

THE 2001 ALABAMA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL PRODUCTIONS OF
KING JOHN AND *JULIUS CAESAR*

by Craig Barrow

In its thirtieth anniversary season, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival produced one play never before performed at the Festival, Shakespeare's *King John*; and *Julius Caesar*, last performed in 1991. *King John* was performed in the 250-seat Octagon Theatre, while *Julius Caesar* was performed in the larger 750-seat Festival Stage. While Howard Jensen of Indiana University directed *King John* and Kent Thompson, ASF's Artistic Director, directed *Julius Caesar*, both directors appeared united in concentrating on keeping the title characters the focus of each play, despite critical fascination with the Bastard Faulconbridge as a developing model of kingliness in *King John* and the tragic fall of Brutus in *Julius Caesar*.

On entering the Octagon to see *King John*, one is confronted by a series of arches forming a rampart set at an acute angle to the stage; each arch seems slightly larger than the next. One wishes imaginatively to make these arches harmonically the same size, but one is frustrated by the creation of this visible symbol of the play by its Scenic Designer, Emily Beck. This skewed design, probably a collaboration with Director Howard Jensen, serves as a representative of the twisted behavior one so often sees in this Shakespearean play. While critics such as James L. Calderwood in "Commodity and Honor in *King John*"¹ and William H. Matchett in "Richard's Divided Heritage in *King John*"² see the Bastard as a potential king in contrast to the ineffectual, morally corrupt John, the ASF production goes another way. Although it does not present the Bastard negatively as Richard A. Levin in "*King John's* Bastard"³ does, where he argues that the Bastard follows rather than criticizes commodity, or self-interest, the production of the play focuses on *King John*, especially his plot against the life, and later the eyes of Arthur, his young nephew and rival to the English throne.

Casting, either by the casting director, Alan Filderman or the director Howard Jensen, shapes the focus of the audience's attention. Ray Chambers, probably the most gifted for serious dramatic acting of the younger actors of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, plays King John, while John Preston, a gifted comic actor, plays the Bastard. Chambers is tall, good looking, with an arresting face; he could easily play Hamlet, while Preston is not quite so tall, heavier, with a face ready to break into a grin or smile. Even though King John appears only relatively strong in the play before the city Angiers and accepts correction from his mother Elinor, the humiliation of reversing himself regarding the supremacy of Rome before Cardinal Pandulph, and the weakness of having the Bastard act as king in John's name, Chambers holds our interest, and the weakness that we see in his *King John* seem only checks to a powerful, ruthless self-interest. Even Jensen and his "Director's Note"⁴ sees Shakespeare's *King John* as "more complex . . . the play action presents us with a dark version of political realities." The moral center of the production becomes not simply John's quest to maintain his crown but his dramatized plot to have Arthur killed by Hubert and later to shift the moral blame upon Hubert as we see in IV:ii:203-248. King John sees only his need to keep the crown; the needs of his country disappear in his

pursuit of commodity. Even at his death, little awareness of others or his country graces his poisoned last lines. Chambers, with his own powerful presence, keeps the audience rooted in his character's fault-ridden collaps. John's plot to kill Arthur in this production almost has the feeling of a tragic error of choice or a dilemma, although neither the director nor Chambers seem to push this effect too far.

While Jensen seems aware of critical attraction to the Bastard as opposed to John, he sees the Bastard's role functionally⁵ as a "strikingly vivid fictional character based remotely on various historical figures, and, like Falstaff, Jensen believes the Bastard exists partly to perform acts and to provide views that help to amplify the action into a coherent and complex work of art." Preston certainly handles this role as commentator well, and he also shows a correcting gravity and responsibility to the office of the king that provide a contrasting mirror to King John's behavior, especially after King John's plot on Arthur's life. Preston is so good in his role as commentator—in his jibes and asides before and after the commodity speech of II:i:561-59—that he directs the audience in what seems the central effect of this production, the examination of political rhetoric. Like the Bastard, perhaps even trained to think like him, the audience begins to weigh the speeches of Arthur's friends, the selflessness that masks advantage of Philip and Lewis, the accusatory speeches of Elinor and Constance covered by maternal love, the self-righteousness that hides the traitorous intrigue of Salisbury and Pembroke, as well as Pandulph's manipulative political maneuvering, which is barely cloaked by religion. Even innocents such as Arthur and Blanche are partially caught by commodity in their decision making. The production frequently seems like a television news analysis of major political leaders scrutinized by the Bastard and his audience.

What is described by Susan Willis, the ASF Dramaturg, as late nineteenth century military costumes appear more like early World War I with its own confusing Balkan problems. Even the women are in uniform here. Such costuming aids the audience in assessing the true aims of speakers and furthers the production's apparent aim of evaluating political rhetoric. The various military encounters in the play, which never have determining results, are sparsely presented in the stylized manner of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. What is important here is that the physical action not seem significant enough to deflect attention from the rhetorical analysis of the virtuous posturings of speaker's language attempting to hide self-interest. The deaths in battle, therefore, seem meaningless, brutal, unfair.

