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In Praise of 'Caesar Maximus' (The NoPro Review)



Kathryn Yu · Follow

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A powerful adaptation of Julius Caesar by We Players

Caesar Maximus is not the same *Julius Caesar* you studied in high school English. Far from it, in fact. Like a splash of water to the face, *Caesar Maximus* (adapted by Nick Medina and Ava Roy) takes the original and rouses it from its slumber. This adaptation strips down the play to its core essence while turning up the intensity to 11. It's a marvel to behold: a rich experience infused with ritual, opera, circus, and the stylings of the Gilded Age, all the while taking advantage of the grand Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park.



The action here moves quickly and seamlessly, plunging audiences into the initial schemings of Brutus (a noble Joseph Schommer) and Cassius (a tragic Hunter Scott MacNair) in the first moments of the show. It accelerates quickly to the assassination of Caesar (a role played with much gusto by Libby Oberlin), and then to the inevitable fallout. There's little to no "filler" to be found here, and attendees would be advised to keep their wits about them as they change locations.

We are led at various points by a small marching band (sometimes cheery, sometimes mournful) and the otherworldly Soothsayer (Emily Stone). We the audience find ourselves under the verdant boughs of the park's elm trees or facing the stately colonnades which double as living quarters in this version of Rome. Suddenly we're at the foot of the regal Bandshell, which serves as the Senate floor. The different locales for each scene make perfect sense — all pieces of a larger puzzle snapping into place. And the Soothsayer impressively fulfills multiple roles here: the seer who foresees Caesar's murder, a stern timekeeper who manages the audience's attention, and a singer of ethereal arias.

The world of *Caesar Maximus* is soaked in visual symbolism. An imposing Roman gladiator statue stands at one entrance to the venue. Moreover, it's hard not to notice the centerpiece of the Music Concourse — a large fountain topped with a statue of a panther locked in battle with a snake. I can't help but look up as we circle it, while keeping pace with the clowns and jugglers. The cast also dons fabulous costumes with gorgeous hues: deep reds, stark whites, and gleaming gold. Caesar's throne echoes these rich tones. The use of color is striking against the backdrop of gray Bay Area skies at dusk. A red, translucent piece of cloth doubles as a wrap on a dancer's shoulders, but when picked up by the wind, more resembles a stream of blood or perhaps a funeral shroud. The vision sends chills down my spine, as the band plays on.



And even though we not affecting the course of events or interacting in depth with the characters, the audience becomes complicit in the story as well. We're conscripted into what looks like an ad hoc rally as performers around us chant about the greatness of Caesar. But, later on, we're in an angry mob filled with denizens of Rome, demanding answers of Brutus and consequently manipulated by Marc Anthony (a most charming Rotimi Agbabiaka); later, we become bystanders to a murder of an innocent man on his way to Caesar's funeral, all because of a mistaken identity. The ease with which we attendees once shouted "Caesar! Caesar!" is suddenly gone.

There are no clear winners in the story of *Julius Caesar*. It is a work with no readily identifiable hero, and audiences are usually left to grapple with the moral gray areas on their own; the rationale for the assassination has always felt flimsy, at best. However, while Shakespeare's work may be over 400 years old, the events contained within feel frighteningly contemporary. The issues of corruption, mob justice, and hubris are more relevant than ever. What *We Players* has birthed in Golden Gate Park is breathtaking. In *Caesar Maximus* we find this classic, reworked, into a version that is electrifying and tumultuous, reflecting both the troubles of the ancient past and today's society.

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***We Players'* *Caesar Maximus* continues through September 30 at the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. Tickets are \$35–80. Read our interview with Director/Producer Ava Roy.**

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