

## FULL REVIEW

### **Philip Pearce, Performing Arts Monterey Bay**

**ON THE SAME WEEKEND** MPC was closing its exciting local production of *Hamlet*, a powerfully innovative *Julius Caesar* opened at Mountain Community Theatre in Ben Lomond. Bill Peters, one of the Monterey Peninsula's most gifted directors, keeps Shakespeare's politically charged tragedy moving with a clarity and force that light up a flexible performing space and adapt to the varied acting talents of a committed cast.

His Director's Notes make it clear that Peters is as fascinated as Shakespeare was with "the dire effects produced by violent acts when they are committed for noble reasons." The acting performances aren't always as strong as they might be. But the violence explodes with plenty of blood and vigor, the noble reasons are served up with a restraint and immediacy that are unusual but compelling, and the dire effects spiral into an ending that is as dramatic as any I've seen in a lifetime of visits to this play.

The action shifts between the conventional raised stage at the far end of the Park Hall playhouse down some steps to a ground level arena marked off by a horseshoe shaped cluster of audience seats. Scenes in the lower area have a directness and intimacy that light sparks under the words and deeds of the story.

Brutus and Cassius are both acted against type and both performances work admirably. Peter Gelblum's Brutus is no philosophical bookworm. He's a benevolent community leader whose blunders in crafting an assassination are accepted by the other conspirators because, like everyone else including the murder victim, they feel an unquestioning affection for this loveable local Nice Guy.

Andrew Davids is unconventional but equally convincing as Cassius. Forget Gielgud's waspish misanthrope, this Cassius is an artful, outgoing spin czar with a nice armory of persuasive rhetoric up his sleeve. He and Brutus act and interact skillfully. Their famous quarrel scene before the Battle of Philippi is clear and moving.

David Leach's Caesar is a chronically self-absorbed narcissist who preps for his fatal mid-March visit to the Senate by lolling in a warm bath. Florid rhetorical speech is such a habit with this world leader that he manages to address even his wife Calpurnia (Ann McCormick) as if she were a public meeting.

By contrast, the political and moral reflections that move Cassius and Brutus toward the killing of Caesar are touchingly personal. "Well, Brutus, thou art noble" and "It must be by his death" aren't even inner soul searches. They are direct challenges and heartfelt justifications spoken straight into the faces of patrons seated in the spectators' horse shoe. It's an eye-to-eye approach that gives the familiar words here-and-now relevance.

I kept wishing that personal touch worked better with Nat Robinson. He's a focused and thorough actor, but he lacks the commanding physical presence or vocal variety that make for a fully convincing Marc Antony. "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" scorns fancy oration and, fair enough, yet it's offered with a reticence that is almost confidential. At one point Robinson even eases into a front row seat and speaks his mind to the spectators sitting either side of him. He uses all the required words and makes all the required moves, but they lack the charisma and guile that would move a crowd to mass slaughter. Their explosions of blood-lust are spirited but seem weakly motivated. Robinson is a lot more effective when he lets himself bellow them back to attention for the reading of the late Caesar's will.

Any new presentation of *Julius Caesar* is that much better if it can offer fresh insights into an equivocal script. This version does that again and again. Most productions tend to wind down after the murder of Caesar and the subsequent high-powered orations of Brutus and Antony. There are bright spots but, with the best will in the world, interest sags a bit as the conspiracy collapses along with the private and public lives of its well-intentioned perpetrators. Not so with this version. Peters and his cast do well by Part 1, but the production really takes off as the dogs of war ravage the civilized world and everyone's high hopes collapse into chaos. Performed throughout in modern dress and contemporary attitudes, this second part of the performance profits from the production's gender-neutral casting. April Bennett has already proved in Part 1 that she's a spirited and charmingly devious female Decius Brutus. Then there's the later scene in which Robinson, briefly but more effectively at work as the Antony of Part II, confronts Samuel Richie's adroit busybody Octavius with the shortcomings of their colleague Lepidus. The incident takes on an intriguing new significance from the fact that this time around Lepidus is a woman. Robin Aronson, having just committed suicide as Brutus' wife Portia, takes on the additional role. Antony's scorn is no longer just some backhanded sniping at a comrade in arms; it's now also a burst of sneering chauvinism aimed at someone he's sure can never be an effective world leader because she's a female.

Most important of all the innovations is what Peters, his cast and choreographer Susann Suprenant do with the ending of this *Julius Caesar*. Antony's predictable closing eulogy is cut and replaced with a wordless pageant that counterpoints the Battle of Philippi and sums up the story in a way that alone more than justifies a trek to Ben Lomond. If you are planning to make that trek you may want to stop reading the rest of this review.

After Caesar's ghost visits the troubled Brutus in his tent on the slopes of Philippi, once the opposing forces arm for battle on the smoke-filled upper platform, Caesar returns to one side of the lower level as a kind of ghostly mascot of the Antony/Octavius/Lepidus army, while the suicidal Portia at the same time appears on the other as a symbol of the Brutus and Cassius faction. The two ghosts lurch and stagger, confront and separate weirdly while the fighting forces on the stage above fall in battle or slit their throats. Their wraiths then come down the steps one by one to join the eerie duo in a bizarre Dance of Death that climaxes with Caesar's Ghost snatching one of the daggers that stabbed him in the Forum and lifting it in a glittering blood stained toast to chaos.

Worth watching, it continues through April 8th.