

Ides of March no match for daring Shakespeare production

High praise for corporate Caesar

Julius Caesar

At the Jericho Arts Centre until March 19
Tickets: 604-224-8007

Reviewed by Jo Ledingham

"BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH" is a warning nearly a hundred people didn't worry about when they turned up March 15 at Jericho Arts Centre. While mid-March turned out badly for Julius Caesar a couple of thousand years ago, it was a good thing for those who went to see this Orson Welles/Neil Freeman adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

This Mad Duck Equity Co-op production, directed by Jack Paterson, deserves all the praise it has been getting. It's splendid in every respect.

Al Frisk's theatre-in-the-round set design is simple yet regal: a triple-tiered platform in centre stage with four red-curtained arches at the room's corners. Lighting designer Melissa C. Powell keeps our attention tightly contained in this central area, while the rest of the space remains mostly in shadow. The intimacy of the Jericho Arts Centre and the concentration of action focuses our attention exactly where Paterson directs it.

An equity co-op is self-produced (read "labour of love") and members take equal shares of net box office proceeds after expenses. The cast of this *Julius Caesar* is almost completely professional and several in-demand actors—including Lucia Frangione and Craig March—have been frantically juggling this show with other gigs. Paterson wisely has understudies ready to step in. Frangione, for example, could



Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* goes business class in this Mad Duck Equity Co-op production.

not be present for every show and the night I attended a very capable Karen Rae played Portia. (Frangione returns for the March 19 performance.) Craig March is fitting a filming commitment into his nightly live performance as Brutus. Some nights the cast has played "musical actors"; director Paterson has even stepped in a couple of times. While it sounds like a nightmare, this production nevertheless looks flawless.

Paterson brings the action forward in time: the players look very corporate in their suits, shirts and ties. When the going gets rough, the jackets and ties are gone, and the sleeves are rolled up. Scarlet scarves replace Roman daggers. Women, sometimes also in suits, play a few of the male roles. Paterson presents a realistic cross-section of a present-day corporate or political structure complete with its metaphorical backroom deals and backstabbing.

Central, of course, to the play is Caesar, here played by lean and hungry-looking Chris Britton. Arrogant and confident, Caesar waves to the

crowd while it's obvious his mind is in the senate where trouble is brewing and his power threatened.

In an inspired directorial decision, Paterson brings Britton back in the final battle scene. Battle-scarred insurgents fall as the ghost of Caesar simply strides by. Britton, still immaculate in his suit, walks a circle around the playing area and one-by-one, the soldiers drop.

Brutus, as played by March, is a decent but easily manipulated man led astray by the cunning persuasion of ambitious Cassius.

What March lacks in huge stage presence, he makes up for in engagement and clarity. Like a lover, March tenderly cradles Caesar's body as it falls. It's a lovely moment and sensitively handled.

Craig Erickson's Antony enters more like a gum-chewing, playboy sidekick of Caesar but quickly emerges as Caesar's passionate and cunning eulogist. He works the crowd like a carney and Erickson keeps us coming and going in his "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech just as Antony did the Roman citizens. Later, when Antony is part of the ruling triumvirate, Erickson reveals his character's true nature with the punch and aggressiveness of a prizefighter.

Central to this production's success is Kevin Williamson as Cassius. Williamson exudes both charm and malice that keep us constantly guessing: is he ambitious or is he a true patriot? Williamson's performance suggests the answer is "yes" and "yes."

Anchored in the language of Shakespeare but firmly planted in the present, this is a *Julius Caesar* that we can ponder as our own politicians parade themselves before us.