

**The Shakespearean Stage and Rising European Fascism:  
*Julius Caesar* between 1935 - 1941**

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## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.



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## **Abstract**

*Julius Caesar* is one of Shakespeare's plays which has remained relatively popular since its premiere in Elizabethan England. However, perceptions of the play and interest in performing it shifted in the 20th century, particularly in the 1930s, during the rise of European Fascism, notably with a 1937 production directed by Orson Welles, which deliberately referenced Fascism. However, this was not the only production of *Julius Caesar* which was linked to Fascism - there were three other major productions: in Berlin directed by Fehling, in Rome directed by Ferdinando Tamberlani, and in Prague directed by Jiří Frejka and designed by František Tröster, between 1935 - 1941. *Caesar* is a Roman play which deals with the ideas of dictatorship, political performance, political power, the rise and fall of regimes and empires; with Fascism's links to Ancient Rome, it represents a complex, interesting play for theatre-makers and directors of the 1930s seeking to discuss contemporary concerns - and yet each production of the period linked to Fascism expresses these concerns - whichever they may be - differently, which extremely diverse impacts. This thesis compares and analyses each production in order to highlight the different meanings and effects a single play can take on across different contexts and under different directors and designers.

These productions of *Caesar* and their importance in the changing reception of Shakespeare's play are not solely due to the rise of Fascism; in the early 20th century, theatre undergoes a rapid change, with the arrival of new ideas from theorists such as Appia and Craig, the development of avant-garde and German Expressionist theatre in Europe, and the subsequent movements in North America; other elements also affect the theatres involved in these productions, such as Czechoslovakia's newly acquired independence or the Nazi regime's tightening control over their theatres. In analysing the different contexts of each production, a basis is formed for understanding the impact of each production; this understanding is further developed through analysis of the lighting design, scenography, and directorial choices of each production.

Key ideas that support the analysis of the *Caesars*' scenography and lighting design are Marvin Carlson's concept of "ghosting", as well as the importance of Ancient Rome, the concept of ruins, and their symbolism.

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## Introduction

*Julius Caesar*, William Shakespeare's second Roman tragedy after *Titus Andronicus*, was first performed in the Globe in 1599, likely the opening performance of the theatre (Zander, 2004, p. 3) Despite its long history, it is a play that has remained well-known. Sohmer described it as:

Unique in the canon, *Julius Caesar* has never been out of vogue. It has been continually recalled to the stage for four hundred years - a play for all times and all audiences. (Sohmer, quoted in Zander, 2004, p. 4)

However, despite this long history, according to Hartley, by the 20th century *Julius Caesar* was considered "shackled by the past and by a lack of inherent theatricality" (2014, p. 4) - and it isn't until the late 20th century, particularly with a 1937 production in New York, that the course of the play on stage is altered, freed from its shackles and the general lack of excitement over the play (2014, p. 53). Indeed, *Julius Caesar* is a complicated play, depicting a Roman general (Caesar) accused of becoming a tyrant, murdered by a group of conspirators, with civil war ensuing as a consequence for his death. Hartley qualifies the play as being, at its core, "preoccupied with political performance," (2014, p. 2) while also - despite depicting (someone accused of) tyranny - "refus[ing] to unequivocally take sides" (2014, p. 173). However, the 20th century marks a turning point for the play, with the play no longer being anchored in the past with an archaic focus on honour or rhetoric - particularly, this shift is evident in the lead-up to World War Two.

Indeed, by this time, European Fascism was on the rise, gaining power and influence - and with it, an increased interest in Ancient Rome. *Julius Caesar*, with its depiction of a dictator and its links to Ancient Rome, was an interesting, powerful text for the time, one in which directors and designers saw new opportunities for links to contemporary concerns, particularly concerns around European Fascism - although not necessarily *criticisms* of Fascism.

Ancient Rome and the Roman Empire is a civilisation that has reached mythical, legendary status; its ruins litter much of Europe, its language is the root of multiple major European languages, its architectural style has been regularly emulated in the centuries since it fell (with the Neoclassical architectural style); its histories, myths, and legends have been frequently retold. *Julius Caesar* is a clear example of this - a story about a historical Roman figure, written over a thousand

years after his death by an English playwright; a play that continues to be performed to this day. The appeal of Rome and the European obsession with it is not new; however, in the 20th century rising European Fascism deliberately and intensely leaned on and appropriated Ancient Roman iconography, down to the name of the movement itself - *Fascism* coming from *fascēs*, meaning a bundle of sticks, a Roman symbol for penal authority (Soucy, 2026). Even the Fascist-Nazi salute was borrowed from Ancient Rome - although, Dunnett points out, there is little evidence for it actually being an Ancient Rome tradition (2006, p. 245). Roche links Fascism and Nazism' obsession with Ancient Rome (as well as Ancient Greece, in Nazism's case) to struggles to create a sturdy, legitimate national identity, particularly in Italy where Ancient Rome has long been utilised for political gains (such as during the 19th century Unification of Italy - at the time, Ancient Rome represented the last time Italy had been a united state) (2019, pp. 127 - 150), although memories and artefacts of the Holy Roman Empire, with power concentrated in Germany, were also important, seen as “emblematic of the pride and greatness of the Old Reich,” (Martin, 2018). Ancient Rome provided a model image of glory, strength and military power, influencing the style of Nazi parades and mock-ups of Hitler's desired future (Bassey, 2021, p. 200); Mussolini frequently referenced Ancient Rome in speeches, complimenting and venerating their power and the scale of their empire. Ancient Rome and the glory of its expansive, “united” empire, and Fascism were then, seemingly, tightly linked, with key symbols of Rome important parts of their image.

It is then, perhaps, of little surprise that between 1935 and 1941, there were a handful of major *Julius Caesar* productions - across Europe, but also in the United States - which are frequently associated with Fascism. The particular productions I will be looking at are from four different countries: Ferdinando Tamberlani's 1935 *Giulio Cesare* in Rome, Jiří Frejka's 1936 *Julius Caesar* in Prague, Orson Welles' 1937 *Caesar: Death of a Dictator* in New York City, and Jurgen Fehling's 1941 *Julius Cäsar* in Berlin (though here I use their original names, in their original language, throughout the thesis they will all simply be referred to as *Julius Caesar* or *Caesar*).

This thesis examines and discusses these four productions of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in the half-decade leading to the Second World War, and the ways in which each reference and discuss Fascism, both in the circumstances surrounding

their production and in the specific design and direction of each production, in an effort to highlight the different effect and significance a single play can have. Chapter One, about Shakespeare, *Caesar* and the 20th century, examines the circumstances behind each production, focusing on theatre history and movements, and the role of Shakespeare in various different countries, highlighting the importance of each production in their specific contexts. Chapter Two, about designing Fascist *Julius Caesars*, discusses directorial choices and the particular set and lighting design of each production, and how these choices reflect ideas or criticisms linked to European Fascism.

Of the four productions, Welles' production at the Mercury Theatre is perhaps the most famous one; Ripley wrote that Welles "dragged Caesar with traumatic abruptness into the twentieth century," with this production (quoted in Anderegg, 2004, p. 295). With its use of modern dress, innovative lighting design by Jean Rosenthal, and references to newsreels about Europe that most Americans were familiar with, this production frequently characterised as "anti-Fascist" made waves in the Western theatre world (Anderegg, 1999, p. 19). A year earlier Frejka directed *Caesar* in Prague, and also met much success, although much of the attention directed to this production nowadays is due to its innovative set designer - František Tröster. Despite much of the post-war, non-Czech focus being on the production's scenographic techniques and philosophy, the production is still frequently considered anti-Fascist, in its echoing and highlighting of the ominous rise of dictatorships surrounding Czechoslovakia, two years before Nazi Germany began to occupy it.

Meanwhile, the other two productions were put on in much more explicitly Fascist contexts - the 1935 production was staged in Mussolini's Rome just two months before Italy invaded Ethiopia, while Fehling's *Caesar* was performed in Berlin's Staatstheatre in 1941, two years after Germany's invasion of Poland. The Rome production is one of the few *Caesar* productions of Mussolini's regime, and was at the time the first major *Caesar* production in Italy in 3 decades (Bigliuzzi, 2020, p. 97). However - it was also commissioned and produced by Achille Starace, President of the Fascist National Party and the National Workers' Recreational Club (Bigliuzzi, 2020, p. 109), perhaps making it the most unambiguously "pro-Fascist" production of the four. In contrast, although Fehling's German production was

technically permitted and felt to be in accordance with Nazi ideals, it is frequently described as both pro-Fascist and anti-Fascist, with scholars still discussing which “side” it falls on.

Despite each of these productions being of the same, base text, as well as all being linked to a specific, divisive historical moment (that of Fascism), there are specific geographical contexts, cultural movements, and directorial visions that mean these productions all have major differences and different legacies - but nonetheless, they also have interesting, overlapping ideas and methods.

## Chapter One: Shakespeare, *Caesar*, and the early 20th century

Hartley qualified Welles' production as "a staging which embraced its historical moment"; not simply the historical moment of 1937 (which would lead to the Second World War two years later), but the mindset, style of acting, "of Shakespeare", of design, were "defined by 1937" (2014, p. 38). Welles' production was not the only one heavily influenced by its historical moment; before considering the specific designs and directorial choices of each production, looking into and discussing the specific context of each allows for a greater understanding of each one. Indeed, even just looking beyond the very different experiences of each country in the rise of Fascism (America across the Atlantic experienced the pressure of rising dictatorships very differently than a newly independent Czechoslovakia sharing a border region with Nazi Germany, for example), the theatre changes greatly, and Shakespeare and *Julius Caesar* occupy very different roles.

In his book *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson writes about the concept of "ghosting" which describes the phenomenon of audiences recognising something they have seen before, in a new context, or "ghosts" of past performances, images, presentations - especially in theatre, which is "particularly obsessed with memory and ghosting," (2001, p. 7). The importance of memory becomes particularly evident in the study of "reception" (as in, audiences' reactions to theatrical productions); the reception of a play varies depending on the expectations an audience brings ("the horizon of expectations", Jauss, 1982, quoted in Carlson, 2001, p. 5). However, the expectations are shaped by audiences' memories - "the residue of memory of previous such experiences," (2001, p. 5). It is precisely these memories of previous experiences that this chapter is concerned with.

Indeed, in this chapter I aim to establish the different contexts, histories, and memories behind each production, in an effort to understand how directors, designers and audiences would have approached each production, the "ghosts" that haunted each production - and how differently *Julius Caesar* can be approached.

### 1.1. Orson Welles, Shakespeare, and New Stagecraft

In the first half of the 20th century, theatre (and particularly set and lighting design) in the Western world - Europe and North America - changed radically compared to the previous 19th century, particularly with the work of designers and

theorists Adolph Appia and Edward Gordon Craig; key developments included the idea of the director being the overall creator of a production - organising and “designing” every part to make a whole, cohesive production (Erven, 2010, p. 24); scenic design also changed, with more Expressionist, abstract, and experimental designs being developed for the stage. Much of these changes originated in Europe, with pioneers such as German director Max Reinhardt and English actor and director Harley Granville-Baker. These changes arrived in North America later, particularly thanks to American set designer Robert Edmond Jones (Erven, 2010, p. 23) and his book, written with Kenneth McGowan, *Continental Stagecraft*, published in 1922.

In America, this movement was known as New Stagecraft. According to David Bisaha, in his account of the history of American scenic design, “New Stagecraft artists turned theatrical presentation into a visual celebration of imagination, expressionism, and complexity,” (2022, p. 22). Furthermore, from the 1910s to 1940, scenic design established itself further as its own, unique creative field. Scenic designers went from being “scenic artists”, whose job was more labour-focused, with the task of creating appropriate painted backdrops, sometimes for specific productions and sometimes as more generic, stock images (2022, p. 15), to creatives in their own right, working to convey particular “aesthetic point of view[s]” (2022, p. 17) for each production, and experimenting with new stage configurations.

