

VOLVO PRESENTS

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Artistic Director, John Bell AM

JULIUS CAESAR

**By William Shakespeare
Directed by John Bell
Teachers' Notes by Nell Hourn**

Teacher's Kit

**Containing 4 lessons and extra discussion material
for use before and after seeing the performance.**

The following Teacher's Notes are presented as a teaching adjunct for teachers and students attending The Bell Shakespeare's production of *Julius Caesar*. The text used here is The Arden Edition, though audiences will notice various textual and character truncations in the actual production, which have arisen to suit the needs of the ensemble and this particular interpretation.

It is the intention of The Bell Company to present a diverse range of interpretative and staging ideas for students' discussion, suiting various ages and interests, via the production of *Julius Caesar* itself and these Teacher's Notes. Thus, interpretative ideas in the notes will differ from those in the production.

We invite teachers and students alike to visit our website - www.bellshakespeare.com.au - for further practical information on the genesis of this production. A 'Design Addendum' to these notes is included on the net for design students, as well as programme notes, cast biographies, and reviews.

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Synopsis

The honours that Republican Rome is heaping on Caesar are so great they have aroused resentment among soldiers, politicians, and popular agitators, who fear that too much power is going to one man. Cassius plots with other conspirators to assassinate him, and persuades the respected Brutus to lead them. The assassination is committed.

Brutus addresses the people, explaining the motive. Antony, disguising his antipathy to the murder and allowed to speak next, turns the mob against the conspirators, who flee Rome.

Antony and Octavius, Caesar's nephew, take command of Rome and lead an army against the conspirators. Cassius, his troops routed, commits suicide. Brutus, haunted by Caesar's ghost, is defeated too, and also kills himself.

PRODUCTION

Director	John Bell
Designer	Jennie Tate
Lighting Designer	Brett Graham
Composer	Nick Wales
Resident Movement Director/Choreographer	Gavin Robins
Sound Designer	Peter Eades

CAST

Julius Caesar	Michael Craig
Marcus Brutus	John Adam
Cassius	Sean O'Shea
Calpurnia, wife to Caesar	Caroline Brazier
Portia, wife to Brutus	Genevieve Hegney
Mark Antony	Christopher Stollery
Octavius Caesar/Flavius	Oliviero Papi
Lepidus/Trebonius	Darren Gilshenan
Decius Brutus/Titinius	John Batchelor
Cicero/Murullus	Robert Alexander
Soothsayer	Katrina Milosevic
Casca/Lucillius	Robert Meldrum
Metallus Cimber/Messalla/Cinna the Poet	David Davies
Caius Ligarius/Claudius	Ashley Lyons
Cinna/Pindarus	Paul Eastway
Lucius	Esther Van Doornum

All other characters will be played by members of the company.

LESSONS ONE AND TWO

THE PLOT UP TO ACT II (i)

It is the feast of The Lupercal, an annual fertility festival, and also in Shakespeare's tale, a celebration of Julius Caesar's great victory over Pompey's sons - achieved some months before the play begins.

Flavius and Marullus have come across common workmen in their best attire celebrating Caesar's triumph in the Town Square. Marullus furiously demands that the workers return home, shaming them for their adoration of Caesar and reminding them that they displayed the same love for Pompey a short while ago. Flavius instructs Marullus to strip Caesar's statues and any public places of adornments honouring Caesar; Flavius will continue to disperse the gathering crowds and send them home in an effort to diminish the growing public adoration of Caesar and his proportionate imperiousness.

Caesar is about to watch a sporting carnival, "the course", as part of The Lupercal celebrations. He instructs Calphurnia to stand where Mark Antony can strike her with the goatskin as he runs past, in the hope that, as lore has it, she will become fertile. Cassius and Brutus remain behind, and we learn that Brutus has been downcast and introspective for some time, is in fact "with himself at war", and Cassius attempts to discover why. Cassius tries to assure Brutus how much he is loved and respected by everyone, suggesting that many have often wished Brutus could see himself and the times around him more realistically.

The noise of the crowd beyond moves Brutus to state a fear that the people are calling for Caesar to be their king, and that he, Brutus, "would not have it so". Cassius, with transparent envy, speaks of Caesar's arrogance and over-grown pride, protesting with instances from his own experience of what he sees as Caesar's failings. Cassius implies that they must redress Caesar's god-like status, and Brutus is very much needed in the equation. Brutus agrees to discuss the matter further, later, after he has examined his own mind.

Caesar solemnly enters after the course and observes Cassius as a dangerous man, possibly a foe, and tells Antony he is to be feared. But Antony does not agree.

Casca relays the events in Caesar's company during the course to Cassius and Brutus. He says that Caesar was offered the crown three times by Antony and three times Caesar refused it, before falling in a fit. Casca mentions that Marullus and Flavius, "for pulling scarves off Caesar's images are put to silence".

In soliloquy, Cassius imparts that Brutus is tractable enough for his purposes. To secure his co-operation, over the night he plans to convey various anonymous written pleas to Brutus regarding Caesar's dangerous ambition and Brutus' high community status.

