

A Study Guide to the Aquila Theatre Company Production of

Julius Caesar

Written By: William Shakespeare and Directed By: Peter Meinick



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Background: Who Was Julius Caesar?

Gaius Julius Caesar (born 100 BCE) came from a very old aristocratic family and was a nephew to Marius, the Roman general and politician who lost the civil war to the dictator Sulla. When Caesar was still very young, Sulla sensed that he was ambitious and could threaten his absolute power. Caesar went into hiding to escape Sulla (who had ordered the deaths of hundreds of political rivals). He was captured by Sulla's guards but escaped by bribing their captain. Shortly thereafter, he was kidnapped by pirates, and when his ransom was paid and he was freed, Caesar captured and crucified the pirates. He then began his illustrious military career.

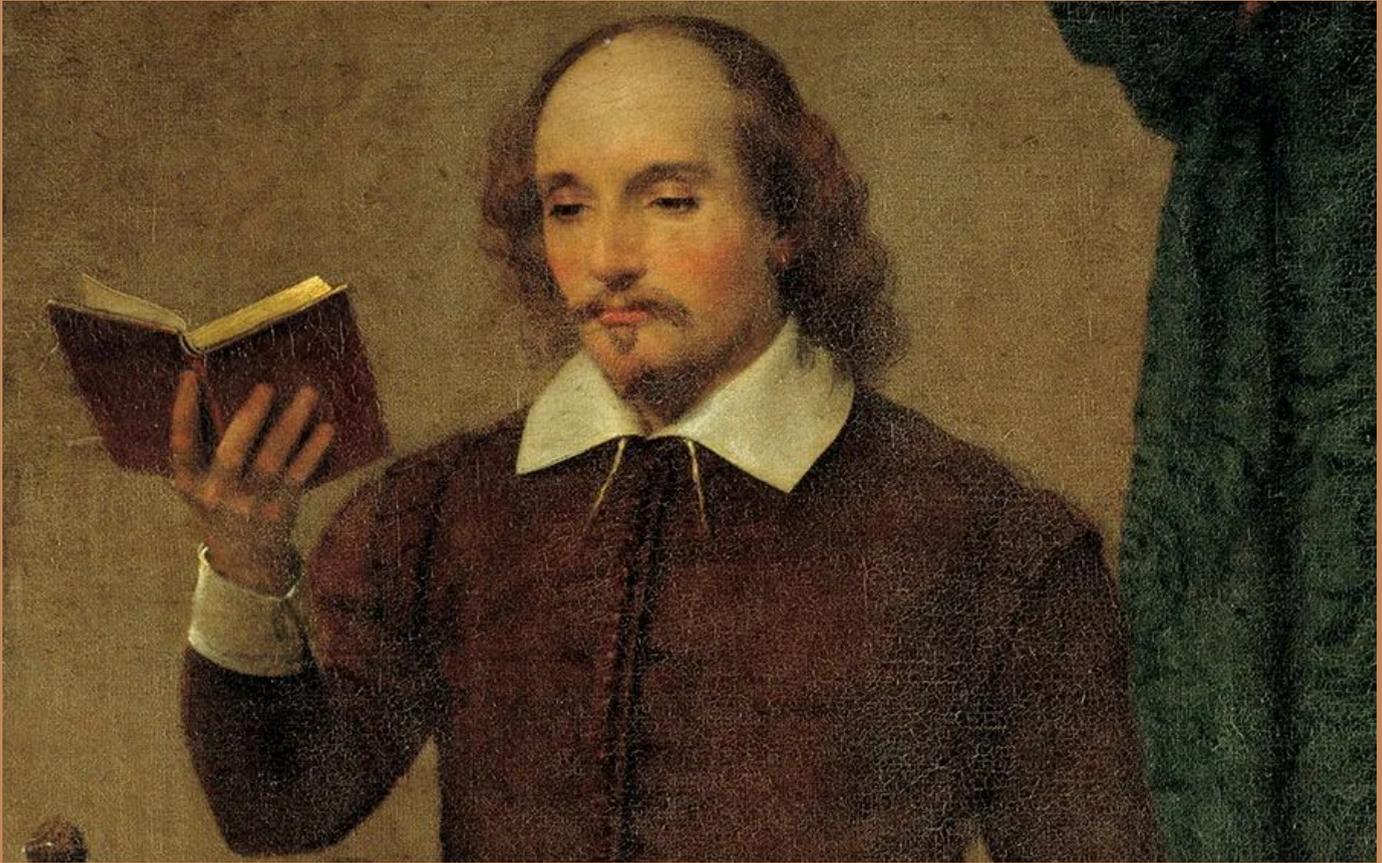
When Sulla died in 78 BCE, Caesar returned to Rome to begin his political career. He held many political offices, and in 60 BCE Caesar engineered a three-way alliance - called the First Triumvirate - to share power with the powerful generals Marcus Licinius Crassus and Gnaeus Pompey. He was elected to the consulship, Rome's highest political office, in 59 BCE. He then launched the Gallic Wars (58-49 BCE), which brought enormous wealth to Rome. But despite his successes and the benefits they brought to Rome, Caesar was unpopular among his peers, many of whom suspected him of wanting to become king.

