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THEATER REVIEW | 'JULIUS CAESAR'

## Soliloquies in Sound Bites From 44 B.C.

By MARGO JEFFERSON

 We live in a media maelstrom, and the Moonwork theater company's "Julius Caesar" comes hurtling toward us right from its center. This production, at the Connelly Theater in the East Village through Nov. 23, is set in the here and now. Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" is about politics, rhetoric and power; about manipulation of a nation's image and its people; about conspiracy, murder and the war that leads to a new regime. What play is better suited for our times?

Politicians' words first came at us through newspapers and rallies; then through radio; now it's television, from extended documentary film to cut-and-splice sound bites. The performing style of each candidate, the rehearsed gestures and line readings, are framed by media performance conventions: the interview; the formality or hysteria (both calculated) of pundits; the paid political advertisement; the news conference. And thanks to shows that mingle fact with fiction, like "West Wing" and "K Street," entertainment gives us no respite.

The action in "Julius Caesar" is taut and sure. But psychological ambiguity is everywhere. How power-hungry was Caesar? How justified are his killers? How different will his successors, Marc Antony and Octavius, be? We understand Cassius — "lean and hungry" and envious. But Brutus loves Rome and Caesar. What lies must this honorable man tell himself to justify murder?

Moonwork's director, Gregory Wolfe, wants us to see this play as satirical tragedy. The characters take themselves seriously. Power must be taken seriously — we know that. But the media frame strips these rulers of nobility and makes clear that farce abounds. It also keeps reminding us that we are the lowly citizens — the plebeians. We get to watch and react, but we shape none of the big events.

Lowell Pettit's clever set blends hints of ancient Rome (flats painted and mounted to evoke marble columns) with that of America today (TV cameras mounted on both sides of the stage).

In Shakespeare's Rome, officers, tribunes and servants traded news and opinions. Mr. Wolfe (and his fellow adaptor, Gregory J. Sherman) give a lot of their lines to newscasters, and reporters. In one of the funniest changes, Artemidorus, Shakespeare's "doctor of rhetoric," becomes the Artemidorus Group, a trio of pontificating television analysts.

When we first see Caesar, he is backstage with his young wife Calpurnia (Sarah Knowlton) being prepped for a rally. Wiry, white-haired Bill Gorman is commanding, and disturbing, as Caesar: it's impossible to separate his intelligence from his vanity. The soothsayer who warns him to "beware the Ides of March" is a homeless black man (Dan Snow) who bursts in from the street. The moment

when a startled Caesar regroups and shakes his hand with camera-ready warmth is priceless

Caesar and Marc Antony (Christopher Haas) are the politicians on the nation's winning ticket. We know these campaign posters; ("Vote Caesar/Antony") in red, white and blue; we know these eager, cagey staffers; young men (and a woman or two) in suits. Their job is to anticipate and facilitate, whatever the task: it might be a photo shoot; it might be an assassination.

We know those party leaders who are about to make their bid for power: the moody, conniving Cassius of Mason Pettit; the thoughtful but self-deceived Brutus of Christopher Yates. And we know ourselves. We are the spectators and the bit players.

Mr. Wolfe is known for multimedia, modern-day productions of Shakespeare. Sometimes, when I see the word "multimedia" attached to a production, I wince. Then I remember that the words "classical" and "traditional" can affect me in exactly the same way. It takes no time for a style to become a fad or for tradition to become prim imitation. It would be ridiculous for theater to ignore the look and sound of our media-driven world. The "Julius Caesar" enacted onstage whets our desire for political truth. The one played out on screen mocks the scripted spectacles we witness every day.

You might dispute certain choices in this production (lines cut; passages rearranged). You might prefer your Shakespearean acting to be more opulent. The style here is deliberately crisp, even curt. It isn't flat though; it's vigorous and physical, from monologues to battle scenes. (Only the Casca of Paula Stevens felt depleted, while Mary Birdsong's Portia stayed at just one high pitch).

When a classical text is modernized, what matters is imaginative logic. Is the transformation coherent? Does it enhance the power of the past and present? I say yes to both questions.

## **JULIUS CAESAR**

By Shakespeare; directed by Gregory Wolfe; sets by Lowell Pettit; lighting by David Sherman; costumes by Oana Botez-Ban; music and sound by Andrew Sherman; assistant director and choreographer, Jena Necrason. Presented by Moonwork, in association with Gray Lady Entertainment. At the Connelly Theater, 220 East Fourth Street, East Village.

WITH: Mary Birdsong (Portia), Bill Gorman (Julius Caesar), Christopher Haas (Antony), Sarah Knowlton (Calpurnia), Mason Pettit (Cassius), Dan Snow (Soothsayer), Justin Steeve (Octavius Caesar), Paula Stevens (Casca) and Christopher Yates (Brutus).