Casca and Cicero meet in the street in the midst of the most terrible and propitious storm Casca has ever seen. He describes the most unworldly, surreal events of a tempest "dropping fire" and in which "men all afire, walk up and down the streets". Casca sees these events as an ill omen of "the climate that they point upon". Cicero unafraid and not superstitious, departs. Casca then chances upon Cassius who is not fearful of the storm either. He likens the frightening tempest to Caesar himself and his terrible overgrown powers. Casca says that the senators mean to crown Caesar the next day and Cassius rails against it and Caesar himself. Casca joins on side with Cassius, the latter revealing he has formed a conspiracy against Caesar and that they will meet to discuss strategy later this night. He instructs Cinna to deliver the anonymous letters to Brutus, confident that Brutus will be won over before morning.

Brutus, in soliloquy, is agonising over whether murder of Caesar is justifiable. He admits that Caesar has never given him any personal reason to "spurn" him, nor in his judgement has Caesar ever ruled by anything but his reason. But with readiness to defend the liberty of the Roman people, he decides that once crowned, Caesar may very well transform into a despot. Basing this assumption upon common human experience of ambitious ones, he decides that it is better to pre-empt that this will be the case, so determining that he must die now.

One of the letters that Cassius has covertly sent to Brutus arrives, urging him to act for the good of Rome immediately, and Brutus' sleepless struggle between mind and spirit is evident at this point:

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream:

The genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection

II (i) 63-69

Cassius and the co-conspirators arrive at Brutus' house, and upon meeting them, Brutus will not hear of them swearing their allegiance to one another. Brutus suggests each man should already know how deeply he is bonded to the cause itself, the cause being so honourable and irreproachable that oaths would only be for those who have doubts.

It is suggested Cicero would be a valuable addition to their coterie. But Brutus rejects the idea, as he does Cassius' idea of murdering Mark Antony - for "Our course will seem too bloody Caius Cassius". Brutus then speaks at length with high-minded objectives of their plans: "we shall be called purgers, not murderers", while the practical task of getting Caesar to the Capitol next morning falls upon Decius. He boasts that flattery is the easiest means to lure Caesar to the murder site.

Portia enters from her disturbed sleep pleading with Brutus, as his loving wife and soul-mate, to share with her the heaviness he has been bearing for so long and something of the obvious dark conspiracy going on. Brutus yields to her and vows to tell her everything in a short while.

Ligarius arrives and is conscripted to the pack by Brutus. They depart for the Capitol, Ligarius entrusting full faith in Brutus' enterprise.

LESSON ONE

HISTORICAL SETTING AND CHARACTERS

Although Shakespeare's play is set in ancient Rome with real historical figures, here as elsewhere he gives his own dynamic version of history and its characters.

It is well known that Shakespeare's strong source for *Julius Caesar* was Thomas North's Plutarch's *Lives*, but from this he frequently departs for his own creative and dramatic ends. For the purposes of all discussion in these notes, only Shakespeare's versions of events and characters as told in the play will be considered.

Bell Shakespeare's production of *Julius Caesar* is set in the present day, and it is important to note that, as a consequence, many themes and circumstances in the play will be viewed by an audience quite differently than if the play were set in ancient Rome.

A modern audience's attitude to a modern Portia's report of self-mutilation for instance, will be one of shock and censoriousness. No doubt the audience will take the same view of the multiple and even gratuitous suicides in the play, and the same of the marginalisation of women and the feminine role. Not forgetting the cold-blooded murder of a modern political leader himself, murdered partly out of spite and envy. There is also the very real politics played by Antony, so familiar to a modern audience it is almost funny.

In a classical setting however, with a forgiving spatial distance, such acts of violence, politics, and social circumstances appear muted and even perfectly seemly. Their incredible dramatic and human impact is therefore lost with, to some extent, the whole experience of the play.

On the other hand, some audience members do prefer the very objectivity a classical setting can bring to the story. They prefer to be free of emotional involvement, and need the separation from contemporary events and images in order to see and judge with clarity.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

The students might like to discuss both before and after seeing the play, their personal preferences for ancient or modern setting for *Julius Caesar* and the advantages and disadvantages of making either work for an audience today.

LESSON ONE (cont.)

KEY MOMENTS ENGINEERING POLITICAL MOOD AND DRAMATIC TENSION, LEADING TO THE CLIMAX

Julius Caesar is a political thriller. Leading up to Caesar's murder Shakespeare has engineered both a subversive social fear and discontent, and conflicting views of Caesar himself, suggesting an enigmatic political climate.

In the opening scene of the play, Marullus and Flavius, as tribunes of the people, are expected to be the watchdogs protecting public liberty and we witness them rebuking the plebeians for their celebration of Caesar's triumph. We know something is politically out of order already, within the first 35 lines of the play. And we soon know why:

These growing feathers pluck'd from Caesar's wing
Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,
Who else would soar above the view of men
And keep us all in servile fearfulness.

I (i) 72-75

Here is the first mention of certainly what can be called in this production, "fascist autocracy". But recalling that earlier we also have the adoration of Caesar by the general public, and in the following scene, we have examples of deference, even obsequiousness, towards Caesar from Casca, Antony, and Cassius, we see that it is no straightforward or open realisation yet.

