

All The Wonders:
Making *Julius Caesar* Relevant Again

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Theatre

“Shakespeare is not for everyone”

I said these words to a fellow theatre-maker when he reluctantly admitted his disinterest in attending a production of *Julius Caesar*. So often in the theatre world, apathy about Shakespeare is accompanied by shame. Our scholastic institutions canonize Shakespeare as an apogee of western theatre, so when one does not enjoy his work, the fault is in the individual’s inability to adequately grasp the story, and not in the story’s presentation. Yet the very notion that Shakespeare’s work is elite or academic is unfounded. He wrote *Julius Caesar* for The Globe, a public theatre which was attended by thousands of tradesmen with only elementary educations, and this first production ‘ravish’d’ its audience according to Leonard Diggs, one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries.¹ Recently, however, theatre critics have lamented the stiflingly academic reputation the play has gained as a “sodden launching-pad for earnest discussions about the perils of democracy.”² This shift in audience perception is likely due in part to *Caesar’s* ubiquity in high school curriculum, yet other Shakespearean high school staples like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* have not succumbed to the same academic reputations. I maintain that *Julius Caesar* has lost its appeal today not because the play is too lofty to grasp, or because it is no longer relevant, but because we have lost the thread of what in performance made the play enjoyable. This essay examines the socio-political context in which the play premiered, the playing space of the Globe Theatre, and the theatrical conventions of Elizabethan performance to

demonstrate that what made the Roman tragedy so successful for Elizabethans is not beyond our grasp. Rather, reinstating just a few Early Modern theatre practices can make *Julius Caesar* a successful production.

Using Bert O. States' theory of theatre phenomenology and his exploration of how the Elizabethan stage affected audience experience, I posit that *Julius Caesar* can be mounted successfully today.³ My argument analyzes Elizabethan politics, unsuccessful contemporary productions of the play, and the scenic and performance practices of Early Modern theatre to present an argument for restoring Early Modern practices when mounting *Julius Caesar*. I write this paper to encourage contemporary audiences to approach Shakespeare with confidence and to help contemporary theatre makers gain a better understanding of how original performance conventions can bring *Julius Caesar* to life.

The eye sees not itself but by reflection:

Elizabethan Self-Identification with Ancient Rome and the Political Similarities to 21st Century America

Julius Caesar was first staged in 1599, more than sixteen hundred years after the death of its title character in 44 BCE. England in 1599 was undergoing sometimes violent political restructuring as it moved from an absolute monarchy to a parliamentary monarchy and Elizabethans found the story of a republic-turned-dictatorship urgently relevant to the politics of their age.⁴ Today, only four hundred and twenty-three years after *Julius Caesar* was written—less than a third of the time between Caesar's death and the play's premiere—the story does not carry the same the same weight in the United States, even though we live in a republic which experienced violent populist uprisings within the last five years. Politically speaking, 21st Century America resembles the political environment of Rome under Caesar more accurately

than England did under Elizabeth I, so it should follow that we appreciate the play more than Elizabethans did. Yet, somehow the relevance is lost on us. In this section, I demonstrate why *Julius Caesar* was so relevant to Elizabethans, and that the play can be just as relevant to contemporary American audiences today.

In the Elizabethan mind, Ancient Rome was a metaphor for Early Modern England: Rome was a model of civilization, colonization, arts and education and Elizabethans saw themselves as the Roman Empire's natural successors.⁵ In 1595, a wildly popular translation of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* captured the minds of Early Modern Londoners and framed England's success under Elizabeth I as resembling Roman success under Caesar. Elizabethan England showed many of the hallmarks of Roman culture, including both nations' imperial success. Britain's prosperity and national borders grew in the 16th Century due to colonization: the arts flourished, urban centers were refined and remodeled, and technology advanced in multiple ways. And the Emperor Julius Caesar became a familiar, yet complex figure to Shakespeare's audience: he was seen as both a symbol of imperial success and a harbinger of despotism.