In 53 BCE, Crassus was killed, creating a power struggle between Caesar and Pompey. Pompey and the senate ordered Caesar to disband his army and return from Gaul. Instead, Caesar chose to march on Rome with his army, and in 49 BCE, he crossed the Rubicon River, starting a civil war. Caesar easily defeated Pompey, but instead of following the precedent of having his opponents executed, he pardoned Pompey's followers.

Back in Rome, Caesar began extensive reforms of Roman society and government, from expanding citizenship to overhauling the calendar. He was appointed dictator for a year starting in 49 BCE, for two years in 48 BCE, for 10 years in 46 BCE, and finally dictator for life in 44 BCE (with Marc Antony as his chief lieutenant). Caesar's apparent arrogance and ambition made him increasingly unpopular with his enemies. On the Ides (15th) of March, 44 BCE, a group of Senators calling themselves the "liberators" assassinated Caesar in the Senate. They justified the act by claiming they were saving the republic from a tyrant and would-be king.

Caesar chose his grandnephew, Gaius Octavius, as his heir. Octavius ultimately avenged his uncle's death and eventually became Augustus Caesar, Rome's first emperor.

Shakespeare and Julius Caesar



When William Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* in 1599, Queen Elizabeth was in the final years of her life. She had ruled England since 1558, and given that she had not married or produced an heir, there was a great deal of anxiety about who would succeed her upon her death. In many ways, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, based on an earlier work by Plutarch, reflects this uneasiness as it recounts a parallel story of leadership, power, and political upheaval.

Under Queen Elizabeth's long reign, the arts flourished and many professional theatres were built with her support. *Julius Caesar* was probably the first play to be performed at the famous Globe Theatre, which was erected by and for Shakespeare's theatre company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men. It's important to note that female actors were not allowed to perform on stage at The Globe (or at any theatre in England) until the 1660's, so the female characters in Shakespeare's plays would have been portrayed by male actors. Woven into these texts from the very beginning, then, is a lively, teasing examination of gender.

Continuing that custom, many female actors over the centuries have played iconic male Shakespearean parts. In 1899, the actress Sarah Bernhardt portrayed Hamlet in France, and in 2003 The Globe experimented with an all-female company. Actresses Helen Mirren, Vanessa Redgrave and Olympia Dukakis have all played Prospero (*The Tempest*). This casting might seem "modern," but in fact, the tradition of crossing gender boundaries has been part of Shakespearean drama from the start.

Another seemingly modern aspect of *Julius Caesar* is its astute and prescient commentary on politics and society: the influence that political rhetoric (persuasive speaking) can have on the populace, fears about the chaos that can ensue when a leader's succession is in dispute, the dangers of mob mentality, the battle between two differing political ideologies. After more than four centuries, these themes feel familiar and relevant. Perhaps one of the reasons Shakespeare is considered to be the most influential playwright in English literature is because he so brilliantly captures these enduring themes about individual human nature and society as a whole.