Not just Ray Chambers and John Preston's efforts deserve praise in this production; the entire cast is good, especially considering the excessive length of the speeches in *King John*, which are better suited to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century performance and taste than that of the modern stage. Even Greta Lambert, the most talented actress of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, is hard pressed to keep audience interest in her major speeches following France's betrayal of Arthur in the beginning of Act III. Deserving of special praise for their performances are Rodney Clark as Salisbury and Brian Kurlander as Pembroke, Paul Hebron as Philip, Aaron Harpold as Lewis, and Rick Hamilton as Cardinal Pandulph. Each is able to show the pose and the interior reality of each character, adding to the triumph of this production.



On entering the Festival Stage to see *Julius Caesar* one sees a stage on one level, but with a series of steps that could be a seat or throne on the audience's left. The name Caesar is in large capital letters at the back of the stage; it is present throughout the action of the play. Kent Thompson seems concerned that the play not divide in two. He says in his "Director's Note"⁶ that "the spirit of *Julius Caesar* lingers

until the play's end. He appears as a ghost to Brutus in the tent scene, and each of the conspirators calls upon him when committing suicide. They cannot escape the power they have created by killing Caesar. Not only will he live on, but he establishes the next great leader—not Mark Antony but Octavius Caesar, later known as Augustus, the greatest of all Roman emperors." While Thompson uses the word *tragedy* to describe Brutus, he nonetheless appears to see the tragic error of Brutus's choice to assassinate Caesar as a subordinate part to Caesar's life and death. The play, in short, could not be called *Brutus*. Maynard Mack, in "*Julius Caesar*," seems to make a similar point in seeing Caesar as the historical center of the play and Brutus the tragic center.⁷ Mack's analysis of both characters is similar, too, in that the endearing part to both Caesar and Brutus is their private selves, while their public selves create problems for both men. Brutus, when forced into a public role by the assassination of Caesar, shows a similar difficulty to his friend, describing his honor in his speech following the assassination in a similar way to Caesar's referring to himself as Caesar, as if his honor were an object almost apart from himself. Both Brutus and Caesar are deaf to what Thompson calls "the hidden side of human existence"⁸ to which Portia and Calpurnia seem attuned, along with the Soothsayer and the portents of the storm prior to Caesar's murder. What is hidden by rationality seems to threaten both Caesar and Brutus. Harold Goddard approaches this issue when he says, "The pride of Brutus is the ghost of Caesar within him as certainly as if at the moment Caesar expired it had literally transmigrated from the dead man to the living one. And so this Tragedy of Brutus is the story of Julius Caesar's spirit after death. The title of the play is precisely the right one."⁹

As with *King John*, the quality of the acting of *Julius Caesar* is excellent, especially with the key roles of Julius Caesar, Brutus, Cassius, and Mark Antony. Roger Forbes wonderfully highlights Caesar's touching weaknesses, his hubristic pride, his generosity. John Resenhouse's Brutus has less distance, more amiability than Jason Robards demonstrated in the Stuart Burge film; Resenhouse nicely shows the corruption of a fine friend and husband by the public roles Caesar's assassination determined for him. Rick Hamilton, probably too old for the part and not exactly "lean" and hungry looking, nonetheless finely portrays Cassius's envy of Caesar, his anger in having to bow to Caesar's pre-eminence, his irritation but respect and love of Brutus. Ray Chambers is an excellent Antony; his funeral oration is a convincing handling of a Roman crowd and the conspirators. Susan Wands as Portia is no Diana Rigg; her flashing of her thigh wound, which makes her seem masochistic, perhaps is meant to tie to her death, but no husband would likely trust any important matter to the privacy of her bosom. Regan Thompson as Calpurnia is much more convincing in her remonstrations to Caesar.

While most of the cuts in the play are logical and unmissed, one part, commented on by Frank Kermode,¹⁰ is surprisingly uncut, Brutus's lines on Portia's death in IV:iii, where even though Brutus talks to Cassius of Portia's death in line 147, he nonetheless responds to Messala's news of Portia's death on line 190 as if told for the first time. Kent Thompson's brilliant intermission, in part to get Caesar's portly body off the stage, makes up for this gaffe.

On the whole, however, the 2001 *Julius Caesar* is excellent, as are all the Shakespeare offerings of the 2001 Alabama Shakespeare Festival season. This season is testimony that the goal of doing all of the Shakespeare canon has not been abandoned.

Notes

1. James L. Calderwood, "Commodity and Honour in *King John*," *Shakespeare: The Histories*, ed. Eugene M. Waith (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 85-101.
2. William H. Matchett, "Richard's Divided Heritage in *King John*," *Essays in Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 152-170.
3. Richard A. Levin, "*King John's Bastard*," *The Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal*, 3 (1980), 29-41.
4. Howard Jensen, "Director's Note," 2001 Alabama Shakespeare Festival program, p.8.
5. Jensen, p.8.
6. Kent Thompson, "Director's Note," 2001 Alabama Shakespeare Festival program, p.8.
7. Maynard Mack, "*Julius Caesar*," *Modern Shakespearean Criticism: Essays on Style, Dramaturgy, and the Major Plays*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1970), p.293.
8. Kent Thompson, "Director's Note," 2001 Alabama Shakespeare Festival program, p.8.
9. Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, vol. 1 (Chicago: U. Of Chicago Press, 1951), p.312.
10. Frank Kermode, "*Julius Caesar*," *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), p. 1100.