Despite the high esteem in which Caesar was held, he was occasionally painted as that most dreaded of Elizabethan bugbears, the tyrant, a figure who exceeds the natural bound of his authority and, in pursuit of what suits his own will best, rides roughshod over his people.⁶

Elizabethans saw Caesar as majestic, aspirational, imposing, and abusive. The internal incongruities of Caesar reflected Elizabethan's feelings about their monarch. The reign of Elizabeth I, was fraught with religious and political tension resulting in disagreements in the citizenry regarding the limitations of royal power and the importance of popular representation. Elizabeth's reign was marked by peace, prosperity, education, and independence, yet Elizabeth

herself was a divisive figure. Throughout her lifetime numerous unsuccessful attempts, both domestic and foreign, through marriage, war, and subterfuge, were made to wrest power from Elizabeth. Elizabeth could be, “like Caesar, capricious, dictatorial and ruthless.”⁷ When Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar*, Elizabeth I was nearing the end of her life and her refusal to name an heir caused anxiety within the English court and the common people alike. Despite the economic and political stability English citizens enjoyed under Elizabeth’s reign, her strict support of Anglicanism and suppression of other religious practices made her unpopular with many. Despite these challenges, Elizabeth maintained her authority through political savvy, popular support, and religious self-iconography, all while overseeing a flourishing economy and maintaining England’s independence from the Catholic Church. Those who found favor under Elizabeth’s reign would have rejoiced in her savoir-faire. But for some, Elizabeth’s fierce unconventionality was a sign that greater power should be given to Parliament; too much power in the hands of one ruler leads to destruction, no matter how popular that ruler might be. Those who opposed her would have seen her political shrewdness—especially in a woman—as an inappropriate abuse of power. In the eyes of her people Elizabeth, like Caesar, was both a mortal deity and a populist tyrant. It is reasonable to say that some of Shakespeare’s audience even considered the moral soundness of violently removing a monarch from power when in the country’s best interest; *Julius Caesar* was written six short years before the Gunpowder Plot to assassinate Elizabeth’s Scottish successor King James I. Thus, Elizabethans would have seen the Roman political struggle as directly relevant to the future of England; they would have understood the conflict of the story as “deeply rooted in the culture of the day, but also urgent.”⁸

Like Elizabethan political struggles, their philosophical debates regarding the nature of human judgement are also relevant today. At the beginning of the 16th century, the dominant

ideology sweeping England was Humanism, which envisioned a more ethical society in which humans privileged reason over emotion. By 1599 Elizabethan drama became “itself an object of emotion,” as the popular opinion skewed toward emotion as the source of human decision making.⁹ The primacy of logic or emotion in human judgement is as hotly debated today in the field of decision science as it was in the 16th century theatre. Although we regard ourselves as rational and sensible, the power of emotionally targeted advertising and speechifying has shown us to be more easily swayed by sentiment than we might like to think. Bert O. States argues that theatre is “an act of removing things from a world in which they have become inconspicuous and seeing them anew” and *Julius Caesar* does just that by showing Brutus, a man “with himself at war,” whose is persuaded to commit regicide by Cassius and then confounded by the fervent and dramatic arguments of Marc Antony.^{10 11} To Elizabethans, Brutus was the model of the humanist man, endeavoring to act ethically through reason, and tragically confronting the overwhelming power of sentiment in human judgement. To contemporary Americans, Brutus is an ordinary man trying to do the right thing for his country and realizing too late that perception is sometimes more powerful than intention. Anyone who has wished to obliterate outdated systems of corruption and tyranny can understand Brutus’ dilemma. We can recall Brutus during election cycles, when reading the news, when acting as ethical consumers.

The socio-political climate in which Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* clearly influenced the success of the production, yet the play is as thematically relevant today as it was when it was written. Contemporary American audiences can find just as much relatable content within the historical tragedy as their Elizabethan predecessors. Politically speaking, twenty-first century America is undergoing socio-political turmoil that is not dissimilar to that of the Elizabethans. Both the English monarchy of the 16th Century and the American republic of the 21st Century are

characterized by political unrest and debates about reasonable use of power. Our political dilemmas today have less to do with the executive limitations of absolute rulers, and more to do with maintaining justice in our democratic process and trustworthiness in our news sources. Nevertheless, the issues of tyranny, mob mentality, and ethical decision-making are deeply relevant to our current national reality. The Roman Republic of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*'s resembles twenty-first century America as much as it resembled Elizabethan England, if not more. Contemporary American audiences have as much reason to see ourselves in the characters as Elizabethans did. The difference is not in the relevancy, but in the way contemporary audiences understand the relevancy. The question, then, is how do contemporary stagings of *Julius Caesar* fail to make this relevance clear?

