

## BC Theater Review (NYC): Julius Caesar, under Threatening Clouds in Queens

By Kate Shea Kennon | Monday, September 27, 2010

The weather itself seemed to help “slip the dogs of war” at a recent performance of Julius Caesar in Long Island City, Queens at the Secret Theatre. The thunder and lightning that dramatically begins scene 3 of Act I resonated in real life beyond the fourth wall all night long, giving the whole evening a disturbed sky outside while inside the political tempest of Shakespeare’s tragedy raged.

Under Richard Mazda’s direction, the Queens Players present a different kind of Shakespeare even when the current trend is to update and outmaneuver the Bard. “Mark Antony, you’re such a tool!” heard from the crowd during the warm-up to the famous eulogy, is not the usual Shakespeare line but not the most unusual feature of this production, the third installment in a “gangland” Shakespeare series. The dress and atmosphere is urban jungle with modern weapons (Mark Antony’s “tool” is an ominous baseball bat) and Mad Max-type clothing.

As described by Richard Mazda, who also is the artistic director of the company, this Julius Caesar is offered in an “environmental theatre” format: a very real journey around various areas both inside and outside the Long Island City Performing Arts complex. Scene changes are precipitated by the Soothsayer who leads the audience to the next setting. Even if Caesar will not listen to the warnings of the prophet about the “Ides of March,” the audience must follow her admonitions to join her outside in the marketplace or to “watch your head” while we travel down to the conspirators’ meeting. After a recent spate of intermissionless hour-and-a-half plays lately, I found this a reinvigorating theatre experience.

To the director’s credit, the production doesn’t lean heavily on the many renowned quotations that come from this play. In fact, the play heads in the opposite direction—rushing past showstoppers like “Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look,” and “Friends, Romans, Countrymen...” well, you know the rest.

Gil Ron as J.C. himself has all the gravitas and magnetism that the role demands, appearing as a cigar-chomping man of the world after the defeat of Pompey, a little like a gangland Patton. It was an interesting and eventually successful gambit to put Caesar in an archaic white robe amidst all that black leather. The white robe brought an image to mind, aside from being a good backdrop for all the murderous blood: white has an apostolate/sacrifice connotation signifying the rising power that Brutus and Cassius were ultimately helpless to stop. After all, Octavius Caesar (Jonathan Emerson) will succeed Julius Caesar, and the Republic of Rome will be in name only despite the power plays on behalf of representation. There is a lot of storm and stress during the battles at the end of Julius Caesar, but the irony remains strong and standing: that the murder of Caesar only strengthens the dictatorship.

Julius Caesar is problematic in that the play easily becomes anti-climactic after Mark Antony's speech over Caesar's dead body. The true action of the play is in Mark Antony's ability to turn Rome against Brutus and Cassius, to honor Caesar through revenge. The subsequent battles become then a given. Here, the battle scenes have multi-media energy to combat the expected, but much of the dialogue is lost in the rush of war. The chaos may be realistic but doesn't always make for good theatre.

And while the thunder and lightning outside may have augmented the restless mood of hungry Cassius, the elevated train also drowned out important dialogue, making the outdoor scenes big on atmosphere but short on quotable quotes.

David J. Fink is a thuggishly menacing Mark Antony who doesn't seem capable of putting two words together, rather than one of the most famous examples of reverse psychology in the Western canon. When he urges the Roman crowd that he is only speaking at the funeral to "bury Caesar, not to praise him," his tough, stoic demeanor supports his assertion. Alex Cape is effective as a thinking, conscientious Brutus, his ambivalence apparent. The cast on the whole is both numerous and athletic, rushing headlong into Roman war with enthusiasm.

Additional cast: Kara Addington (Lucilius, Portia), Elizabeth Bernhardt (Metellus Cimber), Sarah Bonner (Portia), Jeffrey Coyne (Cinna the Poet), Jake Cullens (Decius Brutus), Amelia Gonzalez (The Carpenter), Lena Gora (Publius), Bethanne Haft (Varro), Tyrus Holden (Marullus), Kaitlyn McGuire Huczko (Soothsayer), Suzanne Lenz (Calpurnia), Anthony Martinez (Caius Cassius), Joe Mullen (Ligarius), Rachel Pfenninwerth (Casca), Michael Pichardo (3rd citizen), Michelle Pucci (Cinna), Ashley Denise Robinson (Artemdorus), Greer Samuels (Flavius), Tara Mary Schmitt (Stage Manager), Camilla Skoglie (The Cobbler), and Brian Walters (Lucius).