In Act I scene (ii) Brutus confesses he is "with himself at war", and it is important that it is he who first raises a fear that Caesar may be crowned.

The dramatic tension increases as Cassius avails himself of Brutus' anxiety by enviously declaiming Caesar for no good objective reason at all. The political mood here is spoiled, spiteful and bitter, and brewing emotively towards danger. Between Brutus' calm reason and Cassius' vitriol, we are starting to view a Rome pock-marked more generally with a dangerous discontent and a subversive dissent.

How I have thought of this, and of these times,
I shall recount hereafter...

LESSON ONE (cont.)

Brutus had rather be a villager
Than to repute himself a son of Rome
Under these hard conditions as this time
Is like to lay upon us.

I(ii) 162-172

Although nothing has yet been said about murder, Brutus' very quiet inference of it after speaking at length with Cassius, "What you would work me to, I have some aim", is chilling.

Caesar's incisive character judgement of Cassius upon his return from the course hits a brilliant bull's eye at the factious quarter, and sets up marvellous dramatic tension. The audience knows Cassius and company have a very good chance of discovery by a leader so perceptive. And as if to confirm this, Casca brings news that Marullus and Flavius "for pulling scarves off Caesar's images are put to silence". This is the first reported evidence of tyranny.

The reports by Casca of the cheering, swelling crowds, and of Caesar's easy manipulation of them, tells us once again of Caesar's popularity, and of his vanity:

If the tag-rag people did not clap him and hiss him, according as he
Pleas'd and displeas'd them, as they use to do the players in the theatre,
I am no true man.

I(ii) 255-258

Cassius' final Iago-like speech in the scene sets up a thrilling hiatus and the most open admission yet of a plan to murder Caesar:

Caesar's ambition shall be glanced at.
And after this, let Caesar seat him sure,
For we shall shake him, or worse days endure.

I(ii) 317-319

LESSON ONE (cont.)

SUGGESTIONS FOR OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

The students might like to consider at this point:

- Is Caesar a burgeoning despot?
- Consider the interpretation of Caesar's Rome as seen by Cassius and the conspirators. Are their perceptions to be believed?
- The dissenters fear that Caesar is heading towards political tyranny. But is he? Shakespeare has left the political situation open to interpretation, for are we to believe the jealous Cassius? Or the disgruntled Casca?
- Is Brutus uncomfortable on a technical point only? As a committed republican, he is loath to see Caesar crowned under any circumstances, even if it is what the people democratically choose. Is he a true democrat?
- Does "put to silence" necessarily mean execution?

In the Bell production, a particular interpretative choice has been made, but of course there are other options.

RELEVANT TEXT REFERENCES Taken from The Arden Edition

Cassius I (ii) 89-159

From

I know that virtue be in you, Brutus

To

As easily as a king.

Casca I(ii) 231-247

From

I can as well be hang'd

To

Receiving the bad air

LESSON ONE (cont.)

Brutus I (ii) 78-88

From

What means this shouting?

To

More than I fear death

Cassius I (iii) 58-78

From

You are dull Casca

To

And fearful, as these strange eruptions are.

LESSON TWO

KEY MOMENTS OF POLITICAL MOOD AND DRAMATIC TENSION (continued).

Act I (iii) gives us a brilliant display of dramatic tension, and here as elsewhere in Shakespeare, we have a huge, portentous and symbolic tempest. The descriptive passages are thrillingly vivid and ominous, and we cannot have but some dread of what is to happen. Casca's words "let not men say, 'These are their reasons, they are natural'," speak for the pervading general understanding that the air, sky, and land is filled with unnatural events. Instances of these are reports of a slave whose burning hand remained unscorched, and the sight of men "all afire" walking the streets.

Whether these powerful, unnatural tidings speak for Caesar's unnaturally powerful rule, as Cassius says they do, or whether they bode of the unnatural act of murder which is to come, or both, is again open. A leaning one way or the other in production could be of great persuasive value to interpretation.

Apart from the effects of the raging storm itself, the dramatic momentum increases with Cassius' subtle implications of the assassination plot throughout his discourse with Casca. Further momentum is felt with the latter's conscription to the reactionary side and the repair of the two men to a strategy meeting, and more still, at the end of the scene where we feel Brutus is indeed already in collusion with Cassius. The camp against Caesar is strong and ready.

Certainly with Brutus' words "It must be by his death" we have arrived at the dramatic point to which Shakespeare has been leading us thus far. At "And kill him in the shell", it is all but over, for now it is decided. It is a matter of when and how.

Brutus' struggle from this point on in II (i) is concerned with his conscience: his duty to his countrymen, to Caesar, to his wife, to himself, and to reconciling all this with the dreadful act of murder.

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma, or a hideous dream

II (i) 63-65

LESSON TWO (Cont.)

SUGGESTIONS FOR OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

- Dramatic tension is obviously one of the most valuable of playwriting and theatre tools. The students might like to discuss these mentioned key moments of dramatic build-up in this part of the play, and any others especially working for them.
- When seeing the play, they might like to take note of how and by what means the director, designers, and actors have made use of dramatic tension.
- What use of lighting, music, staging, imagery, costume, or special effect enhanced the exciting escalation towards Caesar's murder?
- The same observations can be made regarding the production's conveyance of fear and discontent - the essential components of the political mood - as we traverse through a textual crescendo in understanding of the perceived tyranny of Caesar's Rome.

