

'Julius Caesar'

An honorable Shakespeare production by Actors' NET of Bucks County

By Anthony Stoeckert

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John Pinto (left) as Cassius and Jim Ludovici as Brutus in *Julius Caesar*.

ANYONE who's seen a Shakespeare play at Actors' NET of Bucks County might be surprised by the company's current staging of *Julius Caesar* — with characters wearing shirt and ties, pant suits, hoodies, Chuck Taylors, and taking pictures with cell phones.

That's because the theater company in Morrisville, Pa., has always hewed to the traditional when it comes to the Bard. But director Aaron Wexler has brought *Julius Caesar*, on stage at The Heritage Center in Morrisville, through May 11, into the 21st century, placing Caesar, Mark Antony, Cassius and Brutus to modern-day Washington.

And it says something that the conspiracy by senators to kill the nation's leader reflects our modern political discourse, but that the idea of senators actually fighting in a war comes off as far-fetched.

In case you skipped high school English, *Julius Caesar* follows the leader (played by George Hartpence) after defeating his enemy Pompey in battle. He is offered the crown by Mark Antony (John Bergeron), but rejects it and grows in popularity. Cassius (John Pinto) plans an assassination of Caesar, out of slight and fearing loss of power, and convinces Brutus (Jim Ludovici) that Caesar's popularity threatens the nation and its democracy.

There are things about this production that are pretty astonishing — particularly the acting. The actors speak Shakespeare as if it's second nature, making it seem effortless — even though we know it isn't.

Mr. Hartpence is the regular star of Actors' NET's Shakespeare productions, and even though he plays the title character here, he isn't really the main character. Caesar is murdered before intermission (his ghost appears in the second half). Mr. Hartpence's Caesar is noble, and humble even though he's clearly confident. He also shows real shock and hurt (not just physical hurt but the feeling of being betrayed) as he is murdered. The line "et tu Brute" is so clichéd, but Mr. Hartpence finds the truth in it.

Jim Ludovici just might give the performance of the night as Brutus. This is no simple villain, Brutus here truly wants what's best for his country, and doubts his decisions and actions. You can see Brutus' struggle in every line.

The real villain is Cassius, and Mr. Pinto is evil, plotting and petty playing the guy who really manipulates the assassination with wit and cunning. It's a scenery-chewing role, and Mr. Pinto plays the character as the kind we love to hate.

The other key player is Mr. Bergeron as Mark Antony. Mr. Bergeron has a deep, soaring voice and that comes in handy as Antony puts on a performance in one of the play's best scenes: Caesar has been murdered and Brutus has convinced Antony to support the new political movement.

That leads to Antony's famous speech — in which the character says he hasn't come to praise Caesar but to bury him. He also manages to rile up the crowd while technically not insulting Brutus, because he reminds his followers that "Brutus is an honorable man."

It's all very dramatic and effective, and Mr. Wexler keeps the action moving along well. The small Heritage Center stage can be limiting, there are lots of scenes where the actors are pretty much just standing around — the set, designed by Ken Jenkins, is terrific but it's not terribly versatile. It looks like marble, with steps and columns, resembling D.C. but also evokes Rome. One nifty touch is the Caesar poster modeled after Obama's Hope artwork.

Going modern with Shakespeare is a big step for Actors' NET, and it's a move that pays off.

Julius Caesar continues at The Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morrisville, Pa., through May 11. Tickets cost \$20, \$17 seniors, \$15 students, \$10 children under 12. For tickets and information, go to www.actorsnetbucks.org or call 215-295-3694.