

# What theater from Shakespeare to Amiri Baraka tells us about the Capitol mob

Lily Janiak



Emily Stone (left) as Soothsayer and Lauren Hayes as Calpurnia perform in “Caesar Maximus,” We Players’ adaptation of Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar,” at the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park. Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle 2018

When I got the idea to turn to dramatic literature to help me parse the events of Jan. 6, when a mob of Trump supporters invaded the U.S. Capitol, my first instinct was to dive into William Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar.”

I found 2021 in the first scene.

The Roman public has spoken, declaring its adoration of a triumphant Caesar by garlanding his statues, expressing their opinion that he ought to be king, but Flavius and his fellow elected officials, leery of a king’s rule and Caesar’s ambition, would silence those voices.

“Disrobe the images if you do find them decked with ceremonies,” Flavius commands, later adding, “Let no images be hung

with Caesar's trophies.”



Libby Oberlin plays Caesar in “Caesar Maximus” in Golden Gate Park. Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle 2018

Later in the play is a further attempt to manipulate public will. Cassius, seeking to recruit Brutus to his conspiracy to assassinate Caesar, hatches a plan that reads like an ancient predecessor to a Russian troll farm or the disinformation campaigns of alt-media: “I will this night in several hands in at his windows throw — as if they came from several citizens — writings, all tending to the great opinion that Rome holds of his name, wherein obscurely Caesar’s ambition shall be glanced at.”

Then there was the part that was so on 2021’s nose that I almost laughed aloud in bafflement. The conspirator Casca, listing a series of ill omens just before the assassination, says, “Against the Capitol I met a lion,” which reminded me of Jacob Anthony Chansley of Arizona, a.k.a. Jake Angeli, the Capitol rioter in face and body paint, fur and horns. What horrible event might he yet portend?



A U.S. Capitol police officer confronts Jacob Anthony Chansley of Arizona, who is wearing fur hat with horns, on Jan. 6. Three days later Chansley was arrested to face federal charges. Photo: Manuel Balce Ceneta / Associated Press

Scarier still, for me, were Marc Antony’s comments after his famous “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears” speech. The plebeians, having discarded then recovered their fondness for Caesar with alarming fickleness, have stormed off, prepared to avenge Caesar’s death. Antony doesn’t join them, nor does he persevere in the display of feeling that spurred the crowd. He’s distant in every sense, cutting himself off from what he’s fomented. “Now let it work,” he says, alone on stage for an instant. “Mischief, thou art afoot. Take thou what course thou wilt.” It’s not his own rhetoric, but “mischief” and “fortune” that are acting. “Fortune is merry,” he says lines later, “and in this mood will give us anything.”



Rotimi Agbabiaka performs as Antony in “Caesar Maximus,” We Players’ adaption of Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar,” at the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park. Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle 2018

Shakespeare’s plays are defined in part by infinite capacity. They have revealed only some of their mysteries and connections

and possibilities to us. They are unsettled and unsettling, seemingly reinventing themselves for every era.

But they don't hold all the answers. Shakespeare is frequently eloquent on the false promise of political violence, and "Julius Caesar" in particular issues a clear warning on the dangers of the mob. But his works can't answer so directly another, perhaps more pointed question: In 21st century America, who gets to commit political violence? Whose protest or rebellion or violence is absorbed into the state apparatus, and whose is punished by the state?

As Jan. 6 played out, I found myself wondering who gets to be called a "protester" and who is a "rioter" or merely a lawbreaker — questions spurred in part by newsroom guidance from San Francisco Chronicle Editor in Chief Emilio Garcia-Ruiz to use "mob" or "rioters" for those who had invaded the Capitol, and in part by the theater makers of color I follow on social media, who were part of a nationwide chorus declaring that no people of color who invaded the U.S. Capitol would be treated as leniently as the rioters were that day. For proof, we need look only to [police treatment of Black Lives Matter demonstrators](#) last summer.

[‘America’s double standard’: Bay Area racial justice activists denounce police reaction to pro-Trump mob](#)

