

CHICAGO TRIBUNE - THEATRE REVIEW - September 12, 2002

Hail 'Caesar': Strawdog's lean production is smartly done.

By Michael Phillips

Tribune theatre critic

From the "Reservoir Dogs"-style poster imagery to the suits-and-sunglasses costume design, Strawdog Theatre Company's "Julius Caesar" announces itself as, potentially, too hip for the room. Here's happy news. Director Nic Dimond's staging does not fulfill that potential. His is a lean and hungry version of Shakespeare's Roman scandals, smartly reduced in scale — the 40-odd characters plus plebian rabble have been cut to 13 — and smart, period.

It's the first good "Julius Caesar" I've seen.

Chicago is getting two other productions, major ones, before the year is out: The Italian company Societas Raffaello Sanzio's "Giulio Cesare" comes to the Museum of Contemporary Art in November, and the Chicago Shakespeare Theater revival follows in December. Thanks to Strawdog, my appetite's nicely whetted.

Whether in togas or sharkskin, productions of this particular tragedy too often reduce Shakespeare's ambiguous power plays surrounding the assassination of Caesar to a muddle of declamation and knitted brows. Those who recall the late-'80s New York Shakespeare Festival staging, with Al Pacino's rasp going *mano a mano* with Martin Sheen's, will recall mainly the fact that they cannot recall much of anything about it, other than the cast's need for a gargle. Strawdog's swift, compact take doesn't hit the heights of eloquence, but it's not trying to. Director Dimond has shaped

"The Tragedy of Julius Caesar"

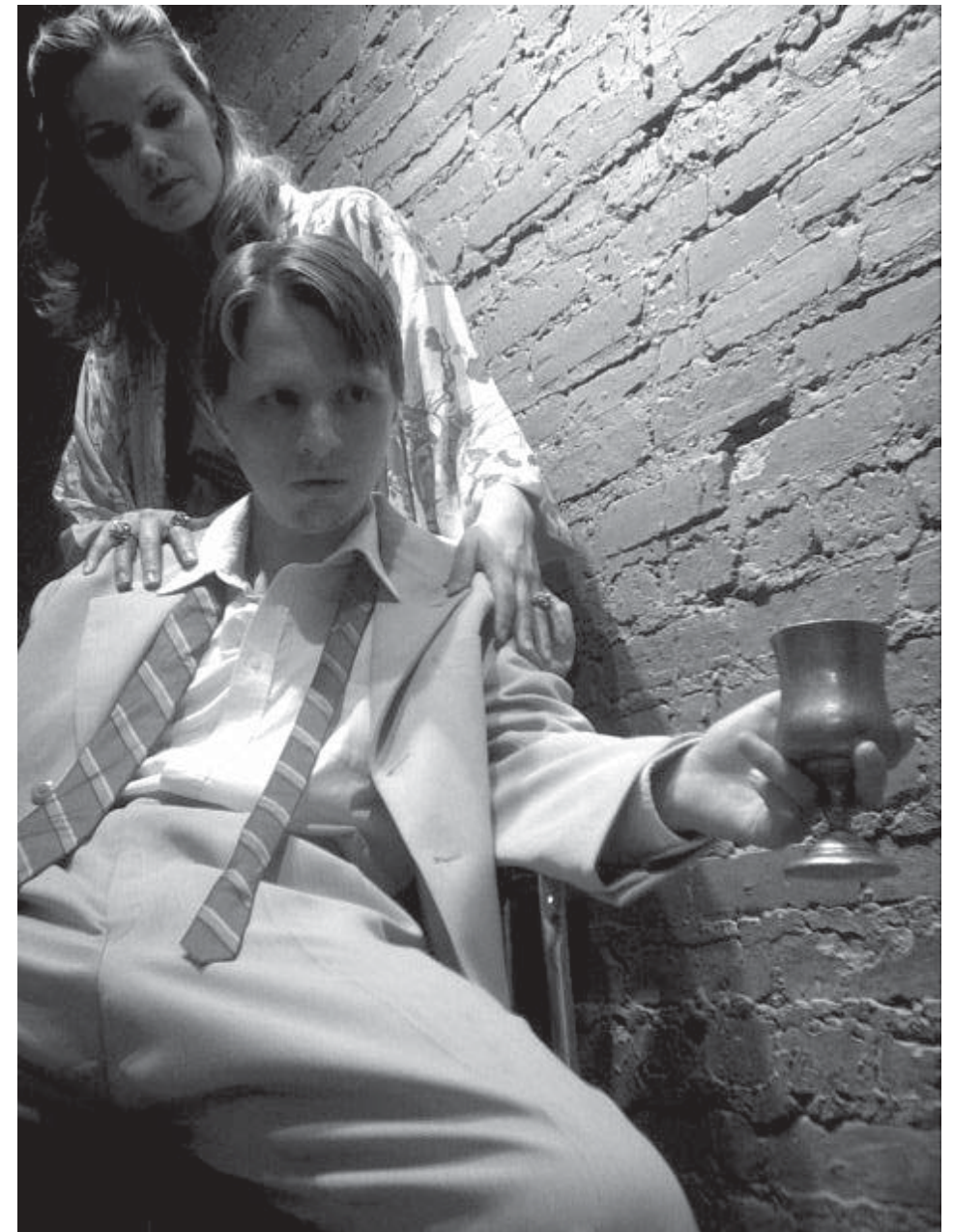
When: Through Oct. 26

Where: Strawdog Theatre Company, 3829 N. Broadway

Phone: 773-528-9696

this version of the text around Brutus (Chris Hainsworth) and Cassius (Michael Dailey), whose machinations subverting the reign of Caesar (John Roberts) are drowned out by the hum of another machine altogether: Marc Antony (John Ferrick). Caesar himself never dominates any "Julius Caesar." Dimond and company acknowledge as much with this cutting, which delivers the backroom-deal aspect of the play, guided by Brutus, Cassius and Antony. When Cassius asks a potential conspirator, Casca (Tom Hickey), "Will you dine with me tomorrow?" the question's preceded by an artfully calibrated pause, signifying that a very deadly game's afoot.

The best performances seize on Dimond's concept, and a "Sopranos"-vibe subtext, without sacrificing meaning for attitude. Ferrick's combustible Antony, Dailey's slippery Cassius and Hickey's hail-fellow Casca stand out, as does Loretta Rezos's Calpurnia (carrying suggestions of a gangster's moll) and Anita Deely's Portia. E. Vincent Teninty's Lucius is clever as well: From his downtrodden perspective, the play's class issues find a human face.



Loretta Rezos and John Roberts star in Strawdog Theatre's "The Tragedy of Julius Caesar."

Right now, with our president arm-twisting the populace into a new bombing campaign, it's a fine time to revisit a play in which cries of "peace," "freedom" and "liberty" aren't necessarily to be trusted. Director Dimond's program notes suggest that Strawdog took on "Julius Caesar" because "the politics and ethics of our leadership are so suspect that we just couldn't resist." The results are surprisingly nuanced.