INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE

Classic Theatre for Youth Program

presents

JULIUS ♦ CAESAR

by

William Shakespeare

April 10-May 16, 1990

Sponsored by

Indiana Bell
AN AMERITECH COMPANY

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Welcome to IRT's Classic Theatre for Youth Program!

We welcome you to IRT's Classic Theatre for Youth production of *Julius Cæsar*, and hope that you, the students for whom this program was designed, will find your experience in the theatre, whether it is your first or your fiftieth, a thrilling one.

The following notes have been compiled to aid you in imaginatively preparing to see the production of *Julius Cæsar*. Because Shakespeare wrote his plays specifically for performance, without much thought that they would ever be published (nor studied in high school English classes), his plays attain their fullest meaning on the stage. Things that you may have found difficult to understand when reading the play will come to life on the stage, as actors embody the characters and interpret Shakespeare's poetic language.

A person doesn't become an experienced theatregoer overnight. Background knowledge and, perhaps more important, specific questions can be carried into each performance to enable the viewer to more fully understand and enjoy the play. A helpful device for constructing the questions is the reporter's "checklist" of WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN and HOW. WHO? invites consideration of the play's characters, their relationships and their possible interpretations. WHAT? suggests questions of plot and structure. WHERE? and WHEN? raise questions of setting—both broadly, in time and place and narrowly on the stage. HOW? invites consideration of theatre technique.

One question that is central to *Julius Cæsar* is: to what extent do noble ends justify immoral means? This is the question that Brutus must face in the play. Also, it is interesting to consider to what extent Shakespeare dramatizes Cæsar as the hero, and to what extent Brutus? The play clearly has two protagonists.

Considering such "performance questions" before you come to the theatre can instill an open-mindedness toward the performance that will itself almost guarantee a better theatre experience. Many people do not realize that a script is just a score, open to widely different interpretations by a director and actors, so they come to a performance expecting to see the play they imagined as they read the text. Unless we are prepared for the unexpected, such preconceptions will interfere with our full enjoyment of the performance. The best art experience has often been described as a balance between the expected (what we imagined when we read the text) and the unexpected (the imaginative ideas in staging and delivery created by the production staff). We hope the production will surprise you, even though you already know the play's plot.

For the theatre experience to truly take place, the audience must become active participants in the play. Accustomed as we are to TV and film, in which attention is focused for us by the camera's eye, people too often come to the theatre as passive observers. A play is not a thing but an event, created when the audience actively participates in a performance. This participation happens as you are drawn into the production, experience its building tension, the excitement and the emotions of the leading characters. The feeling created in the room as you become involved in the production is very influential and important to the actors: they listen to your reactions and incorporate them into each performance, making each performance somewhat different from the others. Consequently, if you are attentive, they are likely to give a finer performance. Conversely, if you are disruptive they are likely to be distracted and give a less intense performance. Therefore, sounds or actions that might indicate that you are not involved in the action onstage are discouraged. The actors certainly want you to respond: "oohs and aahs," laughter, applause, hushed silence and anxious, "edge of your seat" participation are all welcomed. Remember there are others around you that may feel differently.

We hope you're looking forward to experiencing *Julius Cæsar* as much as we are looking forward to having you as our audience. We have consistently found our student audiences to be our most responsive, which makes the experience between the audience and the performers an especially vital one.

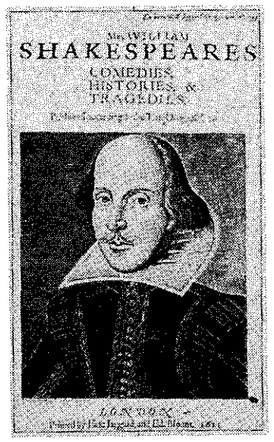
Shakespeare's Life

Although William Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist in the English language, little is known of a factual nature about his life. A handful of legal documents verify his existence, but much of what historians know about Shakespeare has been creatively reconstructed from general knowledge about the historic period and life in that time.

He was baptized in the Church of England at Stratford upon Avon, a Warwickshire market town, on April 26, 1564, which leads us to believe that he was born on April 23 because it was the custom in those days to baptize children about three days after their birth. His father John was a glove maker who became High Bailiff of Stratford, a position very much like our mayor. His mother, Mary Arden Shakespeare, was the eldest daughter of a wealthy landowner, and William was her eldest son. William, with his three younger brothers and two younger sisters, grew up in a middle-class family of good local repute.

