

PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (June 1-3, 2022)
Directed by José María Muscari
International Classical Theater Festival of Mérida*

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CAST

Moria Casán (Julius Caesar), Marita Ballesteros (Mark Antony), Alejandra Radano (Brutus), Malena Solda (Cassius), Mario Alarcón (Calphurnia), Mariano Torre (Portia), Mirta Wons (Lucius), Vivian El Jaber (Caska), Fabiana García Lago (Octavius), Payuca (Trebonius)

What is today known as the International Classical Theater Festival of Mérida (in Badajoz, Spain) began as the Classical Arts Festival in 1933 and 1934. After a long interruption caused by the Spanish Civil War, performances restarted at Mérida's Roman Theater and its archaeological ensemble. Performances began again with a series of initiatives by the Spanish University Theater in 1947 and 1953. However, performances at the Roman theatre decisively took off in 1954 with a performance of *Oedipus* by the Lope de Vega Company. One consequence of the socialist victory in Extremadura in 1982 was the development of the region as an autonomous community. The International Classical Theater Festival of Mérida became part of this regional blossoming that supplemented the transition to Spanish democracy. Since its early performances, the Festival has given space to some of the most renowned Spanish local and national theater artists. Though the site was meant to be for Graeco-Latin works, Shakespeare was first introduced to Mérida in 1955. Since then, Shakespeare's corpus of Greek and Roman plays has been part of the Festival's regular programming.

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Coinciding with the 2022 Pride Parade, the Festival's sixty-eighth edition opened with *Julius Caesar*. The Argentinian Complejo Teatral de Buenos Aires travelled to Mérida with a production directed by José María Muscari, which had been a hit at the Cine Teatro Plata. The concept cohered with the edition's focus on women in the ancient and classical worlds. Female characters and artists were given extra prominence during that summer's season. At first sight, *Julius Caesar* might not seem to be the most obvious fit for the season's program. But the play was re-gendered: male characters were played by female actors, female parts by male actors. The production's goal was not only to encourage male and female individuals to explore each other's viewpoints through the play's gender politics¹ but also to foster playful juggling with categories of gender, sex and sexual orientation in Shakespeare's play. In an interview, Muscari argued that the Spanish context was perfect for this queer take on Shakespeare insofar as debates were taking place over the what has just been recently passed Law for the Effective and Real Equality of Trans People and for the Guaranteeing of the Rights of LGTBI People (Law 4/2023, February 28, 2023).² The production was called radical and transgressive by the local media.

Muscari followed Shakespeare's text closely, though he made the drastic decision to cut acts four and five, reducing them to the proscription scene, the quarrel scene and the parley scene. The latter concluded with manslaughter perpetrated by the gun-carrying Octavius, who, starting with Mark Antony, eliminated every single person on stage, announced the death of all mankind, then received the crown from the Ghost of Julius Caesar himself. The story-world was formed by red-linen sofas and LED screens placed lining the back of the Roman Theater's *frons scaenae*. Shakespeare's Rome became a VIP nightclub dreamscape.

The factions of Optimates and Populares in Shakespeare were replaced by political sides equally driven by fashion, desire, corruption, greed, consumption and striving for popularity. Moria

¹ This re-gendering of characters in *Julius Caesar* was not unprecedented. See, for instance, Phyllida Lloyd's production of *Julius Caesar* at the Donmar Warehouse (2012) and Nicholas Hytner and Tony Grech-Smith's National Theater production (2018).

² See <http://www.canalextramadura.es/noticias/extremadura/julio-cesar-travestido-y-shakespeare-trapeado-esa-es-la-cuestion>.

Casán's Caesar was a voluptuous rap star whose fetishized body simultaneously turned into a feminine and masculine normative model. Octavius was an influencer, a commentator and a choric figure who led the emerging political forces. Antony and Caesar were made lovers. This was also the case with Brutus and Cassius and, eventually, with Antony and Octavius. Muscari inserted misogynistic remarks that spurred reflection on the patriarchal politics of the play. Two soliloquies were written for the Ghosts of Portia and Calpurnia who appeared on stage to protest the historical invisibility that they had suffered as characters. An unusually self-conscious and narcissistic Brutus – fascinated by Caesar's and Antony's bodies, terrified by their autocratic power –, an overtly Macchiavellian Cassius, and an intensely abrupt Caska were an old Left that, for a long time, had been corrupt, ravenous, and contemptuous of the plebs. Lucius was a micro-influencer turned into a morally ambiguous side-switching subject. Trebonius was a trans servant who acknowledged himself a dupe seduced by mass technology and by Caesar's commodification of LGBTQ+.