Orson Welles, an American actor and director better known today for his immensely successful films such as *Citizen Kane*, was well aware of and interested in this movement, particularly thanks to his time in Europe and his acting experience at the Gate Theatre in Dublin in 1931. The co-directors of the Gate at the time, Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir, were experienced actors and designers, heavily influenced by New Stagecraft (Anderegg, 1999, p. 21). Interestingly, one of the major roles Welles played while at the Gate was in a Shakespeare production - *Hamlet*, where he played the Ghost of Hamlet’s father.

Shakespeare, as an English playwright, was - and continues to be - one of the most performed in the English-speaking world, but by the 20th century he was not necessarily the most attractive choice for audiences. Anderegg notes that “by the time Orson Welles was born - 1915 - Shakespeare was no longer the surefire draw he

had been some two decades earlier,” (1999, p. 22). Despite this, Welles’ interest in Shakespeare did not begin with his time in *Hamlet*, and very much did not end with his 1937 production of *Caesar* either. The director performed in multiple Shakespeare productions in America (particularly *Romeo and Juliet* on Broadway), directed in 1936 a production of *Macbeth* (sometimes nicknamed a “voodoo Macbeth”, for the nineteenth-century-Haiti concept), and published his own editions (in collaboration with his teacher Roger Hill) of three Shakespeare plays, including *Julius Caesar*, in 1934.

In *Everybody’s Shakespeare*, as these editions were called, Welles discusses staging Shakespeare, and references Elizabethan stage practices and the simplicity of their stages (which he seemed to view as “an antidote for nineteenth-century scenic excesses”, according to Weiss (1994, p. 149)), with the modern influence of New Stagecraft still present in his ideas. Indeed, Anderegg writes:

The new stagecraft was not all one thing; its principles and practitioners pulled in two directions at once. On the one hand, the movement championed the highly decorative or concept-oriented work of designers like Edward Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia [...]. On the other side, especially with reference to Shakespeare production, the new stagecraft, at least in Great Britain, meant the work of William Poel and Harley Granville-Barker, whose aim it was to re-create, insofar as possible, the simplicity, speed, and intimacy of Elizabethan staging [...]. Both tendencies would characterize Welles’s own approach to Shakespeare staging. (Anderegg, 1999, p.21)

Figure 1 highlights an example of the more standard “scenic excess” of the 19th century, with an elaborate painted backdrop, while figure 2 showcases a production directed by Granville-Barker, with the simpler, more bare Elizabethan stage.

These ideas - those of the director as designer of a whole production, of concept-driven design, as well of simpler, efficient, Elizabethan-inspired staging - were all present in his 1937 production of *Julius Caesar* at Welles’ newly opened Mercury Theatre, with its modern-dress, Fascist-inspired “gimmick”, and impactful lighting design by Jean Rosenthal.

This production was immensely successful, in large part thanks to these ideas. Indeed, despite the attention Welles received with his *Macbeth* a year earlier, in 1937 specifically, Shakespeare was not particularly successful on the New York

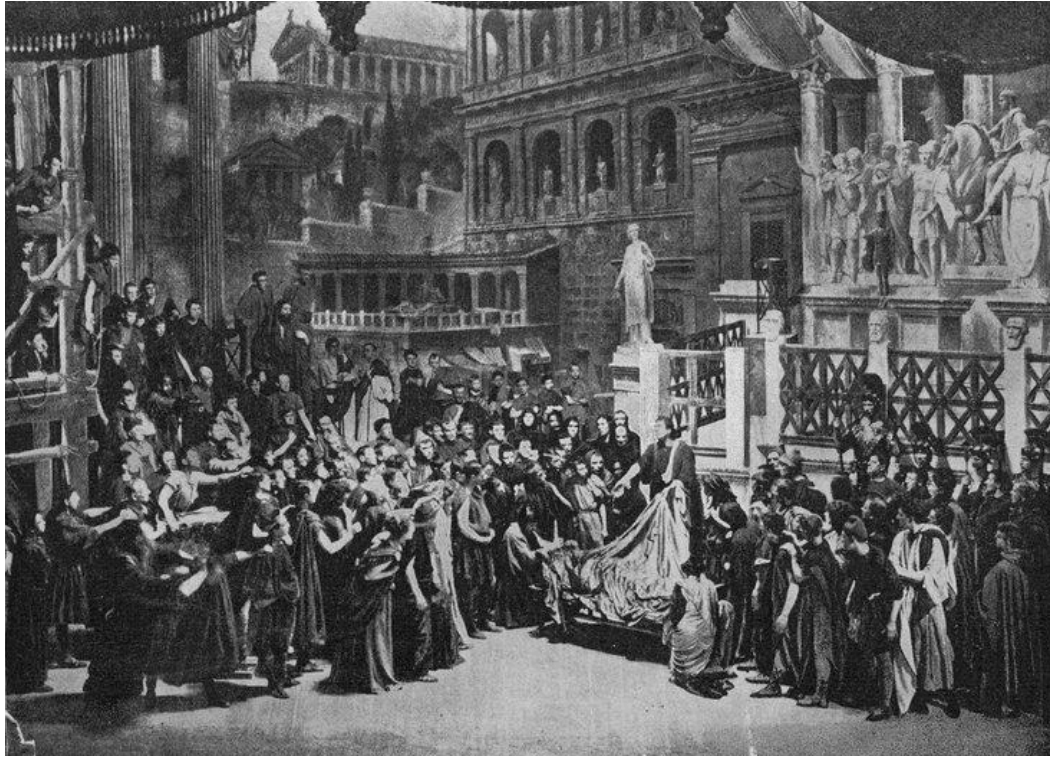


Fig. 1: Forum scene from *Julius Caesar* at Her Majesty's Theatre, photograph, 1898 (Lebrecht / Bridgeman Images)



Fig. 2: *The Winter's Tale* at the Savoy Theatre, Daily Mirror newspaper, 1912 (V&A museum)

scene (Anderegg, 1999, p.27). For example, a Broadway production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, with a much higher budget than what Welles was working with, opened around the same time to little success, and suffered many comparisons to Welles' *Caesar*. Additionally, "concept" productions weren't common ways of staging Shakespeare; they'd been known to happen before, in singular experiments, although not often. In fact, Hartley considers this the most likely "first" concept-production in *Julius Caesar*'s production history (2014, p. 41).

Modern-dress productions of Shakespeare were similarly uncommon, although for *Julius Caesar* in particular, there had been just months prior a modern dress production done by Delaware Federal Theatre. The costuming had some allusions to Fascism, although Anderegg (2004, p. 298) believed "the Fascist parallels appear to have been primarily a matter of costuming", rather than the driving concept of the production. Additionally, Hartley (2014, p.53) indicates that it is unclear whether or not Welles would have been aware of this production. Nonetheless, the idea to set *Julius Caesar* in modern times and anchor it to rising European Fascism, was not wholly unexpected, with a friend of Welles, playwright Sydney Howard, suggesting the idea to him in a letter from February 1937 - *Caesar* opened in November (Anderegg, 1999, p. 27). Indeed, in that year, much of the groundwork for the Second World War was laid, with the Japanese invasion of China, Hitler's forces bombing Guernica in Spain, and Mussolini beginning his invasion of Ethiopia. A month before *Caesar* opened, Franklin Roosevelt called for an end to American neutrality (Hartley, 2014, p. 37). Growing pressures were felt in America.

At the time, however, *Julius Caesar* was more frequently considered a "meditation on Roman history, on rhetoric and on nobility," (Hartley, 2014, p.3) firmly anchored in Ancient Rome and Elizabethan London; it was one of Shakespeare's more well-known plays, but not considered particularly exciting. Welles' decision to anchor it in the tense, conflicted present would have been extremely striking for audiences at the time, offering a new, topical way to view *Caesar*.

Therefore, at the time of Welles' production, Shakespeare and *Julius Caesar* were very well-known, but not necessarily *interesting* to audiences - but combined

with Welles' ideas, the new theatre of the twentieth century, and, as we'll see, the set and lighting design choices and techniques, meant that *Caesar: Death of a Dictator* was striking, engaging audiences in a singularly new way.

### **1.2. Czech theatre and national identity**

In Eastern Europe, and particularly in Czechoslovakia, the theatre also experienced a renaissance of sorts; it was in Europe that "Continental Stagecraft" originated, with Adolph Appia being Swiss and Edward Gordon Craig English, as well as many other influential directors and designers emerging there. Czech theatre particularly seemed ripe for experimentation and advancements in theatre and design. In the interwar period, the theatre became a ripe ground for experimentation, a consequence and response to the Czech people finally gaining independence in the form of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. Not only was the Czech theatre eager to "sustain their new independent cultural identity" and to establish their own "theatrical tradition", but it was also able to take advantage of its geographical location "between East and West," (Burian, 2000, p. 31), able to access the experimental avant-garde theatre of Western Europe (such as Germany and France) and the Soviet Union on the other side. Czech artists were able to draw on various art movements - "Austrian art nouveau, German expressionism, Russian constructivism, French cubism and surrealism, and many other art styles" - leading to "an exceptionally fertile experimental environment" on the stage (Koubská, 2017, p. 21).

Theatre for the Czech people had long been linked to the fight for increased independence - for example, when the first foundation stone for the Provisional Theatre, the first fully-Czech professional theatre in Prague, was put down in 1868, it prompted a "huge three-day national and international Slav festival of pageantry and eloquence, regattas and fireworks, drawing tens of thousands to Prague," (Burian, 2000, p. 31). In the 20th century, while continuing to push for independence from Austria-Hungary, Czech theatre professionals continued to develop a Czech theatrical tradition, with many of the leading directors and designers involving themselves in the fight for independence as well. Jaroslav Kvapil, one of the early 20th century directors that Burian identified as one of the leaders "of the efforts to create modern Czech theatre" along with Karel Hugo Hilar (2000, p. 20), was

involved in the “Mafie”, a Czech covert resistance effort “working within the law to promulgate the Czech cause” (2000, p. 24). Kvapil had long been inspired by the classics - particularly Shakespeare - in 1916 he staged sixteen of Shakespeare’s plays as part of his work with the Mafie - work which seemed to “align the Czechs with England” instead of Austria-Hungary (2000, p. 24) - a clear example of the link Czech theatre made between Shakespeare and Czech national identity.

Shakespeare in Czechoslovakia had an interesting role; he was well-known in Central and Eastern Europe, and according to Dennis Kennedy, was viewed as a “Romantic, revolutionary writer” (Kennedy, 2001, p. 96) in the end of the 19th century; the first extended translations of Shakespeare into Czech, Hungarian and Polish were therefore linked to the development of “indigenous national drama,” (Kennedy, 2001, p. 97), and to growing independence. He was not the only classic and non-Czech writer that was prominent in Czech theatre (French and German playwrights such as Molière and Schiller were also often included), but he was nonetheless fairly present. Czech theatre being less constrained by traditions surrounding Shakespeare, unlike England or even Germany (as we’ll see), meant that Shakespeare’s “visual form” was frequently challenged and experimented with (Koubská, 2017, p. 21), with many major interwar Czech productions being Shakespeare productions.