As the son of a leading citizen and public official, Shakespeare would have been expected to go to school as soon as he had learned to read and write. The Stratford grammar school, one of the town's prized institutions, was excellent by comparison to similar schools in bigger towns. School was in session in summer and winter, and students attended for nine hours a day. The curriculum was limited, consisting almost entirely of Latin—grammar, reading, writing and recitation. It is possible that as an older student, Shakespeare might have had the opportunity to act out some of the fine classical plays written in Latin as part of a school assignment.

By the time Shakespeare was a youth, many travelling theatre companies of significance had visited Stratford, so it is fair to guess that Shakespeare had seen some of them and admired their art. One of the leading companies was the Earl of Leicester's Men (named after their patron), led by James Burbage, who built the first permanent theatre structure in London when Shakespeare was twelve. Burbage's son Richard was destined to become Shakespeare's future colleague and friend. If one side of young Shakespeare's life was dominated by the stern discipline of school and religious morality, the other suggests the color and enthusiasm of the medieval world. From this contrast must have come



Frontispiece from First Folio, 1623, with likeness of William Shakespeare

eventually the impulse that sent Shakespeare to London and theatrical fame.

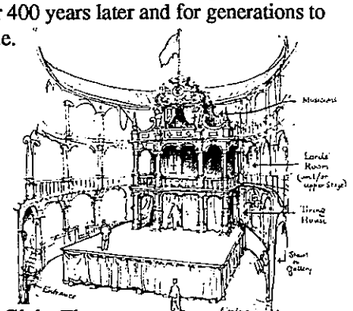
The next fact that exists regarding Shakespeare's life seems to suggest that his path to London was not a direct one: a document dated November 27, 1582 states that at age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. Six months later, Shakespeare's eldest child, Susanna, was born. Two years later he became the father of twins, Hamnet and Judith. Little is known of Shakespeare's life at this time: he might have worked as a school teacher in Stratford. In any case it is clear that by the early 1590's Shakespeare was very much a part of the theatrical scene in London, although we know nothing of the circumstances by which he left Stratford and his family to become an actor and playwright in the city. It is sufficient to note that by 1594 Shakespeare was established at the center of theatrical activity, for he is recorded as a shareholder, along with Richard Burbage, in the famed Globe Theatre, located on the south bank of the Thames, across from the Tower of London.

Shakespeare wrote 37 plays (*Julius Cæsar* in 1599), several narrative poems and over 150 sonnets in the next fifteen years. By the turn of the century he was the most popular playwright in London and his company enjoyed a unique advantage in the city's highly competitive theatrical world. He seems to have attained some degree of wealth and prestige, for he was granted a coat of arms, thus officially making him a gentleman, and bought sizeable pieces of real estate in and around Stratford with his earnings. His plays also exhibit not only a fine sense of poetry and stagecraft, but an excellent awareness of the political and literary atmosphere in which he lived. They were tempestuous times socially and politically and Shakespeare used his plays metaphorically to suggest how order could be made out of chaos in a changing society. By 1604 his company was named The King's Men, for they had attracted the favorable attention of the new monarch, King James I. Their fortunes continued to rise as their plays drew well at the Globe, and the number of command performances at Court began to double and triple. It may be significant that most of Shakespeare's great tragedies—*Othello*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*—were written within the first five years of the new century. It suffices to say that, within a single decade, Shakespeare created a wealth of drama, some of it comic, some tragic, such as the world has never seen.

Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616—alleged to be his 52nd birthday—and is buried in the Church chancel in Stratford. The epitaph, perhaps written by Shakespeare himself, carved on his gravestone reads:

Good friend for Jesus sake forbear,
To dig the dust enclosed here!
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.

The greatest testament to Shakespeare's genius occurred in 1623, when two of his fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, cooperated with a London printer in publishing a collected edition of Shakespeare's plays. Many of the plays had never been published, so it is safe to say that Heminge and Condell reconstructed some of the texts from memory or from a stage manager's promptbook. In any case the first Folio, as this first collection has come to be called, is a document of great historic and literary importance, for it preserved for posterity some of the greatest writing in the English language, allowing us to study and perform Shakespeare's plays over 400 years later and for generations to come.



