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Park fares better than play in We Players' 'Caesar Maximus'



Lily Janiak | August 27, 2018 Updated: August 29, 2018, 5:55 pm

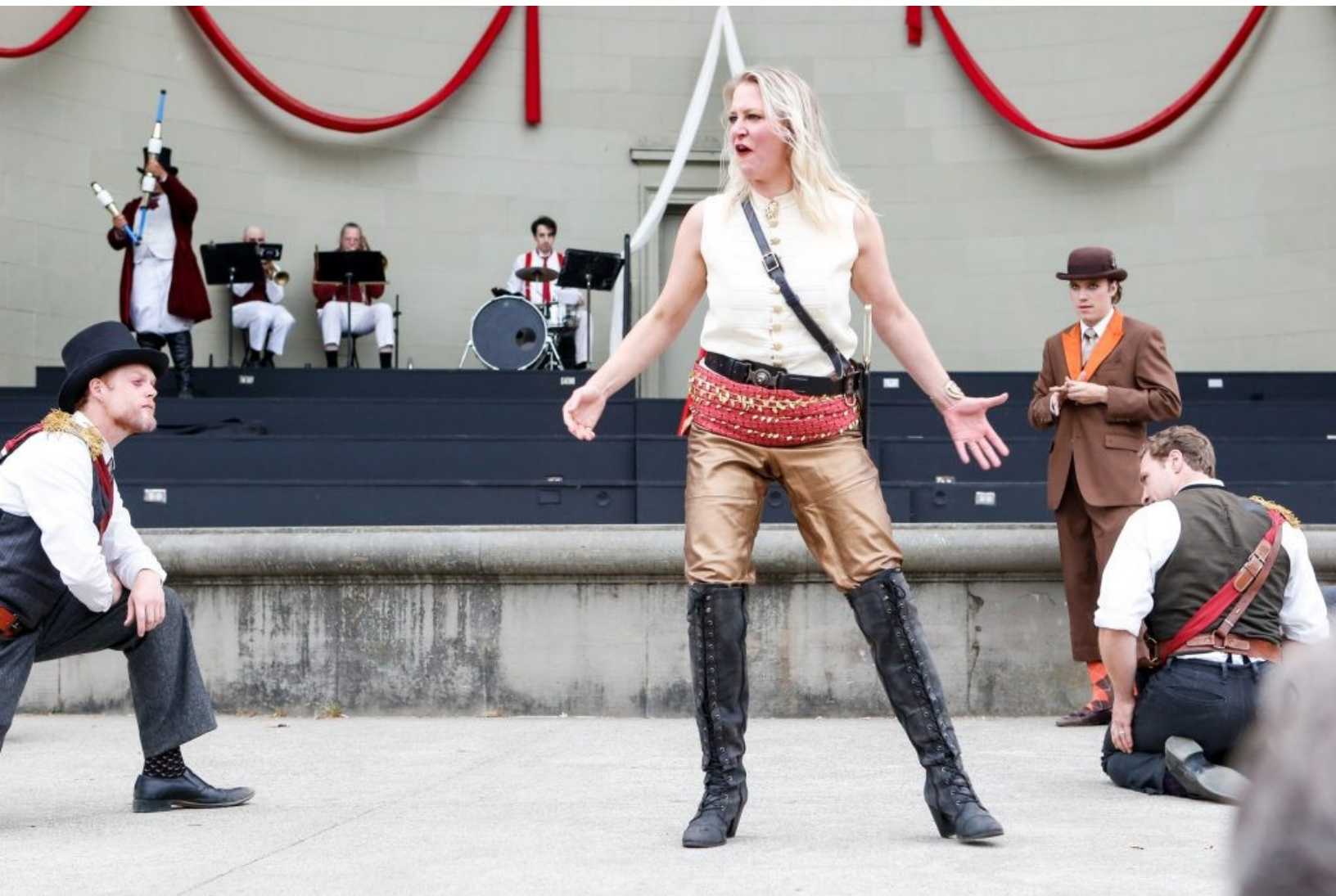


Lauren Hayes plays Calpurnia in We Players' "Caesar Maximus" at the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park.

Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle

When the We Players are at their best, the 18-year-old site-specific theater company helps you see that parks and resources like Alcatraz Island, San Francisco Bay, Petaluma Adobe, Angel Island and Fort Point aren't hermetically sealed artifacts that artists and audiences need tiptoe around or handle with tongs. They're

springboards to adventure, canvases to creation.



