will be given by Ruth James and Alison Clarke.

Britannicus is a timely political thriller set in modern day Rome - a blistering arena of power where the corrosive effects of unchecked authoritarianism pervade every corner of society.

Son or pawn? Lover or manipulator? Brother or usurper? *Britannicus* is a chilling portrait of a dictator's rise to power.

Agrippina – desperate to cling onto power – has ensured her son, Nero, is the Roman Emperor, in place of his adopted brother and the rightful heir. Nero's own obsessions turn a once virtuous ruler into an oppressive tyrant. His path to power is paved with deceit, corruption and cruelty.

As the audience is taking their seats, the safety curtain rises to reveal a front cloth which conceals the whole performance area. It is pale cream with the name BRITANNICUS printed in large red capital letters in the centre. On the far left and far right of the cloth a painted image of a Corinthian column stretches from the floor reaching the full height of the cloth. In front of it, the floor is black. Placed firmly in the centre, facing the audience is a solitary upright chair. The chair has a metal frame, the seat and back are upholstered in pristine black fabric.

Discreetly placed on the front of the stage on the far left are effects pedals, which will be operated during the performance by the violinist who provides an accompaniment to the script.

When the cloth rises, the stage is revealed. The main acting area is represented by a huge richly patterned rectangular carpet. The background is cream, the elaborate ornamentation in brown, gold and orange. In the centre, this forms an enormous medallion with a circular design formed by swirls and curlicues which radiate from the centre to reach the equally elaborate border.

15 identical metal framed chairs are positioned with military precision, five each side along the left and right edges of the carpet, while a further five chairs stand left of centre on the back edge facing us.

On the right of centre is a low white plinth. Lying on top of the plinth and covering it completely is a life-sized, life-like wolf. Its head is turned as if to observe most of the action.

Hanging on the back wall, suspended from a high black bar, is a huge painted canvas. It is approximately 15 feet wide by 8 feet high, and depicts the life-sized wolf with two naked cherubs draped against his body. The background is dark and forbidding.

Behind this canvas, the back wall is bathed in different colours, according to the focus of the scene. At first a pale shadowy light, it becomes an ever more vivid green as Nero arrives, then fades back to shadow as he leaves. The entire stage also floods with red at times.

In the left corner of the carpet nearest to us stands a functioning water cooler with a supply of clear plastic cups, used during the performance. A small, black waste bin stands beside it.

No attempt is made to hide technical equipment. On the black floor behind the chairs on the left and right are three functional black lighting towers. Attached to these are twelve round spotlights trained on the acting area.

During the performance various members of the cast will take up positions on the chairs. Here they sit like statues, silent observers.

As the performance continues, from time to time they will change the configuration of the chairs. We will describe this as it happens

There is a cast of seven actors, four women and three men, who wear modern dress. The action is often very stylised, but at other times is naturalistic.

First to appear and also to speak is **Albine**. She walks on calmly, carrying her violin, walks over to her effects pedals and starts to play. She watches the others attentively throughout, moving slowly around the stage, sometimes acknowledged and at other times ignored. Albine's loose, dark brown, curly hair is swept up into a loose bun, with a few tendrils hanging elegantly down. Her dark eyes are darkly outlined, standing out against her olive-skinned, serious face. She wears a long, elegant, moss green dress with a high neckline that leaves her arms bare and flows down to her ankles, with gold sandals.

Agrippina is 44, second wife (and widow) of the Emperor Claudius and Nero's mother. She is an assured woman, her immaculate presence dominating the stage, despite her relatively small stature. This is corrected by her killer black patent high heels and upright stance. Agrippina's chestnut-brown hair is smoothed back into a large bun on the back of her head, so large it resembles a crown. Her glittering, dark eyes are outlined strongly with eyeliner and her lips are darkly maroon against her Mediterranean complexion. She wears a chic, high-necked black knee-length dress that has crocheted

lace and flowers at the shoulders, revealing some femininity, despite the strict lines of the dress. At first, Agrippina holds an elegant black clutch bag, shot with gold, and wears a dress watch with a slim black strap. Her nails are painted black.

As she speaks of him, **Nero** moves forward. Nero is a slim youth of 20, with a deceptively naïve appearance, as he is barefoot and clad entirely in white. His attire is casual, with white tracksuit trousers and matching zip-up jacket over a white short-sleeved T-shirt. Both trousers and jacket are decorated with white panels of lace, making them seem more imperial. He's 6 feet tall and moves sinuously, especially when, unseen, he watches the others. Nero's hair is blond, cropped short at the back and longer on top, with his intense, piercing eyes standing out against his clean-shaven, pale, youthfully fresh face. He has a thin silver chain necklace and a large blue jewelled ring that he turns in moments of stress.

Next to appear is **Burrhus**, Nero's tutor and advisor. She is in her mid-50s, a loyal servant to both Agrippina and Nero. Her upright stance betrays that she was originally a soldier and she still wears sturdy black leather boots under her black trousers, although her oyster-grey silk blouse is more feminine. Burrhus has short, tight curls, mainly black, but greying at the front and her expression remains almost constantly concerned, her pale forehead wrinkled and her mouth taut with worry.

Britannicus is 18, the son of Claudius' first wife and Nero's step-brother. He is slender and of athletic build - very tall indeed, at least 6'4". His thick, shoulder-length chestnut brown hair is tied up in a ponytail, smoothed back from his brown, expressive face. Britannicus wears black chinos over shiny pointed-toed shoes, and a white crocheted lacy shirt, with a slender, silver chain necklace. On his left-hand ring finger is a plain silver ring.

His tutor is **Narcissus**. In his mid-50s, and at 6ft, he is tall and well-built, but tries not to draw attention to himself, feeling very strongly his position as a freed slave. He wears a black, slightly tweedy suit over a white shirt, and smart shoes and is bald, with a greying moustache and carefully trimmed stubble. Narcissus watches and waits for his opportunity to influence his betters, always ready when needed.

Lastly, **Junia** is betrothed to Britannicus, and is the only one not wearing black or white, but instead is in a crimson, floor-length evening dress of satin, that leaves her pale shoulders uncovered. Junia is in her late teens, and, at 5'3", appears very fragile and delicate, her large dark eyes lost. Her long, dark brown hair, with highlights at the tips, is tousled, held loosely back from her fine-boned face at first, but soon escaping any restraint. She is barefoot, and has a large diamond on her ring finger. The elaborate gown seems to swamp her movements, making her uncertain, often shaking when nervous, or crawling around the space, as if searching, while the others continue to talk, oblivious. When with Britannicus, she melts into him as he towers above her – her head coming up only to his heart.

In between scenes, the entire cast often move as one, juddering and jerking frenziedly, with their fingers outstretched and reaching out, reflecting the cataclysmic events unfolding around them. They also drink from the water cooler, punctuating their dialogue by pouring water into the clear plastic cups, or crumpling them in emphasis.

Due to the nature of the production and the quick-fire dialogue, the audio description will be minimal.

CAST

Junia is played by **Shyvonne Ahmmad**

Narcissus by **Nigel Barrett**

Britannicus by **Nathaniel Curtis**

Albine by **Hanna Khogali**

Burrhus by **Helena Lymbery**

Nero by **William Robinson**

Agrippina by **Sirine Saba**

CREATIVES

Movement Direction by **Jennifer Jackson**

Composition and Sound Design by **Jasmin Kent Rodgman**

Lighting Design by **Lee Curran**

Set and Costume Design by **Rosanna Vize**

Directed by **Atri Banerjee**

Adapted and Translated by **Timberlake Wertenbaker**

From an original script by **Jean Racine**