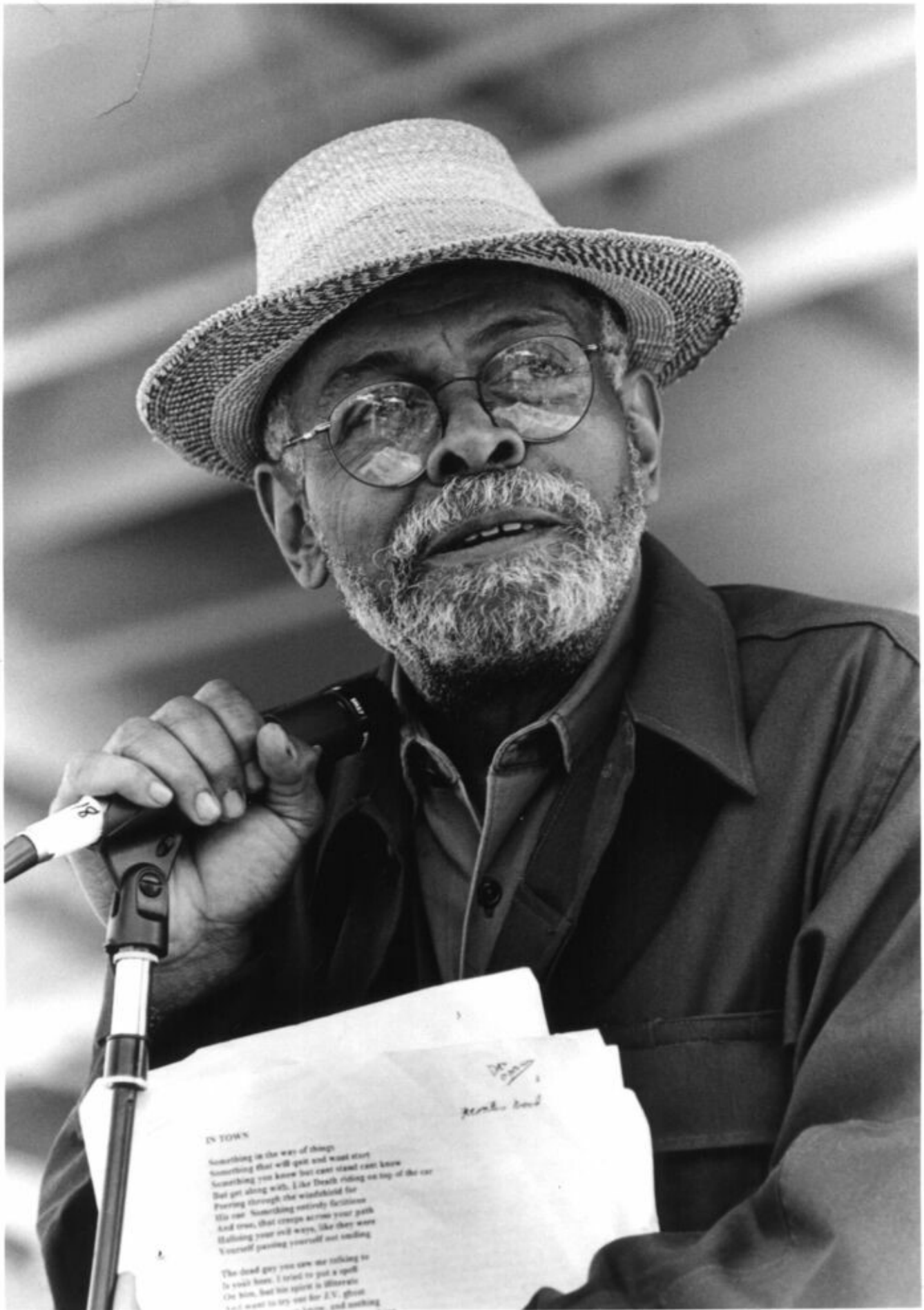


The cast performs in Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story," which is scheduled to be released in December 2021.  
Photo: Niko Tavernise/Twentieth Century Fox

A small but telling moment in "West Side Story" offers some guidance. It's just before the great "rumble" between rival gangs the Sharks, who are Puerto Rican, and the Jets, who are white. Lieutenant Schrank, a white police officer, tries to sweet-talk the location of the fight from the Jets: "I'm for you," he says. "I want this beat cleaned up and you can do it for me. I'll even lend a hand if it gets rough." Even if he backpedals when the Jets stay quiet, it's hard to imagine him saying something similar

to the Sharks.

More illustrative still might be "Dutchman," written by LeRoi Jones in 1964, before he changed his name to Amiri Baraka. In the lightning bolt of a play, set in a subway car, a beautiful white woman, Lula, alternately tempts and taunts a young Black man, Clay. Her insults soon racialize him. She drops racial epithets, mocks his hair, calls him an Uncle Tom. At one point she calls him a murderer, then, provoked by both her abuse and her appropriation of Black slang, he agrees: "Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane."



Amiri Baraka, also known as LeRoi Jones, was the author of the play “Dutchman” in 1964. Photo: Chronicle file photo

It's she who murders, though, or at least calls for it, summoning the will of the other passengers who've gathered in the

subway car. They kill Clay and dump his body from the car at Lula's command. The train keeps running, the Black conductor doing a subdued song-and-dance routine.

Lula's not the law, but she stands in for it. "I lie a lot," she tells Clay early on. "It helps me control the world." Her violence is as part of the operation of society as the train wheels rolling along their tracks. The conductor, a man in uniform, seems to lend authority to it, however mournfully or obliquely.

If you're inclined to ask how rioters could have invaded the Capitol so easily and with such impunity, American drama says that thread has long been written into our story. Some of us are allowed to take the law into our own hands. We can don and doff the sheriff's badge at our pleasure, because we know the law is written for us, to protect us, to serve us. Others of us know the law is always lying in wait, waiting for one false step, any probable cause. The law exists only to take, to punish and to kill.





Libby Oberlin as Caesar and Joseph Schommer as Brutus perform in “Caesar Maximus” in Golden Gate Park. Photo: Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle 2018

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