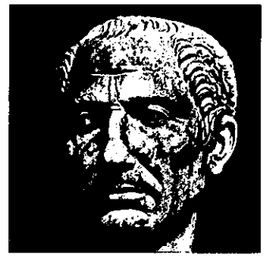
The Globe Theatre

Julius Cæsar: Synopsis

It is March 14, 44 B.C. Julius Cæsar has just returned home to Rome from Spain, where he has prevailed in a civil war by conquering the sons of Pompey, once Cæsar's ally, but since become his adversary. The common people are rejoicing in Cæsar's "triumph," but two tribunes, Flavius and Marullus, accuse the crowd of forgetting that in cheering Cæsar, they are denouncing the great Pompey, who they once considered a hero. Marullus commands the crowd to return to their homes to ask forgiveness of the gods for their offensive ingratitude. Flavius then tells Marullus to assist him in removing the ceremonial decorations that have been place on public statues in honor of Cæsar's triumph, lest they encouage in Cæsar any more godlike behavior.

Also in progress is a festival race to celebrate the Lupercalia, a holiday honoring the god of shepherds. Mark Antony, one of Cæsar's favorites, is running in the race. Just as it is to begin, a Soothsayer approaches Cæsar and warns him to "beware the Ides of March." He brushes off this admonition with a shrug. Cæsar seems to have come to believe in his own immortality and invincibility.

This concept is not shared by other leading men in Rome, namely Cassius, a patrician of high rank, and his brother-in-law Brutus, an honorable praetor (or civil magistrate). In a private conversation, Cassius tries to probe Brutus about his feelings toward Cæsar and the prospect of Cæsar's becoming a dictator in Rome. Several times during their discussion, Cassius and Brutus hear shouts and the sounds of trumpets and wonder if Cæsar is receiving new honors from the people. Cæsar's party reenters and he remarks to Mark Antony that he is suspicious of Cassius, whom he considers a troublemaker. Casca, another of Cassius and Brutus' colleagues, reports to them the nature of the offstage shouting: Mark Antony had offered Cæsar a crown three times and each time Cæsar refused. He also reports on an epileptic seizure that Cæsar has had in the midst of the excitement. Brutus, who is Cæsar's friend, is clearly disturbed by this growing power of an individual man in democratic Rome. He exits and Cassius, in

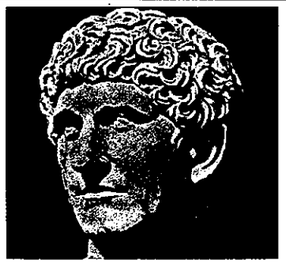


soliloquy, indicates his plans to secure Brutus as the leader of a conspiracy against Cæsar.

Later that night, Casca and Cassius meet on the street. There is thunder and lightening of fierce proportions, and both men share reports of unnatural occurrences that they have witnessed that night. Cassius urges Casca to join him in the plot against Cæsar. Another senator, Cinna joins them and also receives this summons to join in conspriracy. Cassius asks him to throw letters into Brutus' windows enjoining him to join the conspiracy. They agree to meet at a designated location in preparation to going to Brutus' house to persuade him to join their cause.

Later that same night, we see Brutus in his orchard. He has been unable to sleep and calls his serving boy, Lucius, to fetch a light so that he might read. While Lucius is gone, Brutus delivers a soliloquy in which he betrays his fear that the only way to stem the tide of Cæsar's power is by his death. Lucius returns with one of the letters that Cinna has thrown into a window, and with news that several hooded men are awaiting entry at Brutus' gate. The various members of the conspiracy have arrived: Cassius, Casca, Cinna, Trebonius and Metellus Cimber. Several others are discussed as possible members, but Brutus, who is clearly taking the lead, refuses them. It is of prime importance to Brutus that the manner of Cæsar's death be focused on the common good of the people of Rome. As they exit, now clear in their assassination plan for the following day, Brutus' wife Portia enters. She has sensed his disturbed mind and asks him to confide in her. He agrees to do so as Ligarius, a ailing friend of Brutus' arrives who declares that he will discard his illness to follow Brutus in any noble endeavor. They set forth for Cæsar's house.