LESSONS THREE AND FOUR

THE PLOT FROM ACT II (ii) onwards

It is early morning after the storm, yet thunder and lightning continue. Caesar recounts Calphurnia's ominous dream of his murder, and while he waits for portentous advice from the priests, she beseeches him to remain at home today. Calphurnia confirms Casca's earlier reports of apparitions seen by her watch - "yawning graves", "shrieking ghosts", and "drizzled blood upon the Capitol".

Caesar, flat and imperturbable, is determined to go to the Capitol. His reasons are that virtually nothing can touch him, that the portents do not apply to him but to "the world in general", that fear of death is far beneath him, and that nothing will make him afraid - for

"Caesar is more dangerous than he". Calphurnia cautions him that he is over confident, and begs him to stay home on account of her fears for him, to which he concedes. He tells Decius to inform the senators he will not come today.

Decius favourably re-interprets Calphurnia's dream to one of great promise and fortune for Rome. He warns that Caesar may be a laughing stock if manoeuvred by his wife's dreams, and further, that the council wish to crown him this day. At this, Caesar determines to go. He invites the company of Publius, Antony, Brutus, Cassius, Casca and the rest to share a drink in friendship before departing.

Artemidorus holds an exhortation concerning all the conspirators, and plans to present it to Caesar on his way to the Capitol, while Portia is under nervous stress keeping Brutus' murder plans secret and worries that all will not go well. As Caesar approaches, Artemidorus presents his warning but Decius blocks him. There is tension as Cassius fears they are discovered by Popilius Lena, but with everyone in place, Metellus Cimber petitions Caesar regarding the banishment of his brother. Caesar proclaims that no amount of subservience will move him to retract his decree, and though Brutus seconds Metellus, Caesar is even more resolute:

I do know but one
That unassailable holds on his rank,
Unshak'd of motion; and that I am he
III (i) 68-70

And on this unremitting plane, Caesar is stabbed, first by Casca in the back of the neck, then by the others to proximate areas of Caesar's body, and last, conventionally to the front, by Brutus. Thus Caesar dies with the words, "Et tu, Brute? – Then fall Caesar".

The murderers cry “liberty, freedom, enfranchisement” to the shocked senators, assuring the elderly Publius that no harm is intended him or any other. Mark Antony has fled, and Cassius and Brutus reflect that they have done Caesar the favour of cutting “off so many years of fearing death”. They rejoice in the worthiness and honour of their action, and anticipate renown as “purgers” through the centuries ahead.

Mark Antony’s servant humbly requests safe conduct for Antony, and Brutus gives him positive assurance, while Cassius is dubious of Antony’s trustworthiness.

Antony is shocked to see Caesar’s body, offering himself up for death if they have him so marked to die. Brutus welcomes him as a friend, and promises him equal contribution to the new order, explaining that “pity” for Rome was their motive. Brutus asserts that Antony will surely understand the purity of their intentions once fully explained. Antony declares that he doubts it not, and cordially shakes the hand of each collaborator, though the sight of Caesar’s body suddenly sends him into heart-felt feelings for the great man.

Cassius remains unsure of Antony’s loyalty, and is even more nervous at the prospect of him speaking at Caesar’s funeral. But Brutus over-rules him. He determines to first address the populace himself, and if Antony will bear Caesar’s body to the public pulpit, he may speak without blame and only in praise of Caesar.

Antony in soliloquy, apologises to Caesar’s corpse for appearing duplicitous, then swears monumental revenge for his slaughter. He prophesises that Caesar’s spirit shall:

Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war,
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.

III (i) 273-75

Octavius’ servant bears news that his master is en route to Rome, but Antony sends a return warning of the dangerous tide in Rome.

From the public pulpit in III (ii), Brutus addresses the restless masses. He proclaims his love for Caesar, but pledges a greater love for all Romans, and avers Caesar’s ambition would have enslaved them all. He offers his own life for his country’s taking when it so pleases. The plebeians fully support Brutus, and call for him to be named Caesar. They offer to carry him aloft to his house, victorious against the tyrant. But Brutus declines, insisting that nobody depart, save him alone, until Mark Antony has been heard.

Antony begins his famous speech with a promise not to praise Caesar. It is apparent the crowd would riot if he did. He affirms the honour of Brutus and the conspirators, compounding it to opposite effect, throughout his dissertation. He divulges Caesar's concern for social welfare by his filling of the public purse, weeping for the poor, and refusing the offer of the crown three times. Thus, the idea of Caesar's ambition is negated. Antony calls for the plebeians to mourn Caesar, pausing a moment himself, for emotional effect. The public tide changes in favour of Caesar, and Antony stirs the populace to avenge his death, and cry war against the murderers. His final trump card is the reading of Caesar's will which leaves every Roman seventy-five drachmas and his private gardens for their public use. Antony's well-carved intentions are evident with: "Now let it work. Mischief thou art afoot..."

News of the timely arrival in Rome of Octavius and Lepidus is brought to Antony.

