

Caesar must die

Directed by Paulo and Vittorio Taviani, Italy, 2011

A review by Philip Kemp for *Sight and Sound* magazine:

The Taviani brothers, arthouse darlings of the 70s and 80s (*Allonsanfàn*, *Padre padrone*, *The Night of San Lorenzo*), have rather dropped off the international map in recent years. But though they've slowed down they have not stopped making films, and the unexpected triumph of their most recent movie, *Caesar Must Die*, at the Berlin Film Festival (where it won the Golden Bear) brings them back into the spotlight. The film also introduces something relatively new in their oeuvre – a teasing penchant for blurring the line between artifice and reality.

At first sight, we seem to be watching a documentary about a production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, its text somewhat adapted, recently staged by the inmates of Rome's high-security Rebibbia jail. But early on there's a hint that things aren't quite so straightforward. We start at the end – the full-costume production, given before a mixed audience of inmates and invited outsiders, and received with wild enthusiasm. But then there's a title, 'Six Months Earlier', and the screen switches from full colour to black-and-white. A simple enough device, but quietly suggesting that what we see may not be as close to unfiltered reality as it initially appears.



It soon becomes evident – from framing, from camera placement, from the convicts' delivery of their lines – that a good deal of what we see of the run-up to the production has been staged, and quite possibly scripted and rehearsed.

Which immediately raises the question – how much should we believe? While Giovanni Arcuri (playing Caesar) and Juan Bonetti (Decius Brutus) are rehearsing the scene where Decius persuades Caesar to attend the senate despite his wife Calpurnia's ominous dream, Arcuri suddenly slips out of character and starts accusing Bonetti of sneaking around behind his back and badmouthing him. The director Fabio Cavalli and the rest of the cast watch in dismay as the pair barge out into the corridor, seemingly intent on a punch-up. But the framing, and the cutting, make it improbable that this was a spontaneous quarrel – though of course it may have reflected a genuine animosity between the two men which the Tavianis picked up on and put to use.

Similarly there is a moment when two prison guards watch fascinated from a high gallery while another scene is being rehearsed, and start discussing the character of Mark Antony. A third joins them, saying it's time the prisoners were back in their cells, but the other two persuade him to wait until the scene's over. Real? Most probably not. Truthful? It has the ring of it.

Other moments, however much set up, ring equally true to their situation: Arcuri reading Caesar's 'De Bello Gallico', remarking, "And to think that at school I found this boring!"; Cosimo Rega (Cassius), a Neapolitan, marvelling, "It feels like this Shakespeare lived in the streets of my city"; an inmate, refurbishing the prison theatre in preparation for the play, stroking the plush seat of one of the chairs and musing wistfully, "Maybe a woman will sit here."

But Salvatore Striano (Brutus) relating the story of the play to his two enthralled cell-mates does feel less than convincing – the more so since (in the film's one clear piece of out-and-out contrivance) Striano had already been released in 2006, and returned to Rebibbia just to take part in the play and film. And a montage of the cast members back in their cells at night, each staring at the ceiling while we hear their thoughts on the soundtrack, seems to belong to a different (and cheesier) movie altogether.



Wryly humorous touches abound. Chided by Cavalli for slowness, Rega responds: "I've been here 20 years and you say let's not waste time!" The occasional rewriting of Shakespeare might give purists a shock: Decius Brutus's protest that he must know some reason why Caesar declines to come to the senate, "Lest I be laughed at when I tell them so," becomes "The other senators will take the piss." Cries of "For freedom!" from the conspirators carry their own ironic charge, as do the references to Brutus and his cohorts as "men of honour"; several members of the cast, as we're told early on, have been jailed

for involvement in the Mafia. The Tavianis hardly need to emphasise the relevance of the play as a whole to current Italian politics; that, they most likely feel, is a given.

We end with a return to full colour and a longer reprise of the final production in front of an audience and its ecstatic reception, the actors cheering as loudly as the spectators. It's a moment of uplifting jubilation before the dying fall as the cast, now back in drab prison garb, are returned to their cells and the doors locked on them, each a solitary prisoner. One of them, Cosimo Rega, we follow into his cell and watch as he mooches around and makes himself coffee, reflecting as he does so, "Since I got to know art, this cell has become a prison." Another scripted line? Quite possibly – but it hardly matters. Truth to art – as the Tavianis and Rega have just reminded us – is what matters.

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