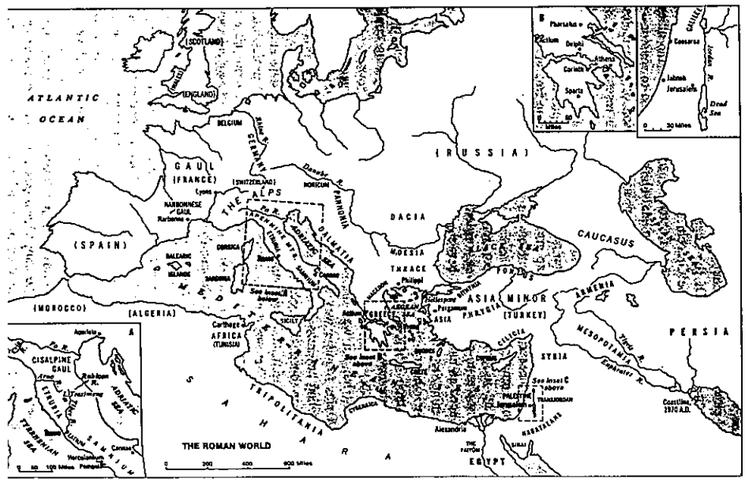
Cæsar's wife, Calphurnia, has also been experiencing premonitions of disaster. She is fearful and asks Cæsar not to attend the Senate today. He sends for the priests to perform a sacrifice which seems to bear out



Calphurnia's fears. But at this moment, Cinna arrives to accompany Cæsar to the Senate. He succeeds in persuading Cæsar that Calphurnia's fears are groundless, just as the other conspirators, and Mark Antony, arrive to accompany Cæsar to the Senate. Cæsar says that they should all have some wine and then go to the Capitol together like friends. In a brief aside, Brutus grieves when he realizes that all of Cæsar's apparent friends are not true friends.

Near the Capitol, a poet, Artemidorus, reads a letter that he has written warning Cæsar against the conspirators. He intends to give the letter to Cæsar as he passes by. Meanwhile, Portia, concerned about her husband, sends Lucius to the Capitol to watch Brutus. The Soothsayer enters and Portia inquires if there is a plan to harm Cæsar.

Outside the Capitol, Artemidorus fails to get Cæsar to hear his letter, the Soothsayer reminds him of the ides of March, but Cæsar, impervious to their entreaties, goes on toward the Capitol and his death. Trebonius deliberately draws Mark Antony off so that the others, led by Casca who strikes the first blow, can bring Cæsar down with their knives. Brutus is the last to stab, and Cæsar dies with "Et tu, Brute?" ringing in the air. The conspirators attempt to calm the onlooking senators and in a solemn moment, anoint their knives and hands with Cæsar's blood, vowing to free Rome from the tyrany of dictatorship. Interrrupting this ceremony, Antony's servant enters to ask if Antony might enter without fear for his life. Brutus assures him that they mean no harm to anyone else and Antony enters. He is aghast at their action and briefly overwhelmed by the bloody sight of his dead mentor. Antony asks only that they might explain why Cæsar deserved to die and allow him to speak in Cæsar's funeral. Against Cassius' wishes, Brutus agrees to Antony's demands and the conspriators exit to the Forum, where Brutus is preparing to address the citizens. Left alone with Cæsar's body, Antony vows to revenge his



he far-flung Roman Empire: from England to Egypt, Spain to Persia, the oman Empire spanned a large portion of the globe. The ever-shifting boundaries f the Empire attest to the continuous state of warfare which blighted the Empire. he Roman highway system and advanced military strategies were two main ources of their power.

eath.
Brutus' address to the crowd is sufficiently oving that they are willing to forgive his art in the murder of Cæsar and follow him. ut Antony's oration, "Friends, Romans, ountrymen . . ." moves them in the pposite direction. By the end of his peeches, in which he claims repeatedly to espect Brutus, he manages to incite the rowd to riot against the conspiracy by howing them Cæsar's bloody robe and eading Cæsar's will in which he left each itizen a legacy of money. As the crowd eaves to burn the houses of the conspirators nd drive them from Rome, a messenger rom Octavius Cæsar, Cæsar's grand- ephew arrives to tell Antony that he awaits im at Cæsar's house to discuss the ormation of a new goverment with Octa- ius and Antony at the helm.

Most of acts four and five take place on he battlefields of Sardis and Phillipi, where Brutus and Cassius' armies plan to encoun- er the opposing armies of the new triumvi- ate, composed of Octavius, Antony and epidus. The triumvirate exposes its plans or proscription, which contain the lists of who will die for traitorous behavior. Dissention has infected the ranks on both ides: Antony and Octavius fall out over epidus' worthiness to serve and Brutus nd Cassius quarrel bitterly about battle plans. In the midst of their quarrel, Brutus tells Cassius that Portia is dead and Cassius gains insight into Brutus' peculiar behavior. Their friendship has clearly been destroyed by the assassination. At night Brutus is visited by the ghost of Cæsar. Finally the forces meet: Antony and Octavius are confident of victory; the Republicans are haunted with uncertainty. They must risk everything in one battle.

