

Democratic selection yields updated classic

By Leanne Campbell

One of the oldest sayings in show business is attributed to American entertainer George Jessel: "You give 'em what they want and they'll fill the theatre."

ON STAGE

Julius Caesar

To March 19 (Tues.-Sun.) at Jericho Arts Centre (1675 Discovery), 8 p.m. Tickets \$14-\$16 (half-price on Tuesday) from 604 224-8007.

To help determine exactly what might tickle our collective fancy, the Mad Duck Co-Op held an online poll last September, inviting the public to vote for one of three plays: *Not About Nightingales*, a recently re-discovered work by Tennessee Williams; *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* by Michael Ondaatje; and William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The results, described in a news release as being "as close as an American election," were 26.1 per cent for *Billy the Kid* and 35.9 per cent for *Nightingales*, but the Bard nosed them both out, garnering 38 per cent of the love. A brief outline of each play was given, so potential audience members had some information on which to base their decision. One of the notable details was that this version of *Julius Caesar* was set in Washington, D.C. Pardon me? How could this work? As it turns out — brilliantly.

After dark-suited Secret Service agents have secured the perimeter of the in-the-round

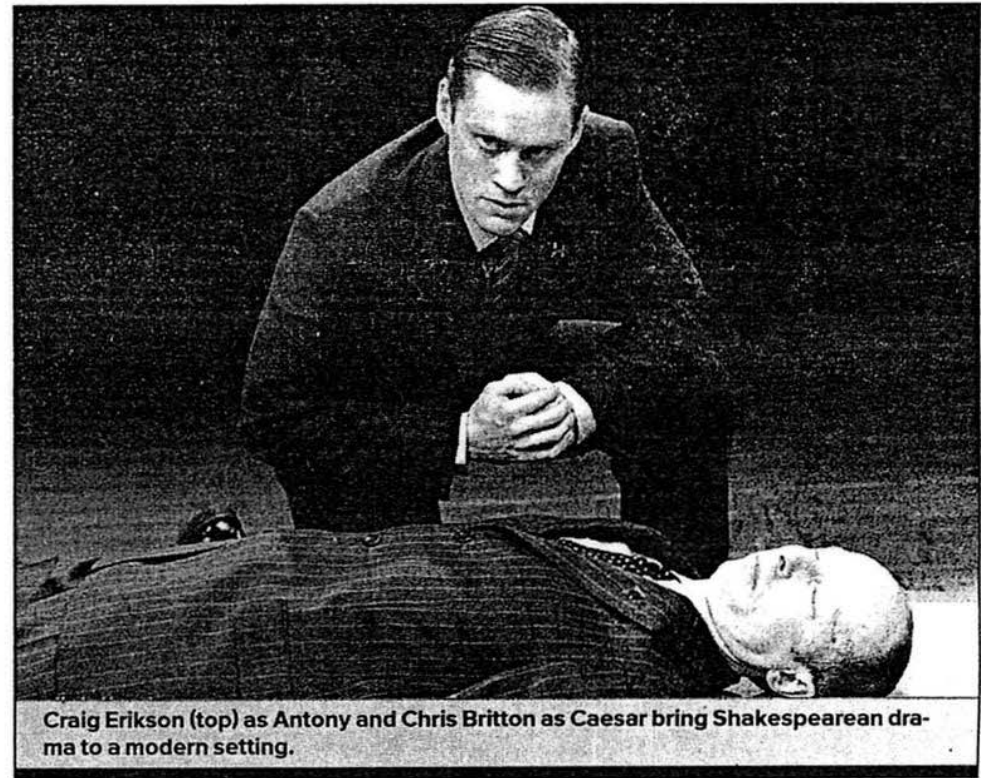
theatre, a press conference takes place where a "street" person warns Caesar about his fateful March date with doom. Chris Britton, clad in a tailored dark suit, has Calpurnia (Teryl Rothery) on his arm in a Chanel knock-off. As they pass through to the adoring crowd, Cassius begins planting the seeds of Caesar's demise in his brother.

It's almost scary how well the guts of the political machine transcend centuries, and, though the broad correlations are too easily cited (tyranny, conspiracy), director Jack Paterson has added fine details such as, when one character asks another if he will "dine with us tonight," he consults his hand-held personal organizer before answering.

The set is a simple, lozenge-shaped, three-tiered riser. There are no real props to speak of, and swords, wounds and even letters are represented by swaths of red cloth. It was particularly impressive in the scene where Antony (a very fine Craig Erickson) eulogizes Caesar: instead of pointing to each wound, he picked up each red rag and threw it down, naming its perpetrator.

While Britton is imperious and blindly trusting in the titular role, he gets snuffed out before the end of the first act. The play rests on the back of Brutus, and Craig March is more than up to the burden; he shows the character's profound confusion but, more importantly, fills the role with the passion it deserves. He's physically correct — reminiscent of a young John Belushi — and shows tenderness in his scene with Portia (Lucia Frangione, doing her usual good work).

As Cassius, Kevin Williamson also turns in a commendable performance, as does Ian



Craig Erikson (top) as Antony and Chris Britton as Caesar bring Shakespearean drama to a modern setting.

Farthing as Cinna. And, though Keith Martin Gordey got all of the laughs as a very fruity Caska, he needs to spend a bit more time with the script.

As it is played in the round, there are at least eight different entrances and exits, and cast members deliver some of the crowd-scene lines

from the last rows of the audience, unobtrusively incorporating us in the rabble. At about two hours (including intermission), this *Julius Caesar* is a pleasant discovery. It's chilling what outrageous and terrible acts can be justified by "love of country" — then and now.