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HEATON, Caroline

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EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Julius Caesar, performed by Sheffield Theatres at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield,
UK, 24th May 2017**

Caroline Heaton
Sheffield Hallam University
C.L.Heaton@shu.ac.uk

Directed by Robert Hastie. Design by Ben Stones. Lighting by Johanna Town. Music composed by Richard Taylor. Sound by Emma Laxton. Fight Direction by Renny Krupinski. With Jonathan Hyde (Julius Caesar), Samuel West (Brutus), Zoe Waites (Cassius), Elliot Cowan (Mark Antony), Chipu Chung (Portia, Octavius), Robert Goodale (Lepidus), Lisa Caruccio Came (Calpurnia), Pandora Colin (Casca), Alison Halstead (Metellus), Mark Holgate (Cinna), Arthur Hughes (Lucius), Abigail Thaw (Trebonius), Royce Pierreson (Ligarius, Dardanius), Lily Nichol (Soothsayer), Robinah Kironde (Popilius, Clitus, Octavius's Servant), Paul Tinto (Artemidorus, Pindarus, Cobbler), members of Sheffield People's Theatre (ensemble).

From Ivo van Hove's Roman Tragedies Trilogy at London's Barbican, to the Royal Shakespeare Company's Rome season in Stratford-upon-Avon, it seems this is a time when it may be difficult for Shakespeareans to avoid a performance of Julius Caesar, even if they wanted to. The temptation to compare the figure of Caesar with a modern-day dictator, oligarch or president, is hard to resist, and numerous comparisons have been made in the media between the leadership styles and rhetoric of US presidents and the character of Caesar: the determined, uncompromising, yet unpredictable leader who is yet to fully unleash his power. A 2017 New York production caused controversy when some interpreted its portrayal of Caesar as a depiction of the assassination of President Trump and, in an article for the Times Literary Supplement, Rhodri Lewis

suggested that ‘when trying to make sense of a world in which someone like Trump can run for and win the US presidency, there are few better companions than Shakespeare’.¹

Spring 2017 saw a production of *Julius Caesar* staged by the UK’s Sheffield Theatres at the Crucible Theatre, a large performance space that is styled like a Roman amphitheatre in a city which, like Rome, is built on seven hills (although the similarities don’t extend much further). However, rather than exploiting the outdoor-indoor feel to the auditorium, and that very loose association with the Italian capital, Artistic Director Robert Hastie made direct reference to the political currency of the play by setting his production in the somewhat dry, municipal atmosphere of a modern-day seat of government, where petitioners sat at their allocated sunken debating desks around the edge of the stage, and petitioned their leader through a microphone. Styled to look a little like the UN’s general assembly, the design by Ben Stones included a logo which was reminiscent of the UN’s, and Caesar began the play by campaigning for votes, surrounded by adoring fans with ‘Hail Caesar’ banners, who were held back from mobbing their hero by crash barriers.

Elliot Cowen’s Mark Antony prepared for his race at the Lupercalia festival whilst sporting a tracksuit in Caesar’s colours, while the Senators wore formal suits, clutching their briefcases and huddling in groups whilst doing deals and discussing the latest political events. Jonathan Hyde’s Mafioso-styled Caesar strolled confidently between them in his beige woollen overcoat, waving benignly at his subjects, and speaking in hushed tones to Marc Antony in a way which might remind us just as much of a modern-day Italian prime minister as of a US president.

Writing for *What’s on Stage*, Ron Simpson points out that a director can feel both inspired and intimidated by the vastness of the thrust stage in the Crucible Theatre.² Stones’s design therefore made use of multiple levels both on stage and within the audience, and incorporated a balcony for the speech-makers, boxes either side of the stage for observers, and a walkway amongst the audience for the more vociferous members of the twenty-three amateur cast-members of the Sheffield People’s Theatre who made up the crowd. The large board-room table which featured in the early scenes

¹ Rhodri Lewis, ‘Shakespeare and the American Oligarchy’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 January 2017 <<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/julius-caesar-richard-shakespeare-trump/?CMP=Spklr-Editorial-FBPAGE-TimesLiterarySupplement-20170123-786001131>> [accessed 20 June 2017]

² Ron Simpson, ‘Review: *Julius Caesar* (Crucible Theatre)’, *What’s on Stage*, 23 May 2017 <http://www.whatsonstage.com/sheffield-theatre/reviews/julius-caesar-crucible-theatre_43673.html> [accessed 20 June 2017]

(and which appeared to give a nod to the *Crucible*'s association with the World Snooker Championships) later doubled as Brutus's dining table, on which Sheffield steel knives were laid and picked up in turn by each of the conspirators.

