Players’ Caesar Too Conventional

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The reading of a play for its original meaning is, at best, a shaky proposition. Playwrights create primarily for the theater—for actors, directors, and audiences—rather than for readers.

Yet reading plays has become as standard as reading novels; and all too often the reading and the production differ widely.

This is a particularly serious hazard in the case of Shakespeare, because most audiences at a Shakespeare production already have some knowledge of the play—and some erroneous literary preconceptions.

Neil Havens and his Rice Players, celebrating their fourteenth annual Shakespeare Festival, presented what may have seemed an unusual interpretation of ‘Julius Caesar,’ yet it is a conventional one—for the theater.

Briefly, Caesar is an arrogant man who wants to be emperor but who also wants to be begged. Cassius, a rather obscure political figure, decides to do away with this potential despot, but he needs prominent support.

He convinces Brutus—a close friend of Caesar’s but also an idealist—that Caesar is dangerous, and they collude in the demagogue’s murder. Brutus assumes leadership, but he fumbles whenever he fails to heed the advice of the more practical Cassius.

Finally, Marcus Antonius is an opportunist who plays on Caesar’s death to gain public support for his attack on Brutus.

The play must be considered on its own merits and assimilated in the light of this interpretation. To attack it because it does not fit the usual literary preconceptions is unfair.

This production concludes another highly successful Rice Player season. The group was the best in Houston this year for modern drama, and it should definitely continue this trend. The diversity of talent within the Players was clearly shown in this last production—Shakespeare is a far cry from college theater.

Neil Havens deserves special credit for his leadership this year, and he merits the support of every Rice student during 1966-1967.

**Determination**

The tone of the production was one of selfish scheming, and the actors accepted their roles as animals. Plot became the important element, with characterization assuming penultimate significance.

Typical of this attitude was the performance of Joe English, who played Caesar so arrogantly that, when the will was read the audience might have accused Antonius of forging the document. Caesar was unilaterally selfish, totally lacking capability for emotion.

But the play centers more on the principal conspirators than it does on Caesar. Thom Scrutchin was more convincing than any other lead actor as the plotting Cassius. He was most effective in his fruitless arguments with Brutus.

**Simple Figure**

Joe Parsons played Brutus creditably in the forceful parts of the role, but he presented too simple a figure. His revelation to Cassius of Portia’s suicide was neither sensitive nor distracted. Brutus, under great stress at this time, could not possibly have responded in this manner.

Barry Mawer, as Marcus Antonius, was adequate through Caesar’s funeral oration, as he skillfully conveyed his concentration on revenge. His approach to Caesar’s corpse was, in any case, not that of a close friend. He seemed to reproduce this opportunistic attitude in the last scene, over Brutus’ body.

**Quality**

Surprisingly, the acting in smaller roles produced highly satisfactory results. Fred Roberts, as Casca, turned in the best performance of the production. His expression picked up what might otherwise have been a painfully slow first act.

Richard Alexander, Joe Caruthers, DeWayne Huckaby, Bob Sculey, and Jeff Seward also performed well in bit roles. The most effective scene in the show was a rather insignificant one from the standpoint of plot. Cinna, a poet whose name is unfortunately the same as one of the conspirators, is torn apart by a thoughtless, enraged mob.

Joe Caruthers and the entire mob made this scene as real as it could possibly have been. The mob scenes were, in fact, generally well done. The group was large, noisy and fickle enough to convey a feeling that democracy would not have been entirely safe in its hands. ‘Julius Caesar’ looks even better from a technical standpoint.

The set, designed by Barbara Clark, was bright and exciting. The bust of Caesar, done by Roger Glade, was an effective addition to the set.

**Technical Perfection**

The lighting was also well done, and its crisp execution kept the show from dragging. Costumes were colorful and authentic enough to adequately convey the atmosphere of the Roman Forum.

Further, Mr. Havens did an exceptionally fine job of blocking the play; this is no small feat in a play with this many actors. Mob scenes are especially difficult to produce convincingly. The murder of Caesar was done in a highly original manner, without stage lights, but with a flashing red light background.

This production was lively, if unusual for the average observer. Mr. Havens obviously invested a great deal of effort in it, and it was certainly well spent.