

# Attempt at censorship in reaction to New York's Public Theater production of *Julius Caesar*

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The corporate and right-wing attacks on the production of *Julius Caesar* by the Public Theater, part of the annual free Shakespeare in the Park season in New York City's Central Park, illustrate the danger of artistic censorship and more generally that of authoritarianism posed by the Trump administration.

Directed by Oskar Eustis, who is also the artistic director of the Public Theater, this *Julius Caesar* is staged with unmistakable allusions to the current occupant of the White House. Caesar (Gregg Henry) is portrayed as an egomaniac who needs constant adulation. This Caesar has a love of glitz, including a gold bathtub. He is dressed in a blue suit and has a shock of blond hair and the trademark Trump comb-over. His wife Calpurnia (Tina Benko) has a Slavic accent and the style and appearance of Melania Trump. His son Octavius (Robert Gilbert) is portrayed as a callow Jared Kushner-type figure.

The Trumpian depiction of Caesar, combined with a graphic, bloody scene of his assassination, has provoked outrage among Trump's ultra-right supporters. Breitbart News and the "Fox and Friends" television show have focused on it. Donald Trump, Jr. tweeted, "I wonder how much of this 'art' is funded by taxpayers."

The reaction was almost immediate. The "Public" Theater in fact receives most of its funding from giant corporate sponsors, not from public sources. A number of the most prominent funders issued statements disavowing the production, although none of them had uttered a word of complaint, through its weeks of previews, until the right-media campaign began.

Delta Airlines announced that the production "does not reflect Delta Airlines' values" and that the "artistic

and creative direction crossed the line on standards of good taste." Bank of America, the lead corporate sponsor for the past 11 years, declared that the production had been designed to "provoke and offend" and, "had this intention been made known to us, we would have decided not to sponsor."

American Express joined the chorus, explaining, "We would like to clarify that our sponsorship of the Public Theater does not fund the production of Shakespeare in the Park, nor do we condone the interpretation of the *Julius Caesar* play."

As Delta's employees and passengers know full well, the airline's "values" have nothing to do with anything but the ruthless drive for profit. The company would prefer to stay off Trump's enemies list. The reactions of financial and corporate management are a direct reflection of the atmosphere being whipped up under this administration.

Even more ominous than the actions of the corporate sponsors was the reaction of the National Endowment for the Arts, the federal agency that funds arts institutions large and small around the US. Trump's budget proposes to eliminate funding for the NEA entirely. The agency issued a brief statement on its website two days ago stating, "No taxpayer dollars support Shakespeare in the Park's production of *Julius Caesar*."

The implication could hardly be clearer. If Congress sees its way to continuing the funding of the NEA, the agency's leadership will ensure that nothing is done to offend the neo-fascistic billionaire in the White House.

As many critics and Shakespeare scholars have pointed out, *Julius Caesar* does not in fact present the assassination of the Roman tyrant in a favorable light.

Harvard professor Stephen Greenblatt explained that a major theme of the play was that the elimination of a dictator “could bring an end to the very republic you’re trying to save.”

In a statement posted on its website, the Public Theater announced that it “stands completely behind our production of JULIUS CAESAR. ... Our production of JULIUS CAESAR in no way advocates violence towards anyone. Shakespeare's play, and our production, make the opposite point: those who attempt to defend democracy by undemocratic means pay a terrible price and destroy the very thing they are fighting to save. For over 400 years, Shakespeare's play has told this story and we are proud to be telling it again in Central Park.”

This is hardly the first time that *Julius Caesar* and other Shakespearean tragedies and history plays have been presented in topical or contemporary guise. The famous 1937 production of *Julius Caesar* directed by the 22-year-old Orson Welles featured a Caesar modeled on Benito Mussolini. Shakespeare himself wrote plays that were unmistakable in their contemporary political references, although these were never expressed directly. *Julius Caesar* was written in the final years of the reign of Elizabeth I, and Shakespeare's career was bound up with the social and political conflicts that would erupt several decades later in the English civil war.

James Shapiro in *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, as we have noted on the WSWS, draws a connection between intense political repression under the aging queen and the writing of *Julius Caesar*, about which he asserts, ironically in light of the present controversy, “No play by Shakespeare explores censorship and silencing so deeply as the one he was writing during these months” in 1599.

Topical interpretations such as the Public Theater's run the risk of obviousness, of course. Although there is a satirical element in the Central Park production, there is also something too easy and limited in the allusions to Trump.

Needless to say, however, the Public Theater's right-wing critics are not in the least concerned with the production's artistic qualities. The purpose of their campaign is intimidation, and such behavior has been directed not only at the theater. For Breitbart and similar sources, moreover, there is no contradiction

between making free speech claims when protests against provocateurs like Milo Yiannopoulos occur, and then demanding clampdowns in the case of such events as the production of *Julius Caesar*.

The current controversy also calls attention to American capitalism's scandalous treatment of the arts. Public spending and subsidies, never generous, have been continuously cut and now face the threat of complete elimination. Over the last several decades theater, art, music and dance have become increasingly dependent upon the largesse of multimillionaire donors and corporate philanthropy. The *Julius Caesar* production shows how rapidly corporate donations can evaporate, and the implications of reliance on such sources of funding.



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