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The Royal Shakespeare Company's Roman Season: A Memento Mori for America

Julius Caesar

Directed by Angus Jackson

Antony and Cleopatra

Directed by Iqbal Khan

Performance Date: May 13, 2017

Reviewed by MARCIA EPPICH-HARRIS

The programs for both *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* open with the following statement from the RSC's Rome Season Director, Angus Jackson: "As we bring the decadence of Shakespeare's Rome to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre stage, the politics, power play and corruption seem more pertinent than ever before."¹ Most audiences would agree. With all four Roman plays being performed at the RSC's Stratford-upon-Avon home from March to October 2017, it was a good time for those who love political drama to be at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. Yet it was not just Shakespeare's Roman tragedies that were highlighted by the RSC during its regular planning cycle – the entire season focused on Rome-related performances and educational opportunities, including: Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, based on Books 1, 2, and 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid*; a six-part play titled *Imperium*, by Mike Poulton, based on Robert Harris's Cicero trilogy; Ovid "events" scheduled throughout October, with readings from *The Metamorphoses*; and a revival of the puppet theatre version of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, conceived by Artistic Director, Gregory Doran. The myths, politics, and crises of ancient Rome were magnified in the season as the whole world watched the United States' own political crises, as well as Brexit, and wondered what would happen next. Daily revelations of corruption and news detailing the misfires of the Trump administration mean that by the time this article is published the world may be an entirely different place.

Lest it seem arrogant for this American reviewer to point to our own president's scandalous term for the RSC's inspiration, it is worth noting that the program for *Caesar* includes a page-and-a-half photograph of Presidents Donald Trump and Barack Obama in the Oval Office together, with Trump pointing emphatically at something off camera, while Obama sits, hands on knees, mouth agape, seeming to wonder how he came to find himself in the same room with the man who questioned his citizenship mercilessly. The picture accompanies an essay by Sam Leith, "Figures of Speech," which discusses not Theresa May's rhetoric, but Trump's. Leith writes that "The US President's rhetoric does not, on the face

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of it, have the formal dexterity or command of a Shakespearean oration. . . . But it is effective – and it's effective in ways that would be quite recognizable to Shakespeare."² Leith explains that the rivaling rhetoric of Brutus and Antony in the play shows us "a pair of two demagogues competing to sway popular feeling first one way, and then another – and at stake is the future of a republic. *O tempora, o mores.* . . ."³ It appears that Leith and I are of the same opinion.

The RSC wasn't the only company making connections between tales from Rome and America's president last year. In fact, another production of *Julius Caesar* put on by the Public Theatre of New York (Summer 2017) cast an actor wearing a Trump wig, a suit, and a characteristic long, red tie as Caesar, who was slaughtered by women and people of color. The assassination fantasia caused Delta Airlines to drop their sponsorship of the Public and put the spot light on the implications of producing *Julius Caesar* less than an eighth of the way through Trump's term. Savvy artistic directors took the political moment by the horns, but no company went full-on Roman the way the RSC did last year. The season was an audacious and historic attempt to make sense of our world-wide unpredictable state of affairs that is so dominated by the tactics of Donald Trump.

On May 13, 2017, I had the unique opportunity of seeing *Julius Caesar* in the afternoon and *Antony and Cleopatra* in the evening at the RSC. Seeing the two plays on the same day, separated only by hours, was an eye-opening and thrilling experience. The scenic design of the season by Robert Innes Hopkins set the stage in the glory of ancient Rome. In *Caesar*, square columns framed the



Fig. 1: Lion Attacking a Horse

upstage landscape, almost cage-like, with the Roman maxim "SPQR" engraved in the entablature.⁴ Six stairs led to a platform, upon which sat a reproduction of *Lion Attacking a Horse*, an emblem from art history that signifies "triumph and defeat," according to the Getty Museum of Art.⁵ The original statue can be found at the Capitoline Museums, Rome (Fig. 1), but the reproduction in Stratford-upon-Avon cunningly forecast the power struggle that would unfold. Indeed, Julius Caesar (Andrew Woodall) is struck down just in front of the statue. Other clever elements of Hopkins's design included the use of hydraulics in the tiled floor to raise and lower a variety of scenic elements. Exits through the audience gave theatre patrons an up-close-and-personal look at the prominent use of blood on the daggers, hands, and costumes of Caesar's assassins.