Burian described the interwar period for the theatre as being in two phases - a first “exuberant, richly inventive phase,” defined by “aesthetic considerations”, until 1930, which brought increasing “moral or ethical preoccupations which at times became flatly ideological or political” (Burian, 2000, p. 33). Director Jiří Frejka and designer František Tröster began their careers in the first phase, but they reached the peaks of their career in the second, particularly with their 1936 *Julius Caesar*. Frejka initially worked in smaller, avant-garde theatres, where he developed a taste for lighter theatre, that was more lyrical; he was quickly taken under the wing of Karel Hugo Hilar at the National Theatre, one of Prague’s oldest and biggest Czech theatres. Despite Hilar being fairly apolitical - in comparison to other major Czech theatre directors such as the aforementioned Kvapil - Frejka became more socially and politically aware as an artist during his time at the National Theatre, although his work in lyrical theatre continued (Burian, 2000, pp. 28 - 36). An example of his later, more politically aware work is his production of

Aristophanes' *The Birds* in 1934, with set design by Hofman; a production which evoked links between contemporary dictators and the main “manipulators” of the play (Burian, 2000, p. 49). A scene from this production can be seen in figure 3- there is a clear poetic and expressionist quality in the production, combined with the more contemporary, modern implications in the design of the city. Frejka also collaborated frequently with Tröster, a set designer who is now viewed as one of the most distinguished Czech scenographers of the 20th century (Koubská, 2017, p. 25) and who had a strong influence on subsequent Czech scenographers such as Josef Svoboda. Niermeyer even credits Tröster's work with being the “beginning of modern stage architecture,” (1959, quoted in Koubská, 2017, p. 26), particularly his work on *Julius Caesar* with Frejka.



Fig. 3: Set from *The Birds*, photograph, 1934 (Národní divadlo archives)

In 1936 particularly, Czechoslovakia was under a lot of pressure politically, which was felt in the theatre world as well. In 1933 Hitler became chancellor in Germany; later that year, a new German political party with Nazi support was formed in the Sudetenland, a Czech region bordering Germany. German writers, intellectuals and artists crossed into and through this region as well as into Prague, effectively exiled from their home country; these included director Max Reinhardt,



Fig. 4: Alexandr Paul, Scene from *Caesar* at the Liberated Theatre, photograph, 1932 (Moravská Galerie)



Fig. 5: Alexander Paul, Map scene from *Caesar* at the Liberated Theatre, photograph, 1932 (Moravská Galerie)

who'd been hugely influential on Czech directors in the 1920s (Burian, 2000, p. 45). In 1932, the Liberated Theatre in Prague staged a production of a play called *Caesar* (not the Shakespearean version), written and directed by Voskovec and Werich, a satire mocking dictators like Mussolini or Hitler, with a mix of Ancient Roman elements (figure 4) and modern dress (figure 5); then in 1934 they staged *Executioner and Fool*, also depicting dictators, but which led to "actual riots [...] between Fascist sympathisers and the greater part of the audience," (Burian, 2000, pp. 46 - 47).

It was in this period of simultaneous theatrical experimentation and rising tension that Frejka directed *Julius Caesar*; in a country where the theatre had long prided itself on supporting Czech freedom and on political awareness, in a period where war and dictatorship were on the horizon - finding anti-Fascist sentiment in this *Julius Caesar* production is wholly unsurprising.

### 1.3. Shakespeare in Nazi Germany

German theatre in the first half of the 20th century was hugely impactful, part of the theatrical avant-garde - with the development of the Expressionist



Fig 6: Robert Edmond Jones, *The Cathedral Scene from Faust*, drawing, 1922 (in *Continental Stagecraft*, McGowan and Jones, 1922)

movement - that influenced Czech theatre and led to the New Stagecraft movement in the United States. Influential directors included Max Reinhardt, who embodied Edward Gordon Craig's ideal of the "autonomous, absolute" director (Burian, 2000, p. 26), and who directed several well-known Shakespeare productions, such as *The Merchant of Venice* in 1921 or *Julius Caesar* in 1920. *Continental Stagecraft* described "the artistic development of the German theater past the realistic stage" as being "fairly complete by 1914 [...] founded upon Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, [...] symbolized in the name of Max Reinhardt." (McGowan and Jones, 1922, p. 42). Figure 6 depicts an illustration of one of Reinhardt's successful productions, *Faust*, designed by Ernst Stern, performed in 1912; the characteristics of the Expressionist movement - which sought to depict "subjective emotions" rather than "objective reality" (Expressionism, 2025) - are on full display: the scene depicts a Cathedral, but the set is simply two large towers, with red light casting the shadow of a cross on the towers. The lighting and set are tools to express the mood rather than literally depict the space. These ideas were found in other of Reinhardt's productions, to much success and popular acclaim. Indeed, it was thanks to Reinhardt and other Berlin-based directors such as Otto Brahm that Berlin became the capital of German theatrical innovation, a change from Vienna's dominance the previous century (Bassey, 2021, p. 53).

However, in the 1930s, the theatrical landscape of Germany changed, in no small part due to the Nazi regime. Hitler's government was well aware of the power of culture and theatre, and, once in power, "proceeded to overhaul the cultural landscape in Germany through tight control and censorship," with a combination of regulating what was produced and choosing who would be "allowed to participate". People viewed as "enemies" were forced to leave ("Jews, Communists,"), which included many influential German artists (Bassey, 2021, p.18). Notably, Reinhardt, who was Jewish, was forcibly "released" from his position as director of the Deutsches Theater - which he owned - in 1933; other prominent directors like Leopold Jessner, who'd directed several productions in the Staatstheater in Berlin, where Fehling would stage his 1941 *Caesar*, followed suit. Several well-established directors and designers still remained, if the regime deemed them suitable. Jurgen Fehling was one of them; he was well-respected in Germany and his productions always received a lot of attention. According to Hans-Thies Lemann, he was the

director “whom the rulers of the time planned on using as a figurehead and ultimate symbol of German theatrical culture,” (1985, quoted in Bassey, 2021, p. 69) although his anti-Nazi sentiment (Hartley, 2014, p. 167) and headstrong, generally adversarial attitude made him resistant to being a “willing cog in the regime’s propaganda machinery,” (Bassey, 2021, p. 69). In the interwar period, Fehling was involved in Expressionist and avant-garde theatre; notably, *Continental Stagecraft* discusses his 1921 *Masse-Mensch* production designed by Strohbach (McGowan and Jones, 1922, pp. 144 - 157) - which was hugely successful - in which the lighting and setting was extremely abstract and symbolic, emotional rather than representational (figure 7).

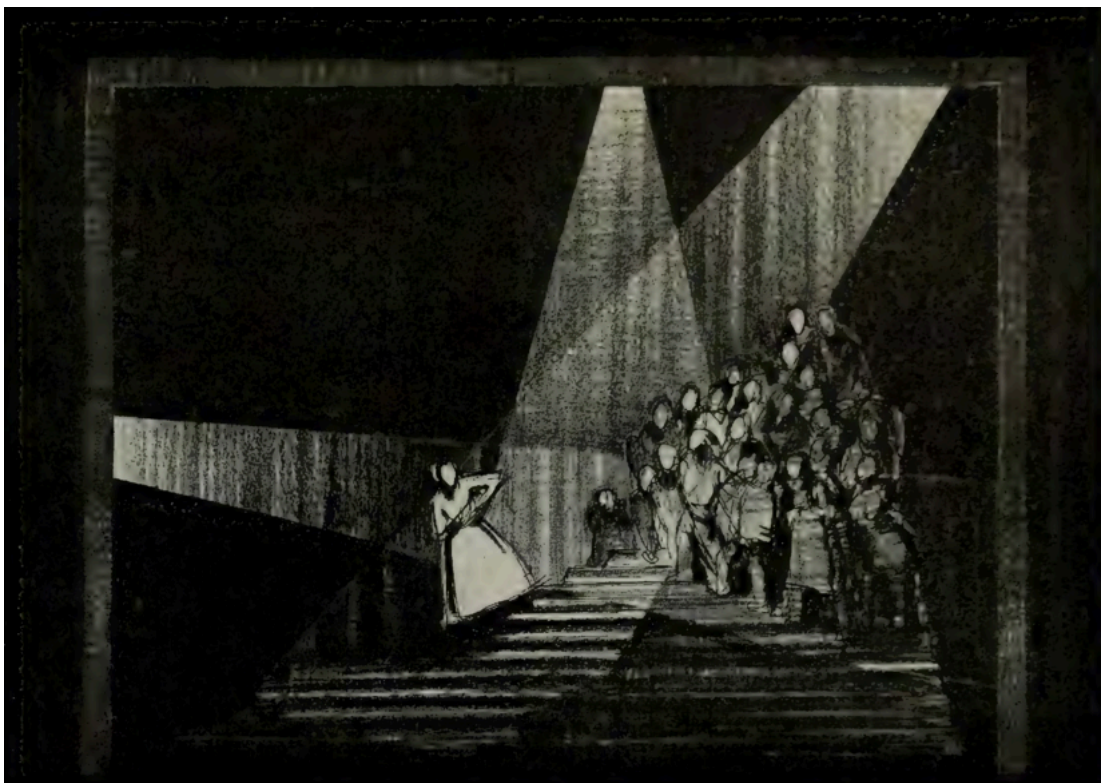


Fig. 7: Robert Edmond Jones, *Masse-Mensch: the rallying*, drawing, 1922 (in *Continental Stagecraft*)

The production addressed contemporary fears and emotions - as McGowan and Jones write:

Here is the misery of capitalism, the misery of abortive revolution, the misery of defeat and black hunger. Berlin is in purgatory. And Berlin goes to *Masse-Mensch*. (McGowan and Jones, 1922, p. 154).

This highlights how, before the regime, Fehling utilised Expressionist design and was willing to address social concerns in stage productions; qualities which become relevant in considering the productions he directed at the Staatstheatre under the Nazi regime.

The regime frequently relied on the theatre as an extension of public relations and diplomacy. Once Mussolini's and Hitler's governments allied, there was an increase in productions of Italian dramas in Germany, with special performances when Italian representatives visited the country (London, 2000, p. 226). When war broke out, playwrights from "enemy" states were banned, such as England, with the exception of Shaw, viewed as Irish and therefore non-English, and Shakespeare, viewed as a cultural icon in Germany (London, 2000, p. 236).

Indeed, in Germany, Shakespeare had long had immense cultural importance, and occupied the same level of importance as German playwrights such as Schiller. This did not change during the Reich; roughly 3 per cent of all stage productions during that period were of Shakespeare plays (London, 2000). Nazi Germany's treatment of Shakespeare took on a worshipping, mythologising view, maintaining there was "a spiritual affinity between Shakespeare and German culture" (London, 2000, p. 240). Much emphasis was placed on the history of Germany and Shakespeare, and new translations were intensely scrutinised and compared to the "canonical" nineteenth century translations, and any production done in modern dress were met with intense backlash. London writes:

A Berlin production [...] was attacked as 'blasphemy to Shakespeare' for its use of revue and cabaret interludes, considered 'Marxist'. [...] Such 'dramatic popularisation' was said to distance the people (Volk) from Shakespeare. (London, 2000, p. 243)

So, it would have been difficult, if not outright impossible, for a theatre to put on a Shakespeare production with as distinct a "look" as Welles' was - not to mention, by the time of Fehling's production in 1941, the war had begun in earnest, and Shakespeare was slowly growing out of favour (alongside the government becoming stricter with what was approved). Fehling himself was at risk of losing his career due to an earlier production, that of *Richard III*, which like his *Mass-Mensch* had a more abstract, Expressionist set design, was perceived as anti-Fascist and used many

modern dress elements (Hartley, 2014, p. 167); his 1941 *Caesar* was therefore one with more traditional “Roman” sets and costuming.

Particularly, *Julius Caesar* itself was a play which could be problematic for the Nazi government, with its depiction of tyrannicide. Rudolf Hess, Deputy Führer to Hitler, allegedly “admitted in private that *Julius Caesar* could be a ‘dangerous play if it fell into the wrong hands,’” (Bassey, 2021, p. 192). Eventually, the regime-approved reading of the production came to be one similar to that of a “Führerdrama” which could be used for propaganda. This reading placed Hitler as akin to Caesar, “the ultimate apotheosis of the Führer” where, though Caesar died, “history proved to be on his side,” (Bassey, 2021, p. 192), with civil war and infighting. Therefore Fehling, despite past experience with less Fascist productions, had to approach the play in a complicated manner, with a play that had a “pre-determined” message already and an audience where the “sanctity” of Shakespeare was king.

