



Indeed, this is the focus of the production: things that play on the mind and the emotions.

From myths to rituals to the semi-divinity of man: religion is the watchword. Under this schema, corruption, sacrifice and purification are put under the spotlight, as the supernatural seeps into every scene. The play and characters are thus shaped by soothsayers and storms, Calpurnia's prophetic dream and the sacrifice of the Augurers. The effect is wholly other-worldly.

#### Style

The ishakespeare company follows a minimalist, post-modern approach "to create a unique, timeless environment," thus shunning narrower, political interpretations. There are no fascist or tyrannical undertones, no "mere politics" (though Mark Anthony's working of the crowd has nothing supernatural about it). In this way, the production is given a more universal feel, refining it "to its purest and most elegant form of lighting, music, costumes and stage design in order to reveal the raw, dynamic myth beneath and give it life and breath on the stage".

The costumes and stage are spartan, all and sundry clothed in black. Subtle green and purple scarves, and a single candle in the centre, provide the only colour beyond the low brick ceiling. The scene is stark yet elegant, however the lighting is harsh and static. This may well be deliberate, yet by the same rationale the entire scene could be more simply – and attractively – lit by can-

of the stage for subsequent scenes. He later rises and paces, at first discreetly, then rather unnervingly, before going on to haunt Brutus. Indeed Michael Fitzpatrick, who plays Julius Caesar, gives the most seamless performance. His measured, impeccable enunciation perfectly captures Caesar, a great man unseated by fate and treachery. Fitzpatrick's imposing figure also contrasts well with his sad, watery-eyes, making him not only look the part but also more than able to draw pathos from the audience. It is impossible not to care what happens to this man.

Gina Ferrarin, who variously plays the Soothsayer, Portia, Casca and Messala also deserves a special mention. Her voice is mesmeric, perfectly capturing the supernatural tone of the play. It is also highly emotive. She also moves effortlessly between the various characters that she plays, according to the deliberate policy of the company. "The refining of the cast to six elemental characters... allows a more intimate and ritualistic production to unfold," reads the blurb. "It is, by necessity, an artificial cast – thus contributing to the intentional artifice of the production."

William Mann, also the artistic director of ishakespeare, gives an authoritative performance as Marcus Brutus, exteriorising the internal conflicts of an 'honourable' defender of the Republic, as his *raison d'être* disintegrate. However, in this openly minimalist production, Mann sometimes comes across as too much of the consummate actor, at times lacking the naturalness and humanity

# THE TRAGEDIE OF JULIUS CAESAR

By the *ishakespeare* company

Action is eloquence.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Howard Hudson

**P**repare yourself for a surreal night. Find Largo Argentina, follow a semi-lit alley to the entrance of what appears to be an antiques shop. Old mirrors, dressers and tables piled along a corridor lead into the bowels of the ancient city, opening into a bar. A veritable cavern, a modern-day Lupercal. Take a glass of red and sink into the ancient side of the Eternal City...

#### Backdrop

The prospect of seeing Julius Caesar in Rome is tempting for any lover of Shakespeare; perform it a stone's throw from Pompey's Curia, where the actual murder took place, and the effect is all the more powerful, at least on the imagination.

dleight; it would have also heightened the supernatural ambience.

#### Cast

The play is crisp to the ear and to the eye in equal measure. The actors all possess strong and articulate voices, conveying near every line with poise and passion, at times bellowing to shake spectators from their shells, drawing them into the shared emotion of the scene – whether mystical or murderous or both.

The on-stage/off-stage device is also impressive – disturbingly so. Seated uniformly in the background yet still visible, characters that are meant to be 'off-stage' remain in sight, in suspended animation, adding to the supernatural undercurrents. This creates a sense of the collective unconscious while mirroring (and implicitly involving) the static audience.

This effect is taken to its extreme when the corpse of Julius Caesar is left in the middle

of, for example, Michael Fitzpatrick. Conversely, other actors at times lack gravitas in key scenes, with excessive sneering and snarling detracting rather than adding weight and intensity. Overall, however, the production was powerful, poignant and original.

#### The Plot

Julius Caesar is a tragedy written around 1599, based on the the final days of the eponymous Roman leader, the conspiracy against him, his assassination and the aftermath. Drawing on real-life characters and events, the play follows the intrigues of nobleman Gaius Cassius and his efforts to win over 'kingpin' Marcus Brutus. Concurrently, Caesar treads carefully between the adulation of the mob (and rabble-rousing Mark Anthony), and the warnings of his wife and soothsayers. The characters are swept inexorably toward the murder of Caesar, before unravelling into recrimination and civil war.

## Interview with William Mann,

Artistic Director of ishakespeare

TRF: How did ishakespeare begin?

WM: The idea was formed right here but I found the only way to start a theatre company in Rome was to leave Rome. There were just too many distractions. So I went back to Ireland, where my parents are based, to get some money together and come back here.