The casting for Hastie's production reflected the director's comment to Ian Soutar of the *Sheffield Telegraph* that 'you should be able to walk in off the street and recognise the world and so that's why the cast is as diverse as it is outside',³ and his sense that, in a twenty-first century retelling of this tale, women should be represented on stage. Given the political setting chosen for Hastie's version, Zoe Waites's Cassius, Pandora Colin's Casca, Abigail Thaw's Trebonius, and Alison Halstead's Metellus Cimba didn't seem out of place amongst the conspirators, and it was refreshing to see a few actors with visible physical disabilities being integrated fully into the ensemble. The emphasis on politics and the power of the word over the physical also enabled Hastie to reduce the usual amount of running on and off, shouting, and weapon-waving in the final act, as he removed the fight scenes altogether. Cassius's lean and hungry look came to represent a passionate drive for equality, rather than a potential lust for power, and her energetic commitment to the cause never waned. Sam West's Brutus was primarily a supportive and reflective facilitator of negotiations between a group of conspirators, rather than an authoritative leader of angry men, though at times his internal struggle was perhaps a little too well hidden, and he was occasionally too softly spoken.

The sense of equality in the casting impacted upon the scene in which the conspirators visit Brutus to plot the assassination of their slippery boss. In quite an effective portrayal of a fairly democratic planning process, each of the conspirators stood around the conference table, leaning in and sharing their views in turn; and at the point of the assassination, each took their turn to stab Caesar, and accepted their share of responsibility. They all bathed themselves in Caesar's blood, following Hyde's fabulously dramatic stumbling and crumpling to the ground, and their commitment to the cause was emphasised when the hooded and bound bodies of the executed Casca, Ligarius and Matellus Cimba were hung from the balcony during the interval, for the start of Act Four.

Other than brief demonstrations of affection between Caesar and Antony, Antony and Trebonius, and Brutus and Cassius, the primary focus was on political relationships, rather than personal ones; despite Portia attempting to wrap her legs around Brutus and

³ Ian Soutar, 'Hastie hails Caesar with new *Crucible* production', *Sheffield Telegraph*, 13 May 2017 <<http://www.sheffieldtelegraph.co.uk/whats-on/theatre-and-comedy/hastie-hails-caesar-with-new-crucible-production-1-8536717>> [accessed 20 June 2017]

smother him with affection, he dismissed her as an inconvenient distraction and the later news of her death appeared to have minimal impact upon him. Chipu Chung doubled as Portia and Octavius; not an obvious pairing and, sadly, perhaps not an entirely convincing one. Octavius was portrayed as a great military leader in combat gear, supposedly providing the experience and wisdom which the pampered Marc Antony lacked, but at times came across as more of a petulant teenager wearing her dad's trousers, rather than a great strategist.

Eliot Cowen's Antony began the play as a spoilt adopted son, pretending to spar with his indulgent benefactor and, later, recovering from a celebratory hangover in sunglasses and a skewwhiff tie. His sudden transformation into a great orator and potential head of the Roman Empire was perhaps slightly jarring, although he did appear genuinely moved by the loss of his surrogate father, and I presume the intention was to indicate that, like a wayward Prince Hal, the potential to take control of his responsibilities was there all the time, just waiting for the right moment to emerge from the shadows.

The crowd he manipulated turned into a terrifying group of thugs, looting the local shops of games consoles and designer trainers, and encircling the terrified Cinna, taunting and prodding him before grabbing him by his limbs and carrying him off to a grisly end. Other than the slightly pedestrian single mother from a local council estate who represented the Soothsayer, the amateur cast were quite convincing in their transformation from disillusioned working-class voters to terrifying angry mob.

The result of the descent into chaos was visually represented by the abandoned government papers, looted goods and empty coffee cups in the shell of the assembly which doubled as Brutus's tent. Discarded office chairs, desks and wires were piled in a heap and the sunken debating desks provided a convenient spot for Arthur Hughes's loyal Secretary Lucius to take a short nap. Hastie omitted the lullaby, as Sam West's Brutus took a brief moment to accept the inevitable defeat with a show of understated stoicism which characterised his interpretation of a principled, reasoned, decent, intellectually astute but rather passionless liberal.

There's a lot more that could be said about the choices made in this production, but my key response was one of wondering whether I'd been watching a different production to everyone else. Mark Shenton, writing for *The Stage*, was impressed by Hastie's decision

to interpret the play as a contemporary political thriller,⁴ and appeared to agree with Sheffield Theatres when they promoted it as a ‘fast-paced gripping tale of intrigue and betrayal’.⁵ However, for me, for the most part, this production wasn’t particularly fast-paced, but rather (at just under three hours), quite deliberate, and steady-paced in its exploration of the nature of government. Some of the detail of the more intimate scenes seemed slightly lost amongst the vastness of the set and auditorium and, by removing much of the physical action from the last two acts, this became a slightly prolonged, melancholy and disheartening philosophical exploration of the seeming impossibility of establishing stable government which truly represents its citizens. That isn’t to say that it wasn’t a good-quality production but just that, for this reviewer, it perhaps wasn’t quite what it set out to be, or what so many others told me it was.

⁴ Mark Shenton, ‘Julius Caesar review at Crucible Theatre Sheffield’, *The Stage*, 23 May 2017 <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2017/julius-caesar-review-sheffield-crucible/>> [accessed 20 June 2017]

⁵ Sheffield Theatres, ‘Julius Caesar’, May 2017 <<https://www.sheffieldtheatres.co.uk/whats-on/julius-caesar/>> [accessed 6 June 2017].