But, for mine own part, it was Roman to me:

How Contemporary Productions of *Julius Caesar* Fail to Translate Today

After the election of George W. Bush, numerous productions of *Julius Caesar* were staged across Canada, England, and the United States. Yet in 2001 the play was called “a constant theatrical disappointment” by Michael Billington in *The Guardian*.¹² Some sixteen years later, the election of Donald Trump inspired a second flurry of productions, which received greater critical success. Not every review of *Julius Caesar* was overly critical, but none were sparkling. Lyn Gardener of *The Guardian* called *Julius Caesar* “a play for elderly actors.”¹³ Meanwhile, Ann Greer of *The Washington Post* hinted at the collective disinterest in the play and recalling memories of dull high school curriculum by framing her plot synopsis as “the CliffsNotes version.”¹⁴ Numerous directors seem convinced that aesthetic changes will make the play successful, which assumes there is something lacking in the text itself. Examples of this include the overt eroticism of David Lan's production at the Young Vic, which infused the play

with pervasive sexuality and clouded the conspiracy of the story.¹⁵ Or the overt equation of Caesar with fascism in Edward Hall's production at the Royal Shakespeare Company.¹⁶ Some directors even make additions to the script, like Chris Abraham's production at Streetcar Crowsnest which uses radio personalities as a prologue to frame the Lupercal celebrations,¹⁷ or the 1953 Marlon Brando film which includes explanatory quotes from Plutarch's *The Lives of Romans*.¹⁸ Every production seems to have had at least one element that did not work, and many articles mentioned aesthetic or narrative additions which ranged from ineffectual to detrimental. Two reviews mention successful directorial choices: the 2001 Royal Shakespeare Company's production, which makes allusions to the resurgence of fascism in Italy,¹⁹ and the 2020 Streetcar Crowsnest production which speaks directly to the global rise of populism but refrains from suggesting to any singular nation.²⁰ The director of the Folger Theatre production references the 2014 American senate election as the obvious reason to produce *Julius Caesar*, but then makes no reference to the art of political persuasion and instead claims that the play speaks to the fundamental human need for war, which seems only obliquely related to senate elections.²¹ Other reviews mention strong performances, weak performances, creative staging, and ineffective costumes, some included well-reasoned accounts of each production's successes and failures, but no critic seemed, as Leonard Diggs would say, ravished.

Many of these contemporary productions applied current theatre conventions to the text, such as the proscenium stage, the darkened theatre, unique and realistic sets, and a stationary and silent audience. These are all theatre practices which contemporary audiences find ordinary and Elizabethans would have found bizarre. I posit that these contemporary theatre conventions are not advancements from the low-tech Early Modern stage but are in fact detrimental to the nature of the Elizabethan storytelling. I posit that there are two fundamental elements required for

effective Early Modern theatre: the first is a neutral stage and the second is open dialogue between the audience and the performers.

Scaena Rasa:

How the Blank Elizabethan Stage supports the Audience Imagination

Contemporary audiences are accustomed to intricate sets, lights, and microphones. Nearly every part of today's theatre focuses on maintaining the illusion of the story and generating greater visual spectacle. Moreover, our sets today are highly specific; a Broadway company could not stage a production of *Wicked* on the set of *Legally Blonde*, no matter how interesting the results might be. This was not so for Elizabethan audiences, whose stages were bare, neutral, and nearly interchangeable between playhouses. Far from detracting from the theatrical experience, this simplicity added to the enjoyment for Elizabethans. The blank stage removes all distractions and gives space for the important ideas in the play to resonate. Additionally, it prompts the audience to engage imaginatively *with* actors; what the actors pretend to see, the audience pretends to see, which creates a richer relationship between performers and listeners. In other words, the blank stage creates an interactive environment in which actors and audience each share an active role in the storytelling.

