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**THEATER**

## Hail Caesar!

Contemporary context enhances  
Shakespeare's classic *Julius Caesar*

BY FLORA SUSSELY



Eric Newsome (left) as Brutus and Deanna Wells as Cassius in Tygres Heart's *Julius Caesar*

**S**ure, it has stabbings and bloody handshakes and a wife on her knees and political betrayal—but you can bring the kids!

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* opened Friday, Oct. 9, to a small but enthusiastic audience. Among them my son, who shouted and rabble-roused right along with the diehard Shakespeare aficionados.

Tygres Heart set the stage by having ushers wear those silly campaign hats worn at political conventions and handing out election buttons declaring "Julius Caesar, Right for Rome." This won the hearts of the children in the audience.

The program, likewise, is printed as a special election edition of a newspaper, and the theater is set up as a senate chamber. A U.S. flag hangs in the background, podiums bear congressional insignia, and pages in navy blue blazers appear and disappear.

Tygres Heart drops Shakespeare's entire play into a contemporary U.S. context. The part of Cassius, the manipulative, calculating conductor of this tragedy, has been cast as woman. Of all the parts that could have been reversed for a woman, Cassius is the one in fashion. I guess it's a little 20th century misogyny thrown into our current poetic license. As the French say: "Cherche la femme." And "There's the rub," as old Will would say.

For those of you unfamiliar with this tale, it begins as Caesar (Tom Lasswell) is about to be elected Dictator for Life. We the audience participate in cries of "Caesar!" which my 9-year-old really enjoyed. Then Cassius, played by Deanna Wells, recounts the tale of having witnessed Caesar in the throes of a fever. The story she tells is not of an immortal god, but of an ill man crying out for water. And thus the seeds are planted to remove Caesar.

Brutus (Eric Newsome) broods and paces by

candlelight, his wife begging him for reason. Cassius is conniving and convincing; men in hats and trench coats and a relay of stabbings lead up to the beautiful Marcus Antonius eulogizing Caesar and inciting civil war.

Director Doug Miller employed a collection of hilarious double-entendres, including dressing Brutus and his entourage in Fidel Castro-esque garb for the revolution. Kris Menger's costumes and props were so on-target that Miller's vision was crystal clear. It felt like watching a documentary about some modern rebels and this year's election.

The actors sit and stand among the audience to shout and protest and argue. There are no dull moments. For those of you who think you don't (or won't) like Shakespeare, I would usually recommend a comedy, but this is a good beginner play—at least the way Tygres has presented it.

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The only negative thing I can say is that, at times, the speeches were delivered too quickly. Granted, that's better than ponderously slow, but it makes it easy to get lost. This prevented boredom but did leave a lot of us asking "What did he say?" And, not being well-versed in 17th century English, we found ourselves perplexed. But not for long. The play moved at a good clip and soon we were off again.

As for individual performances, Tom Lasswell played a dignified, elegant Caesar. Eric Newsome was a perfectly confused and manipulated Brutus. Kevin Otos is eloquent and did a captivating job portraying Marcus Antonius. The best female performance was delivered by Allison Anderson, playing Brutus' wife, Portia. Anderson is natural, passionate, insistent. In her one and only scene, she dominated the stage with her presence from the moment she appeared—a perfect juxtaposition to her befuddled hubby.