



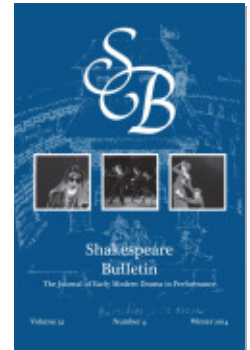
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Julius Caesar by Back Room Shakespeare Project (review)

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(Review)

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double personality of rebellious teenager and future monarch, each production was also guilty of attempting to do too much at once (perhaps an effect of both productions also being codirected). Through age-blind and cross-gender casting, textual conflation, and character bifurcation, both productions confronted issues of identity and performativity. While potentially dynamic production choices, these elements suffered from a lack of staging focus. Whether with young girls skipping through battle scenes or caricatured pensioners cracking wise, both productions used actors' bodies in novel and educationally productive ways, but without clear theatrical intention.



Julius Caesar

Presented by the **Back Room Shakespeare Project** at the **Fireside Restaurant and Lounge**, Chicago, Illinois. March 16, 2014. With Delia Baseman (Citizen/Portia), Victoria Blade (Caesar), Eleanor Caudill (Citizen/Cinna), Caitlin Costello (Metellus Cimber), Kevin Crowley (Soothsayer/Music), Wesley Daniel (Citizen/Flavius/Soldier), Sara Gmitter (Cinna the Poet), Alexander Lane (Citizen/Servant), Molly Rose Lewis (Octavius), Chris Matthews (Citizen/Calpurnia), Matt Mueller (Antony), Kevin Reyes (Lucius), Blaine Swen (Decius Brutus), Samuel Taylor (Cassius), Demetrius Troy (Brutus), and Alex Weisman (Trebonius/Lepidus).

ELIZABETH E. TAVARES, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

The Back Room Shakespeare Project (BRSP) is interested in creating a particular theatrical event. For them, the necessary ingredients to release the ideal experience latent in Shakespeare's plays is to rehearse once, with no director, then perform the play in question as seriously as possible . . . in a bar. The theory is that, under these conditions, audiences and actors can get closer to the kind of play event for which these texts were designed. As an original practices approach, the BRSP is an actorly rather than a materialist methodology. After three years of playing in the Chicagoland and Milwaukee region, they have found both success and a loyal following.

Attendees of their Ides of March performance of *Julius Caesar* were welcomed with two toasts while filing into the Fireside Restaurant and Lounge: first, to brushing oneself off after betrayal; and second, to all things culturally clichéd, the luck of the Irish, and the Roman holiday. The large bar, located in the Edgewater neighborhood of Chicago (a

pocket of single-family homes where cabs and streets lights are equally infrequent), was still frocked with plastic shamrocks and humming from the St. Patrick's Day parades of the day before. The biergarten out back, enclosed by a circus-like tent and sprinkled with makeshift space heaters, served as the main performance space.

At the center of the biergarten was a small and chilly cobblestone courtyard, surrounded by mismatched tiers of reclaimed wooden balcony platforms. Ten minutes after doors opened the few dozen tables and chairs available were claimed, and the rest of us were reduced to draping our coats and ourselves over any available edge we could find. As we searched for a ledge on which to get cozy, several fellow spectators claimed that this was their usual experience of a BRSP performance; later more than half the crowd admitted to having attended one of these shows before. The only source of light was colorful paper lanterns that mixed in between tendrils of ivy above, giving the space a pastoral glow to match the general hoppy buzz.

But the campaign to fill this room had started long before. The Facebook Event feed for the show had sent out intermittent notices in the month preceding. They started simply: "Julius Caesar rode a horse with toes" or "Julius Caesar invented cocaine." In the week leading up to the performance, those of us who had committed to the event were sent notices with more motive:

Caesar was kidnapped by pirates. They played cards, sang songs, and traded war stories together. Caesar joked that they would all be crucified soon enough. Everyone laughed.

Until they were all crucified.

Caesar nailed them to the masts of their own ships and set [them] afloat in the Mediterranean.

Caesar must die. Sunday.

We were being treated to a viral propaganda campaign. Slowly we were being fed myths and facts first about Caesar's beatific status, and then about the horrors he had committed in the name of personal power. We were not only being asked to attend, but to collude with Cassius and Brutus, to support their murderous machinations. As spectators, we were expected to be as knowingly culpable as Shakespeare's conspirators.

While advertised as one-night-onlys, BRSP events are attenuated performances that are slowly cultivated online before taking shape on an

improvised stage. The Facebook postings kept the coming event present, as well as gradually and informally revealing what was at stake in its plot. (These performances are always free; however, donation jars are made available to fund pre-performance drinks for the actors, as well as audience participation elements like the conscription of front-row spectators to whack at actors costumed as bears with Funoodles—a farcical riff on ‘bear-baiting.’) We were filled in on the conflicting opinions concerning Caesar’s imperial status, gaining just enough intellectual collateral to mitigate the disorientation of being thrown *in medias res* to the language and action.

