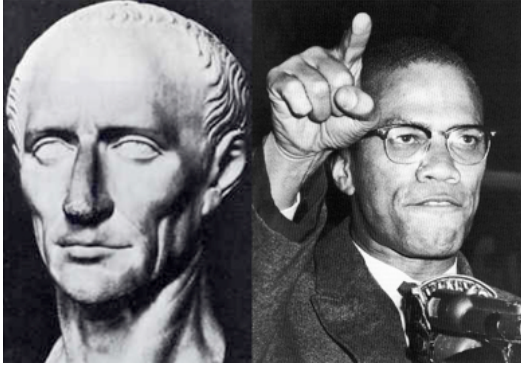


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# BETWEEN THE LINES

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## 'Julius X': a production not to be missed

*By Robert W. Bethune  
originally published 4/26/07*

Plowshare's production of Al Letson's play, "Julius X," is a marvelous piece of work that truly deserves to be seen. Go! Do not let this one slip by you! It is not perfect, but the rewards far outweigh the imperfections.

The play is one of the boldest pieces of writing I have come across lately. It blends Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" with the life and times of Malcolm X in a very unusual way that is easy to grasp in the theater, but not to describe. It uses the language and cultural references in the Shakespearean play to express what happened to Malcolm X and those around him at the time of his assassination. Sometimes the characters speak Shakespeare's language unaltered; sometimes they use Shakespearean language modified to suit the context - and sometimes they speak Letson's own words, which are startling, vivid and even witty in their own right. On occasion, they speak in words from other sources as well, especially the Bible. The result is an extraordinary conceptual and emotional shimmering back and forth from Rome to Harlem. At many points, the characters are unquestionably in both worlds at once. The two worlds resonate against each other in mind-

bending ways.

Gary Anderson, Plowshares' producing artistic director, directs the play with quotations of his own. There are statements that reminded me of the visuals of political power in "Evita," and aural statements that come straight from Greek tragedy. However, the truly skillful aspect of his work is that with all of this conceptual and cultural cross-referencing and blending going on, the primary impact of the play is vividly emotional. We care about these people intensely. I have seen productions of the Shakespearean play that were not nearly so powerful, and here we have a vivid and compelling evocation of the story of Malcolm X as well.

In particular, I would rate John Sloan's rendering of Brutus Mohammed as one of the best performances of the Shakespearean character I have seen, and likewise Anthony Lucas as Cassius 10X.

The women, Tiffany Mitchenor as Calpurnia X and Casaundra Simmons as Portia (same name in both stories) take wonderful advantage of the material Letson adds to the thin gruel that Shakespeare provides, giving us vivid, indeed haunting, evocations of these women both in Shakespeare's Rome and Letson's Harlem.

The work is not flawless. Letson does not always manage his blending of languages and cultures without awkwardness. Late in the play, he bails out on the core of his work and helplessly turns to a narrator. Revise that forthwith, Mr Letson!

With so much of the language coming from Shakespeare or in his style, every slip of diction goes off like a bomb. There is excellent choral speaking - from behind the seats! But none of this takes away from one of the most interesting and exciting stage productions I have seen in a long time.

*The Bottom Line: Go! Just go! Take my word for it and go! And take people with you!*