In *Early Modern visual-verbal esoteric imagery and the theatre*, Sverre Myklebust argues that the Elizabethan theatre experience was characterized by the stimulation of both the intellect and the imagination.²² Storytelling arts in general activate the imagination in some respect, but contemporary theatre works far harder to maintain our suspension of disbelief for us than did Elizabethan theatre. In illustrating the internal experience Elizabethans had when watching *Julius Caesar*, I will draw heavily from the theoretical framework of phenomenology, particularly the second chapter in Bert O. States' book *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, which

is titled *The Scenic Illusion: Shakespeare and Naturalism*. In this chapter, States explores how theatrical objects and occurrences were perceived on the Elizabethan stage. He argues that the Elizabethan convention of the bare stage allows the evocative language space to breathe and do its work. By contrast, theatre sets which approach realism distract the listener from the images in the words and result in a muddled sensory experience.

The 1953 film production of *Julius Caesar*, starring Marlon Brando, offers an excellent example of this phenomenon.²³ In Act 5 Scene 3, Cassius and his men, exhausted by battle, retreat up a hill to observe troops in the distance. Cassius asks Titinius to ride toward the troops and observe whether they are friends or foes. He then asks Pindarus to watch Titinius' progress from a nearby hilltop. Within some six lines following Titinius' exit, Pindarus observes he is taken by the enemy troops. The film stages this scene on a real cliff-face, too steep, high, and rocky for a horse to be nearby. The naturalism makes the lines utterly implausible; Titinius could not have reached the horse in six lines, much less come so near the enemy as to be taken. What seems like an enhancement of the story—a realistic setting—is actually a detriment. The setting offers us a highly believable illusion, but when its realism proves too rigid to support the text, it plunges us into the painful realization that we are watching a play.

By contrast, a platform stage allows listeners construct the landscape in their own minds, editing it instantly to accommodate the story. There are no elements of distraction, no concrete realities to disagree with the dialogue. On The Globe stage, there was often included a ladder which would have been named and used in numerous metaphorical and literal ways. In this scene, it is likely that Pindarus climbed this to suggest a hillside.²⁴ This plants the story squarely in the imagination, where metaphor guides thought. Thus, the blank stage merely suggests the

physical space of the story, which gives audiences the freedom to imagine hillsides, palaces, forums, and cities more beautiful and vivid than any set designer could create.

States' argument demonstrates that when a play asks us to imagine the world drawn by the images in the words, it has not pointed to a deficit in the presentation of the story, but rather given us the images of the world "in the only form this theatre requires."²⁵ The blankness of the Elizabethan stage is not a flaw to be overlooked, but a playground for an essential feature of Elizabethan storytelling: the audience's imagination. The blank stage creates an intimate relationship between actor and audience by encouraging simultaneous imagination. But there is another method by which Shakespearean theatre pulls its audience into the story: the performance style.

Lend Me Your Ears:

How Direct Address Brings Shakespeare's Story to Life

Contemporary acting is shaped by the theories of Konstantin Stanislavsky, whose acting method was largely shaped by the conventions of Naturalism, an aesthetic preference which privileged any artwork that created and maintained a highly convincing illusion of reality. Stanislavsky's system treats all texts, classical or contemporary, through this lens.²⁶ One fundamental element of Naturalism is the theatrical fourth wall, the imaginary barrier which prevents the actors from knowing that they are being watched. This device keeps the world of the stage separate from the world of the spectators and casts the audience as passive onlookers rather than active participants in the drama. But Shakespeare did not write his plays to work under Naturalistic performance conditions of a darkened theatre, a quiet audience, or a realistic set. He wrote for very different conditions, and therefore the plays require a very different performance style.

Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* for The Globe Theatre, a public playhouse which at the time accommodated roughly 3,000 people—due to health and safety codes, The Globe today accommodates only half this number despite occupying the same square footage. To provide sufficient light to see the play, the theatre had no roof in the center. Under the open sky, much of the audience stood during the performance, with only the wealthiest patrons sitting in the balconies. Under these conditions, it is not nearly so easy to lose oneself in the reality of the story as it is while seated in a darkened, comfortable theatre. The actors could see the audience as well as the audience could see the actors, and this mutual visibility is the foundation of an essential Shakespearean performance convention: audience involvement.