In the production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, the tiled flooring remained, along with the columns, but the *Lion Attacking a Horse* was raised to sit atop the

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columns, looking down upon the action – almost like a stand-in for Caesar’s ghost. A luxurious red, scalloped curtain covered about half the stage during Egyptian scenes, and two approximately six-foot tall Egyptian cat sculptures rose out of the floor. Antony (Antony Byrne) and Cleopatra (Josette Simon) made their first entrance through the floor, raised to the stage on a bed-like platform. Indeed, in both productions, the platforms coming through the flooring provided a variety of set pieces. Hopkins also lowered the platforms into the stage to create a pit. One such use was the ingenious entry in *Antony and Cleopatra* of Octavius Caesar (Ben Allen) and Lepidus (Patrick Drury), two-thirds of the famous triumvirate, entering through the floor in a structure that resembled a Roman Bath, with the accompanying costuming of towel-like wraps and steam from the imagined water. In this case, the setting exuded irony as Octavius complains that Antony "fishes, drinks, and wastes / The lamps of night in revel," all while he, Octavius, simultaneously relaxes within the steaming Bath, along with Lepidus (1.4.4-5).⁶ Costumes, supervised by Sian Harris for both plays, included traditional white togas, with a wide red edging, as the primary costumes for men in *Caesar* and the Roman scenes in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The women were dressed in traditional ancient dresses in a variety of fabrics, ornamented with sashes, jeweled belts, or neckline adornments. The continuity in the scenic design and costuming in the two plays provided a deep plunge into ancient ambiance in *Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Caesar started with a brief dumb show of three characters standing over a subdued bull, which one of the characters stabbed before the lights went black. It turned out that the attacker was Mark Antony (James Corrigan), possibly anachronistically linking him to the ancient cult of Mithras, whose followers were initiated through taurochthony (bull sacrifice). While the moment was very brief, beginning the play this way brought forward the theme of sacrificial killing for the good of all. After a blackout, a celebration began with the people rejoicing in the triumphant return of Julius Caesar. The plebeians wore clothing reminiscent of lower classes, with the colors in earth tones. Soldiers returning home, including Caesar, wore brown leather armor and red capes.

The action moved quickly from the beginning of the play, and the pacing kept the audience interested. In the beginning, Woodall’s Caesar showed impressive poise and confidence, while Corrigan’s Antony, shirtless and grinning, appeared more mischievous and youthful. But the center of gravity was found between Brutus (Alex Waldman) and Cassius (Martin Hutson) once the crowd had cleared away in 1.2. Hutson’s portrayal of Cassius was utterly perfect. His description of saving Caesar from drowning, for instance, was delivered with a somewhat amused, almost disbelieving, air that one might use with friends. Hutson showed impressive range throughout the play, displaying emotions from bemused wonder to barely contained rage, and many levels in between. Waldmann as Brutus embodied the gravitas of stoicism from his very first lines, and presented himself as one worthy of the title “the noblest Roman of all,” as Antony calls him (5.5.67). A symbolic prop helped to make clear that Brutus’s consent to the conspiracy to kill Caesar came from a deeply held belief in the Republic and his familial history that founded it: Waldmann wore a family medallion on a necklace

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that he kept touching when questions of tradition or history would arise. In mentioning his descent from Lucius Junius Brutus who helped overthrow Tarquinius Superbus after the rape of Brutus's kinswoman Lucretia (subject of *The Rape of Lucrece*), Waldmann held his medallion up for all to see. His portrayal showed a Brutus who bore the weight of history literally around his neck, and his ambition, as such, was to honor that history by holding the Republic together – not to gain from the ouster of a would-be king. In the end, when the pragmatism of Brutus and Cassius and their desire not to be dishonored by their defeat led to their assisted suicides, Brutus gave his medallion necklace to Strato (Luke MacGregor) just before he ran on his sword, signifying that he wanted the memory of his family's history, and the honor of the Roman Republic, to continue beyond his life.

