



INTERVIEW: WOMEN IN POLITICS AND THEATRE

Festival Dramaturg Kee-Yoon Nahm (KYN) has a conversation with director Quetta Carpenter (QC), who is adapting *Julius Caesar* for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for length and clarity.

KYN: What inspired you to adapt *Julius Caesar*? I am especially interested in your decision to change some of the male characters into women in your modern adaptation.

QC: It actually started at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival when I performed in *Richard II* in 2015. I was up in the balcony as the Duchess of York, watching the fight scene below between Bolingbroke and Mowbray. I noticed a couple of women onstage who were playing male roles. In this production, they dressed in men's clothes, but they still looked like women. I looked at them and thought: why can they not just be in a dress? Would that change the play? I asked some female actors I know whether they would be interested in playing Shakespeare's male roles as women, and they said, "Absolutely. I would love to play a woman as a woman instead of having to act twice—as a man, and then as the character." I received a grant to have readings of *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Richard II* with most of the roles changed to women. After the readings, we had roundtable discussions about what prevented women from playing male roles as women.

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**THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT:
CAESAR**

I started working on an adaptation of *Julius Caesar* in the summer of 2016 for my next experiment in gender parity. I chose this play because it is always a little mystifying, even though there is so much there that people like. It is a curricular play, so it is constantly produced. But no one in our group had seen a production that was successful. I think there are themes in *Julius Caesar* that speak to our world, but they easily get lost. Not only did I want to achieve gender parity in the casting, I wanted to find a way to make the play more exciting and modern.

KYN: The United States is also going through a moment right now in which women are becoming more prominent in politics. I think that the political world of the play will remind audiences of our own. How did you decide which of the Roman politicians to change to women?

QC: Cassius was the first role that I knew had to be female. My version of the character, Cassia, has already planned out the *coup d'état* at the beginning of the play. She is ready to act, but her co-conspirators say that they need Brutus. Why would they need Brutus? Is it because he is more popular? No, in my version of the story, I think it is because Brutus is a white man and Cassia is a woman of color. If you read political power into gender and race, you suddenly understand why Cassia must get Brutus to vouch for her for everybody to be on board, even though she is leading the plot. It felt more truthful for the character to be a woman.

KYN: I noticed that the two most powerful characters in the play—Julius Caesar and Brutus—remain men, whereas their cohorts—Cassia and May Antonia (Mark Antony)—are women in your adaptation. What you say makes sense because this does still seem to be a world in which men are privileged. Therefore, someone like Cassia feels that she needs a Brutus to be the face of the movement.

QC: Exactly. That is what I see in our world today. Even now, we talk more about “electability” when it comes to female politicians, not treating them the same way that we do men. I do not buy that the most powerful figures in the play, Caesar and Brutus, are women. On the one hand, I want to achieve gender parity in casting so that the female actors can also take on large, complex parts. But that does not mean that I will create a world in which everything is equitable in terms of gender. I do not live in that world.



Quetta Carpenter
(director)

KYN: Speaking of which, even though this play was written 400 years ago and depicts events from 2000 years ago, it feels very modern. Is the modern setting something that you always had in mind or discovered through the adaptation process?

QC: The first pass that I did of the play, when I experimented with changing the gender of some of the characters, was not set in modern times. But there were things in the play that I felt got in the way of the story. These things included supernatural elements such as Calpurnia's foreboding dreams, the Soothsayer, and Caesar's ghost. I tried taking all these things out in my second pass. Once I decided on a modern version of the Roman Republic, I also changed the war into a political battle. I did not want a literal war onstage because modern senators do not go to war. What was left was a condensed version of the play that felt contemporary.

KYN: Political assassinations are common enough in modern history, but what stood out even more to me was how you translated the idea of Roman public life—the forum and the art of oratory—into the ways in which we engage in public discourse through technology. Could you talk about how you want to bring media and technology into the production?

QC: Nowadays, you do not address the public by talking in the city square. Even if you do that, it is more about the TV audience watching at home than the live audience. The modern equivalent of a Roman oratory is a televised press conference. While I was working on the adaptation, I watched the 2016 presidential election debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton with a group of people at somebody's house while drinking wine. I saw that people could not stop themselves from talking over the debate and responding to it. I think this is the modern equivalent of the Roman crowd responding to a speech in the forum. This happens in bars, too. I worked in Washington D.C. for Ralph Nader during his 2000 presidential campaign. The staff would sit in a bar drinking, and comment on somebody's speech on TV. Other people around us would have different opinions and join the conversation. I imagine this setting for the famous speeches during Caesar's funeral. In a modern world, the speeches are immediately followed by punditry, which determines the messaging and which side we are going to believe.

KYN: The opening scenes of both acts in your adaptation take place in a bar. In the first act, we see characters of various political

alignments congregate at a bar after Caesar's victory in an election. The second act begins at the same bar where the characters tune into Brutus and Antonia's speeches at Caesar's televised funeral service. Can you talk more specifically about this setting that you have created?

QC: It's called Pompey's Porch. This location really sets the stage for the play. I imagine it as a very chic and classy upscale bar that caters to a younger crowd. Very slick and sophisticated. \$13 for a beer—it is that kind of bar. The spaces inside the bar and out on the patio are almost like pavilions where people move around a lot. No matter where you are, you can be seen by everyone. The setting is based on my experience of working on a presidential campaign. After the election, we would all go to the bar. Everybody who worked on anyone's campaign would be at the same bar at the same time. And we would all mingle and talk to each other and exchange jibes and have drinks. I want to bring that environment to the stage.

KYN: Just to clarify for our readers, a beer will *not* cost \$13 at the Illinois State University Center for Performing Arts, where *Caesar* will be presented!