

Review of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar (directed by Robert Hastie for Sheffield Theatres) at the Crucible, 31 May 2017

ANDERSON, Susan

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/17757/>

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

ANDERSON, Susan (2017). Review of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar (directed by Robert Hastie for Sheffield Theatres) at the Crucible, 31 May 2017. Shakespeare, 13 (4), 353-355.

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Review of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (directed by Robert Hastie for Sheffield Theatres) at the Crucible, 31 May 2017.

Susan Anderson

English, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

Correspondence address: Faculty of Development and Society, Sheffield Hallam University, 1147 Owen Building, City Campus, Sheffield, S1 1WB, email: Susan.Anderson@shu.ac.uk

Review of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (directed by Robert Hastie for Sheffield Theatres) at the Crucible, 31 May 2017.

In the late Spring of 2017, with a 'snap' election looming, a febrile political atmosphere provided an apposite context for Sheffield Theatres' *Julius Caesar*. The production's resonances with the situation in the UK and with wider recent political and social upheavals were made immediately obvious through a set that resembled a modern conference facility or a purpose-built parliament like the EU or the UN. The thrust stage pulled the audience into political responsibility by turning the auditorium into the senate, with the sunken seats in front of the front row set up as desks with neatly arranged papers and microphones. Centre stage, an enormous mahogany table dominated the opening tableau, its obvious solidity and opulence made menacing by the seven Sheffield steel knives laid out across it with absolute precision. This orderly vision of ruthless bureaucracy at the outset progressively deteriorated across the first half in preparation for the chaos and anarchy of a second half that played out the terrifying consequences of the 'burn it down' nihilism of political disaffection.

The table was repurposed several times during the first half, operating variously as a debating table, Brutus's private study, the breakfast table at Caesar's grand residence, and the backdrop to Caesar's throne as he sat above the rest of the senate. Its obvious quality and expense brought status to the scenes it furnished. It came in between the play's married couples, dividing first Brutus and Portia, and then Caesar and Calpurnia. The conspirators gathered round it, clutching its sides like a life raft as the intensity of their discussion pulled them together. Its disappearance from the play after the first half seemed to signify the loss of solidity, another victim of the destructive forces of social change. Once gone, along with their object of hatred, the conspiracy

became unmoored, their discussions taking place amid flimsy, hastily assembled camp-beds, or the trashed senate.

Briefcases were also a key element of the first half's exploration of the semiotics of objects of power. They were a constant accoutrement of the conspirators, and, having seen Cinna pick up, brandish and then put away the knives into a briefcase in the opening tableau, it was clear what these objects signified, even before we saw the conspirators each take one of the knives and stow it in their briefcase. This yoking of bureaucracy and violence seemed to suggest that the orderly society of the first half was powered by threats as real as the anarchy of the second half, albeit ones that were repressed enough to stay polite. The ominous click of the locks as the conspirators opened their cases to retrieve their knives ramped up the tension effectively as the play started to hurtle towards the assassination.

Within this world dominated by objects of power, the actors' performances revealed the impotence of those who try to control the repercussions of wielding such power. Zoë Waites was particularly compelling as Cassius, bringing out a clear strand of long-standing resentment in her relationship to Caesar. Her barely concealed rage at his presumption propelled her initial recruitment of Brutus, but once Caesar had been eliminated, her clarity of purpose was too, and her outrage lost its focus, as did the conspirators' mission. Sam West's Brutus was a careful, sensitive figure, an 'overthinker' whose hesitations made him seem rather pathetic, in all senses of the word. His speech at Caesar's funeral was emphatically *competent*, complete with cue cards that showed how well-prepared, and well-thought-out his speech was, delivered from a balcony with a microphone. This left the stage clear for Mark Antony (Elliot Cowan) to wheel out Caesar's coffin below and deliver a barnstorming off the cuff

performance that ranged around the stage and auditorium, bellowing at the crowd at times with ten times the energy of the seemingly rather milquetoast Brutus.

