

pieces are added (aside from an almost steady flow of armor and swords), but a huge stage-filling canvas does effective double duty as a battle-ground and a tent. Hands' strongest contribution is his lighting (with the assistance of Clive Morris). Startling and sudden changes in the light's intensity and color radically alter the shape of the walls and floor, effectively creating the many locales suggested by the play. A stormy night scene and the startling first appearance of Caesar, played with stentorian splendor by Joseph O'Connor, are especially fine visual moments. A grotesque display of Caesar in his coffin, as well as the wandering ghost of Caesar haunting the conspirators, are also stunning moments, but largely due to O'Connor's powerful presence.

But too often the staging is static and flat. Some of the play's most famous scenes, such as the assassination of Caesar, come off like textbook exercises. Early on the production moves with adequate pace and the acting area is used with some invention and fluidity, but later the pace slows to a crawl. The actors become increasingly declamatory and, with the exception of the introduction of the large canvas, Hands seems to have exhausted the possibilities for movement.

The company is uniformly competent, with standout performances given by Roger Allam as a strong and conflicted Brutus, Janet Amsbury as an sharply intelligent and highly emotional Portia, Susan Colverd as a frumpy Calphurnia, and Geoffrey Freshwater as an intense and furtive Casca. Nicholas Farrell's stolid Mark Antony disappoints, but Sean Baker's shriveled Cassius is a gritty, edgy performance that seems stifled by the staid production.

What emerges from all of this is an uninspired reading of Shakespeare's well-worn theme of the powerful, but distinctly human leader who suffers from excessive hybris. The great man is manipulated by the cunning plots and deceptions of a few sychophantic followers who succeed in attracting the aid of a couple of powerful and ambitious supporters in a sinister plot. There is certainly an exciting play in such a story, but unfortunately one could find considerably more lively theatre in Oliver North's Iran-Contra testimony than in this flaccid *Julius Caesar*.

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