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Hail Caesar! Shakespearean Drama Meets Historical San Francisco in 'Caesar Maximus'



By [Nicole Gluckstern](#) Aug 29, 2018 [Save Article](#)



Antony (Rotimi Agbabiaka), Caesar (Libby Oberlin) and Calpurnia (Lauren Hayes) appear before their adoring public. (Lauren Matley)

In these politically charged times, the impetus to draw parallels with similarly fraught occasions in history becomes an irresistible pastime. This month, it's We Players' turn, with a timely adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* that recalls the origins of Senate obfuscation and the long struggle to distinguish between political and personal ambition within the various seats of office and leadership.

Set at the music concourse in Golden Gate Park, with its grand bandshell, the gracious Rideout Fountain, and several pedestrian underpasses, the actors' Gilded-Age top hats and waistcoats (designed by Brooke Jennings and Kathleen Qiu) lend a raffish, robber-baron aesthetic to the production, neatly fusing Old San Francisco to Old Rome.



The Cast of *Caesar Maximus* stroll through Golden Gate Park's Music Concourse. (Lauren Matley)

Frequent proponents of cross-casting, We Players has Libby Oberlin in the role of Caesar, which she plays to the hilt with brash swagger, clad in high

boots and breeches and brandishing a riding crop. It is her stance as a woman in power that has turned her conspirators against her, *We Players* suggests, her self-assuredness mistaken for tyranny. As Caesar, Oberlin helps her conspirators set their case at certain moments—particularly when mocking a soothsayer (Emily Stone) come to warn her (not a good look, as one might say in today’s vernacular). But is such careless ego truly a mark of a tyrant? *We Players* forces us to consider the spectrum of self-absorption, neither excusing Caesar’s behavior nor explicitly condemning it.

More compact than certain past *We Players* productions, *Caesar Maximus* (adapted by Nick Medina and director Ava Roy) practically zooms by in just a couple of hours. The action is limited to just a few locations, all within a brief stroll of each other. The cast, too, is streamlined, with most actors doubling their roles, and several characters serving as composites—such as Chris Steele’s impish Casca (who arrives to the Lupercalia on roller skates) speaking lines to woo Caesar to the Senate House originally intended by Shakespeare to be spoken by Decius Brutus. In effect, it plays like a greatest-hits reel of the play, the minutiae mostly not missed as the San Francisco fog settles in for the evening and blankets are passed out to the audience. (Pro tip: do not neglect to bring your layers.)





Alan Coyne, Hunter MacNair and Chris Steele as the conspirators in the plot to kill Caesar. (Lauren Matley)

The only really disconcerting jolt in the pacing is the swiftness with which Caesar is dispatched to her death. It happens early in the production, before it feels as if enough momentum or acrimony has gathered against her to justify the boldness of the deed. The death itself is curiously bloodless, built up with some neat, slow-motion fighting choreographed by Chris Steele, but leaving the actors in their frozen positions for much too long after. Only Antony's mellifluous monologue, expertly delivered by Rotimi Agbabiaka, cements the moment with the appropriate solemnity. Agbabiaka anchors Caesar's funeral scene as well, inciting a too-small mob in a too-large playing area to enact some too-staged violence, setting the stage, as it were, for the eventual downfall of Brutus (Joseph Schommer) and Cassius' (Hunter Scott MacNair).

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In every We Players show, there is a concentrated effort to mold the piece visually into its staging ground. For *Ondine*, ocean spray crashing against the ruins of Sutro Baths provided an essential backdrop; for *Hamlet* on Alcatraz, even the ferry boat on the way to "The Rock" was used for an introductory scene. Here at the music concourse, the actors playing the conspirators lounge against the towering pillars of the bandshell, the vaulted ceiling of which lends architectural gravitas, and high-spirited parades are led through the central promenade. Less immediately intuitive are moments when the audience is led from scene to scene as actors pose in the distance at street level with fluttering red scarves in hand, or the

curious choice to eschew the conveniently located seating which already faces the bandshell stage, opting instead to arrange its audience on folding stools a few feet closer to the action.



The Timekeeper (Emily Stone) assists Brutus (Joseph Schommer) with his suicide, as the ghost of Caesar watches from the background. (Mark Kitaoka)

However, the decision to end the play in the dark confines of a low tunnel arching over a pedestrian path at the far end of the concourse is an inspired one. By the beam of a single amber light—framed from behind by the bars of an iron gate, a diaphanous furl of fabric, and the unbowed ghost of Caesar—Cassius and Brutus face their final moments, assisted silently by the production’s audience guide and chief wrangler, the Timekeeper (Emily Stone).

Walking back into the light, flanked by overgrown foliage and a burst of pink amaryllis, feels like a triumph. For a moment, everything seems

possible: the dispatching of would-be tyrants, the power of a well-turned oratorical phrase to inspire action, and the continual evolution of the “classics” in their ability to reveal modern concerns.



‘Caesar Maximus’ runs through Sept. 30 in Golden Gate Park. Details [here](#).

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