The raging plebeians murder Cinna the poet, a devotee of Caesar, just for having the same name as Cinna, the collaborator.

The new triumvirate are coolly deciding who shall be executed under their new regime. Members of their own families are not excluded. Antony calls for scrutiny of Caesar's will, that they might extract extra revenue from it for their own military uses. With some spite and superiority, he rails against Lepidus while alone with Octavius. It is clear Antony intends to use Lepidus while he serves a purpose, but certainly he will have no place in the new leadership. He suggests he and Octavius combine forces against the crusading Brutus and Cassius.

Cassius, his army following, has arrived for council with Brutus. It is reported the two friends have been estranged, but the extent of the quarrel is only clear in their first sharp exchange. Brutus insists that they repair to privacy. It seems Brutus has recently condemned an officer for taking bribes, and further, criticised Cassius for pleading for leniency on the officer's behalf. Cassius feels that in difficult times such as these, it is not possible to be punctilious, but Brutus accuses him of corruption. The two friends move through a hostile and at times threatening quarrel, Brutus reminding Cassius of the lofty objectives in killing Caesar. The stress behind their political machinations is evident as each descends to squabbling pettiness. Brutus angrily asserts that Cassius refused him gold when he requested it to pay his troops, as he would not raise it by "vile means". Cassius denies it, then, in a revelation of the deep love between the two men, begs forbearance by Brutus of his faults. Both confess they have been "ill-tempered", and the rift is lovingly healed.

Brutus announces that Portia is dead after "swallowing fire". He gives reason that she pined for him and was fearful of the trouncing power of Antony and Octavius.

Titinius and Messala enter to plan for the coming battle with Octavius and Antony. They bring news of Cicero's death among as many as one hundred executed by the new regime.

Brutus is determined they should all march to meet the enemy at Philippi, but Cassius is not convinced. He feels it is a better plan to make the enemy waste their energies traversing to Brutus' and Cassius' secure mountain camp. Brutus' reasons to differ are that this latter plan would give the enemy the opportunity to tout for conscriptors along route, and that their own forces are "ripe" and "ready to decline". Cassius, though more strategically experienced, concedes.

Brutus is reluctant to impose upon his sleeping servant, Lucius, but requests a song on the boy's lute. In a dreamy sequence, Lucius falls asleep as Brutus, while reading, is disturbed by Caesar's ghost who forewarns that they shall meet again at Philippi. Brutus unsure of his senses, interrogates his sleeping servant and guards if they have spoken or heard anything. None have.

Upon the plains of Philippi, Octavius and Antony are pleased to sight the advancing enemy. Octavius did not think Brutus and Cassius would use this battle strategy. Pressure is high as the four leaders meet and exchange bitter words.

It is interesting to note Antony's acquiescence to Octavius, though he is himself, the older and more experienced soldier, mirroring the order between Cassius and Brutus. Antony addresses Octavius as Caesar already.

Cassius prematurely and uncharacteristically, feels a foreboding sense of death and defeat. He and Brutus bid each other a touching farewell in the case of the worst outcome. Brutus confesses he does not favour suicide as an option, but implies that he could not rule it out either if the choice were to be dragged through the streets of Rome after defeat.

Over the following battle scenes, Antony drives Cassius into retreat. The latter sends Titinius back into the fray to determine the status of the troops beyond, and also orders Pindarus above to report Titinius' progress. Pindarus relays that Titinius is "ta'en".

Believing Titinius to be captured and Brutus to be overwhelmed by Octavius, Cassius, already in a mood of defeat, enlists Pindarus' help to commit suicide. Pindarus then flees. Cassius' last words are addressed to Caesar.

Titinius returns with a victory garland and the news that Brutus has defeated Octavius. Pindarus has mistaken victory for defeat. Finding Cassius dead, he places the laurel upon him and suicides himself.

Brutus discovers the dead Cassius and orders a second battle.

Lucilius is captured impersonating Brutus but conveys that Brutus himself is too noble ever to be captured alive.

Brutus “full of grief” severally requests his sub-ordinates to assist him suicide. They refuse, and their loyalty warms Brutus’ heart. Finally, Strato holds Brutus’ sword while he runs upon it. His last words are notably also to the spirit of Caesar.

Brutus’ men Lucilius, Messala, and Strato, consider Brutus’ suicide an honourable death. Antony’s valedictory of Brutus as the “noblest Roman of them all” and Octavius’ order for a reverend funeral ceremony shows curiously high regard for an enemy.

LESSONS THREE

IDEALISM VERSUS PRAGMATISM

What makes a political leader?

This is one of the most interesting ideas in the play running through the vein of character - Brutus the idealist, versus Antony the pragmatist. It finally begs the questions: is it possible to be a punctiliously honourable leader like Brutus? Or is one compelled to resort to Antony's stripe of unscrupulous politics to survive? But is one really honourable to commit murder in the first place?

Julius Caesar is obviously a rich character study. Certainly the most common interpretation for Brutus is that of the thoroughly good man, indeed the most admirable person in the play, and there is plenty of textual evidence to support it. Conversely, Antony is most commonly seen as the shamelessly calculating politician, and again, the text definitely supports it.

