

IT CAME, IT SAW, IT

By Sean Bartley

1599

When *Caesar* opened at the Globe Theatre in 1599, Queen Elizabeth's reign was at its weakest point. Military conflicts with Catholics in Spain and Ireland spread the Crown's armies thin. Parliament openly challenged Elizabeth's authority to grant monopolies. And with the death of Lord Burghley, her chief political advisor, confidence in her inner circle began to fade. Like Caesar, Elizabeth was an aging ruler without an heir. A play exploring the fall of a powerful leader could not have been timelier.



A.L. Hirschfield cartoon of the Mercury Theatre production of *Julius Caesar* (with Orson Welles as Brutus).

1937

By the time of *Caesar's* next major American production in 1937, another military conflict loomed large. The Mercury Theater, an innovative New York repertory company headed by producer John Houseman and director Orson Welles, made *Caesar* the premiere offering of their first season. In his memoir, Houseman explained the production's impetus:

"All over the Western World sophisticated democratic structures were breaking down. First in Italy, then in Germany, dictatorships had taken over; the issues of political violence and of the moral duty of the individual in the face of tyranny had become urgent and inescapable. To emphasize the similarity between the last days of the Roman Republic and the political climate of Europe in the mid-thirties, our Roman aristocrats wore military uniforms with black belts that suggested the current fashion of the Fascist ruling class: our crowd wore the dark, nondescript street clothes of the big-city proletariat."



John (left), Edwin (center), and Junius (right) at the "Booth Benefit for the Shakespeare Statue Fund" in 1864.

1864

Caesar's first major American production, starring Edwin Booth, also came at a point of crisis. By 1864, the Civil War had been waging for three years. Both Union and Confederate generals were constantly being fired and replaced. Draft riots broke out regularly in both the North and South. Two weeks before Booth's *Caesar* opened, Abraham Lincoln won his reelection by the narrowest of majorities. Lincoln's political position, like Elizabeth's and Caesar's, was tenuous.

The 1864 production in New York was Booth's only public performance with both of his famous brothers, Junius Brutus and John Wilkes. The one-night-only benefit, intended to raise funds for a statue of Shakespeare in Central Park, was the season's hottest ticket; box seats were scalped for \$100 (over \$1000 by today's prices). Critical acclaim was fervent: *The Castle Square Theatre Magazine* wrote that "...as they entered together, at the opening of the piece, it would be difficult to look on three finer types of physical and intellectual perfection." Five months after the *Caesar* benefit, John Wilkes Booth would borrow Brutus' famous words, shouting "sic semper tyrannis" as he shot Lincoln and ran from Ford's Theater.

Welles drew the visual concept for his production from what he dubbed "The Nuremberg Festivals": Hitler's lavish rallies in the early days of the Nazis' rise to power. Smoke filled the stage. Steel platforms and stairwells sounded an ominous banging that announced the entrance of actors. In his strongest visual metaphor for the Nuremberg Festivals, Welles created his signature "Nuremberg Lights." Set into the metal grating of the stage floor, the lights cast vertical beams running up the actors' bodies and often as high as the proscenium arch.

New York critics roared with praise. John Mason Brown of the *New York Post* called it "the most exciting, the most imaginative, the most topical, the most awesome, and the most absorbing of the season's new productions. The touch of genius is upon it." Brooks Atkinson claimed that "it puts fire back onto the American stage." *Variety* gushed, calling the show "Bard Boffola."

CONQUERED:

Shakespeare's *Caesar* through Political Strife

1953



MGM poster for *Julius Caesar* featuring Brando as Mark Antony in the classic Caesar pose.

Fifteen years later, Houseman would again produce *Caesar*, this time for MGM Films. The cast was a laundry list of top-rate actors: Deborah Kerr as Portia, John Gielgud as Cassius, James Mason as Brutus, and a young Marlon Brando as Antony. The MGM movie was filmed in no less a politically explosive time than the Mercury production. European nations were actively testing their hydrogen bombs. Joseph McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities was in its third year of investigations. The Korean War claimed thousands of U.S. soldiers. Followers of Houseman's career expected another strong anti-war statement.

Yet, Houseman and Mankiewicz produced what might be considered the most apolitical *Caesar* in American history. In stark contrast to the 1938 Mercury staging, this *Caesar*'s strictly Roman sets and costumes made no contemporary allusions. Houseman articulated the aim of his new *Caesar* in bland terms: "We had one dominant artistic aim: to bring to motion-picture audiences in all its clarity, energy, and beauty the direct dramatic impact of Shakespeare's

tragedy." Why didn't Houseman and Mankiewicz use the bard's play to speak to contemporary problems?

The answer may simply have been fear. Mankiewicz was aware that the McCarthy committee would be watching his film closely. The nephew of the man who would become, in the 1960s, Senator Robert Kennedy's press secretary, Mankiewicz was close to prominent liberals and was a friend of several members of the infamous "Hollywood Ten," a group of screenwriters and directors arrested and blacklisted for their supposed Communist links just six years prior. Political scrutiny would continue to dog Mankiewicz throughout his career: some theaters refused to show his more overtly political work. Just as he had in *Caesar*, Mankiewicz would create an apolitical adaptation for his film of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. Greene and Mankiewicz feuded over the film's ending; Greene claimed that Mankiewicz had turned his book into "a propaganda film for America." In 1963, speaking of the hostile responses to his films, Mankiewicz said, "I feel like the guillotine is about to drop."

2005

A half-century later, British director David Farr would move *Caesar* into the 21st century. At London's Lyric Hammersmith, Farr used *Caesar* as a parable for the fear of terrorism. In acts four and five, the armies of Octavius and Antony became elite terrorist cells, hidden by ski masks as they executed the conspirators. Brandishing flashlights, the terror troops invaded the auditorium to search for more conspirators amongst the audience. Farr's production, opening just two months after London's 2005 subway bombings, brought the role of terror to the forefront of the play.



Gary Oliver as Mark Antony in the 2005 Lyric Hammersmith production.

Arthur Nauzyciel will be staging his A.R.T. production in yet another politically explosive era. Just as in the days of *Caesar* and Elizabeth, Americans find themselves engaged in foreign wars that drain their resources and weaken their defenses at home. Just as in the age of Welles' *Caesar*, some Americans choose to ignore distant atrocities. Just as in the time of Mankiewicz's *Caesar*, when civil liberties dissolved under the pressure of McCarthyism, Americans cannot be confident of their constitutional rights, facing secret phone tapping and the possibility of imprisonment without trial. Just as in the time of Farr's production, the

fear of terrorism creates a stranglehold on the political landscape. The groundwork for another powerful parable has been laid: How will Nauzyciel bring *Caesar* into the political malaise of 2008?



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