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Balanced 'Caesar' worthy of ASF

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Subjects: Martial law; Theater

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After the senator Milo's murder of the populist, rabble-rouser Clodius Pulcher precipitated unprecedented riots in Rome, the senate granted Pompey Magnus extraordinary powers of martial law to restore order. It was this situation that impelled Julius Caesar, famed orator, consul and conqueror of Gaul, to cross the Rubicon and invade Italy proper so that the would-be dictator Pompey might be controlled. In less than four years Caesar had the entire empire under his rule.

Suddenly he was the potential dictator of and threat to what the more conservative senators still thought of as the Roman Republic. This history is the preface to Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar," a play called an "apprentice tragedy" by the noted critic Harold Bloom and which is the Alabama Shakespeare festival's newest offering in its repertory season.

But whose tragedy? Certainly not the triumphant Mark Antony's. Caesar dies brutally at the center of the play, an early death for a tragic hero, though his spirit suggestively hovers over the remaining action. Brutus, with his inner conflicts, qualifies in the eyes of many but is of questionable eminence and make-up for a tragic hero.

Nor is there a clear-cut villain. The conspiratorial ringleader Cassius is the most obvious candidate, but he is possessed of too many admirable qualities to win the title. He and the co-conspirators have valid reasons for assassinating this Caesar who "doth bestride the narrow world/Like a Colossus."

"Caesar," then, is an eccentric and hugely intricate drama. And how the director balances the four complex central characters decides what the play will ultimately say to its audience.

Kent Thompson's thoughtful direction achieves an admirable balance, avoiding the blacks and whites of hero versus villain. The characters emerge in their rich and rounded psychological complexity rather than in the two-dimensional melodrama which plagues both stage and screen versions.

Roger Forbes' Caesar adeptly reveals a flawed great man. John Resenhouse's Brutus, though sometimes straining, shows us the equally flawed idealist. Ray Chambers creates an intelligent, sympathetic Antony and handles the familiar funeral oration with such casualness that the words spring fresh from his lips. Rich Hamilton molds a masterly Cassius, at moments Machiavellian and at others warmly human, who moves in and out of the audience's sympathies.

"Julius Caesar" is a play that profits more than most from careful cutting, and this production could have used more such shaping to create greater clarity and a shorter running time.

Charles Caldwell's gorgeous set suggests "the grandeur that was Rome" while providing optimum acting space and not overpowering actors or audience. Particularly effective are Colleen Kelly's stylized battle scenes.

WANT TO GO?

What: 'Julius Caesar' by William Shakespeare

When: 7:30 p.m. today, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. April 21, 2 p.m. April 22, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. April 28, 2 p.m. April 29, 2 p.m. May 5, 2 p.m. May 12, 7:30 p.m. June 6, 7:30 p.m. June 14, 2 p.m. June 16, 8 p.m. June 22, 8 p.m. June 29,

7:30 p.m. July 1, 2 p.m. July 5, 8 p.m. July 7, 2 p.m. July 8, 7:30 p.m. July 10, 8 p.m. July 14

Where: Alabama Shakespeare Festival in the Blount Cultural Park

Cost: Tickets range \$20-\$30, depending on date and time; discounts are available

Theatre in the Mind: Free noontime lectures will be Director Talk with Kent Thompson, April 7; 'Caesar: The Man Who Would Be King,' April 21; Festival Set Design by Charles Caldwell, scenic designer, May 5; Onstage with

the Actors, May 12; and Repertory Costume Design by Elizabeth Novak, June 16

Information: 271-5353

Allan Swafford has reviewed local theater for more than 15 years. You can contact him by writing Allan Swafford, c/o the Montgomery Advertiser, 200 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 36104 or by faxing (334) 261-1548.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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