However, a more even interpretation of both men is also justifiable. Considering Brutus first: if one accepts that a thoroughly good man would not choose to commit first degree murder for any reason, let alone the murder of a dear friend, the popular interpretation of Brutus as an icon of virtue, sits very uncomfortably indeed.

A common excuse for Brutus' actions might be "Oh well, politics is like that". But excusing Brutus so casually may be missing the whole human dilemma the play presents. Murdering Caesar also presents a certain irony for a pure democrat like Brutus, considering the democratic way to get rid of Caesar, is to find a democratic way to get rid of Caesar. But the democrats use the autocratic, expeditious route of murder.

Brutus shows quite a few fatal character flaws. One has to wonder, for instance, whether a thoroughly good man would ally himself with a band of conspirators so evidently galvanised by inferior motives. He fails to perceive Cassius' flaunting jealousy of Caesar even though he knows both men very well.

LESSON THREE (Cont.)

Casca also shows a sarcastic bitterness, a jealousy that is quite arresting:

And for mine own part, I durst not laugh, for fear of opening my lips
And receiving the bad air.

I (ii) 246-47

While the other conspirators are not developed characters, if Mark Antony is to be believed, they “did that they did in envy of great Caesar”. Surely it should have been of prime concern to make certain all in the band were pure and devoted to the common good, as Brutus says he himself is. It may be that Brutus was not wise in this regard, but it is hard to see how he could be so blind. Besides which, in society we are all held criminally accountable for our own stupidity, if a crime is involved.

Brutus certainly has honourable intentions. But aspirations are one thing, practice is another. In this light, Brutus may be viewed as a theorist living in an academic world where he justifies the murder of a friend by calling it sacrifice:

Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius
We all stand up in the spirit of Caesar,
And in the spirit of men there is no blood

II (i) 166-68

And throughout this same speech he alludes often to the act of murder as sacrifice. Today we have world leaders who call genocide “ethnic cleansing”.

Although there can be no doubt of Brutus' devotion to the Roman people and the republican cause, throughout II(i) when preaching to his conspirators, he sounds rather like some sermonising, moralising patriarch who speaks of what is right, not from experience, but from some separate idea removed from the intended action of murder. *See II (i) 114-140 and 162-183*

Immediately after killing his friend, Brutus has the astonishing audacity to agree with Cassius' statement:

Cass: Why, he that cuts off twenty years of life
Cuts off so many years of fearing death.

LESSON THREE (Cont.)

The students might like to discuss their views in the light of the text and events of the play.

- Is Brutus a good man?
- Can a good man commit murder?
- Is the quality of shrewdness the fatal missing ingredient in Brutus' character?
- Or alternatively, is he just a different stripe of fascist?
- Are there any contemporary world events – or any in recent history – which parallel Brutus' taking of Caesar's life? Do such comparisons help the students to understand Brutus' position or the world of the play?

RELEVANT TEXT REFERENCES

Earlier scenes:

Brutus II (i) 234- 309

From

Portia, what mean you?

To

Leave me with haste

Brutus II (I) 10-34

From

It must be by his death:

To

And kill him in the shell

Brutus II (ii) 128-129

That every like is not the same, O Caesar!

The heart of Brutus earns to think upon

Brutus III (i) 103-110

From

Grant that, and then is death a benefit:

To

Let's all cry 'Peace, freedom and liberty

LESSON THREE (Cont.)

Cassius III (i) 230-251

From

Brutus, a word with you

To

Brutus: After my speech is ended.

Brutus III (ii) 12- 63

From

Be patient till the last

To

Save I alone, till Antony have spoke.

Brutus IV (iii) 18-28

From

Remember March

To

Than such a Roman

And 65-82

From

You have done that you should be sorry for

To

Dash him to pieces

Consider Brutus' consideration to his servant:

Brutus IV (iii) 240-271

From

Give me the gown

To

I'll take it from thee; and good boy, good night.

LESSON FOUR

Given similar analysis, it is possible for Antony's character to polish up a little more favourably than it does at first sight. Certainly his devotion to Caesar is deep and true. His genuine reactions to Caesar's corpse III (i) 148-150 and in soliloquy 254-275, are heart-felt human responses to the death of a friend. Even III (ii) 171-199, though rhetorical, is moving for the depth of feeling and graphic imagery it musters. His responses to Caesar's death express rage and remorse, as opposed to Brutus' frigid denial of what has occurred on a physical and emotional level.

That Antony dissembles when shaking the conspirators' hands immediately after the murder, is understandable really, given his true loyalty is not to them but to Caesar. That Antony consummately leads the Romans to anarchy in his great speech, certainly displays remarkable shrewdness, but it may be a weapon no sharper than that whetted against his friend and patriarch.

It is also clear that though Antony marshals the plebeians to his purpose of revolution, his motive is revenge for Caesar's murder, not self-interested ambition. Later, it is notable that he submits to Octavius as the senior statesman and the new Caesar.

At the end, he is gracious enough to speak praiseworthily of his enemy, Brutus, in a detailed observation of character. Yet earlier, he did not see through Cassius, as Caesar did:

Ant: Fear him not, Caesar, he's not dangerous.
He is a noble Roman, and well given.

