

We Players' 'Roman Women' enthrall at Palace of Fine Arts

By Jean Schiffman

May 8, 2018



From left, Micael Bogar, Lauren Hayes, Emily Stone, Britt Lauer, Baily Hopkins and Julie Douglas are excellent in We Players'...

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There's an incantatory, mesmerizing quality to We Players' "Roman Women," which, with Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" as a gossamer framework, comprises original songs (score by Charlie Gurke); circular, choreographed movement; grave prophecies and existential musings; and excerpts from the tragedy itself.

The production features an excellent chorus of five women (Micael Bogar, Julie Douglas, Lauren Hayes, Baily Hopkins and Emily Stone) plus the Roman goddess of wisdom, Minerva (Britt Lauer), who presides majestically over the activities.

By turns solemn, poetic and playful, the show includes modern-day dialogue and ad libs, and plenty of antics, including raunchy comedy scenes in which the women tease each other, confide, gossip, squabble and role-play,

suggesting a jigsaw puzzle of a “Julius Caesar” from a female, #MeToo perspective.

The only men in this production, conceived and directed by endlessly inventive We Players founder/artistic director Ava Roy, are the tattered street musicians on percussion and trombone who wander about and lurk in corners.

In fact, everyone wanders in this almost-two-hour show, including the audience: Patrons follow the performers as the early evening light wanes in the windy rotunda of the Palace of Fine Arts, with its alcoves, pathways, grandiose archways and expanses.

The Players make good use of the gorgeous setting, and of their proximity to the audience.

It’s a partially interactive show, as the Roman women — beautifully dressed by costumer Brooke Jennings in suggestions of Roman attire: pink robes with lavender and white accents, capes and skirts billowing in the breeze — weave among the audience, speaking directly to them (“Beware the Ides of March,” they murmur, and “Beware of fake news”).

And a dazed seer reads palms with intense eye contact. (We Players is all about audience-actor eye contact.)

Roy intends for “Roman Women” to represent a cycle, a ritual that, as she writes in the program, weaves through time as the women search for, and re-create among themselves, some version of the emperor Caesar, the all-powerful male figure.

Accordingly, don’t expect a clear narrative arc, or to actually see the emperor assassinated in the space, which at times represents the Roman forum.

The women’s singing voices are lovely within the rotunda’s acoustics, their monologues from “Julius Caesar” and other text impassioned and clear, and the steady repetitions of movement and choral chants (some in Latin) are hypnotic.

Site-specific work this sensorial, this well done, is its own *raison d’être*.

REVIEW

Roman Women

Presented by We Players

Where: Palace of Fine Arts, 3301 Lyon St., S.F.

When: Fridays-Sundays; plus closing Monday, May 28

Tickets: \$30 to \$60