

**Post-Performance
Lesson Plans**
Handout 3 - Sample Reviews of *Julius Caesar*

THEATER REVIEW - *This Caesar Wears an African Cloak*

'Julius Caesar' at the Harvey Theater - By BEN BRANTLEY

The blood runs warm in the Royal Shakespeare Company's vibrant production of "Julius Caesar," now at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Experience has taught the inhabitants of the African country in which this Shakespeare tragedy has ingeniously been reset that life is tenuous and easily taken. Their fears lie close to the surface, quick to tumble into anger, despair and, on occasion, a joy that remains edged in apprehension.

The heat that rises from this "Julius Caesar" — staged by Gregory Doran, the recently appointed artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company — might surprise some who feel they know this staple of high school reading lists all too well. "Somewhat cold and unaffectionate" was the verdict of the uber-Shakespearean Samuel Johnson in the 18th century, who wrote of the playwright, "His adherence to the real story, and to Roman manners, seems to have impeded the natural vigor of his genius."

No one could accuse Mr. Doran's version, which deliberately evokes the tumultuous African dictatorships and civil wars of recent years, of lacking vigor. But it's not wanting for clarity or insight either.

In putting aside what we normally think of as "Roman manners," and introducing a greater emotional transparency, this "Julius Caesar" is the easiest to follow I've seen. Its big speeches of fate and politics, so often memorized under duress by young English lit students, have rarely felt more personal and specific to the characters speaking them.

True, none of these battle-ready political adversaries might exactly be described as Stoics, including the noblest Roman of them all, Brutus, played with a radiantly open face by Paterson Joseph. But as they plot and squabble and destroy one another, you understand for once where these men are coming from. That's a place of dread and uncertainty, where governments are built on sand and the egos of dictators who would be gods.

Designed by Michael Vale, with lighting by Vince Herbert and music by Akintayo Akinbode, the production begins in a disarmingly festive vein. The common folk have declared a holiday for themselves, assuming their Caesar will soon be crowned. So they are singing, dancing, and buying and selling Caesar memorabilia — shirts and fans emblazoned with his image. The mood is sunny. There's not a cloud, even a metaphoric one, to be seen.

Then a couple of irritable tribunes show up, dispersing the revelers and reminding them that not so long ago they had been similarly celebrating another idol, Pompey. The tribunes address the mob as "You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless thing." But that's not what they are. They're simply human, which means they're changeable and highly sensitive to new tremors in the body politic.

So, I might add, is every single person we meet in this stark, sun-blinded world of sand and towering monuments. Because of all the ceremonious speeches and soliloquies in "Julius Caesar," people tend to think of its characters as carved out of marble. But to revisit this play is to be reminded how very fallible — and mortal — everyone in it is, starting with the mighty man of its title.



Theo Ogunidipe in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of "Julius Caesar."

Sara Krulwich/The New York Time

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This Caesar Wears an African Cloak - Continued

Shakespeare deliberately endowed his Caesar with physical frailties, including deafness in one ear. And the Caesar portrayed here by Jeffery Kissoon is definitely made of penetrable flesh. Whether in street wear or ceremonial garb, he's an imposing peacock with a pistol, bringing to mind photographs of African dictators like Muammar el-Qaddafi and Mobutu Sese Seko. (The immense statue of Caesar, which dominates the back of the stage until it falls most memorably, inevitably recalls that of Saddam Hussein.)

He can also, though, be seen furtively popping his medication, and as he leans on his gorgeous young wife, Calpurnia (Samantha Lawson), he doesn't always seem steady on his feet. His belief in his regal invulnerability has made him careless, too.

When he speaks of not trusting Cassius (Cyril Nri) — he's the senator with "the lean and hungry look" — he turns his criticisms into a public dressing down for all to hear. Mr. Nri's expression as he registers Caesar's words is that of a man who feels a noose tightening around his neck.

Wary and sly, scared and manipulative, Mr. Nri is an excellent Cassius, capturing the climate of paranoia and politicking that thickens the air. He and his co-conspirator Casca (an enjoyably wry Joseph Mydell) are certainly skilled at twisting someone like Brutus to their ends.

Mr. Joseph gives us an unusually ingenuous Brutus, who in his rationalizing and vacillation is less like Hamlet than a first-act Macbeth, whose feebly guarded expressions betray his every pang and uncertainty. He even has, in his Portia (Adjoa Andoh), a loving but frustrated wife who, like Lady Macbeth, may be made of sterner stuff than her spouse. (This is the first time that, when I heard Portia had died by eating fire, I believed it.)