Miscommunication and intrigue cause the battle to go against the Republicans and Cassius, dismayed at the loss of his friendship with Brutus and the loss of his soldiers, kills himself by running upon a sword held by his servant, Pindarus. Titinius, another loyal follower of Cassius', finds his body just as the battle turns back in their favor, but Titinius commits suicide in order to follow his noble master in death. Brutus discovers the dead bodies and himself vows to die rather than be captured, but runs off to reengage the enemy. Finally though, he sees that the enemy has captured their camp. Brutus tries to pursuade one of his followers to hold the sword for him to die upon and many refuse to do this morbid service. Finally Brutus finds success and dies, asserting Cæsar's power even in death. Octavius and Antony win the day, and Antony mourns Brutus who, only among the conspirators, did what he did for the glory and freedom of Rome, rather than for personal gain.

Creating a Cultural Amalgram

"Rome began as a collection of villages beside the lower Tiber River. Today we can see the handiwork of Rome flung defiantly across the moors of northern Britain, along the dusty margin of the Sahara and in the sands of Mesopotamia. If we look at a list of the rulers of Rome, we find there not merely Romans nor even Italians. The list includes provincials from Spain, Africa, the Balkans and Syria. From the Euphrates to the Atlantic, every sort of language and colour was encompassed by the Roman Empire. Rome, unlike the relatively coherent world of Greece, was an amalgam of disparate traditions, cultures and peoples such as the world has rarely seen."

History of the World, Esmond Wright, General Editor

Perhaps the civilization most like this description of ancient Rome is our own: the United States in the closing decades of the twentieth century where, particularly in our urbans centers, the mixture of cultures, races, and peoples is evident in great diversity. This cultural comparison between ancient Rome and contemporary America has allowed us to seek out the talents of actors from distinct ethnic backgrounds thus encouraging a vision of theatre—and of life—that is not merely parochial, and provides through the diversity of vocal patterns, looks and cultural backgrounds, a stage world that typifies both ancient Rome and our own world.

Notes from the Director

Reviewing the star-studded film version of Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar* (1953—Marlon Brando, James Mason, John Gielgud, Deborah Kerr, Greer Garson), I was struck by the studio-created "Roman sets:" columns supporting no weight, stairs leading nowhere, drapes hanging on "sky hooks," all placed before a painted panorama of the villas of ancient Rome for Part One of the play. Part Two featured the sudden move to location shooting outdoors in the California hills (already wearied by countless Westerns) to depict Shakespeare's battlefields of Sardis and Philippi. The design impulse was to be true to ancient Rome in architecture and geography.

Among the curious textual edits were all references to "clocks," and "sleeves,"and "hats." Why? Hollywood was viewing Shakespeare's play as a "historical documentary." In the 1950's era of "You Are There," it behooved the filmmakers to correct Shakespeare's misunderstanding of history. The clock was not invented until the thirteenth century, togas do not have sleeves, and in sunny Italy, the Romans did not wear hats. To let the inaccuracies of the writer be filmed would suggest poor studio stewardship.

But was Shakespeare writing a historical newsreel from poor research? Probably not. Shakespeare's plays were presented in clothing and architecture of his day—in which men had sleeves and wore hats and the public places of the Elizabethan world had battlements and clocks that struck the passing hours. Shakespeare believed that history supplied stories whose narratives were applicable to his own times and therein lay his interest. In the story of Julius Cæsar, Shakespeare saw a parallel between the political climate that toppled Caesar and the Elizabethan governmental world—the increasing strength of a popular executive (Cæsar-Elizabeth) clashing with the growing disenfranchisement of the legislature (senators-nobility). Within this dangerous equation, Shakespeare concentrated his dramatic focus on the man of principle (Brutus) as a mirror for his contemporary leaders. Shakespeare asked: how far could the idealist deny reality, or reconcile his moral beliefs with the immoral actions led by men with hidden agendas?

Approaching *Julius Cæsar* in 1990 at the IRT, I asked designer Ann Sheffield (who designed *The Cocktail Party* in 1988, and *Six Characters...* and *The Rivals* in 1989) to jettison the "historically accurate" Rome. Actors draped in white bathsheets would push an audience to believe they were attending a world-weary newsreel. (Incidentally, togas were not white, but the sun-bleached, formerly-painted statues observed by the nineteenth century tourists fostered a notion of a white linen clothing for designs of ancient Romans).

