

Modern Caesar is delightful, horrifying

Theater Review
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The Theater Department of the University of Nebraska presents a compelling Shakespearean production. It does not compel through a passive appreciation of the past, but through a grappling with the present. Antonin Artaud began the concept of creating the new environment for masterpieces of the past when he said, "Masterpieces of the past are good for the past: they are not good for us. We have the right to say what has not been said and even what has not been said in a way that belongs to us, a way that is immediate and direct, corresponding to the present modes of feeling, and understandable to everyone."

The contemporization of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar as it is now being presented in Howell Theater is successful in almost every respect: it is imposing, alternately delightful and horrifying, and, above all, relevant.

The time in which the action occurs might be anytime between 1938 and the present.



Mills as Brutus . . . "strong, gentle and dedicated."

The scene is modern Rome and central Italy. "Standard" Shakespearean characters have acquired startling new perspectives — Mark Antony, for example, shares many characteristics with pop singer Tom Jones in manner and dress. All characters appear in modern street dress and war uniforms.

Part of the effectiveness of the production is the result of employing what is known as "total theater" or "environmental theater." The environment of the play gives a sense of adventure, and ceases to be merely a backdrop for action. The audience enters the theater and takes its perspective as part of a new world; it is literally surrounded by the set and action of the play.

In Howell Theater ramps

have been constructed through the center of the seating, and much of the action occurs in the aisles. Most entrances are made from the theater lobby. The audience must turn and watch on all sides to follow and participate in the action.

Other innovations, stylistic in nature, are important: the bulk of the play may be seen as a flashback, because all the battle scenes of Act V are portrayed first in the sculpture gardens of Sheldon Art Gallery. Caesar's murder and the ensuing scenes are closely covered by hidden T.V. cameras and monitored to sets which sit in easy view of the audience, so that one can see a scene from three different angles without stirring from his seat.

Certain dramatic elements of a Shakespearean play cannot



Tebo as Cassius . . . "conniving and nefarious."

be radically altered with success, however. One of these is the magnificent poetry which characterizes his dramas. And, although in the present production much slang and colloquialism is employed in transitional moments, and sometimes even within longer speeches, the language remains basically that which Shakespeare gave us.

Where substitutions are made, they do not distort the dramatic purpose or artistic quality of the language usage: good poetry is left good poetry. The speeches of Cassius and Antony testify to this. These substitutions generally help the audience to understand the context in which the lines were given.

Some characterizations have changed little since their creation. Three such characters in Julius Caesar are Brutus, Cassius and Caesar. Brutus is a strong, wise and valiant warrior and statesman, who joins the conspiracy against Caesar because he believes it to be for the general good. Dana Mills' portrayal of Brutus is that of a strong, gentle and dedicated man, whose sincerity and warmth make it understandable that he is loved and respected by all those who know him, including Caesar. Technically, Mills' body attitude often somewhat belies the sense of his characterization; he "poses." He brings, however, an enormous believability to the central character of the play.

The fiery, unstable Cassius is played to the hilt (no pun intended) by Mitch Tebo. The conniving and somewhat nefarious side of Cassius is clear throughout the play, yet he is human enough for our sympathies to be fully with him at the end. One could desire more control in Tebo's performance, however; often there is too much fire and not enough ice.

Steve Gaines' portrayal of Caesar offers all the honorable conceit possible, and leaves no suspicion but that Caesar's great vanity plays no small role in the incurrence of his death.

The most challenging role of the play was entrusted to Bill Szymanski. His Antony is mod in every respect. The funeral oration of Antony is the high point of the production: it is a moaning, swinging, screaming three-dimensional lament for the dead Caesar (who lies in the center of the audience throughout the scene). Microphone in hand, Antony stalks the audience and rouses them to a fever-pitch of mourning excitement. In curious contrast to the excellence of the scenes surrounding Caesar's death is the rather affected, mechanical reading Szymanski gives to speeches in other scenes.



Szymanski as Antony . . . "rouses the audience to fever pitch."

Technically, the show is extremely complex and Set and Lighting Designer - Technical Director Jerry Lewis and his crews are to be complimented on a superb job. Costuming by Royal Eckert compliments the production, which was created under the aegis of William Morgan.

In light of the brilliance of design and execution of all of the elements of theater in this highly experimental and effective production of Julius Caesar, area theater viewers have reason to expect more innovative and exciting productions at Howell Theater, and I suspect that their expectations shall not be disappointed.

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