



Julius Caesar: Adapted to Death

I AM NOT SURE when I developed an interest in adapting Shakespeare, or why. In the mid-90s, I did a four-person, cross-gendered, ten-minute *Othello* as part of the Testing Ground series put on by the Popular Theatre Alliance of Manitoba. A couple of years later, I wrote (with Philip Adams) *Shakedown Shakespeare*, a piece of theatre for young audiences that incorporates four of Shakespeare's stories: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. The idea of *Shakedown Shakespeare* is that it serves as a primer; the characters begin the play speaking colloquially, and as the play progresses, more and more of Shakespeare's text is incorporated. Students acquire the language painlessly, incidentally, while their attention is focused elsewhere: on plot, on comedy, on action, on journey. The language does not get in the way; the language is the way, as the adage goes.

I arrived at the adaptation of *Julius Caesar* through the back door. When I took over the artistic direction of Native Earth Performing Arts in 2002, I frequently found myself sitting on panels discussing diversity in theatre. In Toronto, although fully half of the population is not white, theatres were—and still are—struggling to reflect that reality. Ergo, a series of panels on cultural diversity were created. At one such

LEFT Actors Ryan Cunningham, Sara Sinclair, Falen Johnson, Craig Lauzon, Tara Beagan, Cheri Maracle-Cardinal, and Jani Lauzon in *Death of a Chief*, performed at the Festival of Original Theatre (University of Toronto)

event, I glibly remarked, “Why can’t Native Earth produce an Aboriginal *Julius Caesar*? It’s really just about band politics after all.” The idea had sprung from my head and began to nag me.

At about the same time, an actress came to me with a suggestion: why not access some professional development funds and offer a Shakespeare intensive for female Native performers? Native performers are rarely considered for roles in Shakespeare, in part because white producers cannot imagine a Native Desdemona, a Native Lear, unless it is stunt casting. Many of the established Native theatre artists did not come through formal schools or conservatories, and therefore have acquired the tools to work with Shakespeare through a piecemeal process, often finding themselves at a disadvantage when they do audition. I thought a professional development workshop in Shakespeare might at least level the playing field a bit.

Kennedy (Cathy) MacKinnon has a reputation as a teacher of Shakespeare and as a vocal coach. Like me, she loves the language; like me, she believes that his stories have resonance with almost everyone. She has coached at Stratford Festival, taught at the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, and worked with a group in Mozambique to adapt *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to tell their own story. She also runs an annual Shakespeare intensive out of Humber College.

Her work with my small group of Native actors lit a fire in them, and in us. Now that they had the tools, we should capitalize on the knowledge. I confessed my Caesar fantasy, and we began to plot.

We snuck up on the adaptation. In the first week-long workshop, a company of five women and three men spent much of the time acquiring the tools to read and speak Shakespeare’s text. We read the folio three times, changing casting each time. We did some physical work, creating tableaux of critical moments, distilling the story into a short movement and vocal piece. We still had no idea where we were heading with the text.

Much of the second and third weeks of the workshop were spent discussing the parallels between our lives and the story of Caesar. The actors had done personal writing that was inspired by the text, about power, identity, community, leadership. They brought writings and stories of others as well, everything from traditional teachings to Trudeau. At the end of the workshop, we presented the work we had done so far at Native Earth’s Weesageechak Festival. Our adaptation at this point

ended with the third act, after Caesar’s death and the eulogies for him delivered by Antony and Brutus. Because we had played with the chronology of the text, the showing actually ended with Antony’s speech: “O pardon me, thou bleeding peece of earth: that I am meeke and gentle with these butchers.”¹

By the time we entered our fourth week of workshop, which was precipitated by an invitation to show at the University of Toronto’s Festival of Original Theatre (or FOOT), we had begun to incorporate the actors’ personal writings into the text. The themes that popped for us—responsibility to a community, the laws a community holds dear and what happens to those who transgress, the responsibility to be true to oneself—began to shape the adaptation. The company members spent much time in a circle discussing what aspects of the Caesar story resonated with them.

The adaptation of *Julius Caesar* into *Death of a Chief* is by no means complete. The process of the adaptation—because it happens in the studio, with the full involvement of the company—is a long, relatively organic process. We are also adapting as a community, and at the same time, we seem to be creating a community. At the most recent workshop, at the University of Guelph, a company member announced that we felt like an ensemble, like a company, and it felt good.

Death of a Chief enters its final development phase in June 2007, when the company of eight or nine actors, two directors, and a choreographer enter the studio for a three-week creation period in anticipation of a full production next season. We still don’t know what story we are telling, what the final shape will be. We still don’t even know if any of the fourth and fifth acts will find their way into our text. We will discover the answers in a room, together, as a community.

ENDNOTES

- 1 William Shakespeare, *The Tragedie of Julius Caesar: Applause First Folio Editions*, ed. Neil Freeman (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Hal Leonard Corp., 1997), 50, 3.1.255. References are to act, scene, and line.

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