#### **1.4. Italian Fascism and *Julius Caesar***

In Fascist Italy, there were similar considerations over *Julius Caesar* and what the play would mean to a government heavily leaning into Ancient Rome and the historical Caesar in its propaganda. Shakespeare was well-known in Italy; a huge bulk of his work is set in Italy, from *Romeo and Juliet* to the Roman plays. In return, Italian culture found his work “attractively assimilable [...] appropriated into new works and artistic media,” (Isenberg, 2012, p. 87), notably in operas. Shakespeare was temporarily put aside during the First World War when tensions rose between Italy and England, but after the war this was forgotten. Renewed interest in Shakespeare grew in the 1920s, at the same time as Fascist propaganda began to utilise the “model’ of Caesar” - of the historical Caesar, specifically. For example, in 1923 a dual-biography of Mussolini and Julius Caesar was published, linking them together (Bigliuzzi, 2020, p. 95). In 1922, Mussolini’s march on Rome - which would lead to the birth of his Fascist government - was deliberately planned to reflect Caesar’s historical “March on Rome” in 49 BC (Isenberg, 2012, p. 85).

Indeed, even before the birth of Fascism the myth of Caesar was prominent in Italian culture, as a result of Italy’s tendency to rely on and evoke the memories of Ancient Rome for political gain (Roche, 2019) - and Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* easily joined this. *Julius Caesar* was Shakespeare's first play translated into Italian in

1756 (Bigliuzzi, 2020, p. 96). It is unsurprising, therefore, that Shakespeare was accommodated by Fascism, particularly in the 1920s and 30s as it sought to revive Italy's "glorious past" and support the "narrative" the rising totalitarian government used to justify itself. Shakespearean scripts were the second most approved scripts at the official censor's office between 1931 and 1944 (Bigliuzzi, 2019, p. 10). Of these scripts two were *Julius Caesar*, with one being the 1935 production (the first major *Julius Caesar* in Italy in thirty years) and the other an opera based off of *Caesar*. Zurlo, the head of theatrical censorship did, much like Rudolf Hess, expressed "worry" over the play, although the interpretation of Caesar that became dominant during the 1920s and 1930s in Italy - mostly in academic circles and prefaces to new translations, less so on the stage - was one which upheld Fascist ideals, with the idea of "Caesarism". Caesarism was an ideal which focused on the idea of the spirit of Caesar (which embodied greatness, and the glory of Ancient Rome), in which, despite Caesar himself being killed, his spirit lives on in the birth of the Roman Empire at the end of the play. The implicit link is, of course, that the spirit of Caesar now lives on in Il Duce - Mussolini.



Fig. 8: *Mussolini giving a salute next to a statue of Caesar*, photograph, c. 1930. (Hawai'i Times Photo Archives Foundation)

This link was established in a variety of ways, from speeches and posters to photographs such as the one in figure 8, a press photograph in which Mussolini salutes beside a statue of Caesar - a visual comparison of the two figures. The connection was also partly reinforced in popular culture with secondary school assigned readings; although studies on Ancient Rome were mandatory at most levels of education, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* was part of the middle school curriculum; part of this was because it was perceived as a "straightforward" play with no "sexual innuendos, off-colour jokes [or] lewdness," which would be able to contribute to young Italians' education and encourage them to admire Caesar-Mussolini (Isenberg, 2012, p. 87). There were still precautions in place to guide readings: the text was primarily studied in extracts, with lines that were too derogatory or critical of Caesar removed; schoolbooks also often included prefaces that encouraged students to appreciate how "Caesar's spirit 'powerful dominates the entire drama'" and to draw analogies to their present time with a "republican regime which was falling to pieces [that] could only come to an end with Caesar - or rather Caesarism - stepping in [...] to consolidate - the empire," (Isenberg, 2012, p. 88). When Caesar's flaws were acknowledged, it was in order to disprove them one by one.

Some alternate interpretations of Caesar still existed under the regime in the form of translations - interestingly, the translation chosen by the National Workers' Recreational Club, and the one which was ultimately used for the 1935 production, was one whose translator, Raffaello Piccoli, had an interpretation and preface which did not "pa[y] tribute to Fascist ideals of Romanity," (Bigliuzzi, 2020, p. 110). In Piccoli's interpretation, the core of the tragedy is in humanity becoming "lucidly aware of its own limits," (Sestito, 1978, quoted in Bigliuzzi, 2020, p. 110); each character is driven by "the demon of passions," as they convince themselves that they can "rule [the world]". This interpretation also places importance on the crowd, "the inhuman embodiment of instinct", being the only true power in the play (Bigliuzzi, 2020, p. 110). The preface completely avoids uplifting Caesar, instead making him "Brutus' demon," as well as avoiding any mention of Caesarism or Brutus' incompetence. Fascism's laws on print ("leggi fascistissime") did not come into force until after the publication of this translation, but it is doubtful if it would have been published if they had come into force earlier. Nonetheless, before the

performance, the script was extensively censored - nothing that could have been interpreted as being “anti-Fascist” would have remained.

The specific context of August 1935 reveals why there was such careful censorship, and why the president of the Fascist National Party would have chosen to produce this play. Bigliuzzi (2020) argued that Mussolini’s regime would selectively use Shakespeare and the theatre - and *Julius Caesar* - during periods of “crisis” to support the regime, with the “crisis” of 1935 being justifying Mussolini’s imperialistic ambitions - as demonstrated by the invasion of Ethiopia two months after this production. *Julius Caesar*, with its ending on the figure of Augustus, the first Roman emperor, after struggle and combat, would be the perfect “support” - Holderness describes it as a “cultural vindication of the regime” (2017, p. 343). Therefore, in Italy, Shakespeare had less of a canonical role on the stage, but the government was aware of its dangers and of its uses, and likely would’ve leaned into Caesar to support propaganda efforts, deliberately avoiding the potential for nuance in the play’s original text.

Each of the four productions come from different, very specific contexts, with memories of vastly different pasts - from a Shakespeare viewed as being a venerated, classic playwright, to him being linked to theatrical experimentation and national identity. Many of the directors and designers involved were also involved in or at least aware of the new theatrical movements of the 20th century - encouraging creativity and innovation on the stage - with memories of avant-garde, Expressionist theater haunting multiple of the productions, especially the Berlin one, where many of the key figures of German Expressionism were forced to leave due to the rise of Fascism. Above all, 1935 - 1941 represents a period of intense political turmoil in each country discussed, with growing fears and concerns over Fascism bleeding into theatre. It is unsurprising, therefore, that directors and designers leaned into these concerns in the process of designing *Julius Caesar*.

## Chapter Two: Designing Fascist *Caesars*

Cultural contexts and expectations can and do affect audiences' perceptions of different productions, as is made especially evident when comparing the specific contexts and ideas around each Julius Caesar production; however, it is the analysis of the scenography, lighting design, and directorial choices around each production that reveals the more intriguing aspect of each one, particularly the analysis of the directors' and designers' choices within the cultural context of their production; it is these design choices that make a production appear more or less "Fascist". Each one makes very different choices, with different designers and directors. However, there are some similarities in directorial and design choices between each production - some of which have completely different effects. These similarities include the influence of film, the deliberate use of bold shadows and lights, the depiction of Ancient Rome (particularly its ruins), as well as the idea of playing with space and scale.

### 2.1. New York, 1937: Filmic influence and the use of lighting

A key idea linked to the rise of European Fascism is *modernity*; in Italian Fascism specifically, Mussolini's regime heavily leaned on the Futurist movement and the idea of modernity, of the future, with new technology and ideas. One of the major tenets of Futurism is the desire to "inaugurate Italy's rise to world power [and] violent annihilation of the past," (Bowler, 1991, p. 764), and some of these principles can be found in both Italy and Nazi Germany, with the embrace of advanced, modern technology - particularly technology related to film and theatre. Both regimes leaned on film for propaganda purposes - in Nazi Germany to the point that director Julie Taymor, who adapted both Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *The Tempest* into film, wrote that "if you're shooting military marches and you do it well, on some level it's going to look like the work of [German Third Reich filmmaker] Leni Riefenstahl" (quoted in Burt, 2001, p. 80). Of particular interest is the techniques used by the Nazis during rallies and other live events; the Nuremberg rallies, in the Zeppelin Field, were striking due to the searchlights placed around the field, which created imposing walls of light, later known as the Cathedral of Light, "transform[ing] rallies into theatrical acts of state worship," (IMPERIAL, 2025), as can be seen in figure 1, which depicts the Zeppelin field during one such rally. This

image, this iconography, remains a striking example of the effective use of theatre and film under Fascism; a use which provides ample opportunity for contemporary theatres to implicitly discuss Fascism.



Fig. 9: Nürnberg, Reichsparteitag, Lichtdom [Nuremberg, Nazi Party Rally Ground, Cathedral of Light], photograph, 1936 (Wikipedia, 2017)

On the topic of film, there is an interesting idea in Maurice Hindle’s *Shakespeare on film*, where, in discussing how Shakespeare on the stage is different to Shakespeare on the screen, he mentions the idea of visual versus verbal. Theatre is an essentially “verbal medium foregrounding the spoken word”, while film communicates visually; he points out that in Shakespeare’s time, playwrights were known as “poets” (2015, p. 12). 1930s theatre seems to therefore occupy an odd space in history: with the innovations of New Stagecraft and the ideas of designers like Appia and Craig (where the director’s vision takes precedence over everything; where lighting is recognised as being a major, key tool for designing the stage),

combined with film developing as an art and industry, the stage seems to be moving from an essentially actor-focused, “verbal” space to one much more similar to film, changing in order to face the challenge of film.

Modern technology, lighting techniques, and film were embraced in the *Julius Caesar* productions at the time. Both Welles’ and Frejka’s productions were influenced by film in their designs and staging, although in slightly different manners. In the 21st century, Welles is primarily known for his filmmaking, with iconic films such as *Citizen Kane* or his Shakespearean adaptations *Othello* and *Macbeth*; his company at the Mercury Theatre had a fairly short-lived life in comparison to his later filmic endeavours, but his interest in film is evident even in his stage *Caesar*. The actor for Cinna in his production mentioned Welles’ obsession with getting “the shot” (Hartley, 2014, p. 46), highlighting how Welles looked for very specific iconography and images, in a way more cinematic than theatrical. Most importantly, he was preoccupied with evoking the (filmed) newsreels - in themselves a newer technology and newer way of propagating information - about Europe’s rising Fascism that American audiences would’ve been familiar with.

In contrast, in Frejka’s Czech production, the filmic influences are less in the use of technology and iconography, and more in the rhythm and movement of the production. The set was designed to be able to shift rapidly between scenes of different scales, from angry crowds to intimate conversations to battlefields, with a speed and ease matching film editing and rhythm (Příhodová, 2017, p. 12), by using unlike the normally slower pacing forced by the physical limitations of theatre. This was primarily achieved with moving platforms, which quickly changed the space between scenes. Tröster, the set designer, also used new methods for the time, therefore bearing some similarities to Welles, although his production placed less importance on specifically filmic visuals.