Bill Kincaid, Margie Pignataro, and Peter Johnson have identified three types of dramatic speech which guide audience involvement, and which used liberally create a more engaging audience experience. They are direct address, soliloquy, and asides.²⁷ Soliloquy functions like a spoken diary entry; soliloquies occur when characters are alone onstage and reveal their innermost thoughts. However, the audience is not addressed directly during a soliloquy, so the fourth wall illusion is somewhat maintained. Think of a moment in a mockumentary like *The Office* in which a character believes they are in private, but the cameras are actually capturing their behavior. An aside, by contrast, occurs when characters are together onstage, but for just a moment only one character addressed the audience. In the world of *The Office*, think of a character looking directly into the camera during a moment of extreme tension and rolling their eyes. It clues the audience in on the characters' inner thoughts and motivations, but simultaneously acknowledges the proximity of the other performers. It peeks through the fourth wall while not fully breaking the action of the scene. By contrast, direct address completely breaks the fourth wall; it not only acknowledged the audience's presence, it almost demands a

response from them. It is like a talking head moment in *The Office*, in which a character does a private interview speaking directly to the film makers. It turns the audience “from a passive listener into a verbal *actor*.”²⁸ Audiences today are less apt to give a spectrum of responses than were Shakespeare’s audiences; laughter is our most common response, perhaps due to standup comedy being our shared reference for direct address. Shakespeare’s crowds, however, would have also booed and hissed at the villains, or even shouted lewd phrases at some of the lovers, depending on the context.²⁹ Any performer can confirm that an active, talkative, rowdy audience can be a liability during a performance. Shakespeare knew that he could not expect his standing and well-lit audiences to be docile and polite, unlike the seated and darkened contemporary audiences. Therefore, he took this liability and wrote directly to them in order to keep them engaged. This element of engagement in the play is vital to making *Julius Caesar* a successful story.

Yet direct address is very frequently excluded from contemporary stagings of *Julius Caesar*, despite it having been well-documented as a feature of Shakespearean plays and a theatrical device used since ancient Greece. In my own experience as a Shakespearean actor, I have attended and performed in many productions which resist employing direct address, aside, and even soliloquy. Actors are sometimes directed to give asides to other actors, sometimes they are directed to write a letter instead of speaking in direct address, and in some movies soliloquy becomes voiceover. There are many reasons that contemporary theatre-makers might make these missteps. Perhaps contemporary directors fear that today’s audience will not participate the way Shakespeare’s would have. Perhaps their predilections for Naturalism are threatened by bringing the audience so close. Perhaps it begs too much intimacy and heat and vulnerability between the performers and the viewers. Perhaps they subconsciously know that “insult can become

unavoidable when an audience is fearless about participating.”³⁰ Perhaps they simply do not know about Early Modern performance conventions. Whatever the cause, stripping direct address, aside, and soliloquy from Shakespeare fatally reinforces the barrier between the players and spectators; it leaves the audience out of the fun. Thus, by failing to perform the plays as they require, contemporary theatre makers produce Shakespearean works which disconnect audiences from the action rather than directly engaging them. Taking advantage of direct address and asides whenever possible repeatedly breaks the fourth wall lets the audience feel like insiders in the drama. Shakespeare astutely peppered these moments of engagement throughout his plays, perhaps because he realized our capacity for disengagement when we are not called on to participate.

Not only does direct address keep the audience engaged in the story, it also eliminates seemingly impossible problems with the script that Naturalism could not begin to solve. One such problem in *Julius Caesar* is the impossibility of staging a mob of Roman citizens. We have no record of precisely how Shakespeare staged the first production of *Julius Caesar*, but we do know that many of his plays, especially the heavier and denser plays like the histories and the tragedies, feature prologues in on preceding the first scene. Shakespeare likely utilized direct address in his more serious and complex stories because it immediately establishes a relationship with the audience. *Julius Caesar*, which is both a history and a tragedy, features in its first scene two tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, berating a mob of Roman tradesman for celebrating in the Lupercal festival instead of working. Onstage, the mob is sometimes imagined in the wings, with the tribunes looking off stage right and stage left. In the 1953 film, the mob is composed of thousands of extras. Neither of these choices is particularly impactful because both stagings direct the attention of Flavius and Murellus away from the audience. Based on Shakespeare’s

