

THEATRE

Not the noblest Romans of them all

THE Royal Shakespeare Company has spread its talent rather thinly lately, but **Julius Caesar**, which has been chosen to open the new season at **Stratford-upon-Avon** under the direction of Terry Hands, has enough narrative thrust to carry us from conspiracy to assassination and the plains of Philippi without interest flagging.

Mr Hands's well-placed production (played without an interval) keeps the plot and the plotters firmly before us, assisted as ever by Shakespeare's superb construction. But the tragic excitement and poetic intensity of these headstrong Romans defying augury in their rush to destruction are not conveyed more than intermittently.

This is not only from a lack of command in the acting but also because the stage of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre looks so big. Ancient Rome, as the designer Farrah sees it, resembles an empty supermarket car park. Sky-high walls of stark red brick enclose the action. Overhead lighting (by Mr Hands and Clive Morris) imaginatively pierces this cavernous void to indicate a street, or Caesar's house, Brutus's bedroom or the Forum. But we are more aware of the illumination techniques than of any location in the shadows.

When David Waller's Caesar is urged at home "not to stir forth" the advice seems superfluous, since he appears to be already in the street. And what are these noblemen's womenfolk doing out at night in their nighties?

It is the tent scene which retrospectively emphasises the vague geography of the first half which often leaves us wondering where we are. For this the actors get (surprisingly) a real tent. Roger Allam's Brutus and Sean Baker's Cassius quarrel and make up with a dramatic focus, even if Cassius does knock a stool over and Brutus nearly singses himself in trying to read by the fire.

These two players carry the evening. They make improbable comrades. "Noble" is not the first word that comes to mind for Mr Allam's admirably spoken Brutus but this is a man of honour who hates having to act dishonourably. He also seems at home with the verse. Although, like almost everyone, he tends to shout, especially in his bust-up with Cassius, you can see why he is so well thought of.

On the other hand Mr Baker's Cassius (round whom the early scenes appear to have been staged) is not only lean and hungry-looking but also unattractive enough to create a



Sean Baker as Cassius and David Waller, Caesar

sense of mischief wherever he goes. This actor, arms akimbo, looks about as villainous as Iago or Richard Crookback. He cuts quite a theatrical dash but to my mind it's the wrong dash for this class of conspirator.

The actual assassination is a disappointment because the victim flops bloodlessly onto the forestage so that the murderers have to go into a huddle round the body to produce (by disembowelling?) enough gore to

go round symbolically. At the funeral the open coffin is tipped on its end for the rowdy, recorded off-stage mob to peep at the corpse (will it fall out?) while Nicholas Farrell's Mark Antony oddly sways the rhu-barbers with his tearful sometimes sotto voce way of playing down the irony. He is on his own admission no orator. But who in this company (apart from Mr Allam) is?

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