We have tried to create a Rome moving from an insular position of self-government to a world player in multi-national relationships—not dissimilar to the 21st-century global village. A world familiar yet foreign, Roman yet Eastern, old and new again. Polyglot. What happens to individuals raised with the strong parochial values of their ancestors when confronted with global politics? What happens to those persons who wish to preserve the character and strength of their past when in conflict with the rush of times? What happens to a New England town-meeting democracy in a world where a foreign political leader supercedes our own elected head in popularity polls?

Shakespeare, of course, was neither a politician nor a futurist—he was a portrayer of human behavior under civic pressure. A fresh vision of the world of *Julius Cæsar* should be able to free the play from a role of illustrated history to assume its rightful function as a revelation of life—characters' whose lives are fragmented with the catastrophic deed of assassination, only to find truth in their ultimate resignations to the enormity of their actions.

Tom Haas

John Gielgud as Cassius and Harry Andrews as Brutus in a 1950 production of Julius Cæsar in London.

Marlon Brando as Mark Antony in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 1953 movie version of the play.

Ann Sheffield

A Designing Woman

"May I call you back?," Ann Sheffield says breathlessly on the phone from New York, "Ralph Lauren is on the other line." She adds quickly, "The company, not the man," a bit embarrassed about what it must sound like to have the international fashion design sensation on the other line.

Sheffield, well-known to Indiana Rep audiences for her set designs, will see the curtain go up on her set *and* costume designs when Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* opens on the Mainstage April 10.

Meanwhile, she is assisting on a project for Lauren's showrooms in New York City, her first foray into retail projects in the midst of a blossoming theatrical design career.

Sheffield began her on-going relationship with the Indiana Rep several years ago as a graduate fresh from the Yale drama school. It was at a portfolio review, where young designers like her have the chance to show their work to artistic directors like Tom Haas. "People waltz around and either stop and talk to you or just say 'hmph' and go on," she said. Haas stopped. Hence, the beginning of the Haas/Sheffield collaboration, which has brought to the Mainstage such luscious visual feasts as the bright and sleek *The Cocktail Party*, the surprising and stark *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and the rich and sunny *The Rivals*.

It was at the same portfolio review that she met soon-to-become mentor and friend Tony Walton, the renowned Broadway designer whom she assisted on the recent revival of *Anything Goes*. That project, she said, "went and went," and may move to Berlin this fall, which is why she's been caught practicing her German lately.

Both Walton and Haas have latched onto what the latter calls Sheffield's "vision." It is a vision that's been hard to suppress and has, in fact, surfaced almost against her will.

As an art major at Occidental College a small, liberal arts school in California, she and her talents were often pulled into the theatre department. "Anyone interested in theatre was either a writer, a director or an actor," she said. "They figured, 'Ann can draw,' so I often found myself working on posters or set designs." Even though she had done a great deal of performing in high school, "I found a niche in design that was better than the limelight."

By the time she was a senior, she had won the American College Theatre Festival design award without knowing her work had been entered in the competition.

After a year's respite from educational rigors, during which time she toyed briefly with the idea of a commercial design career, she entered the Yale School of Drama as a design major. "I had always loved going to the theatre," she remembered. "Maybe that comes from growing up in London." Besides, "I've always been curious about what makes people tick through the ages."

Sheffield's curiosity about "what makes people tick" is a perfect complement to her design vision. Theatre is all about people and how they tick. Her curiosity and understanding helps her to place characters in the most effective, provocative settings. More importantly, it helps her work well as a collaborator—an essential gift for any theatrical designer.

"Tom is great to work with," Sheffield said. "He is excited about the unusual. He'll send me an idea and say 'I'm sending you this magazine picture . . . I'm not sure why, but it just struck me . . .' and that's how we begin to communicate."

The same sort of evolutionary process has entered her plans for *Julius Caesar*.