The ambiance of the production struck me as somewhat closer to what early moderns might have experienced in an inn yard than at the playhouses. (In the past, BRSP has put on productions aiming to recreate the experience of something like the indoor Blackfriars.) Not peanuts but full plates of food and trays of beer made their way in and out of the biergarten at regular intervals throughout the performance, the servers having been asked to show only a mild regard for the play at hand. (The bar had released a Groupon promotion—\$15 for \$30 worth of dinner—that coincided with the holiday weekend.) The noise of the main bar did not so much compete with the actors as it filled in the sonic landscape: a background humming with passersby just on the edge of the event itself.

With the courtyard, food, and foot traffic, this particular performance did not ask its audience routinely to disrupt the frame as much as it asked us to reframe our personal script of behavior as spectators. It was a smartly cohesive approach to a rather uncohesive play. An anticlimactic read, the play begins with a fantasy of senatorial cohesion that peters out after Julius Caesar’s death in act three. Here, we as an audience experienced the power of the cohesion that planning a revolt can create, as well as the emotional fragmentation when murder failed to be a wellspring for some larger social unity. Actors portraying nameless citizens were strewn throughout and attempted to entice the crowd to chant and respond. But as conditioned theatergoers watching a play that intentionally broke apart those ties that bind, the combination of the seriousness of the acting with the regular kicking over of pints made it difficult to know our own script (Fig. 16).

In an attempt to bring some coherence to the play as a narrative, the production stressed the two Caesars, Julius and Octavius, as bookends to the plot. Women were cast in both parts, and the gender pronouns were changed from “he” to “she” and “him” to “her,” all the more noticeably as the rest of the cast was largely male. Wearing white summer frocks and



Fig. 16. Victoria Blade as Julius Caesar is restrained by Decius Brutus (Blaine Swen) as Brutus (Demetrius Troy) prepares to deliver the fatal blow in the Back Room Shakespeare Project's 2014 production of *Julius Caesar*. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth E Tavares, with permission of the Back Room Shakespeare Project. The Back Room Shakespeare Project does not have professional photos taken, but rather encourages the audience to take photos and post them to Facebook and Twitter (#brsp and @the_brsp). It has permitted the author to share this photo of the production here.

gilt headbands to signify coronets, the two Caesars were the only actors mildly out of contemporary dress (or rather the least weather-appropriate for the brisk nine degrees outside, not counting wind chill). Calpurnia was likewise gendered male, converted into a simpering suburban husband complete with plaid pajamas, newspaper, and morning coffee. The seasonal and gender discontinuities underscored the Caesars' positions as semi-divine political figureheads—not quite of this world, or at least not of this moment.

This highlighting brought more clearly into relief the troupe's interpretation of the play, which stressed both the necessity of a semi-divine figurehead around which to rally a community and the fruitlessness of killing a political figurehead to achieve release from political "bondage." Emphasis was routinely placed on the notion of bondage, especially in

the alliance between the darkly besuited Brutus and the calculating Cassius. Cassius was the calm eye in the storm made of intrigues and omens, whose clear motives and absolute unwillingness to be forcibly subjected to any singular ruler made of no more mettle than he brought Brutus's equivocations into stark relief. In the scenes between Cassius and Brutus the clatter of plates and clink of steins was stilled, the audience pausing for a minute to take in the stakes of tyrannical representation.

Such an atmosphere begs for some comic relief, and the Soothsayer served this turn, played as both a prophetic voice—it was he that incanted “beware the ides of March,” the date on which this performance took place—and human jukebox. A tall and lank hobo with beaten guitar, patchwork scarf, and fingerless gloves, he kept the action continuously in motion with cover songs both related to the action and immediately sing-able by the audience. The most powerful instance was his concluding the play with U2's “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” to which both audience and actors sang along. It was then that our communal script was most clear and we as an audience were allowed to enjoy the kind of social cohesion that the ephemerality of the play event makes possible, even if only for a moment.



The Duchess of Malfi

Presented by **Resurgens Theatre Company** at the **New American Shakespeare Tavern**, Atlanta, Georgia. April 14–16 and April 18, 2014. Directed and edited by Brent Griffin. Stage-managed by Kathryn McDonald. Choreography by Hayley Platt. Costume Design by Anné Carole Butler. Fight Choreography by Matt Felton. Props by Kathryn McDonald. Vocal arrangements by Olivia Kaye Sloan. With Chelsea Braden (Julia), Daniel Carter Brown (Bosola), Laura Cole (Duchess of Malfi), Bryan Davis (Cardinal), Kayla DelPizzo (Cariola), Thom Gillott (Ferdinand), Ryan Krygier (Delio), Stuart McDaniel (Antonio), Jim Wall (Doctor/Executioner/Servant), and others.

CAMERON E. WILLIAMS, *University of North Georgia*

In the first act of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the titular Duchess defies her brothers' orders never to remarry and proposes to her steward, Antonio. It is a pivotal scene that exposes the strength and fearless confidence of the Duchess's character. Resurgens Theatre Company added another layer of complexity to this scene in its recent production of Webster's tragedy: as she delivered her proposal, the Duchess (played