I (ii) 193-94

Antony's morals and methods are questionable at times, but he is evidently living in the real world as it is now. Brutus may be living in a hypothetical world as he hopes it will be.

Obviously he cannot win.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

The students might like to discuss a comparison of the two men in relation to the varied interpretations of character.

LESSON FOUR (Cont.)

- How moral is Antony's whole motive of revenge?
- Who would be the better leader of Rome? Why?
- Does one have to be a Machiavellian ruler to govern efficiently?
- Can one possibly be a thoroughly good and honourable leader?
- The students might enjoy comparing the funeral speeches of Brutus and Antony (III, ii) with attention to what each reveals about the individual characters of the two men, through the use of differing language by Shakespeare.

RELEVANT TEXT REFERENCES

Antony III (I) 183-209

From

I doubt not of your wisdom

To

Dost thou here lie!

And 254-275

from

Antony O pardon me

To

With carrion men, groaning for burial.

Antony III (ii) 75- end

From

Friends Romans Countrymen

To

Mischief, thou art afoot.

Antony IV (I) 1-51

From

These many then shall die:

To

Octavius: Millions of Mischiefs.

Antony V (v) 68-75

From

This was the noblest Roman of them all

To

This was a man!

LESSON FOUR (cont)

WHERE IS THE TRAGEDY IN JULIUS CAESAR?

The death of Caesar is the climax of the play. Leading up to it from II (ii), we know the murder plan is ready but we do not know if Caesar will venture to the Capitol. The tension increases and decreases as it seems he will, then won't. The dreams of Calphurnia, the predictions of Caesar's priests, the possibility of reprieve for Caesar by Artemidorus, fear of disclosure of the plot by Portia or Popilius Lena, and the volatile state of Cassius - "For I will slay myself"- just prior to Caesar's murder, all build climactic blocks for the audience.

As the conspirators all assume their contrived places around Caesar, the audience witnesses a very sinister scene. Caesar in council, unaware of what is to happen, is more unheeding and supercilious than usual. His arrogance is near detestable:

I could well be mov'd, if I were as you;
If I could pray to move, prayers would move me;
But I am constant as the northern star,

III (i) 58-on

Our sympathies are thus temporarily in restraint until the tragic apogee: Brutus and Caesar, conventionally face to face, eye to eye, Brutus with the knife in hand and Caesar reduced to his humanity - the common level - in heart-felt recognition of closest betrayal, "Et tu, Brute?". For some, this very moment is the tragic pinnacle of the play: that a human being we recognised as just one of us in his final words, acknowledged and received the pain of betrayal by a dear friend.

However for others, the tragedy of the play is not here with Caesar at all, but with Brutus. Brutus has the sympathies and love of almost every character in the play, and often of most of the audience. His highest social ideals are crushed. Through his own personal and political naivete, he descends to certain defeat by the razor-sharp strategist, Mark Antony. If only Brutus' egalitarianism and trusting spirit could win wars. If only the world was as simple as Brutus imagines it to be.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

- Where is the tragedy in the play for the students?
- Was Caesar an efficient ruler?
- Would Rome be better off if he had lived?
- What sort of ruler would Brutus have made?
- What sort of ruler will Octavius be?
- The students might like to construct for themselves an alternative interpretation of Caesar. For instance, one who is intelligent, perceptive, thorough and effective, certainly vain and egotistical, but no tyrant. Rome in this case, like any city, would have a certain radical faction, represented by Cassius and company, who interpret everything the establishment do as “fascist”. Thus Marullus and Flavius being “put to silence”, would mean something far more benign.
- What would this interpretation bring to the experience and meaning of the play as a whole? Would the tragedy in the play then be that a good ruler was murdered?

EXTRA OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

THE MALE WORLD OF JULIUS CAESAR AND GENDER REFERENCES AND ATTITUDES IN THE PLAY

There are only two scripted women's roles in *Julius Caesar*. Immediately we can see that the function of women in the domain of this play is probably peripheral.

It is clear *Julius Caesar* is a world of war-making, decision-making men in which women have no active role. Given a modern setting, a modern audience will notice it instantly, as they will the language and attitudes in the play referring to women.

In I (ii) 1-9 we witness the pompous Caesar publicly order Calphurnia into the path of the fertility rites, as if she alone is responsible for their barrenness. Later, the exchange between them in II (ii) is also curiously derisive when at last Caesar mocks her with:

How foolish do your fears seem now Calphurnia!
I am ashamed I did yield to them.

105-106

Noteworthy is how accurate Calphurnia's dreams and predictions of Caesar's death become.

Act I (iii) 82-84 sees Cassius bitterly liken their servitude as men under Caesar as "womanish yoke", and later he blames his distemper upon his mother's legacy, IV (iii) 121-122.

There is a reference in Act II (i) 122 of Brutus' need to strengthen "the melting spirits of women", while his wife's own self-regard is particularly deprecating. Later in the same scene, she repeats over and over again that she is only a woman. Although it must be said, that nothing in Brutus' treatment of her suggests a discursive or superior attitude to her. Indeed, he is loving and appreciative of her, and it is notable how well Portia knows her husband and senses the conspiracy in which Brutus is involved.