For Welles, it was mainly the lighting design and set design choices that meant that his production was considered so strikingly “modern”. Although Welles also looked for the ability to swiftly change scenes without needing large slow changes, this ability was mostly gained with striking lighting changes. His lighting designer was Jean Rosenthal, although interestingly enough, Hartley points out that some of Welles’ knowledge of lighting and its effectiveness would’ve been learned in his time in the Gate Theatre (2014, p. 39). Particularly, co-director of the Gate and

lighting designer Hilton Edwards was extremely interested in stagecraft and the innovative lighting techniques developed by German Expressionist theatres (Sisson, 2011, p. 53) - theatres whose techniques were then appropriated for use in Nazi rallies (“modern electrical stage lighting”, according to Hartley, 2014, p. 40). Rosenthal’s lighting was specifically designed to evoke these rallies, particularly that of the “Cathedral of Light” depicted in figure 9; this is especially obvious when looking at the sketches for the lighting in *Caesar* (figure 10), which not only include the striking lines of light that create the rallies’ characteristic “walls of light”, but also features figures doing the Fascist-Roman salute, an obvious, deliberate reference.

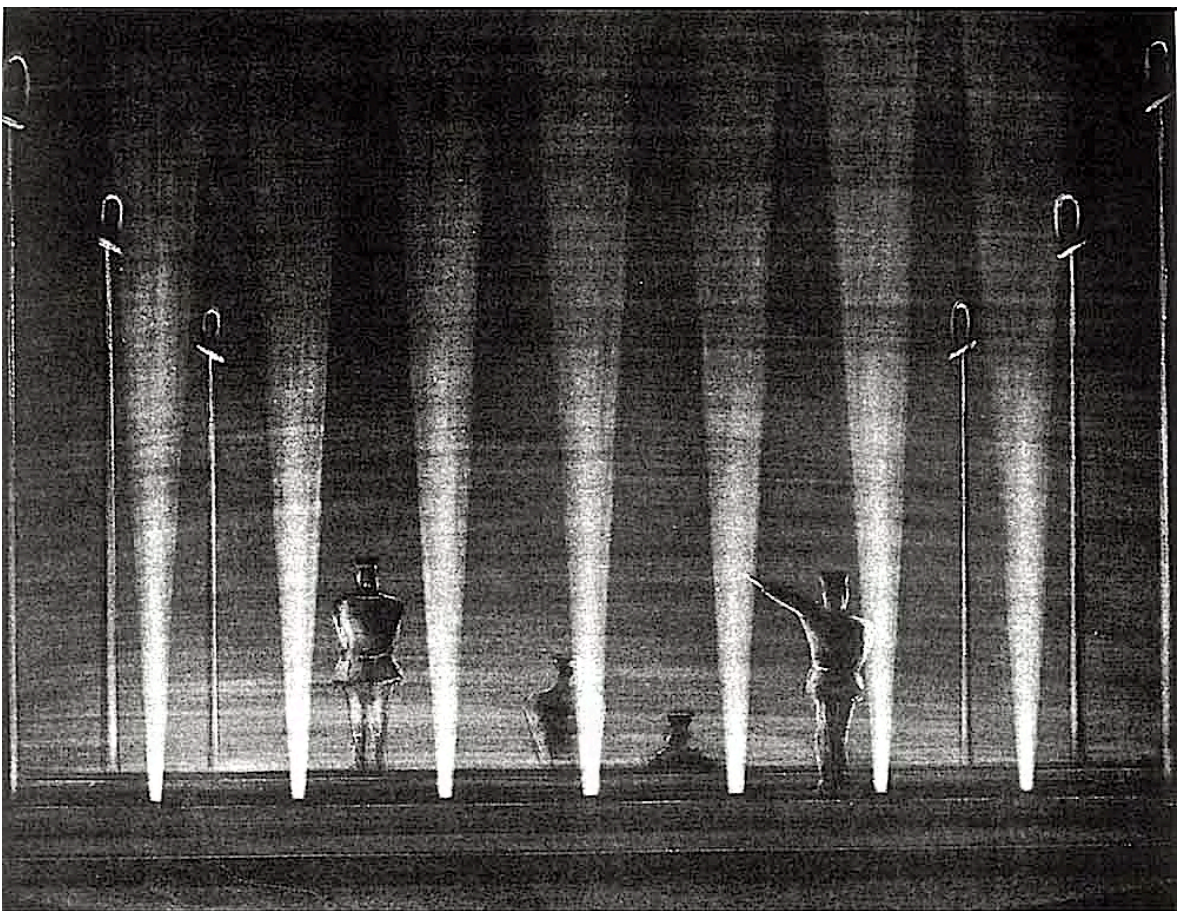


Fig. 10: Orson Welles, Design for a theatrical performance of *Julius Caesar*, drawing, 1937. (WorldImages archive, 2008)

The lighting and the fairly new techniques employed were quite striking for the New York audience, but the set design further contributed to this. The stage, designed by Samuel Leve, was mostly bare, with sparse construction and the occasional different levels, allowing much of the focus to be on the lighting. The

design was primarily composed of small steps (to allow a height hierarchy on the stage) as well as a simple flat “building” in the background, with little detail and uniform in colour, as can be seen in figure 11, a promotional photograph of the production. In America and New York specifically, Shakespeare was still expected to have ornate, complicated set design and dressing, more grounded in traditional theatrical traditions (Anderegg, 2004, p. 299); instead, this stage leaned into the simple bare Elizabethan-style stages that Welles had evoked in his *Everyman’s Shakespeare*. The set focused on providing the best way for lighting to be emphasised as well as creating simple hierarchies that would reflect in-text power dynamics, as can be seen in figure 12, a promotional photograph of *Caesar* in which Mark Antony addresses the crowd at Caesar’s funeral, while also visually “holding power” over the audience by being placed above them.

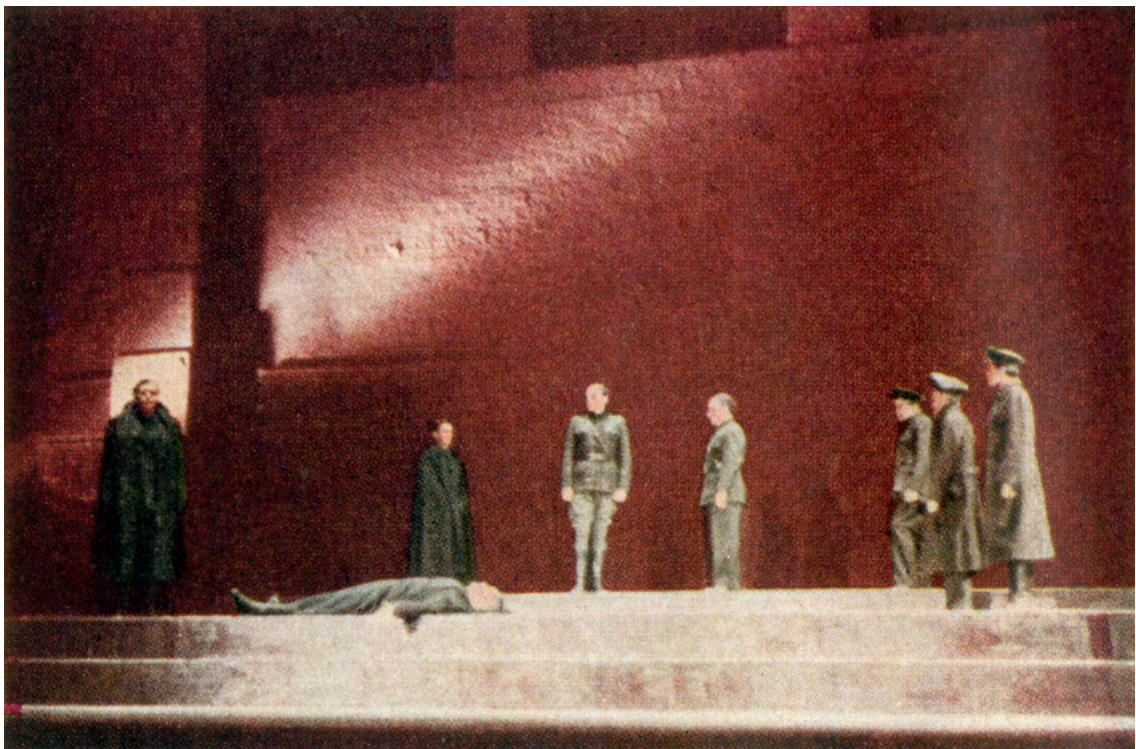


Fig. 11: Promotional photograph of *Caesar*, Coronet magazine, 1938. (Wikipedia, 2015)

With this set and the lighting design, Welles was also particularly effective at implicating the audience - playing on a key characteristic of theatre, one which film lacks: the intimate relationship between the audience and stage (Sisson, 2011, p. 54). He invited the actors in the crowds throughout the production to consider themselves as really *present* at the time, and as individuals (even if the audience only

saw them as a single unit), as really watching these politicians make speeches; for example, the names of the speaking actors in the mob are, in the script, the actors' actual names. Additionally, the lighting deliberately highlighted the politicians, leaving the crowd - and their slowly growing unrest - in darkness, while simultaneously placing the crowd at a similar level and sightline as the audience. For example, in figure 12, a spotlight illuminates Mark Antony while the audience, in darkness, looks up at him; the spotlight casts a strong shadow behind him, creating a literal larger than life silhouette of the actor, further emphasising power.

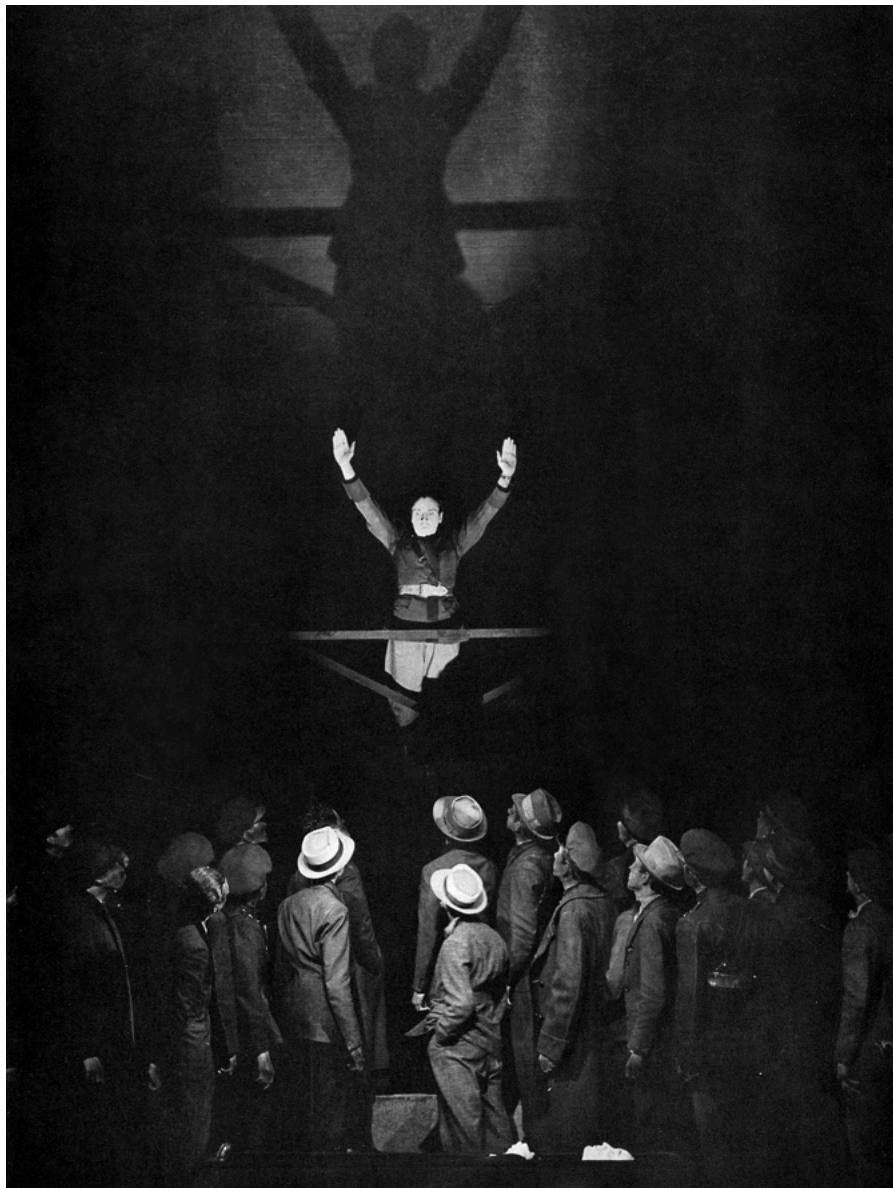


Fig. 12: Promotional photograph of George Colours as Marc Antony in *Caesar*, Stage magazine, 1938 (Wikipedia, 2018)

Altogether, it almost appeared as if this unrest and “mob mentality” was coming from the theatre audience itself - who, thanks to the modern-dress nature of the play - would’ve seen themselves in the costume design of the audience (Hartley, 2014, p. 45).

