

THEATER

Why 'Julius Caesar' Speaks to Politics Today. With or Without Trump.

By MICHAEL COOPER JUNE 12, 2017

Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" has always been about more than killing Julius Caesar.

On the eve of World War II, Orson Welles staged a landmark anti-Fascist production with a Mussolini-like Caesar. The Royal Shakespeare Company recently set the play in Africa, powerfully evoking the continent's dictators and civil wars. Five years ago, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis staged a production featuring the assassination of an Obama-esque Caesar by a group of right-wing conspirators.

But it's the Public Theater in New York that finds itself in the middle of a pitched controversy, for its new staging of the play at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park. Oskar Eustis, the director, chose to make his Caesar decidedly Trumpian, giving him a shock of hair, an overlong red tie and a wife with a recognizably Slovenian accent. As all Caesars are, he's killed in the middle of the play — bloodily — by Brutus and his band of co-conspirators.

[Outrage over a Shakespearan depiction of President Trump.]

That killing has driven Delta Air Lines and Bank of America to pull all or part

of their sponsorship of the Public Theater's free Shakespeare in the Park program, and thrust the theater into a maelstrom of criticism from President Trump's supporters.

"Julius Caesar," with assassination at its core, is politically fraught, and subject to multiple interpretations. The play was written during a tense moment when Elizabethan England seethed with political plots. In Catherine the Great's Russia, copies of the play were removed from bookstores. Over the years, totalitarian regimes have banned or bowdlerized it. And audiences and scholars have long debated the play's meaning, and the extent to which Shakespeare was sympathizing with the conspirators or condemning them.

"One thing about Shakespeare's plays that makes them so alive is that they are extremely labile," said Stephen Greenblatt, a Shakespeare scholar. "They go in a lot of different directions, and 'Julius Caesar' is a strong, extreme case of this."

Not that the play, in which the increasingly powerful Caesar is killed in the name of saving the republic, is pro-assassination. On this, most Shakespeare scholars agree.

"I think the general drift of it is: Be careful, you might get what you want," Mr. Greenblatt said, noting the chaos and bloodshed the assassination unleashes. "The very thing that you think you're doing to protect the republic can lead to the end of the republic."

Leaders have been fascinated by the work. George Washington saw a production of the drama in 1790. Nelson Mandela annotated a copy when he was imprisoned on Robben Island for fighting apartheid in South Africa.

And the play became a staple of American public school reading lists, in part because it allowed teachers to discuss republicanism, said Brett Gamboa, an assistant professor of English at Dartmouth.

But like any work, the play, and the history it is based on, can be interpreted in different ways, and it has at times inspired violence. John Wilkes Booth acted in a

production of “Julius Caesar” in New York City not long before he killed Lincoln, and complained after the assassination that he was being hunted “for doing what Brutus was honored for.” And Claus von Stauffenberg, a leader of a failed attempt on Hitler’s life, reportedly kept a marked-up copy of “Julius Caesar” on his desk.

Stanley Wells, a prominent British Shakespeare scholar, said that Shakespeare seemed to anticipate the play’s long afterlife when he has Cassius, one of the conspirators, exclaim to Brutus: “How many ages hence/ Shall this our lofty scene be acted over/ In states unborn and accents yet unknown!”

“Within the play itself,” Professor Wells said, “Shakespeare is looking forward to times when people will also see this historic event as relevant to their own times.”

Mr. Eustis, who is also the artistic director of the Public, includes the Cassius quote in his program note, in which he adds his own gloss: “Julius Caesar can be read as a warning parable to those who try to fight for democracy by undemocratic means,” he writes. “To fight the tyrant does not mean imitating him.”

The anti-fascist production that Orson Welles staged in 1937, with the Mercury Theater, was a revelation. The critic Brooks Atkinson wrote in *The New York Times* that it was “the most exciting and terrifying drama of the season” and added that “the grim march of military feet through the ominous shadows of the stage is the doom song heard round the world today.”

“It was like nothing anybody had ever seen,” Professor Gamboa said, adding that the production went on to influence a host of other Caesars, portrayed as a recognizable political figure from more recent times.

“When everyone’s in white togas, there’s just not a lot of context there,” said Rob Melrose, who staged the 2012 Obama-inspired production at the Guthrie by the Acting Company — which was supported by a \$25,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. “Making those choices to have it in contemporary clothes, I think, illuminates Shakespeare’s play. What kind of person was Caesar? What kind of person was Brutus? But it also illuminates our time.”

Mr. Melrose said that the act of violence at the play's center should always be appalling. "When Caesar is killed, it's horrifying, it's awful — whether it's Obama or Trump," he said. "Trump, Republicans and Democrats should all take heart that what this play says is that killing a political leader, no matter how righteous your views are, is a bad idea — a terrible idea."

Correction: June 14, 2017

Because of an editing error, a picture caption on Tuesday with the continuation of an article about a production of "Julius Caesar" at the Public Theater misidentified the role played by one actor in a 2012 production of the play. Will Sturdivant played Brutus, not an Obama-inspired Caesar. (The role of Caesar in that production was played by Bjorn DuPaty.)

A version of this article appears in print on June 13, 2017, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: In 'Julius Caesar,' an Assassination Echoes Across the Centuries.