Julius Caesar: Synopsis



*"Beware the Ides of
March . . . "
(Soothsayer: 1.2.18)*

ACT ONE:

- Julius Caesar has returned to Rome after defeating the armies of his rival Pompey. Some Roman Senators fear that Caesar's growing power threatens the Roman Republic.
- On his way to the celebrations of the feast of Lupercal, Caesar is warned by a soothsayer (or prophet) to "beware the Ides of March" (the middle of March, i.e. the 15th). Cassius tells Brutus that Caesar behaves as if he were a god, and Caesar voices his distrust of Cassius.
- Casca reports to Cassius and Brutus that Mark Antony offered Caesar the crown, which he refused three times. Cassius determines to use any means necessary to turn Brutus against Caesar.
- The night brings violent storms, comets, and other strange phenomena. Casca, Cicero and Cassius all interpret the appearance of these natural wonders in a different way. The conspirators against Caesar arrange to meet at Brutus' house.

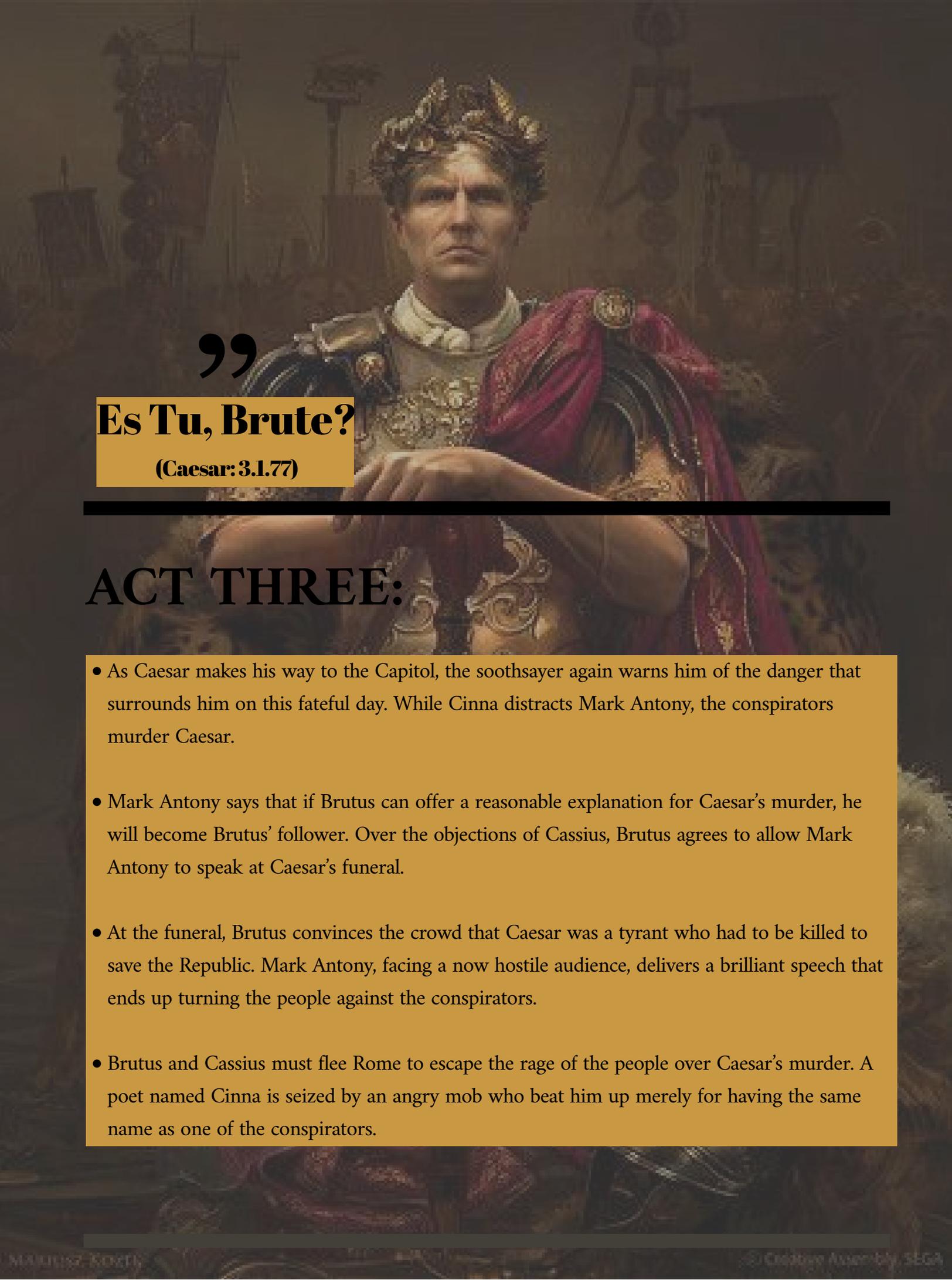


Cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once.