Libby Oberlin (center) orates as Caesar in We Players' "Caesar Maximus."

Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle

The company's latest canvas, for "Caesar Maximus," is Golden Gate Park's Music Concourse, the oval-shaped lawn between the de Young Museum and the California Academy of Sciences. If you were to take in the area on your own, you'd probably find the manicured grounds and neoclassical accents (fountains, "Bandshell" buffeted by Ionic columns) pleasant but stately and orderly, the public works bluster of a polity that needed to impress you with both aesthetics and authority.

The play, an adaptation of William Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" seen Sunday, Aug. 26, makes the site's man-made and natural majesty less intimidating without compromising either. A female performer trails a long sheet of red fabric, beating in gusts of evening wind at a jaunty angle toward the foggy sky; the brightly dyed diagonal pulsating upward makes you look more closely, more appreciatively at lawn, horizon and landscaping alike. Those same bursts of ocean air find a welcome echo in Emily Stone's singing as a soothsayer, whose pure, ethereal vocals seem to seep from her surroundings as naturally as sea salt coasting in on marine squalls.



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Libby Oberlin speaks from above as Caesar in We Players' "Caesar Maximus."
Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle

Yet in "Caesar Maximus" the advantage goes mostly to the setting and not to the source material, which Nick Medina adapted in collaboration with Ava Roy and which Roy directs. The company sets Shakespeare's play in the Gilded Age, with Brooke Jennings' red, gold and white costumes, all epaulets and knee-high boots, aptly setting off the greens, browns and grays of the park. They reward close inspection: Sit in the front row at some point as the troupe takes you on short walks from one scene to the next, and you might notice that on the costume of Caesar (Libby Oberlin), a lion adorns both belt buckle and top button. But if the garb looks sharp, it's an arbitrary sharpness. We Players might have chosen any other era, so unapparent are any connections among time period, setting and text.



Oscar Velarde plays Ajax the Juggler in We Players' "Caesar Maximus" at the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park.

Same goes for the juggling, dancing and match of tug-of-war that warm audiences up before the show itself starts. Yes, these games create a giddy feeling, but is that child's play really the same as the heady euphoria of a conqueror returning from war, which begins Shakespeare's play?

In *We Players*' hands, the conspiracy of Cassius (Hunter Scott MacNair) and Brutus (Joseph Schommer) to murder newly crowned emperor Caesar feels equally arbitrary, the stuff of featherweight impulse or by-the-book plotting. If you were to ask characters why they speak and act as they do, you'd expect them to respond, "Because that's what the script tells me," rather than speak of their own desires. Part of the problem is baked into *We Players*' conceit. Each time you get up from a kneeling cushion or a folding stool (*We Players* supplies audiences with either option) to walk somewhere else, the story's stakes and momentum falter.





Rotimi Agbabiaka emotes as Mark Antony in We Players' "Caesar Maximus."
Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle

Still, almost every member of Roy's ensemble has a transcendent moment. As Caesar, Oberlin settles into her throne with a prodigious manspread, and she commands her entourage with the bumptious, back-slapping informality of a big man on campus. When Mark Antony (Rotimi Agbabiaka) gives the famous "Lend me your ears" speech, Roy's ensemble become as savage as hungry beasts, clawing and tearing at each phrase like it's the last scrap of flesh on earth. Schommer, a promising newcomer to the Bay Area, communicates an ocean of trouble behind Brutus' distant gaze. In one especially fine scene, when his wife, Portia (Britt Lauer), sneaks up behind him, he's so afflicted with inward crises that he's barely startled.



A family stops to watch as the We Players stage "Caesar Maximus" at the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park.
Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle

Even in duller sequences, the Music Concourse is a welcome distraction. You'll see incredulous passersby and their even more incredulous dogs, and you imagine what they might be thinking about the top hats and dagger fights, the juggling and the Elizabethan language. But for you, immersed for a couple of hours in another time, it's they, on their bicycles and Onewheels, who look momentarily out of place. For all the flaws of "Caesar Maximus," We Players expands the possibilities of the Music Concourse, a feat any thespian, park visitor or conqueror should bow down to.



Caesar Maximus: Adapted by Nick Medina in collaboration with Ava Roy from William Shakespeare. Directed by Roy. Through Sept. 30. Two hours, 20 minutes. \$35-\$80. Golden Gate Park's Music Concourse, S.F. 415-547-0189. www.weplayers.org



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