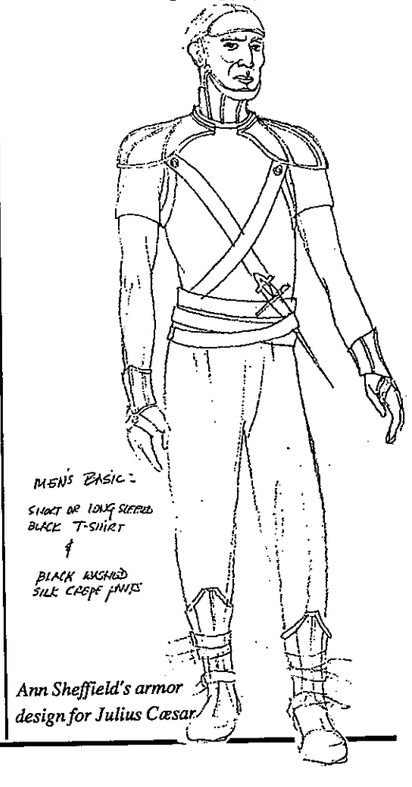
Time constraints in the costume shop determined much of her approach to what the characters will wear. "Because we had to start building so early—even before the show was cast—we knew we couldn't do this in a fitted Shakespeare style. We also didn't want to go to the opposite extreme and put Buck Rogers on stage. Nor did we want a traditional, toga approach to our Roman empire. So how could we create our own world without confusing the audience?"

Scissors, swords and stacks of contemporary magazines were her answer. Citizens of Rome had no scissors, Sheffield explained, so the most appropriate costumes would be simple and draping rather than pieced and fitted. That civilization was a warring nation and conquered other societies far and wide. "I went to the library and looked up everything I could about Assyrians, Celtics and Russian and African nomads," she said, gathering ideas about clothing lines and accessory approaches.

At the same time, she focused a good deal of research on contemporary fashion. "I hoard magazines," she said. "I've got stacks of *House and Garden*, *Elle*, *Details*, *Haute Couture* . . . I think it is very important to see where our world is today, or at least to see what we're looking at every day." The resulting look is "slightly exotic," but practical, allowing for 20 actors who must change costumes to fill 40 roles.

The set for *Julius Caesar*, Sheffield reports, is inspired by the "fabulous Land of Petra" in southwest Jordan made up of a narrow gorge with ancient buildings carved into the side of the rock.

Sheffield admits that her work and worries are not over when the plans are complete. After that, she must be on hand to consult with shop heads as they build what she has left on paper and in model. "The whole process is really scary," she said. "It's a thrill when it works, but you never know until opening night."



Ann Sheffield's armor design for Julius Cæsar

Michael Gross

"Family Ties" Michael Gross plays Brutus in IRT's *Julius Cæsar*

Michael Gross can't wait to get back to Indianapolis. He wants to erase the memories of his first visit here many years ago as a budding theatre actor.

It was a sunny summer Sunday when Gross made a journey out of Louisville, Kentucky (where he was a member of the acting company at Actors Theatre) to visit friends in rural Illinois.

There was only one way to get to rural Illinois from Louisville for a young actor who didn't own his own wheels: The Illini-Swallow busline—with a six-hour layover in Indianapolis.

Today, a body might have a hard time choosing from the number of downtown sites and sounds on a Sunday afternoon. Twelve-or-so-odd years ago, the only gig in town was the Civil War Memorial. An interesting enough way to fill an hour or two . . . but six?

"It was one of the hottest days of the year," Gross laughed, relaying his memories by phone from L.A. "I must have studied every photograph and every piece of memorabilia in the memorial."

He won't lack activity when he returns this March to begin rehearsals for Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar*. As Brutus, he has the job of bringing to life one of the most widely read, studied and watched roles in all of English literature.

Such a classical role could be a tall task for an actor who has spent the last seven years as TV's favorite father—Michael Keaton on NBC's *Family Ties*. But this is no made-for-TV actor. He is a graduate of the prestigious Yale School of Drama (where he was taught by Artistic Director Tom Haas, then head of the acting department at Yale)—and a veteran of some of the nation's top regional theatres.

Gross spent six years in regional theatre production, including three seasons with Actors Theatre of Louisville, Kentucky, where he appeared in several classic dramas. Other regional theatre credits include seasons at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, the Yale Repertory Theatre and Baltimore's Center Stage.

Gross made his Broadway debut as 'Greta,' a female impersonator, in *Bent*, which also featured Richard Gere, and he was the recipient of a 1982 Obie award for an off-Broadway performance. During the summer of 1986, Gross starred in the L.A. Mark Taper Forum Repertory Company's productions of *Hedda Gabler* and *The Real Thing*.

His television work has ranged far beyond *Family Ties*. The day after that series taped its touching finale, he began work on a different character altogether, 'Burt Gummer,' a right-wing survivalist in the new Gale Ann Hurd sci-fi movie, *Tremors*.