This Brutus is so openly self-questioning that he's almost too weak an opening act for Mark Antony (the strapping, handsome Ray Fearon) at Caesar's funeral orations. Unlike Brutus, Mr. Fearon's Antony is a great instinctive politician who can untap sound and fury at will to whip up a crowd. You may feel a shiver when you see him later, in a military encampment, coolly checking off a list of those to be executed.

Mark Antony is no villain, though. Nor is Caesar, Cassius or Brutus. We tend to forget how wonderfully ambiguous "Julius Caesar" often feels in its moral definitions of its characters.

This production takes advantage of its African setting to provide such arresting elements as a white-painted, chanting soothsayer (Theo Ogundipe) and an aural backdrop of roars and drumbeats. (Jonathan Ruddick is the sound designer.) But it doesn't layer on the exotica, and it almost never feels gimmicky.

Instead, in exchanging togas for dashikis and desert khakis, Mr. Doran has liberated Shakespeare's divided countrymen from the yoke of Roman stateliness. This production pulls "Julius Caesar" off its pedestal, all the better to show us that it was never really a frozen statue.



Paterson Joseph with Adjoa Andoh in "Julius Caesar," directed by Gregory Doran.

Sara Krulwich/The New York Time

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photo by Liz Lauren

'Julius Caesar' a fine modern tragedy

THEATER REVIEW: "Julius Caesar" at Chicago Shakespeare Theater

February 15, 2013 Chris Jones | Theater critic

Jonathan Munby's visually thrilling, exciting and richly wrought production of "Julius Caesar" — which opened Wednesday night and features everything from a flash mob to a hot-dog stand to soldiers rappelling from the rafters of the Chicago Shakespeare Theater — comes to life with celebrants milling around some granite-clad capitol or another.

It seems like inaugural Washington, D.C., as the audience enters, but Munby makes his point about America and then resists flying in the Stars and Stripes for a familiar critique from across the pond. Instead, once David Darlow's ambivalently calibrated Julius Caesar makes his appearance beneath a massive banner pointing supporters to <http://www.caesarforall.com>, it feels like the show makes a sudden dash for Eastern Europe, home of Bulgarian assassins, or the Middle East, where once-omnipotent leaders can perish in the heartbeat of an Arab Spring.

William Shakespeare's famous opening scene of plebeians celebrating a man who might be a great leader, a monarchical threat to the Republic or just someone of whom they get bored, is killed off by a couple of cynical security guards. One of them fires a gun into the air, which makes one especially jumpy in Chicago these days. As the crowd of tacky button sellers and skateboarders disperses, you can't help but be struck by how well this rising British director, with the help of a deceptively complex and layered design from Alexander Dodge, one of the best I've seen in this particular space, has navigated one of the trickiest tracks of any contemporized Shakespeare: His production is plenty specific to sear with direct matters of the moment but smart enough to step away into more nuanced and ambiguous visual metaphor when the play needs to simmer across time and place.

In this extraordinarily well-charted and briskly paced production, many of the individual scenes fuse together with sudden and quite dazzling fullness; entire environments quickly envelope you, and Munby and his designers have thought up a plethora of striking images. The conspirators parade, bloody hands in the air; the ghost of Julius Caesar floats on illuminated track; a security camera captures assassination; conspirators pull out smartphones for documentation and description, as today one would. The famous crowd scenes in this play are especially well realized. Munby, demonstrably, is very interested in the timeless spot where the people's revolution meets the people's lack of planning.

Everything could not be clearer. Jason Kolotouros' unstinting Cassius is relentless in its self-serving drive, gorgeously contrasted with Larry Yando's sardonic Casca, which has the kind of politicized pop that makes the language feel so immediate, it pulls you up short. An Achilles heel, though, it reveals itself at one of the play's most famous lines: "Et tu, Brute?"

Brutus here is played by a very capable British actor named John Light, a handsome, hyperarticulate, brooding fellow whose speeches are filled with smarts and context. Light is making his American debut in an Americanized concept with a pretty pathetic American accent. That, one can forgive him. He could be doing a political Piers Morgan (a redundancy?). But it's harder to see past the deeper problem: Light seems to miss one of the most fundamental aspects of Brutus: a good and decent man who loves his country. Light's Brutus is certainly tortured by what is and is not expedient, fair enough, but tortured ain't the whole picture of Mr. B.