In the meantime, my brother got married in Oslo, I went to the wedding, met a girl. So ishakespeare actually began in Oslo. I got involved with a theatre company there, took that over, renamed it, rebranded it. We did lots of Shakespeare, then we toured Ireland with our production of Romeo and Juliet. And the feedback was so good that we decided to move there for a year; then I thought, 'let's tour, let's be international, European'. So we did that in Ireland for a year.

Then I had the option of staying there to do Merchant of Venice, going to Paris to do Macbeth or come to Rome to do Julius Caesar. And I chose Rome. But next year I'll be a judge for a competition in Paris, the European Student Festival, so I have a lot of contacts there. The plan is to go there in March and judge this competition and start something running there. Have Julius Caesar always running here, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday every week. Then start Othello and try and take that to Paris.

But it's difficult to start things here. I came here in June expecting to be doing this in September and so it's two months behind schedule. So if we go to Paris that could take another six months, which is frustrating. But the plan is to go there with Othello.

So you're constantly on the move?

Yes, three years in Oslo, one in Ireland and here since June. When we went to Ireland, we were based in a small town in Kerry. A Polish girl – Patrycja Nowak – whom I worked with in Norway came over as well because she's a brilliant actress. But here it was a case of getting people together, telling them to keep their jobs, starting off semi-professionally. Eventually the income will hopefully mean we can work less and less, so we can do more and more plays and make more money. Patrycja will hopefully join us next year.

Is this the first time that you're trying to give the company a permanent base?

Yes, ultimately Ireland wasn't a good place for Shakespeare. People are more interested in local plays. But we can still tour as you always have the A-level and O-level students so any company can do Romeo and Juliet every year and have lots and lots of money just doing it for the students, schools and theatres. JC is a possibility for Ireland because some of them study it, though not many. But I have the contacts there and in Norway for touring and there are a lot of English speakers in Scandinavia – but neither has the tourist market that Rome has. We just reached the glass ceiling there.

So is that your aim for Rome, to tap into the Anglophone tourist market?

Expats, tourists, anyone is welcome. There are so many possibilities here: you have *l'Estate Romana*, *Notte Bianca*, and hopefully we can get involved with these. One of our actresses, Marzia Del Fabbro, owns her own recording studio so we are going to do an audio production. Set things up like that – put it on the website – make it international. Then have the Rome people go to Paris and to Ireland.

Is that all fluid or is there a concrete plan?

At the moment, the priority is establishing Rome. Paris, again, it's the same thing: people who live there, who work in theatre but who don't get an opportunity to perform Shakespeare in English. For example, I heard there was a production of *My Fair Lady* in Rome, where the local actresses had to pay to do it in English for the work experience. I'd also like to get into more workshops, movies, filming the productions. Trying to make it profitable so you can do more theatre. Then for the summer we aim to do lots of outdoor comedies, winter is more for the tragedies.

Have you sought backing from the City of Rome?

We first have to register as a cultural association, then we can apply for funding. That would transform everything on the business side. It wouldn't affect the production – costumes wouldn't change. Well maybe we would buy Armani black polar necks but it would still be the same style. Stripped down, shown in a different way. Some people were expecting togas, and it just becomes ridiculous. The venue is nice, it has that subterranean feel about it, but we may move.

The site of Pompey's Curia between Largo Argentina and the river, to the west, is where Caesar was killed – and the site of the theatre. Did you choose this venue on purpose?

It was a complete surprise to us but it is amazing, creepy. There's also a statue of Pompey three or four doors down.

Do you plan to perform at the replica of The Globe in Villa Borghese?

We'd love to. People have been saying to us: 'interesting but come back to us once you've got things going'. A few weeks, months, maybe after Christmas. If you build up your reputation you can start saying to people 'we're established, we've done this – here's the poster, the flyer', and they can see what you've done. So we're working towards that right now.

The Globe currently only performs Shakespeare in Italian. What do you think of foreign (language) productions?

I've seen some terrible Italian and American productions, but perhaps it's not their fault. The worst, most damaging thing anyone can say about Shakespeare is that 'it's so beautiful' and they are describing it as being beautiful in the same way as my gran used to describe classical music as being beautiful – because it puts you to sleep. And they have this idea that beauty is a kind of narcotic. People don't go to the Sistine Chapel and say 'oh I need a good sleep now'. They go and say 'Oh my God', which is what great art should do, and what we're trying to do.

Venue: (Subject to change)

Anticaja & Petrella  
Via del Monte della Farina, 62  
Rome (Two minute walk from  
Largo Argentina)  
Tel. 06.68192176  
www.anticajaepetrella.it  
www.ishakespeare.net

The ishakespeare season  
2006/2007 (Rome):

November 2006 - June 2007:  
The Tragedie of Julius Caesar

February 2007 - June 2007:

The Tragedie of Othello  
Antony and Cleopatra  
The Tragical History of Doctor  
Faustus  
The Tempest

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Promo for ishakespeare's The  
Tragedie of Julius Caesar

This page, top to bottom

Marzia Del Fabbro in one of her  
various roles

Michael Fitzpatrick (Caesar)  
and William Mann (Brutus)

The six cast members

