

'Julius Caesar'

RECOMMENDED

WHEN: To Oct. 26

WHERE: Strawdog Theatre Company, 3829 N. Broadway

TICKETS: \$15

CALL: (773) 528-9696

BY MARY HOULIHAN
STAFF REPORTER

The great tragedy "Julius Caesar," the play with some of the most quoted lines in all the Shakespearean canon, is performed surprisingly rarely. But this season two local productions are on hand, as well as one by an Italian company. The first of these is currently running at Strawdog Theatre, and the second staging comes in December at Chicago Shakespeare, with Societas Raffaello Sanzio's production "Giulio Cesare" premiering at the Museum of Contemporary Art in November.

Strawdog's pared-down rendition strips away much of the play's filler and focuses on the complex relationship between Marcus Brutus and Caius Cassius, the two politicians who orchestrate Caesar's demise. While all the key moments remain in place, there also is a sketchy, skeletal feel to the drama that is weirdly satisfying.

In "Julius Caesar," Shakespeare unveils a richly psychological web of power politics and the manipulation of the masses. Still a potent drama, it is an engrossing assessment of an ageless triumvirate—the balance



Tom Hickey (from left), Chris Hainsworth, Michael Dailey, Sam Porretta and Kevin Stark play the conspirators in "Julius Caesar".

of power among a ruler, his political and military aides, and the people he is accountable to.

What gives director Nic Dimond's production strength is the spotlight it puts on the psychological evolution of the relationship between Brutus and Cassius, two characters who, along with Marc Antony, have always been the key to the drama's dark heart and soul.

Fiery and hotheaded, Cassius is the first to bring notice to Caesar's changing profile and observe that he is on the verge of becoming a tyrant, that his unbridled popularity is a threat to democracy and that assassination is the solution. With swift, convincing tactics, he corrals Brutus ("the noblest Roman of them all") into betraying his good friend Caesar (an aloof, acidic portrayal by John Roberts) for the good of the country.

It is impossible to focus on Cassius and Brutus

without also bringing Antony (a sly performance by John Ferrick) into the mix. His funeral oration ("Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears...") over the bloodied body of Caesar as he begins his revenge and ascension to power is a fine example of carefully devised spin. It is the point at which the moral compass of the deed is turned even in the eyes of its perpetrators.

As the complex Brutus, Chris Hainsworth agonizingly displays the moral torment of a man whose deed has come back to haunt him. Always looking over his shoulder, Michael Dailey's smooth-talking Cassius hides his "lean and hungry" look behind a deadly palate of convincing political and moral banter.

Dimond etches the two lone female roles with compassion. Anita Deely as Portia and Loretta Rezos as Calpurnia are not merely hysterical asides, but rather, as the wives of Brutus and Caesar, their emotional outbursts come from a true well of emotion and are the rational reaction to what their intuition tells them is about to happen.

Costume designer Karen Kawa outfits Caesar and his senators in modern suits and tan trench coats (a twist that can't help but conjure up an imaginative parallel of modern-day executives conniving the demise of one of their own). Only Marc Antony, the firebrand who is Caesar's revenge-filled angel, stands out from the crowd dressed in casual wear.

David Meihaus' subtle set ties ancient Rome to modern times and easily suggests several different settings, from palatial terrace to vast battleground. The requisite Roman columns are backed by 10 wood-framed panels that are the perfect canvas for Scott Zematis' evocative lighting. Gregor Mortis' edgy, original sound design nicely evokes the unrest that is at the key of this great drama.