Communal moments like this made the crowd, in many ways, the star of the show, with the community chorus from Sheffield People's Theatre exceptionally well-integrated into the cast. From the very beginning, their presence helped to bring the audience right into the action as they charged through the aisles in celebration of Lupercal, shouting like a football crowd, chanting and jeering. Their vocal responses to Brutus and to Mark Antony felt spontaneous and vital, and again made use of the entire auditorium to immerse the audience in the lurches of sympathy of public opinion. The shock of Caesar's death was expertly managed, too, with stunned silence as the conspirators clumsily slashed at him as he staggered across the stage, and then, when Brutus delivered the final blow, came the sudden outbreak of screams and uproar.

Jonathan Hyde's Caesar had been an avuncular chap, a man with the relaxed air of someone used to being in charge. His loving interactions with Calpurnia (Lisa Caruccio Came) made him a humanised leader of the modern sort who invites us into their home and family to show how 'normal' they are. Nevertheless, the servants in maid outfits hovering at the back of the stage and hesitating over whether to obey Calpurnia or Caesar made clear the highly privileged and rarified world of power the couple moved in. In a world where the stakes are so high, however, political allegiance and friendship are the same thing. There is no divide between public and private, rather, it is the idea of such a divide that is exploited by successful politicians. Caesar's startlingly red socks reminded me of Sir Christopher Meyer, the well-known diplomat and ambassador whose habit of wearing red socks was a deliberate strategy to make

himself distinctive and memorable.¹ Sartorial choices like this seem trivial, but are in fact politically and diplomatically valuable trademarks. To bastardise a phrase: the personal is the political.

The play's diverse casting made it seem representative of the world that it was speaking to, with actors of colour and actors with visible disabilities playing principal roles, and a gender balanced cast. Pandora Colin was particularly convincing as Casca, playing her as a brusque, practical manager, well inured to the realities of political pragmatism and capable of keeping her cards close to her chest, unlike Brutus and Cassius, whose emotionalism made them vulnerable to falling for their own rhetoric, even as they used it to persuade each other. The argument between Brutus and Cassius in the second half circled through mistrust, paranoia, recrimination, remorse and back to friendship. The closeness of their bond was conveyed through physical touch extending to a tender kiss as they parted for good. Arthur Hughs portrayed a subtle character arc for Lucius, charting his development from loyal valet to reluctant soldier. Whereas Mark Antony (in a tellingly smooth transition from popular politician to ruthless and ambitious soldier) swapped his suit for head-to-toe combat gear, Lucius simply seemed to have shoved a combat vest on over his clothing, an improvised last minute response to the sudden descent into martial law.

The contemporary setting brought out the play's engagement with the conflicts between individual and group, ideals and realpolitik. There were echoes here of the US version of *House of Cards*, though there were no obvious Machiavels to match Frank Underwood, the series' antihero. The glossy, polished facade of power and its performance seemed to have been drawn in the same style, though. Luperca became a

¹ Lawley, Sue. Interview with Sir Christopher Meyer. *Desert Island Discs*. BBC Radio 4. London. 23 Nov. 2003. Radio.

sports tournament hijacked for political capital, with corporate logos and banners decorating the back of the stage. Mark Antony was a sporting hero, who reinforced Caesar's political-social cachet by association. There were also clear echoes of the typography and design of US election placards, with a "Hail Caesar" poster that looked exactly like a Trump-Pence or Clinton-Kaine flyer from the 2016 election. The references here were broad, creating general rather than specific resonances, but the parallels were clear: the erosion of trust in public figures and institutions, and the manipulation of public opinion with 'spin' or even falsehood that are the familiar concerns of 21st-century political and public discourse.

The good-natured loudness of the initial Lupercal scenes established a tense but orderly society. This carefully balanced polis, established and maintained through the performance and manipulation of image and object, quickly fell apart after the assassination, with costumes askew, papers scattered, and rubbish littering the consoles of the senate. The chaotic looting, gunfire and explosions, and the three hanging bodies dangling above the stage at the start of the second half seemed a shocking and disproportionate response to the conspirators' initial grievances and justifications. The production's exploration of the unintended consequences of political complaint seemed directly relevant to a context of chronic uncertainty where pollsters and predictions are routinely wrong, and the unthinkable regularly becomes not just thinkable but normal. It deftly wove together consistently compelling performances and a design that created a fascinating, if deeply unsettling, range of resonances with contemporary Britain.