(Caesar: 2.2.49-51)

Act Two:

- **Brutus is persuaded that Caesar's death is necessary for the Republic. He reluctantly joins the assassination plot, but rejects Cassius' proposal that Mark Antony also be killed.**
- **Brutus' wife, Portia, suspects that he has some terrible secret. To prove she is tough enough to handle the truth, she shows him that she has wounded herself in the leg.**
- **It is now The Ides of March. Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, has had a horrible dream about his murder. She begs him to stay home. He agrees, until Casca arrives and persuades him he has nothing to fear.**
- **Escorted by Brutus, Casca and Cinna, Caesar leaves for the Capitol.**



”

Es Tu, Brute?

(Caesar: 3.1.77)

ACT THREE:

- As Caesar makes his way to the Capitol, the soothsayer again warns him of the danger that surrounds him on this fateful day. While Cinna distracts Mark Antony, the conspirators murder Caesar.
- Mark Antony says that if Brutus can offer a reasonable explanation for Caesar's murder, he will become Brutus' follower. Over the objections of Cassius, Brutus agrees to allow Mark Antony to speak at Caesar's funeral.
- At the funeral, Brutus convinces the crowd that Caesar was a tyrant who had to be killed to save the Republic. Mark Antony, facing a now hostile audience, delivers a brilliant speech that ends up turning the people against the conspirators.
- Brutus and Cassius must flee Rome to escape the rage of the people over Caesar's murder. A poet named Cinna is seized by an angry mob who beat him up merely for having the same name as one of the conspirators.

ACT FOUR:

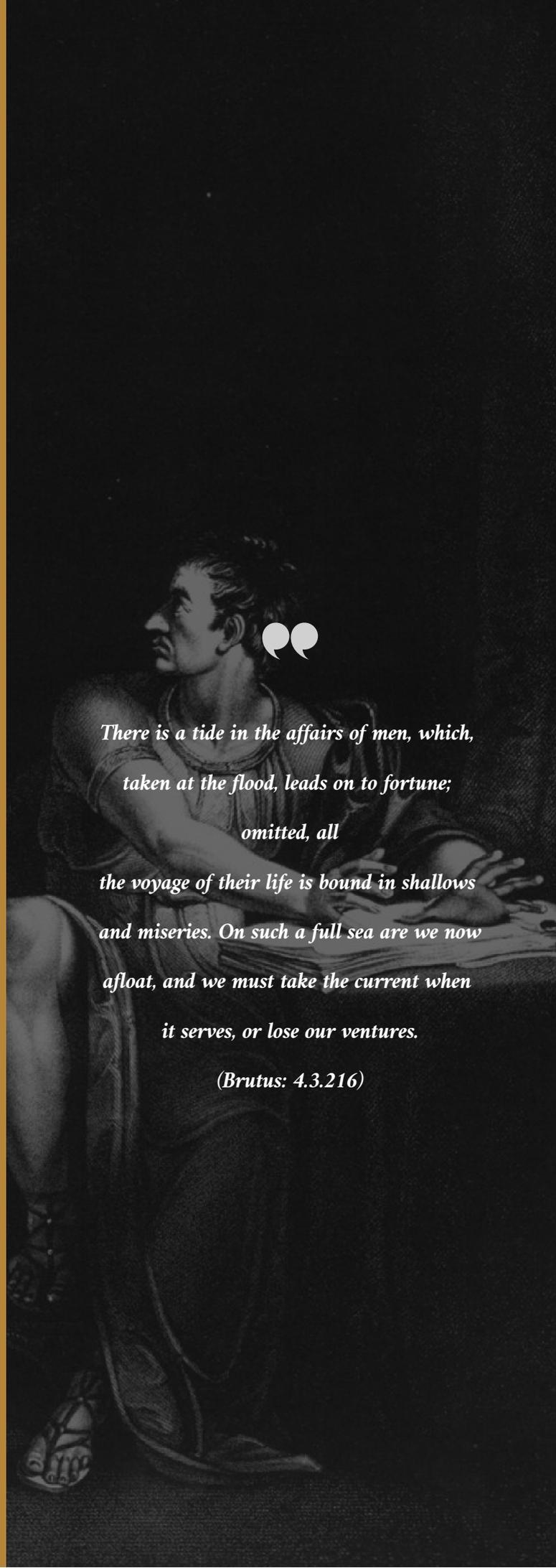
- Mark Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus have formed a triumvirate to destroy Caesar's killers and gain control over the Roman Empire.
- The conspirators and their armies have been on the run for months. At Brutus' camp in Sardis (present-day Turkey), he and Cassius quarrel, then resolve their differences. Brutus reveals that Portia has committed suicide.
- Word arrives that the triumvirs and their forces are approaching Phillipi (in Greece). Once again Brutus overrules Cassius' strategic advice; he decides to take the battle to the enemy instead of waiting for the enemy to come to them.
- Late at night, Brutus is visited by the ghost of Caesar. The ghost says that Brutus will see him again on the plains of Phillipi.