In Brechtian style, Muscari concentrated on describing the socioeconomic forces and the material culture that shaped the story's events. Digital platforms, WhatsApp, TikTok, Facebook, Tinder, Twitter, public and private TV replaced Shakespeare's fora as arenas for dispute. Trawling, fake news, influencing, and binge-watching became tools to guide the masses to seemingly fulfill what is regarded as their ultimate aspirations: to be guests in Caesar's private lounge before falling off the rails of the rollercoaster of (self-) consumption. Nathy Peluso's songs were used as transitions between scenes and to shine light on certain themes in *Julius Caesar*. "Businesswoman" – playing during Caesar's first entrance – appeared to be used to criticize the tyrant's autocratic rise. C. Tangana and Peluso's "Yo era ateo" was incidental music played to the quarrel scene. The song's focus on the miraculous power of love contrasted with the crisis of friendship in times of impending defeat that underlies the scene.

The play's overall approach to gender, sex, and sexual orientation and their convergences with the themes of love, politics, and mass culture were, to my mind, stimulating, particularly since previous Anglophone re-genderings of the tragedy (see footnote 1) were still

too subjected to textual canonicity, one dispensed with here. As far as I could see as a spectator, re-gendering was neither dismissed nor rejected by audiences. And yet this did not suffice to make this *Julius Caesar* as incendiary as it was meant to be.

Some reviews made too much of Muscari's radicalism in re-gendering characters and of his cynical portrayal of politicians. While the acting was highly praised, deviations from Shakespeare's text were criticized, sometimes through anachronistic invocations of Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953). Others argued, patronizingly, that feminism and LGBTQ+ were not suitable for Mérida's public, accustomed – so they said – to more traditional renditions of the classics. Negative comments were made on the occlusion of the archaeological ensemble with LED screens, red-linen sofa and the narrow range covered by the lighting. Others did not interpret the production's feminism, LGBTQ+, queer, and trap overtones as revolutionary, but as *totum revolutum*.

While I enjoyed the show, my critical reaction to this *Julius Caesar* is mixed. I was impressed by Muscari's skill as a director as well as by the players' deliveries, yet the production did not engage the space in the way it had apparently managed to do in Buenos Aires. This *Julius Caesar* was disembodied, though not in its politics. Obscuring Mérida's site with LED screens and using an extremely narrow section of the *frons scaenae* doubtless facilitated the production's global exportability. But theatrical research and practice show that taking advantage of site specificity in archaeological locations strengthens productions and helps make them unique. Such an opportunity was missed in Mérida. Additionally, some jokes about Spanish politics were too predictable, outdated, or confusing. What was marketed as provocative eventually became simply an amicable, fast-paced and light-hearted theatrical event. Paradoxically, it was not as successful as the much more traditional *Titus Andronicus* (directed by Antonio Castro Guijosa) which in 2019 was put on in the Roman theater with the superb local actor José Vicente Moirón in the title role. This production successfully toured through Extremadura and the rest of the country. But the success of *Titus* was not, in my opinion, due only to its plain delivery of the text. Castro Guijosa took advantage of the site and hired local actors who had been schooled on the site. The overall production was conceived for that specific Roman theater.

Muscari's *Julius Caesar* was provocative though for other reasons. I did not find that the combination of feminism, LGBTQ+, free love, screens, mass media, and popular culture was *totum revolutum*. Rather, the mise-en-scène was a semiotically rich intermedial palimpsest worthy of in-depth examination. Muscari raised questions about the currency of love in times of political crisis. The production challenged the idea that the LGBTQ+ and feminism cocktail itself suffices to produce substantial social transformations if subsumed under the aegis of global capitalism. The inclusion of plebeians as influencers suggested porosity in the lines dividing elites and the lower classes in *Julius Caesar*. Even though the text stresses that the masses were dupes – whose intellectual and feeding habits made them incapable of political action – , these masses were made complicit with the very power that subjugated them. The interpolations of trap, Rosalía, CNCO, Annen May Kantereit, and references to Netflix and mass consumption suggested nuanced lines of intersection between Shakespeare and pop culture. It did so by inviting the audience to ethically assess inter-weavings of the Renaissance and contemporary zeitgeists. Though Muscari succeeded in producing those intersections, it is only to be regretted that this excellent palimpsest did not quite fit the performance space of Mérida.

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