The recipe for success on both stage and television screen is simple, Gross says, "you get smaller and quieter for the little screen and larger and louder for the stage." Actually, there was a time, he adds, when "I was a theatre snob. I didn't think any medium could be as fulfilling as the live stage. But now that I've done smaller screen work, I've discovered something else."

The key, he says, is not whether it's live, taped or filmed, but who is involved in the project. "I have learned that the work is as good or as bad as the people that come together for the project. Good work starts, Gross says, with the writer. "You can tell from page three that a script has promise. Then you need a wonderful director and set of actors." The *Julius Caesar* project is certainly solid on the first count—and Gross has long looked forward to working with Haas again. He's also excited about the racially mixed company assembled at IRT for *Julius Cæsar*.

Gross lives near Los Angeles "about two miles from the Rose Bowl." In fact, he says, "If you're watching the Rose Bowl next season, my house is on that hill they show in pictures from the blimp." He and his wife, former casting director Elza Bergeron, and their two teenage children, spend much time hiking in the San Gabriel Valley—a national forest only a half-hour's drive from suburban L.A.

Parked on the front patio of the Gross home is an antique baggage wagon from the Sante Fe Railroad filled with milk cans and suitcases—a visitor's first introduction to Gross's passion for trains. As the grandson and great-grandson of railroad workers, Gross is a railroad buff who held his wedding reception in a private railroad car on a train bound for San Juan Capistrano. He was even employed for a time, before his acting career kicked in, as an engineman.

Family ties to Chicago will make Gross's stint in Indianapolis more than a theatrical venture. His father and mother, who still live in the windy city, will no doubt drive down for *Julius Cæsar*, as will other relatives who have not seen him on stage since his undergraduate days at the University of Illinois.

A Note on Shakespeare's Source Material and on Roman History

Julius Cæsar stands at an important turning-point in Shakespeare's playwriting career: as the nineteenth of his thirty-seven plays, *Cæsar* represents a mid-career shift from Shakespeare's adolescence into his maturity: from his early comedies and English history plays into the great tragedies, romances and "problem plays." *Cæsar* was probably written in 1599: his earliest plays date from 1590; his latest from 1611.

With *Julius Cæsar*, Shakespeare embarked upon a writing journey that was to take him into his series of great heroic tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. In his flights of rhetorical brilliance as the thoughtful hero who is "with himself at war," Brutus can easily be seen as a dry run for Hamlet, written two years later.

Moreover, *Julius Cæsar* represents another shift in Shakespeare's thinking. As Shakespeare scholar Harold Goddard states: *[In Julius Cæsar,] Shakespeare finally passes from one world to another. . . . Shakespeare was growing more convinced that we neglect dreams and dreamers at our peril. This play is fairly saturated with omens and ironies, portents and wonders. . . . The secret of human life, the play seems to say, lies beyond that life as well as within it. The ghost of Julius Cæsar was as truly a part of Brutus as it was of Cæsar. That is why a play whose protagonist is one of the two is appropriately named for the other.*

Julius Cæsar represents a bridge in Shakespeare's use of historical material as well: with this play he turned to Plutarch's comparative studies of the careers of great men of Greece and Rome. The action of the play is based on a simple Plutarch passage: "Upon Cæsar's return to Rome after defeating Pompey in the Civil War, his countrymen chose him a fourth time consul, and then dictator for life. Thus, he became odious to moderate men through the extravagance of the titles and powers that were heaped upon him."

To men of the Renaissance, Republican Rome was the apex of human achievement in civilization and political organization, although without benefit of Christianity. Its heroes, whether legendary or historical, were held in reverence as notable examples of patriotism, military valor, and the pagan virtues.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Shakespeare's play is this sustained ambiguous focus: Cæsar himself is alternately dramatized as "the noblest man that ever lived in the tide of times," making the assassination a senseless act of criminal folly, and as an ambitious, power-hungry tyrant, thus making the assassination a valiant attempt by Brutus and other patriotic Romans to preserve the Republic. This approach drew Shakespeare into mining the Plutarch source material for its deep sense of irony and it was immediately available to him. But using Roman history as a base—a history filled with forebodings, portents, ghosts and the pathetic fallacy of nature—and one in which the historic figures were both the subject of myth and of historical truth, allowed Shakespeare fertile imaginative ground to explore dramatic irony.