In Act II (iv) Portia does seem, to the modern mind, to hold a very low regard for the strength of her sex:

I have a man's mind, but a woman's might.
How hard it is for women to keep counsel!

8-9

And

Ay me, how weak a thing
The heart of woman is!

39-40

Her character is, nevertheless, an interesting one to play in modern times. She is fussy, intelligent and bold, yet lacking in confidence, loving, highly nervous to bordering on the manic, dependent, self-mutilating and finally suicidal. Portia's self-inflicted wound to her thigh, may be seen as an impotent dumb-show of bravery in a society where she will be given no other outlet to test her own masculine side. Her character adds to the dramatic tension of the play when it seems in her womanly weakness she cannot be relied upon in the male world of political intrigue. In all this, Portia speaks loudly for the very marginalisation of women in the world of the play and the personal and general costs of it.

However, there is an alternative view to the inevitable modern one of sexism in the play. It is possible to see and create a world here where men and women have equal but separate roles. Specified gender roles may be necessary in a war-faring state, where the inescapable evolutionary fact of male expendability pushes men to the front in positions of risk, and women to the safety of the rear. Any society of warriors knows that if you kill the women, the society will soon be extinct.

The women in *Julius Caesar* serve safe, though important, classical feminine functions of nurture and prescience, in which the men seem hardly competent; the men take on the perilous business of the government and protection of the society.

Cassius' derisive references to the feminine may also be seen in another way - as a warrior summoning the necessary restraint to the feminine side in himself, considering his objectives and position as a soldier. In this case, it is only himself he is abusing.

This view may depend on how much one values the classical masculine qualities of *doing* and *achievement* against the classical feminine qualities of *being* and *innate knowledge*. And how much regard one has for a society which attempts to embody them exclusively in men and women respectively, and then separate the sexes to opposite ends of the spectrum. Certainly, today, we value *doing* and *achievement* far more than anything so arcane and organic as *being* and *innate knowledge*.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The students might like to discuss these views and possibilities as well as their own antipathies or sympathies with the sexes in the play.

- The bodily gesture of kneeling, suggesting supplication, is used by characters in the text a number of times. Both Portia, II (i) 275-, and Calphurnia, II (ii) 54, kneel to their husbands while imploring them on various matters. What does this suggest to the audience about their status or power?
- See also III (i) 35 Metellus Cimber kneeling to Caesar and later in III (i) 123, Antony's servant kneeling to Brutus. What position of status and emotion are these men in when kneeling? Are all these characters begging for power?
- Do the students agree / disagree that there is a way of presenting a modern interpretation of *Julius Caesar* to a modern audience without it appearing sexist?
- Does the play have a stronger impact just as it is, sexist or not?
- What is the cost of living in a male dominated society for Portia? For Calphurnia?
- What is the cost for Caesar? For Brutus?
- What is the cost for the whole society?

EXTRA OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

SUICIDE IN *JULIUS CAESAR*

I did blame Cato for the death
Which he did give himself, I know not how
But I do find it cowardly and vile,
For fear of what might fall, so to prevent
The time of life, arming myself with patience
To stay the providence of some high powers
That govern us below.

V(i) 102-108

Thus, Brutus perfectly expresses one modern Western view toward suicide. Yet of course, Brutus will change his mind. The many suicides in the play are, as often is the case, motivated by desperation or hopelessness. The one exception is that of Titinius, whose motive is self-blame, or unswerving, perhaps myopic loyalty to Cassius.

Portia kills herself, we are told, because of her own instability without Brutus, her fear of the advancing power of Antony and Octavius, and perhaps because she could see no hope in the political enterprise of which she was now a part.

Cassius' death seems a stupid, desperate mistake. Yet just prior to his death, despite his exchange with Octavius and Antony in Act V (i) and a good a show of aggression and alacrity for the battle, he is suddenly effete:

Be thou my witness that against my will
(As Pompey was) am I compell'd to set
Upon one battle all our liberties.

V (i) 74-on

A few lines later, he is abruptly filled with doom as he uncharacteristically believes ominous signs around him, declaring: "Our army lies ready to give up the ghost". It seems he has already given up himself. He bids the firmest and really, most final farewell to Brutus, and too ready to die, kills himself upon mistaken information that Brutus is overcome by Octavius. We know that normally speaking, Cassius is far too experienced a soldier to make such an impulsive error.

Brutus, in the same broken spirit shortly after, falls upon his sword with Strato's help, and both Cassius and Brutus call out to Caesar in their final moments.

The reigning, pugnacious spirit of Caesar is every bit their fiercest opponent whom they cannot surmount. It is he who defeats them. But it is also their own unspoken regret and deep sense of failure in the whole campaign. Upon a certain plane of imagery, the deaths of Brutus and Cassius are not suicides but fair conquest by Caesar.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

The students might like to discuss these points:

- What is the effect of the suicides upon the republican cause? Does it make the whole venture a failure?
- What effects do the suicides have upon the students individually?
- Is there any nobility in the suicides in the play?
- Is suicide ever an admirable option?
- Is this where the tragedy lies - with the multiple and senseless deaths in the play?