

Orson Welles' 1937 Production of Julius Caesar

A director's preparation

Directing Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar is the first tragedy written by William Shakespeare and was probably written in 1599. It deals with a famous event in classical history – the assassination of the Roman General and Consul Julius Caesar in 45BCE by conspirators who believed his personal ambitions to become an autocratic leader would overthrow the Republic of Rome and its government. The issues examined in the play – democracy, ambition, loyalty (both personal and public) and the complexities of political allegiances in civil war, resonate as powerfully today as they would have done to an Elizabethan audience, ruled by an autocratic monarch who was old, had no heir, and was the last of the Tudor dynasty.

During the twentieth century, as the political ideologies of fascism and communism competed with democracy to become the dominant form of 'world government', the play's exploration of the effects of ideological struggle and the cult of leadership seemed even more pertinent and achieved a stunning realisation in Orson Welles' famous 1937 production of the play.

Directors have always been drawn to plays which offer an opportunity to explore ideas that interest them, and also understood the unique power of drama to give space to ideas and views that might be controversial. It is unlikely that Orson Welles decided to direct Julius Caesar and then came up with a production concept. He would have been drawn to the play because its subject matter enabled the kind of examination of contemporary political ideologies he sought to exploit artistically. The play's setting in ancient Rome would have had a powerful resonance for a contemporary audience aware of the extent to which the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was manipulating ancient Roman myth to support his new 'empire'. Fears that there would be another 'world' war and questions about what part the US would have to play were already beginning to be voiced and Welles' decision to emphasise similarities between Julius Caesar in the play and Mussolini (particularly physically) was a conscious provocation to the audience to take sides and have a view.

Beginning the process

The cast list of Julius Caesar lists 41 different characters, and in addition, 5 'Plebeians', 3 Soldiers in the army of Brutus and 3 in the army of Antony. There are also 'Commoners, Soldiers and others'. Some of these characters only speak once and it would have been common practice even in Shakespeare's time for actors to 'double' roles, playing more than one part and also taking part in crowd scenes. Even with actors doubling, it is still a dauntingly large cast.

Julius Caesar is a big play in scale of setting. There are domestic scenes, but much of the action takes place in public environments like the streets of Rome. In Shakespeare's time, there was no set as we understand the term, but as theatre technology became more sophisticated and it was possible to incorporate scene changes, productions became more elaborate and more literal. In modern times, the fashion for the single-set production meant that the set became much more significant, requiring a visual style that would convey the play's essential subject, whilst remaining flexible enough to convey the particulars of a scene's setting. Large-scale productions survived but it was in cinema that the full visual life of the play could be most effectively and realistically achieved. Joseph Mankiewicz's 1953 film, starring Marlon Brando, James Mason and John Gielgud makes full use of all the panoramic visual excitement and variety the play contains.

Practicalities

There are three significant practicalities to be addressed by the director when beginning to work on a theatrical production:

Venue – where the production will take place

The venue will define:

- Scale of production – is it a studio? Is it a large theatre?
- Design possibilities – is the space a conventional proscenium arch theatre? Is it 'in the round'? Does it have a thrust stage?

Budget

The amount of money available for the production will dictate the:

- number of actors who can be employed
- length of rehearsal period
- scale of costume and set design
- technical scale of sound and lighting
- composition of original music

Cast

- Will the production be an 'ensemble' piece?
- Is it a 'star' production (usually commercial/West End/Broadway) with one or two actors being paid a significant amount to be in it?

N.B.: Where a star actor is involved (as when Denzel Washington played Brutus in Julius Caesar on Broadway in 2005) this will usually be known before the venue and budget are decided.

Creative choices

Creative decisions about the production concept and style will be crucial to the outcome of the production and will involve a creative team:

- set designer
- costume designer (usually, but not always, the same person who designs the set)
- lighting designer
- sound designer
- musical director/composer (if there is music, either recorded or live, this is a different responsibility from sound design)
- assistant director
- casting director (who works in collaboration with the director, introducing them to actors whose work they may not know and coming up with lists of names of actors who are suitable for each part)

The director's job is to work in collaboration with all these different areas of production to develop a coherent concept of the play, which will then inform the rehearsal process. A good director will have some knowledge of all the creative elements of a production so they can make the most of the creative expertise available to them. All those involved will have a large creative input but the director will make the final decisions.

The director's view

A good director will have a very thorough knowledge of the text, reading background and studying in minute detail all the nuances and challenges of the text. The director's view of the play and their ability to communicate it to others is essential to the success of the production.

How does a director take a view?

The relationship between the director and the text is as intimate as that of the actor and the text. The difference between the two is that while, for the actor the most important issue is how they develop their characterisation and come to know the person they are playing, the director must always have an OVERVIEW of the play, which allows for the right balance of themes and details in order that the ideas of the play can be most fully realised. Issues of interpretation have become very important as great plays like Julius Caesar are re-examined in different social and political times and the director will always be looking for new discoveries in meaning and relevance to a modern audience.

The director must first of all understand what the play means to them – which of the ideas in the play seem to them to be most important and what the world of the production needs to convey to emphasise and illuminate those ideas. It is important to remember that in theatre anything is possible and the scope of technical possibilities, which now includes video and film,

are endless. The huge number of the creative possibilities offered by Shakespeare's plays are made significantly greater by the fact that he wrote for a theatre with no set. ALL the scene setting happens in the text and a director can interpret that text imaginatively to create visual environments as they choose.

Some questions for the director:

- When is this production set?
- Does the director want to do a 'historically accurate' production set in Ancient Rome?
- Does the director want to place the play in another historical context?
- Does the director want to place the play in a contemporary setting?
- Where is this production set?
- Is the play taking place in a realistic world, with walls and doors etc.?
- Is the play happening in an unrealistic world, where scenes happen in undefined spaces and there are more symbolic renderings of place?

Good directors are able to communicate their view of the play to their colleagues and inspire confidence and belief in their creative judgement, and achieve the commitment of everyone involved to following their creative vision. If you couldn't see any connection between 'Julius Caesar' and fascism, if you believed that Shakespeare shouldn't ever be cut, if you didn't like the idea of 'modern' dress, you probably wouldn't have a great time working on Orson Welles' production! And he probably wouldn't have a great time working with you!