



PROJECT MUSE®

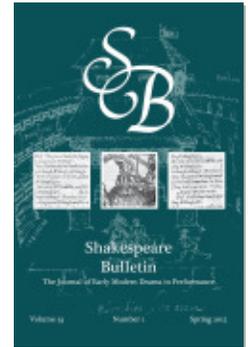
Othello, and: **Julius Caesar (review)**

Kimberly M. Jew

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 25, Number 3, Fall 2007, pp. 104-111 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/shb.2007.0050](https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2007.0050)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/shb/summary/v025/25.3jew.html>

Fallon as Desdemona, who exuded a heightened emotional availability throughout the play. Before the death scene, she pushed her bed into the playing space and sang with emotional depth and longing; despite the private intimacy of this action, Fallon communicated her emotional desire in clear theatrical terms.

During their final confrontation, Desdemona and Othello knelt passionately to one another, a rich and exciting image that suggested the presence of two lost souls clinging together as the world pressed down upon them. Ultimately the ASC's *Othello* sheds its aura of dispersed energies and introversion and built toward a heightened state of involvement and crisp theatrical form. In the final scenes, Warren and his cast demonstrated the power of human desire to move people and events toward tragedy.

The ASC's production of *Julius Caesar*, directed by Colleen Kelly, offered a tightly packaged and highly theatrical vision of the power dynamics at work in first-century BCE Roman society. The production's clear emphasis on social groups and power differentials was evident from the poignant musical opening of the play in which the actors re-created a 1960s counterculture rock band singing about revolution. This late-twentieth-century reference fleshed out with tambourines and hippie swirling suggested the historical repetition of social movements, accompanied as they are with a complex mixture of joy and anger. As the song ended, the actors opened a small box filled with props and costume pieces needed for the performance: unlike *Othello*, this production was to be played entirely for the audience's, as opposed to the actors', immediate experience and enjoyment.

Kelly's directorial approach emphasized the pervasive hierarchy and fear that shaped the lives of the characters. For instance in the opening scene, the initial clash between the tribunes and reveling commoners was filled with anxiety as the tribunes enforced a harsh class privilege. As the commoners scattered for their lives, the soothsayer ran into the audience area and secretly watched the grand entrance of Julius Caesar, who emerged like a god through the discovery space. Moments later, the soothsayer rushed away from the audience and prostrated himself in front of Caesar's dismissive retinue.

A persuasive use of choreography and blocking, including the careful planning of geometric patterns and poses, was demonstrated throughout this production; the actors' bodies effectively communicated a world in which formality and appearances mattered deeply. One small but powerful moment occurred when Caesar discussed his distrust of Cassius early in



Joseph Langham (Julius Caesar) in American Shakespeare Center's production of *Julius Caesar*, 2006/2007. Photo by Michael Bailey.

1.2. Standing downstage right with Marc Antony, Caesar spoke of his fear while nodding and smiling to Cassius, who stood far down stage left. This stage-picture clearly delineated the two sides at war and the greeting shared by both men reflected the feigned friendship and empty protocol that marked their world. Another intriguing moment occurred during the forgiveness scene between Brutus and Cassius (4.3): here the actors talked while sitting on small benches positioned diagonally to one another, a visual pattern of movement than suggested a game board where the players strategized their next move.

The storm scene, arguably the best-staged scene in the play, illustrated the power of choreography to create an imaginary world on a bare Renaissance stage. Against the background of a heavy drumbeat of thunder, the conspirators moved onstage like hunted carnivores, knives drawn, heads covered by bright red sashes, bodies bent. At times the drumming was so loud it drowned out their voices, and often Cassius, played by Henry Bazemore, Jr. with full-bodied physical expression (in contrast to the more reserved decorum of the other Roman characters), moved to the beat of the drumming as if he were one with the storm. Upon entering Brutus's home, the weather-beaten conspirators formed a circle around Brutus, suggesting an uneasy balance between protecting and attacking their host. The use of circular formations was used again to strong effect in the killing of Caesar as the Senators surrounded their victim both horizontally and vertically. Thematically this deadly act came full circle as Caesar stabbed himself with Brutus's sword after his famous line, "Et tu, Brute!"

The characters of Brutus, Cassius, Antony, and Caesar were engagingly developed, each demonstrating different political strengths and styles. Brutus, played by Adam Jonas Segaller, confidently carried the production with a calm, gentle demeanor that became increasingly brittle and agitated as the action developed. Cassius was portrayed as earnest in his desire for reform, though his penchant for self-mockery and vocal play (including the imitation of other characters and the occasional use of a southern accent) reflected a trickster quality to his persona. Antony, attractively played by Jonathan Maccia, was perhaps too soft for a commanding chief, his skills at diplomacy hindered by a low speaking energy that downplayed his reputed gift for rhetoric. Caesar, played by Joseph Langham, possessed a fitting physical bearing, dignity and humility; he poignantly re-appeared as the two soldiers who aided Cassius and Antony in their suicides.

The inherent goodness expressed by all four lead characters suggested an open-minded outlook on the political situation at hand, making it dif-

ficult to infer the production's answer to the question "whose tragedy is this?" Indeed, by first staging the crowd scene (3.2) among the audience members, and then dressing the soldiers in contemporary movie-styled military gear, this performance clearly implicated the audience in the thirst for revenge over Caesar's death. Perhaps the desire for blood and violence is the true evil in this play; the play's tragedy is ultimately our own.

In addition to the strong, detailed focus on the play's shifting power dynamics and the highly theatrical use of movement to underscore social phenomena, Kelly used cross-gender casting to intriguing effect. Though *Julius Caesar* is not known for its strong female roles, this production integrated female actors in all of its groupings—as commoners, tribunes, conspirators, triumvirs, and soldiers. The presence of female actors was certainly a reminder of the original gender-bending played out in Shakespeare's Blackfriars Theatre, and also suggested a universal humanity underlying social revolution. Like the box that held the props and costumes at the beginning of *Julius Caesar*, the active presence of female actors playing male roles highlighted the power, scope and limits of representation in matters of both artistic and political persuasion.



The Merchant of Venice

Presented by **Theatre for a New Audience** at **The Duke**, New York, New York. January 6–March 11, 2007. Directed by Darko Tresnjak. Scene Design by John Lee Beatty. Costumes by Linda Cho. Sound by Jane Shaw. Lighting by David Weiner. With F. Murray Abraham (Shylock), Kenajuan Bentley (Launcelot Gobbo), Arnie Burton (Balthazar), Cameron Folmar (Solanio), Kate Forbes (Portia), Ezra Knight (Morocco), John Lavelle (Gratiano), Nicole Lowrance (Jessica), Vince Nappo (Lorenzo), Tom Nelis (Antonio), Saxon Palmer (Bassanio), Matthew Schneck (Salerio), Christen Simon (Nerissa), and Marc Vietor (Aragon, Tubal, and Duke of Venice.)

The Jew of Malta

Presented by **Theatre for a New Audience** at **The Duke**, New York, New York. January 6–March 11, 2007. Directed by David Herskovits. Scene Design by John Lee Beatty. Costumes by David Zinn. Sound by Jane Shaw. Lighting by David Weiner. With F. Murray Abraham (Barabas), Kenajuan Bentley (1st Knight), Arnie Burton (Ithamore), Cameron Folmar (Barnardine, 2nd Merchant), Kate Forbes (Bellamira), Ezra Knight (Selim Calymath), John Lavelle (Lodowick), Nicole Lowrance (Abigail), Vince Nappo (Mathias),