

# YORK SHAKESPEARE PROJECT NEWSLETTER



January 2009

“You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!”

## **Julius Caesar**

The next play off the YSP conveyor belt will definitely be Julius Caesar, which will be performed at the Monkgate Theatre from May 16 to 30 2009.

Interviews for the director will take place on 28 and 29 January and details of auditions will be sent round by dear Sally shortly afterwards.

Anyone wanting to help backstage or on the production side of things please can contact Sally now and let her know what aspect they can offer their skills.

Richard II will take place in Autumn, also at the Monkgate Theatre.

## **Spring Fundraiser**

We're having a giant and exciting fundraiser in town on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> April. It'll be in front of St Michael le Belfrey and performing exciting sections from Shakespeare including the mechanicals scene from A Midsummer Night's Dream and, as they say, much much more.

## **Julia's Caesar**

For those of us who aren't great experts on Julius Caesar, here's Julia Atkinson, official Shakespearian genius of the YSP on the play...

*Hello Julia, how would you summarize "Julius Caesar"?*

A group of Roman patricians led by Brutus and Cassius conspire to murder dictator-for-life Julius Caesar, ostensibly because of his insatiable appetite for power and glory. However, they

fatally underestimate the political and military strength of the opposition led by Caesar's friend Mark Anthony and adopted son Octavius (the future Emperor Augustus). As a result of this miscalculation, after Caesar's death a civil war breaks out between the two factions. The forces led by Mark Anthony and Octavius are victorious at the Battle of Philippi, and both Cassius and Brutus kill themselves rather than be taken prisoner. Anthony, Octavius and their lacklustre colleague Lepidus survive to divide most of the known world between them, which is an incredible stroke of luck because Shakespeare will need all three of them again for "Anthony and Cleopatra".

Shakespeare took historical events which took place over three years and telescoped them so ingeniously we get the impression that in the world of the play no more than a few months, or even weeks, have passed. This gives "Julius Caesar" tremendous narrative drive – there are literally no dull moments.

*What's the best thing about "Julius Caesar" and why?*

I think the best thing about "Julius Caesar" is Shakespeare's depiction of friendship. There is no conventional love story in the play (although the briefly-sketched but touching relationship between Brutus and his wife Portia comes close to supplying one) yet the words "love", "lover", "loving" and "beloved" occur on average once every fifty lines. Some of the play's key scenes revolve around the friendship between Cassius and Brutus, most notably their quarrel and reconciliation in Act 4 Scene 2. And Brutus' almost fatherly concern for his servant boy Lucius is also striking.

*Who is the most interesting character in the play and why?*

I would say Brutus. If you look at the play's production history it seems rather odd that until well into the twentieth century Brutus, together with the other principal characters, was regarded as the stereotypical "noble Roman" whose virtues were drummed into generations of schoolboys via a classical education. Yet Shakespeare's Brutus makes one disastrous error of judgement after another – misreading the mood of the plebeians, underestimating Mark Anthony, inept leadership at the Battle of Philippi. He is guilty of hypocrisy in blaming Cassius for extorting money, then demanding a share of those same ill-gotten gains to pay his own legions. There's a curious scene in which Brutus apparently pretends not to have heard of his wife's suicide so as to impress his underlings with an awe-inspiring display of stoicism. Yet it's a measure of Shakespeare's genius that when Anthony delivers his famous eulogy over the dead Brutus:

This was the noblest Roman of them all.  
All the conspirators save only he  
Did that they did in envy of great Caesar.  
He only, in a general honest thought  
And common good to all, made one of them.  
His life was gentle, and the elements  
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up  
And say to all the world "This was a man!"

...it's almost impossible not to agree with him, even as you think "Yes, but if Brutus had taken Cassius' advice and had you killed on the Ides of March none of this might have happened!"

*What was the best (and worst) production of the play you've seen and why?*

The best "Julius Caesar" I've seen was Deborah Warner's modern dress production for BITE (Barbican International Theatre Events) in 2005, one of the greatest strengths of which was Warner's casting against type. The play starred three of my favourite actors – Simon Russell Beale, Ralph Fiennes and Anton Lesser. I think most directors would have cast Beale as the intellectual Brutus, Fiennes as the haughty Cassius – he's got the perfect nose for looking down, except when he's playing Lord Voldemort – and Lesser as the devious Mark Anthony. But Warner cast Lesser as Brutus, Fiennes as Anthony and Beale – not an actor anyone would describe as having "a lean and hungry look" – as Cassius. To this day I can't use a laptop without thinking of that production's "black proscriptions" scene, in which Anthony, Octavius and Lepidus huddled over their computers and calmly deleted the names of those marked for death...

Although I've seen some *dull* productions of "Julius Caesar" – the RSC's for the 2007 Complete Works Festival at Stratford was instantly forgettable – I can't remember a truly dreadful one. In fact, given a competent director and cast I think "Julius Caesar" is one of the few Shakespeare plays it's almost impossible to make a complete mess of.

*If you were directing the play what one thing would you do to make the production wildly exciting?*

Easy! Having recruited the entire cast from the Ladyboys of Bangkok, I'd set the play in 1920's Shanghai. On ice.

Actually that's three things, but if you're going over the top you might as well go all the way!

Thank you Julia, I know I'd like to see your production! Although there seems to be the absence in the best of JC of the 1996 RSC version starring John Nettles, Julian Glover, Christopher Benjamin and, ooh, me!

### **The Finest Moustache In All The York Shakespeare Project**



After a steward's enquiry, and a raid on the Darlington Carrzi Offices, the following moustache has been discovered round the back of a filing cabinet. Dear old Jamie, less a moustache, more a work of art! Although the trophy for the Finest Moustache in All Shakespeare has been given to Alex, Jamie is being awarded an honorary doctorate of the University of YSP for moustache studies, which allows him to call himself the Finest Moustache in All the York Shakespeare Project.

## **Competition Prize**

As no-one correctly answered the competition in the last newsletter I got to keep the prize, the false moustache as worn by Alex Darlington and the two tickets to see Doctor Who in Hamlet in London, which was absolutely splendid, if anything improved by me wearing a false moustache.

## **Alsatian Cousin**

Usual thing, any comments, contributions or complaints about me nicking unclaimed competition prizes, please email me at [mr.alistair@talk21.com](mailto:mr.alistair@talk21.com).

Pip pip!