Octavius is Caesar's Nephew and eventual successor



Lepidus is a Roman senator. He later goes on to become one of the three leaders of Rome alongside Octavius and Mark Antony



*There is a tide in the affairs of men, which,
taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
omitted, all
the voyage of their life is bound in shallows
and miseries. On such a full sea are we now
afloat, and we must take the current when
it serves, or lose our ventures.*

(Brutus: 4.3.216)



”

This was the noblest Roman of them all . . . His life was gentle, and the elements So mixed in him that Nature might stand up And say to all the world, “This was a man.”

(Mark Antony: 5.5.73-80)

ACT FIVE:

- The leaders of the two armies meet at Phillipi and exchange insults and accusations. Cassius and Brutus part as friends as they go off to prepare for battle.
- The battle begins. The conspirators appear to be winning. Mistakenly believing that his friend Titinius has been captured, Cassius commits suicide.
- Titinius and Messala bring word of victory to Cassius, but find him dead. Titinius kills himself in grief. Brutus discovers the bodies and fears that Caesar is having his revenge.
- With Cassius dead, the battle turns against the conspirators. Rather than be taken prisoner, Brutus kills himself. The triumvirs discover his corpse. Mark Antony sadly proclaims Brutus to have been “the noblest Roman of them all.”

KEY CAST OF CHARACTERS

Julius Caesar and His Supporters

- **Julius Caesar:** Roman military hero who has defeated his political rival, Pompey, and sets himself up as dictator for life of the Roman Republic.
- **Calpurnia:** Caesar's wife, who believes strongly in omens and portents.
- **Octavius Caesar:** Julius Caesar's grandnephew and adopted son. Becomes a joint ruler of Rome (along with Lepidus) after the death of Julius Caesar.
- **Mark Antony:** Caesar's closest companion.

The Conspirators Against Caesar

- **Marcus Brutus:** A leading member of the Senate and respected friend of Caesar who fears that Caesar's grab for power is against the interests of the Roman Republic.
- **Caius Cassius:** A general and senator, the ringleader in the plot against Caesar. His tactical advice is repeatedly ignored by Brutus.
- **Cinna:** The conspirator who recommends that they persuade Brutus to join their case against Caesar.
- **Casca:** A senator.
- **Portia:** Brutus' wife. She eventually kills herself when she discovers that Antony and Octavius have become very powerful.

Other Romans

- **Cicero:** A famous orator (public speaker) and Roman Senator

ADAPTATIONS

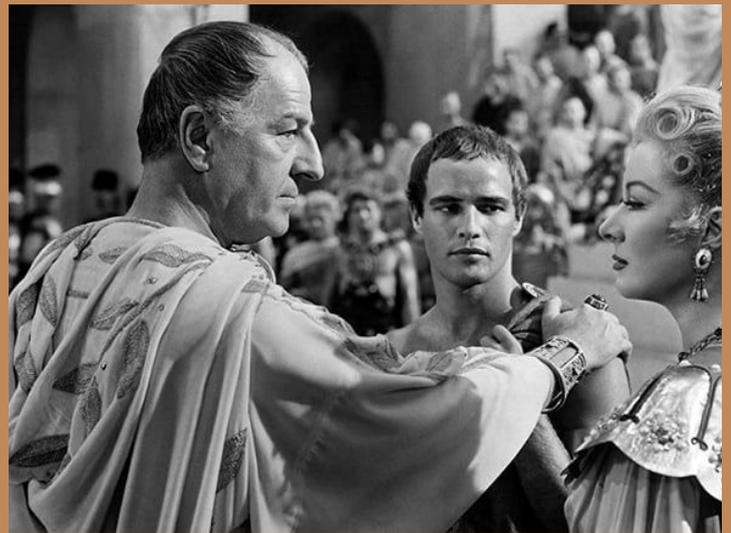
According to the Guinness Book of World Records, there are 410 feature-length film and TV adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, making him the most filmed author ever. And as of 2020, the IMBD (Internet Movie DataBase) gives Shakespeare writing credit on 1500 films.