This implication of the audience into the production, encouraging the people to see themselves on stage as the ones being affected by dictators and propaganda, in conjunction with the highly specific references to European Fascism in the lighting and costume design, meant the production was a very striking reminder of the dangers of not only a dictator with control over a crowd, but specifically this rising, not-so-distant Fascism, doubly so when remembering that the play ends in violence.

## **2.2. Rome, 1935: Ghosts of Ancient Rome**

Welles was not the only director who placed a lot of emphasis on the use of light; the 1935 Italian production did also. This particular production was staged not in a theatre, but in the ruins of the Basilica of Maxentius in Rome, and therefore the director, Ferdinando Tamberlani, had to make careful lighting choices to accommodate the non-traditional stage. The design of this production did not incorporate direct references to Fascism the way Welles’ did, with the actors being in togas, but it was nonetheless fairly successful. Tamberlani’s lighting made use of *chiaroscuro* (strong contrasts between light and dark) and focused attention on the main three arches of the Basilica, which allowed the Coliseum to frame one side and the Capitol to frame the other (Bigliuzzi, 2020, p. 113). Lighting was also used to shift the scenes from intimate conversations to larger scale scenes; much of the storytelling was through the use of light, similarly to Welles. The effect, however, is fairly different, creating an effect of majesty, of massive scale.

The “stage” used was massive, and the director and actors took full advantage of the space, meaning a huge amount of lighting was needed - and as such huge, highly contrasting changes were possible. The arches were at times brightly lit when the action was centred in that area (see figure 13, of the audience watching the production) and then “plunged into blackness” for smaller scenes. Perhaps most strikingly, during the final battle of the play, “huge shadows danced” on the walls behind the arches (p.93). The lighting’s effective use of the Basilica’s

massive arches, combined with the visual framing of other major monuments, therefore created a sense of grandeur, of Ancient Roman power. The director also made effective use of the space allowed by incorporating huge crowds on stage (see figure 14, where the crowd that Mark Antony addresses is seemingly present in full, not limited by standard theatre size), crowds which moved “intricately across” the space (Isenberg, 2012, p. 93) and which add a level of intense realism to the action of the play.

Though the lighting was a key part of the 1935 *Caesar*'s staging, much of the production's impact came from its setting which the lighting emphasised, making it the inverse of Welles' production, where the stage was less important, a tool to emphasise the lighting.

The history and analysis of the location of the staging is integral to understanding the design and the impact of this production (and of the production in Prague, though to a lesser extent), despite the location not being built or designed specifically for the production in question. In part, this is because, for the 1935 *Caesar*, the location represents a deliberate choice more or less in accordance with a directorial vision, one which supports Fascist ideals of Roman ruins, a choice which implicitly relies on the phenomenon of ghosting. Indeed, “site-specific performance” in theatre adds certain “nontheatrical resonances,” (Carlson, 2001, p. 134). This is part of a long theatrical legacy, with theorists suggesting that the origins of theatre can be found in recreations of historical or mythic stories in the presumed locations of the stories (p. 136); it is easy to understand how, by staging *Caesar* in an actual Ancient Roman ruin, the 1935 production may have had a stronger “mythic” atmosphere than the other *Caesars* of the era. Additionally, Carlson places the more modern interest in site-specific theatre as being linked to Romanticism, with the highlighting of Victor Hugo's arguments against the use of stock settings and backdrops for theatre (p. 137). In Italy, the Romantic movement was linked to patriotism and the Risorgimento (Italian unification) (McKenzie, 1940, p. 31); keeping in mind the use of Ancient Rome by politicians during the Risorgimento in order to justify Italian unity (Roche, 2019), a use which is echoed in the 1920s and 30s by the Fascist government, the 1935 production, which its Ancient Roman design, is doubly haunted by Italian history.

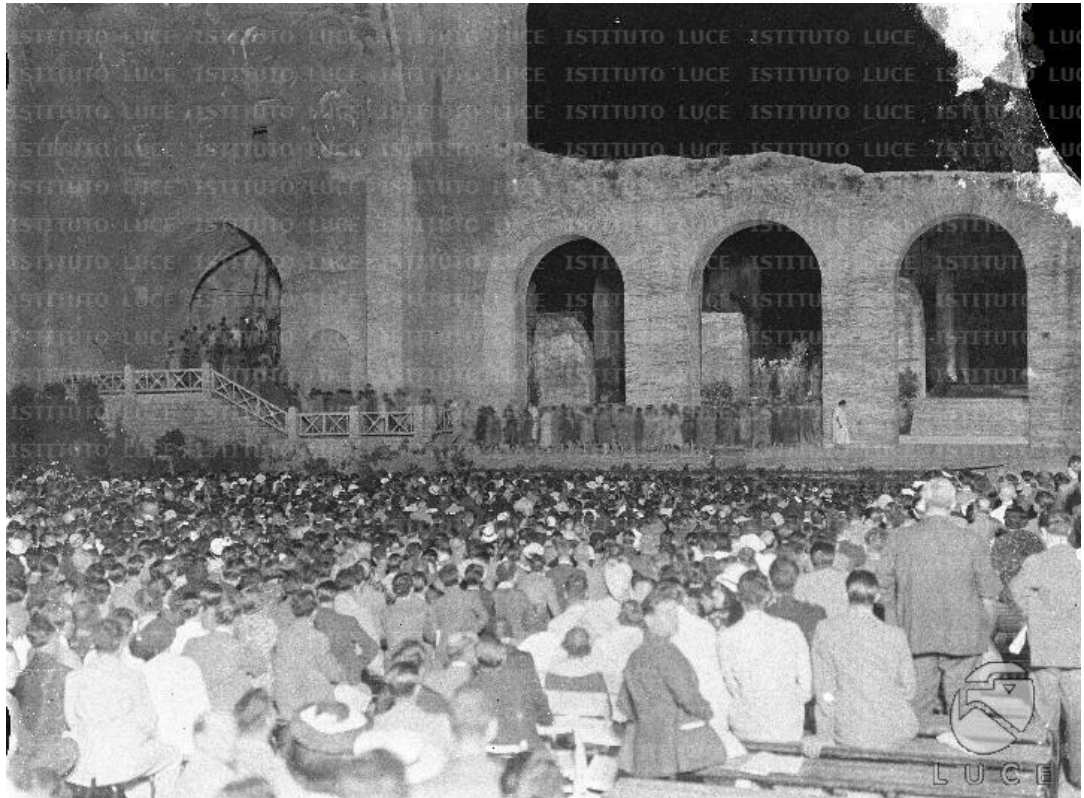


Fig. 13: The audience during the performance of *Giulio Cesare*, photograph, 1935 (Archivio Luce)

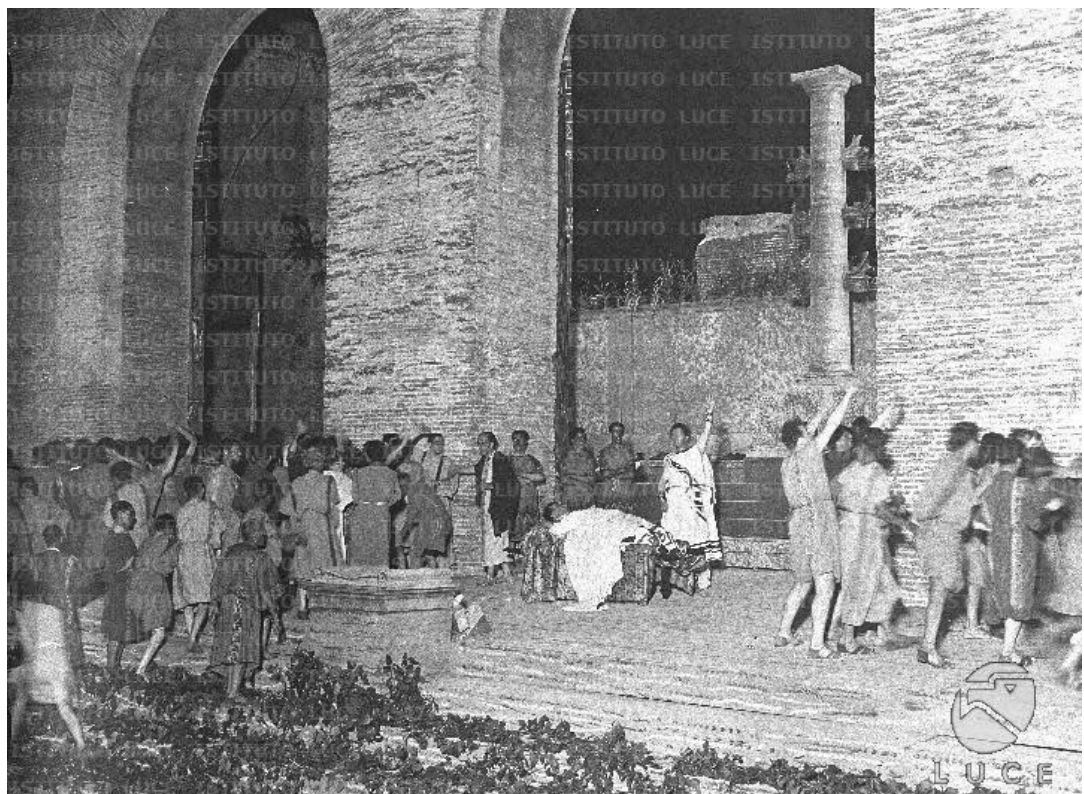


Fig. 14: Crowd scene from *Giulio Cesare*, photograph, 1935 (Archivio Luce)

The Basilica of Maxentius, also occasionally called the Basilica of Constantine, is the largest Ancient Roman basilica, and also the last basilica built in Rome. It was built circa 312 AD, started by Emperor Maxentius and finished by Emperor Constantine. The use of this ruin is highly symbolic, particularly in the context of this production, one which is as “Fascist-approved” as it can get, in comparison to the other productions in question - the script and the production was approved by the censor’s office and by the President of the Fascist Party. To begin, much of Rome’s ruins, as we know them today, are only as visible and famous as they are thanks to efforts and policies by Mussolini to re-arrange and re-model Rome, according to Holderness (2017, p. 341). In Shakespeare’s time, Rome was seen as a desolate, crowded city, with ruins hidden by modern buildings and lacking much of the grandeur it would later come to represent (pp. 345-346). However, in the 20th century Mussolini heavily relied on the city of Rome - and Ancient Rome particularly - to support and legitimise his image as Il Duce; propaganda depicted him as an “urbanista” (city planner, a field that emerged in Italy alongside Mussolini’s rise to power), symbolically fixing Rome’s societal issues and reviving past glories (Pooley, 2013); for a time, Rome and Mussolini were intimately connected, to the point the city was known as “Roma di Mussolini or Roma Mussoliniana,” (p. 209). Mussolini and the Fascist regime sought to dismantle the past - following the Futurist ideal - but specifically the recent, 19th century past that was perceived as “decadent” in order to reveal and revitalise interest in Ancient Rome, with artefacts and ruins of Ancient Rome “supremely visible” and able to “endorse the regime,” (Holderness, 2017, p. 342). Therefore, the use of a ruin in this theatrical production contributed to the idea of Ancient Rome and Mussolini’s Rome being linked. For *Julius Caesar* specifically, the action of the play was made much more impactful - when the characters gestured to the Rome around them, the audience could literally see part of the Rome these characters lived in. The scale of the play is made historical - not only is the physical scale of the ruins made obvious with the lighting, but the production prompts audiences to “look back to a past in which Rome once held a great empire, and forward to future in which that empire might be revived” (p. 344). For example, the killing of Caesar under the arches, according to Carlo Tamberlani, the actor who played Brutus, created a sense of grandeur and of massive tragedy, although, Bigliuzzi points out this overwhelming

grandeur and Ancient-Rome-inspired awe would have downplayed the worrying image of “tyrannicide” (2020, p.113).

