

# WINDOWS INTO JULIUS CAESAR

## THE STORY

A crowd of Roman citizens gathers to celebrate Julius Caesar's triumphant return from foreign wars. Their fervor alarms a group of senators, among them Cassius and Caska, who fear Caesar's growing power and conclude that only his death will safeguard the Republic. They approach Caesar's friend Brutus, believing that his honorable reputation will aid their cause. After spending a night in anguished reflection, Brutus agrees to join them. The next day—the Ides of March—they surround Caesar in the Capitol and stab him to death.

Caesar's ally Mark Antony feigns sympathy with the conspirators and wins permission to speak at Caesar's funeral. There he follows Brutus, who has convinced the citizens that Caesar's death was justified. Without overtly blaming the conspirators, Antony turns the crowd and deliberately incites it to riot. Violent chaos ensues. The conspirators flee, and Antony forms a ruling triumvirate with Lepidus and Caesar's adopted son, Octavius. After a brutal purge of their enemies, Lepidus is demoted and Antony and Octavius join forces against Brutus and Cassius and face them on the battlefield of Philippi.

## COMMON COMPULSIONS

Crowds turn to mobs easily in Shakespeare's plays. *Julius Caesar's* are no exception. Rome's plebeians are presented as fickle and too easily played upon, equally eager to worship great men and tear them down. But the play examines just as searchingly the patricians who manipulate them, often in linked or contrasting scenes. A mob of plebes tear a man to pieces. A mob of patricians coolly and rationally decide to hack a man to death, then bathe their hands in his blood.

## PAGAN RELIGION

Roman spiritual beliefs abound in *Julius Caesar*. There are soothsayers, diviners, prophetic dreams and a ghost. The night before the assassination, as a ferocious storm shakes the city, there are sightings of such "prodigies" as men who walk in flames through the streets. Are these signs of a society on the verge of breakdown? Of the destructive urges roiling under its civilized surface? The precise meaning remains unclear. As Cicero observes—and as the two radically opposed interpretations of Calphurnia's dream will demonstrate—meaning is too often constructed from the beholder's own needs and projections. People turn signs into their own needed stories.

At the same time it's worth noting that the play's leading women, shut out from the public world of politics and ambition, both sense or seek to turn aside the violence that omens seem to foretell. Equally notable, neither will be able to break through the barriers the play's men have erected to understanding and to possible peace.

## ESSENTIAL GESTURES

Director Shana Cooper wanted to present an elemental world, one stripped down to its essential core. She found inspiration for the production's design in contemporary dance theatre, particularly the choreography of Pina Bausch, which emphasizes the form of the body in its simplest states, highlighting line and silhouette. As a result, the action is able to inhabit a space at once realistic and metaphysical. The play's dance-theatre vocabulary gains increasing importance as the action unfolds. By the end, as the characters gather on the final battlefield, the visual lines between the two armies are blurred; all order and hierarchy have been broken. No bodies are left untouched by the unrelenting violence that consumes this world.