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'Caesar and Cleopatra'

By: Stuart Duncan, TimeOFF

03/12/2003

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Actors' NET of Bucks County opens its 'Toga Trilogy' with George Bernard Shaw's 'simple return to nature and history.'



C. Jameson Bradley and Tammy Koehler star in *Caesar and Cleopatra* at the Heritage Center in Morrisville, Pa.

It is sad that many high school students get their introduction to Julius Caesar through Shakespeare's play of the same name. The man from Avon took some delight in portraying the Roman general and administrator as something of a weakling and a braggart.

History has questioned that assessment and, partly to answer, George Bernard Shaw wrote *Caesar and Cleopatra* in 1896, explaining that it was "a simple return to nature and history." He further insisted that Shakespeare's character is "the reductio ad absurdum of the real Julius Caesar."

Actors' NET of Bucks County has mounted a stunning production of the Shaw play on its tiny stage at the Heritage Center in Morrisville. It will knock your eyes out with its majestic setting and costumes, then tease your brain into pretzels with the playwright's joyous leaps to surprising conclusions. In a series of impressive mountings, this one — with George Hartpence as director and a deliciously talented company of two dozen — may just be the most impressive ever.

Shaw filled his serious comedy with fascinating characters, both historical and fiction: The playwright begins with a 12-minute prologue (here cut nicely to seven minutes) giving the audience some essential historical background. (We are in the B.C. era, after all.) Jerry Lyden lends his magnificent baritone/bass tones to the proceedings, while director Hartpence, who doubles for this outing as set designer, presents a kaleidoscopic onstage panorama to the words.

We soon meet the principal characters: C. Jameson Bradley as a thoughtful, considerate Caesar, so very different from Shakespeare's, and Tammy Koehler as the 16-year-old Cleopatra, child-like rather than childish and very appealing, even when bouncing out of a rolled-up carpet. Actually, Cleopatra was 21 when she first met Caesar, but Shaw winked at history and took five years off.

Cheryl Doyle comes very close to stealing the evening as Cleopatra's protectively faithful nurse, Ftataeteeta, and Shaw has great fun with the pronunciation of that name all evening. Ms. Doyle uses her lowest register (aided by a nasty cold) to get glorious laughs.

But the minor roles are not neglected — Actors' NET has a resource of many veterans

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ready and willing to step into cameo parts when needed. Curtis Kaine is a stentorian presence as one of Caesar's most loyal sentinels. Dale Simon breezes through one of his patented "almost a villain" portrayals. Marco Newton finds tiny bits of humanity as a stalwart Egyptian elder. David Cramer is impressive as Apollodorus, Shaw's spokesman for the arts.

Caesar and Cleopatra ends with Caesar leaving Egypt for Rome, where we know he will be slain on "the ides of March." Cleopatra remains in Egypt, awaiting Marc Anthony. That, of course, is another tale, and next month, Actors' NET will present *Anthony and Cleopatra*, the Shakespearian tragedy, as the "Toga Trilogy" continues.

Don't wait. Start your history lesson now.

Caesar and Cleopatra continues at the Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pa., through March 23. Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 6 p.m. Tickets cost \$12, \$10 seniors and students. For information, call (215) 295-3694. On the Web: www.actorsnetbucks.org

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Added: Thursday March 13, 2003 at 03:51 PM EST

Any true theatergoer would certainly echo those sentiments, Mr. Nott.

Mr. Newton ('Marco') is widely hailed as both the crown jewel and the lynchpin of this formidable acting corps.

Tight Knit

Added: Wednesday March 12, 2003 at 04:21 PM EST

The Heritage Theater of Morrisville never fails to please. It does have that veteran corps of actors to draw upon.

However, one of this corps stands out from the rest, Marco Newton. Whether standing stiffly as a colonial guardsman or regurgitating his lines with his inimitable faux accent, he delivers performance after performance that never fails to produce a smile upon the theater-goer's countenance.

Rob Nott

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