This production therefore upholds Fascist ideas and seems to act as a support in propagating Fascist ideology and movements, particularly through the use of an actual Ancient Roman ruin and, of *scale*. It is not the only one of these *Caesar* productions to use Rome and scale, however.

### 2.3. Prague, 1937: Monumental ruins

In Prague, Frejka’s production similarly uses ruin and scale in its scenography, but to very different, seemingly opposite effects. Frejka had characterised his and Tröster’s work as “hyperbolic realism,” with elements of surrealism (quoted in Kennedy, 2001, p. 100), and Tröster’s work specifically was described as the “monumentalisation of dramatic reality,” (Koubská, 2017, p26) - though these characterisations were not necessarily specific to this production, they are exemplified in this production.

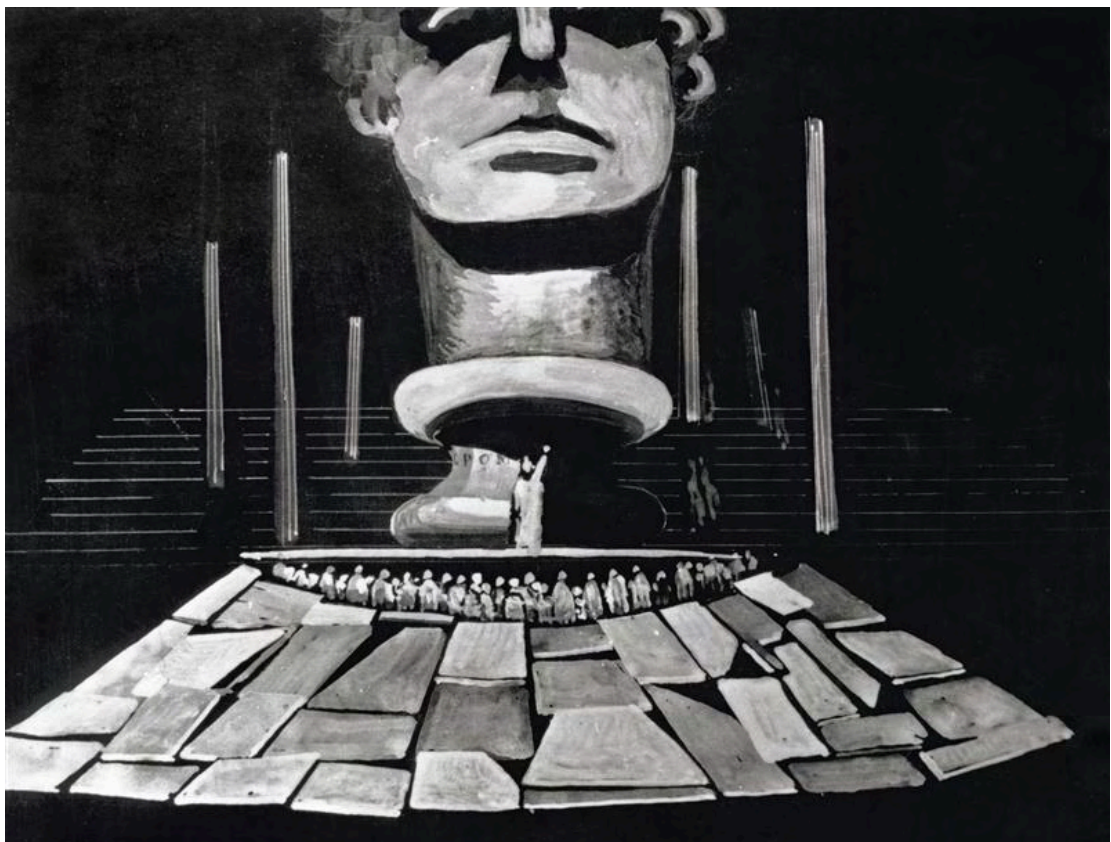


Fig. 15: František Tröster, Stage design for *Julius Caesar*, drawing, 1936 (Národní divadlo archives)

This production also chooses to use Ancient Roman elements, both in the costuming and in the set design. The set design is dominated with Roman ruins: columns, white sculptures, classical stairs (see figure 15, one of the potential stage designs for *Caesar*). The way Ancient Rome is included in the set is fairly non-traditional, with disjointed elements of various scales in front of a dark backdrop, as opposed to the traditional flat painted backdrops of the 19th century. The beginning of the play is dominated by a massive sculpture of horse's legs, and a huge crumbling pedestal (as seen in figure 16). The horse legs - implied to be part of a much larger sculpture - ominously linger over the characters. The use of the horse as a sculpture evokes popular imagery of emperors on horseback; particularly, the Ancient Roman sculpture of Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius on horseback, from



Fig. 16: General scene from *Julius Caesar*, photograph, 1936 (Národní divadlo archives)

around 175 AD, comes to mind, although more recent depictions, such as Jacques-Louis David's painting *Napoleon crossing the Alps*, which depicts French 19th century emperor Napoleon on a rearing horse. The implications of this sculpture - which, on the surface are just horse legs - already begin to set the scene - a rearing horse, controlled by an emperor, rises over the republican Rome of *Julius Caesar*.

Tröster also employed stage floors that could be tilted to change perspective (Příhodová, 2017), and altogether this succeeded in creating a vision of Caesar dominating the stage and people as he made his way down the pedestal (Kennedy, 2001, p. 102). The massive scale of everything, additionally, added tension, creating a sense of the actors being dwarfed or crushed by the set - the Roman Empire - surrounding them. Particularly, a massive bust (as seen in figure 17) dominates the stage, evoking reminders of dictators' and their use of image to reinforce power, with huge amounts of portraits or sculptures in their honour - in discussing this, Tröster even references Mussolini: "Art historians know effects

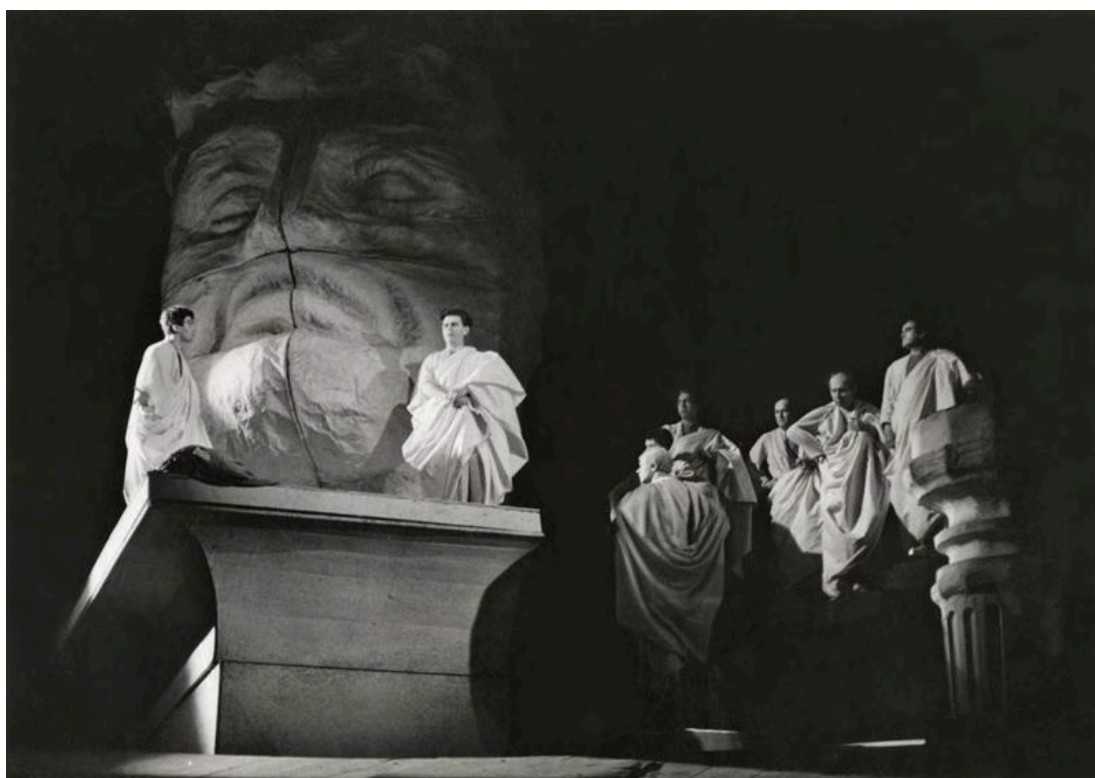


Fig. 17: Ladislav Boháč (playing Mark Antony) in *Julius Caesar*, photograph, 1936 (Národní divadlo archives)

very well—they go back to the baroque Jesuit times: breaking the axes in sculpture and architecture... leaders appeared on plinths, balconies, they spoke to disorganized crowds from the balcony at Palazzo Venezia,” (1968, quoted in Koubská, 2017, p. 26). Kennedy points out that, at times, Caesar even appeared to be part of this massive sculpture (2001, p. 102). After Caesar is murdered, however, the sculpture splits open, and the stage becomes littered with the pieces of the bust and surreal large columns

(see figure 18), the ruins visually representing the collapse of Rome, of the status quo - a visualisation of the destruction of war.

Kennedy describes it “as if the threatened war had arrived not in Ancient Rome, but in Prague,” (p. 103) and Příhodová, in an article discussing the exhibition “Shakespeare in Prague: the Bard in the Heart of Europe” that occurred in 2017, says that the design “became an active agent in communicating pressing political matters”. The monumental scale of the set, combined with the earlier-discussed use of platforms and turntables to quickly and effectively move between scenes (therefore adding impactful dramatic rhythm), meant Frejka’s production created a powerful, urgent sense of tension.

This impression is likely further heightened by the “ghosts” of the location - the National Theatre - although to a lesser extent than in the 1935 Rome production. Carlson writes (2001, p. 141) that theatres are part of the public buildings that “might be said to be repositories of cultural memory” although the particularity of theatres is that they are more preoccupied with the “preservation and stimulation of historical memory itself,” rather than just historical artifacts (as would be the case with museums, for example). This is especially true with Czech theatres; as previously mentioned, the laying of the foundation for the very first Czech-language theatre in Prague, the Provisional Theatre, led to a huge three day festival. The National Theatre in particular had a lot of importance for Czech independence movements; Burian describes the opening of the theatre in 1881-1883 as being the “ca[p]” of “decades of organized effort,” linked to the National Revival Efforts and its goals of “reawakening [...] Czech cultural and national identity, and progre[ssing] toward political autonomy,” (2000, p. 9). By the 20th century, the National Theatre is one of the major Czech-language theatres in Prague. The ghosts of the Czech National Revival that haunted the stage of the National Theatre were likely extremely impactful in this production, with the heavy weight of Fascism looming over its head.

