

Review: Audience stays on the move in engaging ‘Caesar’ at SF’s Golden Gate Park

Sam Hurwitt, Correspondent

“How many ages hence shall this our lofty scene be acted over in states unborn and accents yet unknown?”

This line by conspirator Cassius was a sly sort of in-joke when William Shakespeare originally wrote it in “Julius Caesar,” because of course ancient Romans would have known nothing of Elizabethan England. More than 400 years later, Cassius’ question has only gained resonance as Shakespeare’s words have achieved their own seeming immortality.

Spoken by a different character, those lines are given new weight in “Caesar Maximus,” the new production by We Players at the Music Concourse in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. We Players specializes in site-integrated productions at various Bay Area historic sites, often in partnership with state, national and city parks. These productions usually involve adaptations of Shakespeare and other classics, from “The Odyssey” to “Beowulf,” some more faithful to the original text than others, but all altered to accommodate moving the audience around to different spots in the chosen picturesque space. Comfortable walking shoes and layered outside clothes are always recommended.

Adapted by Nick Medina, who also serves as assistant director, and helmed by artistic director Ava Roy, “Caesar Maximus” radically cuts and reshuffles Shakespeare’s play, stripping out many scenes and characters. The trimming leads to a few confusing moments late in the play (mostly concerning Brutus and Cassius), but Roy’s staging lends added resonance to key scenes and gives extended arcs to certain characters after they more or less disappear in the original.

Roy makes superb use of the Music Concourse’s classical-inspired architecture, built in 1900 and flanked by the De Young Museum and the California Academy of Sciences. The actual assassination of Caesar takes place in the park’s famous Bandshell, but other scenes are staged all around the area.

Brooke Jennings’ costumes are reminiscent of that Gilded Age era of San Francisco, with a lot of long coats, top hats and bowlers. There’s some old-timey jazzy marching music in music director Charlie Gurke’s compositions, played by a small mobile combo on trombone, trumpet and drums, and Oscar Velarde kicks things off juggling in a Lupercalia carnival scene. The character Cinna the Poet, who gets swept up in mob violence, is here depicted as an operatic Italian singer played by Zoltan DiBartolo in an unexpectedly touching scene.

Libby Oberlin makes a swaggering, arrogant female Caesar, always playing loudly to the crowd and at one point mocking a Soothsayer’s tics in a manner familiar to anyone who followed the last presidential campaign. Rotimi Agbabiaka is a crafty and charismatic Mark Antony, Caesar’s ardent follower and eloquent defender.

Among the conspirators, Hunter Scott MacNair is a feverishly obsessive and brooding Cassius, with red eye makeup that makes it look as if he hasn’t slept in weeks. Joseph Schommer is a conscientious, reserved Brutus, and Alan Coyne is almost foppishly refined Cinna. Chris Steele is an impishly two-faced Casca, depicted as a snarky and gossipy reporter who laughs heartily at all of Caesar’s jokes while constantly taking notes.

Britt Lauer is fretful as Portia, Brutus’ wife, whose role is halved to just one scene, and Lauren Hayes is palpably panicked and terrified as Caesar’s wife, Calpurnia, who’s artfully included here in later scenes such as Antony’s speech and the rampaging mob.

Emily Stone ties everything together as our guide, the Timekeeper, who directs the audience from place to place and occasionally intervenes in the action in haunting ways, appearing as the Soothsayer and helping to send the dead on their way. She occasionally functions as a narrator as well, borrowing lines that originally belonged to other characters, artfully woven together, and often sings beautifully in a haunting, mournful manner.

Packed with somber atmosphere, it’s a strikingly effective interpretation that breathes new life into this durable old tragedy.

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