

# VANCOUVERPLAYS

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review

Julius Caesar  
by William Shakespeare  
Mad Duck Equity Co-op  
Jericho Arts Centre, 1675 Discovery  
March 2-19  
\$14-\$16  
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What better than a refreshingly in-your-face treatment of *Julius Caesar* to celebrate the Ides of March? This stripped down, two-hour, modern dress version on a bare platform in the round gives the play a powerful immediacy that it often lacks. Though some of the subtleties, particularly in the character of Brutus, get lost, a strong cast and innovative direction provide interesting new twists to a play best known for its Great Lines and Famous Speeches.

Director Jack Paterson has dressed his politicians in business suits, given them Blackberries and Secret Service style security, and suggested the kind of cut-throat political atmosphere found in contemporary Washington. The stubborn arrogance of Caesar, played powerfully by big-voiced Chris Britton, and the ability of Antony to work the crowd like an evangelical preacher contribute to the sense that we know these people. Paterson doesn't draw the analogy too closely. This remains a play about ancient Rome. But its view of politics is very dark. Few virtues are to be found in these men who slice and dice their way through their power struggles. The ending, with news of a bloodbath at the Senate and the ultra-cynical Antony as victor, lacks any of the restorative qualities found in traditional tragedy.

Shakespeare's Brutus, the play's central character, vacillates and rationalizes. He's an earlier version of Hamlet, an ambivalent intellectual unused to killing. Paterson's Brutus, in contrast, barely hesitates before agreeing to join the conspiracy for reasons which are never clear. And because we don't see him working through his issues, he appears shallow rather than noble. As played by Craig March, a physically dominant actor, Brutus actually seems rather dull-witted, a nice man who gets in over his head.

His main co-conspirator, Cassius, stands at the centre of this production, largely due to the sterling performance of Kevin Williamson who shows us a character seemingly both politically manipulative and utterly sincere. Williamson is also most at home with Shakespeare's language and verse rhythms. As Antony, Craig Erickson has the "lean and hungry look" that Caesar attributes to Cassius. Erickson uses his feral presence effectively in making Antony a self-serving slimebag. But his many vocal tricks call attention to themselves as acting technique, what David Mamet calls Funny Voices.

Paterson has cross-cast women in some of the male roles—a convention that works just fine here—but he gives the play a feminist twist primarily by foregrounding male violence and stupidity. This is made most clear in back-to-back scenes in which women take centre stage. Lucia Frangione excels as Brutus' wife Portia, deeply pissed at the refusal of the man she loves to confide in her. As Calpurnia, Teryl Rothery uses intellectual argument and physical intimacy to try desperately to keep Caesar at home on the fateful day. But of course his pride trumps her love and intelligence. These guys don't deserve such wives.

The production style melds the aesthetic and the physically immediate to fine effect. When actors surround the playing area, shouting in unison and stomping on the floor, there is a real sense of visceral threat. At the same time, rather than employ traditional swords and daggers or substitute modern-day guns, Paterson has stylized the violence by giving the conspirators red scarves, the only splash of colour in this gray world, which become their weapons. These are used very imaginatively, especially in the assassination. I really liked the moment just after "Et tu, Bruté," when Caesar falls into Brutus' arms in a kind of deathly mutual embrace. I could imagine Portia and Calpurnia doing the same, but without the deathliness.

Jerry Wasserman  
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