penchant for direct address, I think it is likely that in the original staging, the mob scene was played *by* the audience. If the opening line of *Julius Caesar*, “Hence! Home you idle creatures, get you home!” was directed at an Elizabethan audience, they would doubtless have understood that they were part of the game.³¹ In the Globe Theatre, especially, the audience would have been composed of tradesmen who were enjoying an afternoon of idleness instead of working. If the audience is treated like a scene partner, a delightful element of ironic metatheatre is awakened; the audience is performing their theatrical duty by shirking the day’s labors. Humor is not the only effect which comes from this use of direct address. It also communicates to the audience that they *are* Rome, and it is their good opinion that Brutus and Antony vie for after Caesar’s death. Direct address is essential to engaging the audience of *Julius Caesar* successfully: the metatheatrical humor excites them, but more importantly it positions them in their essential role as the populace of Rome.

Careful examination of the themes of the play indicate that Shakespeare’s intention was to position the audience as active participants in the story; Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* to be a tug-of-war between reason and emotion played out in the arena of politics. Brutus conspires against Caesar to protect the common people against populist tyranny, yet his actions go horribly awry when he fails to effectively argue his case before the Roman masses. Brutus’ fatal flaw comes from his preference for reason and stoicism, which eventually causes the people of Rome to turn against him in favor of the far more emotional and politically shrewd Marc Antony. If we enter the play already believing Caesar is a tyrant, Cassius’ fine arguments will seem obvious and redundant. If, instead, the audience are primed to love Caesar because the direct address tells them so, then they can witness the persuasive power of Cassius’ argument to assassinate Caesar. Direct address in *Julius Caesar* makes the moral questions in the play come alive in the hearts

and minds of the audience. If the audience are the people of Rome, then it is their struggle to choose between Brutus and Antony, between reason and emotion, that gives the play power. Brutus and Antony speak directly to the audience because it is their minds and hearts that are at stake. To strip *Julius Caesar* of direct address is to deprive the audience of their role in the story, and to lose the intended effect of the play.

There is a tide in the affairs of men:

***Julius Caesar's* Relevance Today**

Today, *Julius Caesar* is widely regarded as archaic and troublesome to stage. We seem to feel that the play must be *made to work*; that the content must be explained in full before the play begins, or the story must be reskinned for a younger audience. Yet, the story of Brutus and Caesar is as relevant to contemporary American audiences as it was to Elizabethans. Fault lies not in the play, but in how contemporary productions translate the play from page to stage. I do not argue that productions of *Julius Caesar* must perform the play exactly as the Elizabethans did—on the contrary, I believe changes and additions are part of the joy of creating theatre. Rather, I argue that contemporary productions of *Julius Caesar* can rediscover the elements of fun and imagination integral to the success of the play by utilizing two Early Modern performance conventions: a playing space which allows imagination and metaphor to flourish and an engaged relationship between audience and actors founded on direct address. The moments of joy and wonder generated by these two theatre conventions make the story more effective than any 21st century additions could. The Roman citizens in *Julius Caesar* face many of the socio-political dilemmas American audiences face today, yet they have only the voices of Caesar, Brutus, and Antony vying for their loyalty. They had only one tyrant to dethrone, only one cult-of-personality to uphold or upend. By comparison, the people of 2022 are inundated by

argument, accusation, rhetoric, narcissism, and even megalomania in our leadership and in ourselves. It is urgent that we recognize how to effectively stage this play because its themes are just as topical and urgent as they were when Shakespeare wrote them. I write this paper to encourage theatre makers to approach this play not as a dusty example of poetry and rhetoric, but as a living story which speaks to matters contemporary and timeless. We can better understand ourselves through stories, as Brutus tells us, “the eye sees not itself but by reflection.”³² If we can see ourselves in this story of persuasion, betrayal, reason, pathos and regret, then we can better understand the struggle to make moral choices in the face of uncertain truth.

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