If you want to better understand Julius Caesar from a wide range of perspectives, here are several film adaptations that might help:

(1953) Julius Caesar

dir. Joseph L. Mankiewicz

This acclaimed film version of the play includes an all-star cast, including a young Marlon Brando as Mark Antony.



(1994) Julius Caesar: Shakespeare, The Animated Tales.

dir. Yuri Kulakov

One of twelve half-hour animated adaptations of the films of William Shakespeare. This project was conceived of as a way to introduce schoolchildren to the works of The Bard.



ADAPTATIONS

(2012) Julius Caesar

dir. Gregory Doran.

In this adaptation, the film takes place in a modern post-colonial African country, with only Black actors in the cast.



(2018) Julius Caesar

dir. Phyllida Lloyd.

This all-female production is set inside a prison, and points at parallels between the modern incarceration system and Caesar's authoritarian rule.



A CONVERSATION WITH DIRECTOR PETER MEINECK:

Why did you decide to adapt and direct Julius Caesar for Aquila? What is it about this particular play that felt compelling at this moment in time?

PM: To be honest, for a while I thought Julius Caesar had become a bit irrelevant, maybe even a little stale. Some of Shakespeare's other plays - Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello - all felt somehow more germane, more accessible, more open to interpretation and innovation. But events of the last year, both at home and abroad, have made me realize that Julius Caesar is actually one of Shakespeare's most relevant and prescient dramas. It shows how completely people can be manipulated by rhetoric and how dangerous the mob mentality can be. It also poses a central question that feels quite familiar these days : can a democracy be saved by non-democratic means? And in the later Acts, the depiction of the Civil War certainly parallels the current situation in other parts of the globe and likewise provides a cautionary tale for our very divided America.

What do you want the audience to be aware of with this adaptation? In what ways is this a "traditional" production and how have you "modernized" it for contemporary audiences?

PM: Our intention is to unleash Shakespeare's original objective and recreate it for a present-day American audience. The design is fairly modern and our costumes reflect contemporary stylistic trends. This serves to draw further parallels between the ancient, Elizabethan and modern worlds. Another interesting distinction is that we have a cast of six, and no actors ever leave the stage, so the audience can watch as cast members transform into their roles. With such a small ensemble, the members double and even triple up on parts. These dual-role performances require an active attentiveness on the part of the audience, as well as a certain level of acceptance beyond even the usual such suspension of disbelief necessary when viewing live theatre.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

- The play is called *Julius Caesar*, and yet Caesar dies halfway through the story. Why do you think Shakespeare chose this title?
- Is there a hero in this play? Who is it?
- Why is *Julius Caesar* considered a political play? What does the play suggest about the coexistence of morality and political ambition?
- What parallels can you see among ancient Rome, England in the early 17th century, and modern-day America and Europe?
- How would you describe the role of the female characters in *Julius Caesar*? How does Caesar's relationship with Calpurnia differ from Brutus' relationship with Portia?
- Why does the ghost of Julius Caesar appear only to Brutus?
- Why does Mark Antony call Brutus "the noblest Roman of them all" at the end of the play?
- What are some of the "unexpected" choices made by the director and/or the actors? Do you feel they enhance or diminish your experience as an audience member?

AQUILA

T H E A T R E

Aquila Theatre's mission is to create innovative interpretations of the classics for today's audiences. By diversifying the classics and expanding the canon, Aquila seeks to enhance the plurality of our perspectives.

Aquila Theatre is one of the foremost producers of classical theatre in the United States and has been bringing audiences world-class actors, captivating designs, innovative adaptations, and impactful direction since 1991. Aquila Theatre also provides extensive educational offerings and is an award-winning leader in the field of public arts and humanities programming.



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