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Much Ado about Julius Caesar

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 21st, 2017

You would have to have been stranded in Antarctica or on Mars to have missed all the hoopla generated by the New York Public Theater's Shakespeare in the Park production of *Julius Caesar.*

I did not see it, so I will *not* presume to assess its artistic merits or lack thereof. Suffice it to say, the physical similarity the character of Caesar bore to the current occupant of the White House aroused enough popular ire — much of it from people who, like myself, had not seen the production — for both Delta Airlines and Bank of America to withdraw their sponsorships.

So much for upholding free speech in our democracy.

What is unoriginal here is the widespread habit of using — sometimes coercing — classic plays to speak to our modern political kerfuffles, red, blue or polka-dot. There is nothing wrong with the practice in principle. Its success or failure depends on how apt or skillful is the enterprise. If the shoe fits, you know…

By all reports, Gregg Henry as Caesar wore a long red tie and an orange comb over and was viciously knifed right on cue in Act III, scene one. His wife Calpurnia, played by Tina Benko, was directed to speak with a mock-Melania accent. That is not a huge concession, although I'm not sure how well those lines came across in a kind of Garbospeak. It was just the combination of the tie, the hair and the accent that brought on the problem. A bit of an overstatement perhaps, and satire doesn't like overstatement.

Intrigued by all this, I re-read the play. I don't believe the Public changed any of Shakespeare's lines; they didn't have to. Shakespeare's descriptions of Caesar fit Mr. Trump quite well as written. In Act I, scene two, Marc Antony tells Caesar, a bit unctuously, "*when Caesar says 'Do this' it is perform'd*." Now you know that's also true of any command given by Mr. Trump to anyone in his White House coterie. Or his cabinet.

Cassius, who resents Caesar, tells Brutus, "*Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world / Like a Colossus; and we petty men / Walk under his huge legs, and peep about / To find ourselves dishonorable graves … Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed, / That he is grown so great?*"

I know not what meat, but you get my drift.

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My best friend of many years (and no mean scholar), whom I'll simply call The Sage of Paris and with whom I often like to discuss how many angels can fit on the head of a pin, astutely pointed out that this analogy to Caesar is, in fact, all wrong.

"Caesar refuses the crown three times and is loved by many," she said. "Nor is he portrayed as a Mussolini fascist… The real villains in Shakespeare are Richard III and Iago, who is pure evil. The movie I saw of *Richard III* was placed in the 1930s, with Richard as a Fascist leader overthrown on the battlefield," she explained, digressing a bit. "It made sense," she added, "in spite of some humorous moments when only my husband and I in the audience couldn't help chuckling. 'A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!' How are they going to get around *that* quote? Well, they did, more or less."

To the point that Caesar refused the crown three times, I replied that it was just Caesar's way of being coy. Had they offered it a fourth time, he would have accepted it, I'm sure. He didn't really *mean* the refusal any more than Mr. Trump would were we to offer *him* a crown. As for the Mussolini part, I can see Mr. Trump, physically speaking, better in that role. He has the build, the girth, the swagger. He is just *déclassé* enough.

The Sage of Paris was right, however, in noting that Caesar was loved by many. He was. And so is Mr. Trump. Even Nixon continued to be loved after his resignation by, well, at least a quarter of his original supporters. (I got this bit of information from one of them.) And, to this point, remember that, in Shakespeare's play, Caesar's assassins — Casca, Cassius, Brutus et al. — all come to very bad ends. Caesar's supporters, on the other hand, emerge triumphant.

The Sage was probably right also in saying that Mr. Trump is far from being a Caesar clone. Caesar was a far more dignified leader than Mr. Trump, prideful, yes, with some justification, and dominating, while Mr. Trump is merely domineering. It's a matter of nuance. Unlike Mr. Trump, Caesar was perfectly capable of controlling his utterances. But then there was no Tweeter feed in the day. He also was very good at calculating his moves. No chaos in that administration even if, in the end, there was that small matter of being assassinated.

So really, tell me, where's the beef?

That the theatre didn't bother to try to be more subtle about making this analogy is a reflection of the extreme frustration felt across the country with politics *in general* — a frustration exacerbated in the community of artists by the hard time artists have just making a living under *any* administration. ("*A plague on both their houses,*" quoth Shakespeare.)

And then there was that petulant squeak from The President's oldest son who wondered on social media if any taxpayer money had been involved in the staging of this *Julius Caesar*. I'm not sure when previously, Donald Trump Jr. had ever exhibited such concern for the taxpayers, but to its credit, The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was Johnny On the Spot with a reply that put such speculation to rest.

A statement on its website read: "In the past, the New York Shakespeare Festival has received project-based NEA grants to support performances of Shakespeare in the Park by the Public Theater. However, no NEA funds [were] awarded to support this … production of *Julius Caesar* and there are no NEA funds supporting the New York State Council on the Arts' grant to The Public Theater or its performances."

Phew. A good thing, too, since the NEA itself is threatened with its own assassination by the Trump administration's budget blueprint for 2018. ("*Et tu Trumpe?*") Not a done deed, not yet, but possible. So better to come down on the side of caution since, as a person wiser than I had already pointed out, "in the current, political environment, it seems, there is no winning."

As for The Public Theater, right or wrong, it has been firm in upholding its position, issuing the following statement:

> "We stand completely behind our production of *Julius Caesar*. We recognize that our interpretation of the play has provoked heated discussion; audiences, sponsors and supporters have expressed varying viewpoints and opinions. Such discussion is exactly the goal of our civically engaged theater; this discourse is the basis of a healthy democracy. Our production of *Julius Caesar* in no way advocates violence towards anyone. **Shakespeare's play, and our production, make the opposite point: those who attempt to defend democracy by undemocratic means pay a terrible price and destroy the very thing they are fighting to save.** For over 400 years, Shakespeare's play has told this story and we are proud to be telling it again in Central Park."

The bolding above is mine but the reasoning is theirs — and Shakespeare's, since he wrote the play.

So, I repeat, where's the beef???

Image: Elizabeth Marvel as Marc Antony and company. Photo by Joan Marcus.

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