Opposing Waldmann's Brutus, James Corrigan as Mark Antony left quite an impression as well. When Corrigan delivered Antony's funeral speech, his youthful, mischievous grin from earlier in the play gave way to full-grown charm, oratorical skill, and raw magnetism as he made his compelling case against Brutus's actions. Corrigan's speech was another moment, like Hutson's above, in which light wit contrasted with Waldmann's sober stoicism and created a crescendo of persuasion over the course of the scene. Corrigan's initial entrance in Act 1 did not make any real impression on me, but in the funeral scene his range and variety shone through, and he commanded the stage exceptionally well. With Corrigan and Waldmann both playing appealing characters with convincing deftness the viewer no longer knew for whom to root.

Other standout performances in *Caesar* came from the only two women with real speaking roles in the play. Caesar's wife Calpurnia (Kristin Atherton) and Brutus's wife Portia (Hannah Morrish) both made oversized impacts for the constraints of the roles. Portia's "voluntary wound" on stage was just one of many times that a good deal of blood was spilt. One could imagine Morrish and Waldmann being married themselves, so natural was their on-stage presence together. Calpurnia's pleas to Caesar not to go to the Senate on the Ides of March did not seem peevish or paranoid. Instead Atherton played Calpurnia like a wise and trustworthy advocate for her husband – too bad he didn't listen to her.

While Antony and Octavius honored Brutus for his honesty, nobility, and sense of duty, the death of Brutus might as well have been followed up with "So much for him," in light of the coming play. In contemplating what would come next in *Antony and Cleopatra*, I anticipated that there would not be continuity in casting because I had seen the promotion pictures for the next play. Yet, as the play began, I was disappointed nonetheless. Corrigan's Antony became so spectacular by Act 3 in *Caesar* that I missed his presence in the role and was distracted with wondering how he might have interacted with Josette Simon's Cleopatra. Most of the actors in *Caesar* reappear in *Antony and Cleopatra*, including Corrigan, but none continue their roles from the previous play. I think this was an incredible mistake. Having such a unique opportunity to develop these characters across two plays would have been an astonishing feat for Corrigan as Antony, as well as Marcello Walton (Lepidus in *Caesar*) and Jon Tacy (Octavius Caesar in *Caesar*). Continuity casting had been done when Trevor Nunn directed the Roman

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plays in the 1971 RSC season, so the precedent exists – as it does in many productions of Shakespeare’s histories. But more importantly, had Corrigan, Walton, and Tacy retained their roles, it would have shown the continuity not just in character, but between the plays themselves. Instead, Antony Byrne replaced Corrigan as the older, but certainly not wiser Antony.



Fig. 2: Augustus of Prima Porta

class distinction fashioned the character into a no-nonsense commentator who was not blinded by power and love, regardless of his admiration for Cleopatra. It worked quite well. David Burnett as Pompey gave an excellent performance, being the only character to seem sincere when talking about the good of the people. Ben Allen played Octavius Caesar as a chilling megalomaniac, making the former Caesar’s ambition seem quaint by comparison. Octavius’s Machiavellian maneuvers looked natural, though haunting, in Allen’s performance. At the end of the play, Allen’s Octavius signified his ascent to Emperor, Augustus Caesar, by striking the pose of the famous ancient statue of the Emperor as a young man:

What I did appreciate about the RSC *Antony and Cleopatra* was Josette Simon’s performance as Cleopatra. Simon played the role with mature control, bringing the anxiety-driven facets of the Egyptian Queen into a new light. Rather than not trusting Antony, Simon’s Cleopatra seemed rather to want to exert royal authority over him, in an attempt to assert her own power. Simon played Cleopatra as if she were naturally superior to Antony, but the chemistry between Simon and Byrne was, after the first couple of scenes, mostly unconvincing. Throughout the play, they were both more appealing as characters when separated from each other than when they appeared together on stage. Andrew Woodall had a stand-out performance as Enobarbus, whom he played with an accent that sounded a shade lower class than every other actors’ RP English. The

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Augustus of Prima Porta (Fig. 2). This allusion was another superb implementation of art history, like the *Lion Attacking a Horse* used in *Caesar*, and showed just how thoroughly the RSC did their ancient Roman homework.

For my money, *Caesar* has always been an overall better play, but what *Antony and Cleopatra* teaches us that *Caesar* does not is the price of political power – isolation. The RSC production illustrated that issue well. Octavius had many followers, but no real friends, and Allen’s power-focused Octavius did not seem to care. Meanwhile Cleopatra’s devotees, Charmian (Amber James), Iras (Kristin Atherton), and others devotedly love her, but they were not Antony, and thus did not fill the void. (Plus, James’s Charmian often appeared to be bored during her scenes. Atherton as Iras was far more emotive – and memorable – than expected.) Often, marriages arranged in political maneuvering, such as Antony’s to Octavia (Lucy Phelps), both begin and end with ambivalent partners, but the RSC played Antony and Octavia as though the pair initially attempted to transcend their marriage’s political roots. The siren song of Cleopatra, of course, made the match impossible to maintain. And obviously, the two eponymous lovers found themselves apart more often than together because of their nagging political duties.

While *Antony and Cleopatra* made the political literally personal and led to the tragic deaths of beloved characters, it somehow did not move me as much as *Caesar* did. *Caesar* inspired greater contemplation of our current political moment, and how principled declarations of noble people like Brutus are no longer countenanced, but are undermined as out of touch. The RSC *Caesar* was a manifesto on the desire for integrity, while *Antony and Cleopatra* felt less like a tragic love story than a peek into a political scandal that ended badly. I think this outcome could have been changed had Corrigan retained his role as Antony from one play to the next. In his role as Agrippa, Corrigan had some one-on-one contact with Simon near the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and they worked very well together – I just wish it had been with Corrigan in different role. I liked that the questions presented by *Caesar* resonated with today’s political moment, but were not exploited in an untactful way. Regardless of an audience member’s personal politics, the play would not offend, unlike, for some, the Public Theatre’s *Caesar* did. The subtlety with which the RSC’s *Caesar* handled Shakespeare’s themes allowed the play not to be about a few men with differing ideologies *only*. Instead it was a smoldering commentary on the history of strong men and the people who either support or oppose them.

The things that struck me as poignant in both plays, however, were the timelessness of their themes. For instance, what does it mean to be “noble”? (A word used forty-one times in *Caesar* alone, if we include phrases and variants such as “noblest.”) To love one’s country, or city-state, or empire, appears to be a “noble” thing, but what actions may one justifiably take to protect it? Can a politician be both successful and human, or is a Machiavellian heart, focused on power over all other relationships, necessary? The RSC’s historically designed *Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* allowed for abstract contemplation of these questions and their relationship to the 2017 political moment. The RSC plays permitted the audience to think about the characters as relevant, although not

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completely analogous to our modern world. In this classically framed season, Shakespeare's Roman plays became abstractions of our time, in which one could see the RSC suggesting a shrewd memento mori for the modern American Republic. Would that we could learn a thing or two from these powers that once seemed too big to fail — but will we?

Notes

1. Angus Jackson, Artistic Director Statement in *Julius Caesar*, Program (Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Company, 2017), 1; and in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Program (Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Company, 2017), 1.
2. Sam Leith, "Figures of Speech," in *Julius Caesar*, Program (Stratford-upon-Avon: Royal Shakespeare Company, 2017), 11.
3. Leith, "Figures of Speech," 11. "O tempora, o mores" translates to "Oh what times! Oh what customs!" and refers to Cicero's Second Oration against Verres, book 4, chapter 25.
4. The letters "SPQR" are an acronym for "Senātus Popolusque Rōmānus," roughly meaning, The Senate and People of Rome. SPQR is the official emblem of the modern-day municipality of Rome, and can be seen all over the city. It refers to the city's ancient republican past.
5. The statue was an ancient Greek sculpture purloined by the Romans during their conquests sometime in the second or first century BCE. During the 14th century CE, the sculpture was placed in the Palazzo Senatorio, which was "an area used for the administration of justice and capital punishment." See "*Lion Attacking a Horse* from the Capitoline Museums, Rome: http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/lion_attacking_horse/. Embedded image by Saiko may be found at https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Leone_che_azzanna_un_cavallo,_et%C3%A0_ellenistica_con_restauri_di_ruggero_bascap%C3%A9_del_1594,_01.JPG.
6. Quotations from *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar* are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2008).

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