Therefore, where the Italian production used ruins and scale to create grandeur and justify Mussolini’s imperialistic plans, Tröster and Frejka use these elements to communicate worry over “megalomaniac” dictators and Czechoslovakia’s increasingly unstable political climate.

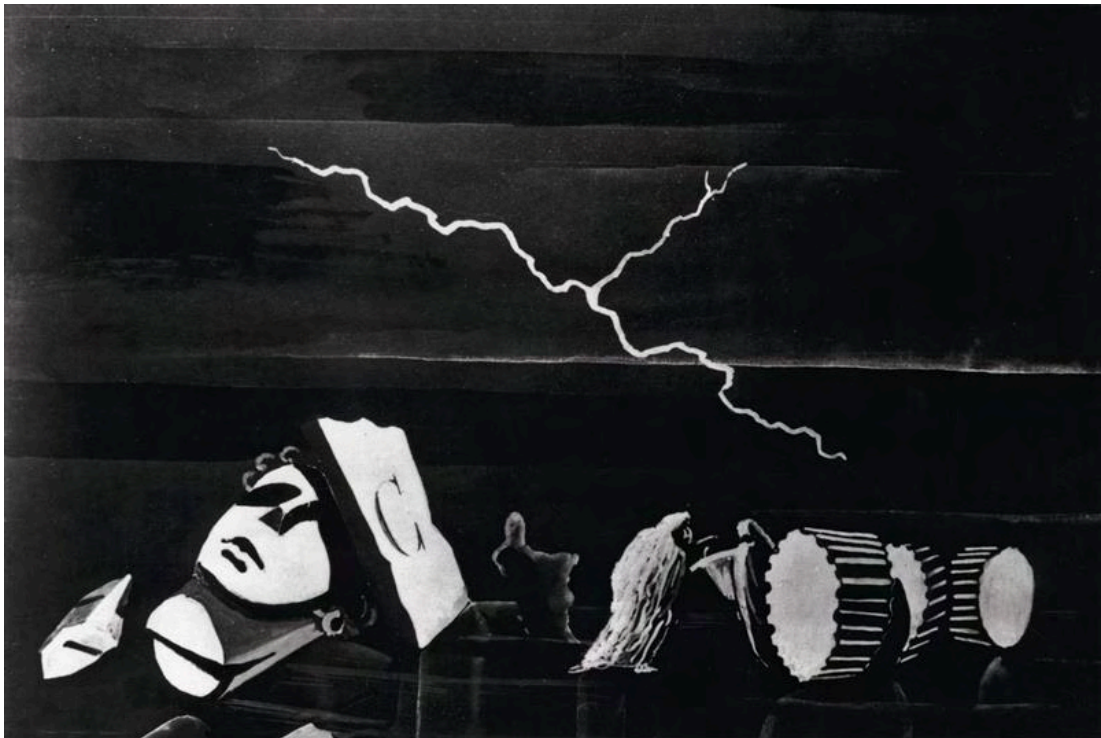


Fig. 18: František Tröster, Stage design for the end of *Julius Caesar*, drawing, 1936 (Národní divadlo archives)

#### 2.4. Berlin, 1941: Ambiguity and *Richard III*

In Berlin, Jurgen Fehling used Ancient Roman trappings in his production of *Julius Caesar*, similarly to the the Italian and Czech productions, and was also familiar with the concept of using space as a tool to communicate anti-Fascist ideas; indeed, before his *Caesar* he directed a production of *Richard III* and of *Richard II*, with *Richard III* generally considered to be “anti-Fascist”.

His *Richard III* opened in 1937, in the Staatstheater in Berlin, with set design by Traugott Müller, the same location and the same set designer as his later *Caesar*. The set design for *Richard III* used the Staatstheater’s freshly renovated stage in conjunction with carefully designed lighting to create a sense of immense scale and depth; to the point critics would “overestim[at]e the depth of the stage to up to 80 meters,” (Bassegy, 2021, p. 76), the stage ‘only’ being 44 meters deep in actuality, as we can see in figure 19. In combination with this, the actual set pieces were quite minimal - leaving the bare space of the stage the main focus. The effect of this was to “dwarf” the characters (much like Tröster’s *Caesar* set did), making them appear as small and insignificant, “much like the individual lives and stories of the audience

within the Third Reich apparatus,” (Bassey, 2021, p. 75). The set pieces that were used were also quite modern, which, in combination with some of the murderers of the play being dressed in military uniforms that evoked Nazi Storm Troopers, meant the setting called to mind contemporary Germany rather than a historical England (London, 2000, p. 248). Some of these uniforms can be seen in figure 19, as well as some furniture - chairs - that read as more modern. The production did encounter some success (which, at a time where much of the audience would have been in

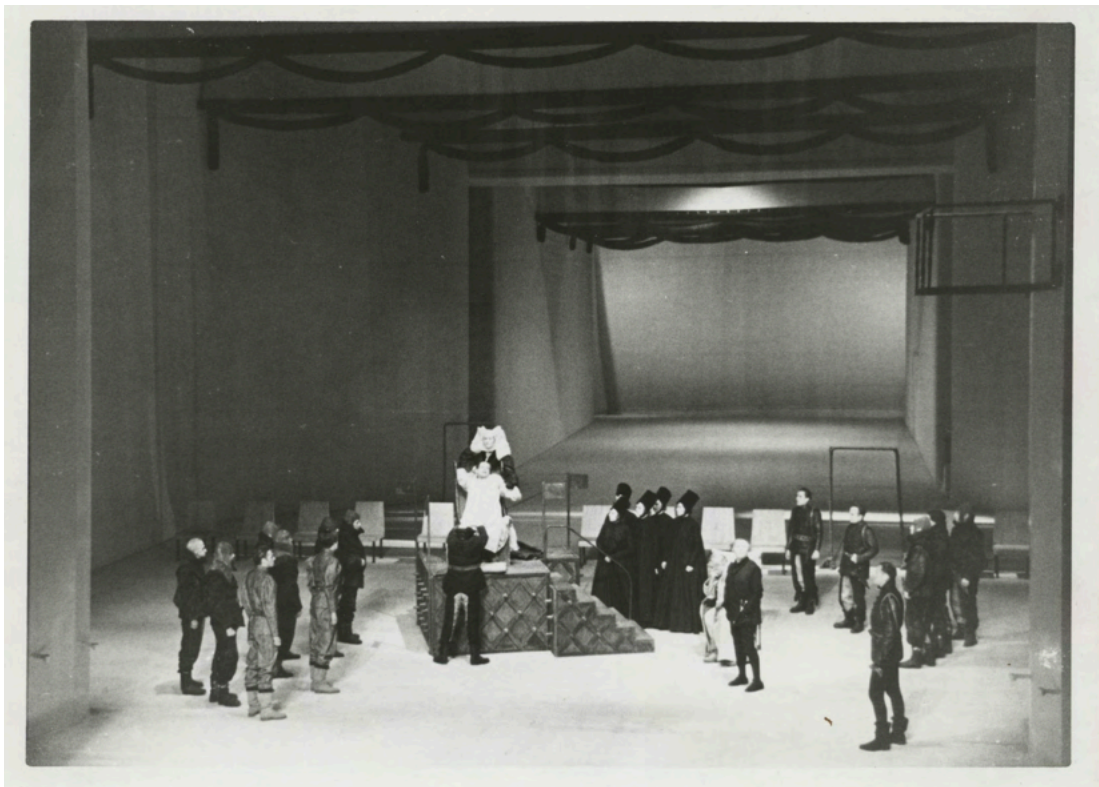


Fig. 19: Scene from *Richard III* at the Staatstheatre, photograph, 1937 (Traugott Müller Institute)

favour of Hitler’s regime, suggests it was not so obviously Nazi-critical as post-Second World War critics assume), but it also encountered some controversy behind the scenes. Notably, Schlösser, the Reich Drama Advisor to Goebbels’ Ministry of Propaganda, described it as “almost a cultural-Bolshevist experiment” (quoted in London, 2000, p.248); the production also led Goebbels to revoke Fehling’s passport (Bassey, 2021, p. 70). London (2000) speculates that the only reason Fehling kept his job at the Staatstheater was due to famous actor Gustaf Gründgens threatening to quit the theatre if Fehling left (p. 249). Nonetheless Fehling continued

to work, and in 1941 directed *Julius Caesar* at the same theatre. However, this use of space and modern dress was not found in his *Caesar*.

Müller's designs for *Caesar* referenced many of the traditional depictions of Ancient Rome, and the actors wore togas and other Ancient Roman trappings (see figure 20). By this point, the Second World War had begun in earnest, and Fehling's position was already precarious after *Richard III* (and, to a lesser extent, his



Fig. 20: Scene from *Julius Caesar* with Maria Koppenhöfer as Calpurnia and Werner Krauss as Caesar, photograph, 1941 (Traugott Müller Institute)

*Richard II*); Bassey (2021) speculates that he may have deliberately chosen this ancient, traditional “style” to bypass any particular political reading, although with a play as preoccupied with politics and political performance as *Caesar*, an apolitical production would have been difficult. On the other hand, Hartley characterises Fehling as, not only being “violently anti-Nazi”, but also “artistically eccentric to the point of egomania and fascinated by powerful men who altered history,” (2014, p. 167), men like Julius Caesar, which may explain the direction the design of this production took in comparison to *Richard III*.

The set of Fehling's *Julius Caesar* did take advantage of the physical scale of the Staatstheater's stage - much like his *Richard III*, although it lacked the haunting

emptiness of that 1937 production - with large set pieces such as oversized columns, Roman temples (see figure 21, of Müller's design for Mark Antony's speech), with the overall effect being fairly literal. In figure 20, the depth of the space with the arrangements of the buildings as well as the distant cloud backdrop certainly gives a "realistic" effect, as if an actual Roman street were on stage. Other parts of the play



Fig. 21: Traugott Müller, Mark Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar*, drawing, 1941 (Traugott Müller Institute)

did have "still over-sized but pushing into the abstract" designs (Hartley, 2014, p. 167) with some particularly expressionist designs such as figure 22. Overall though, even the more expressionist, less classical designs, are hard to read as particularly political or critical of the regime.

It is also worth considering the potential impact of the location - the Staatstheatre - on the production. Its 1935 renovation perhaps limited the amount of "ghosts" the audience may have seen on the stage, with its veneer of fresh paint, but the theatre itself was not new. In my research on Fehling's *Richard III* production in the Staatstheatre, I came across a blog discussing avant-garde theatre and its use of the proscenium stage; notably, however, the article described the set design for

*Richard III* as having “an emptiness almost designed to remind audiences of Jessner’s” - who had directed *Richard III* in 1920 (McGowan and Jones, 1922) - “in 1937, seven years after the Jewish Social Democrat Jessner had been driven from office by reactionary critics and four years after he had fled Germany once the Nazis came to power,” (Syme, 2018), a comparison made even more striking when considering *Continental Stagecraft*, in which, in McGowan and Jones’ account of *Mass-Mensch*, the authors constantly compare his work with Jessner’s - the abstract lighting, the use of different levels (1922, pp. 147 - 155). In *Richard III*, the stage was therefore seemingly haunted by the ghost of Fascist deportations - and it is unlikely this ghost disappeared entirely by the time of Fehling’s *Caesar* in 1941, although perhaps it was felt in different ways. For example, Hartley writes that the “major production [of *Julius Caesar* in Germany] of the inter-war period” (2014, p. 164) was Max Reinhardt’s 1920 production at the Grosses Schauspielhaus - Reinhardt being an iconic German director, forced to leave the country, whose work Fehling and the audience would likely have been well aware of. However, if comparisons to Reinhardt were made, they weren’t common.

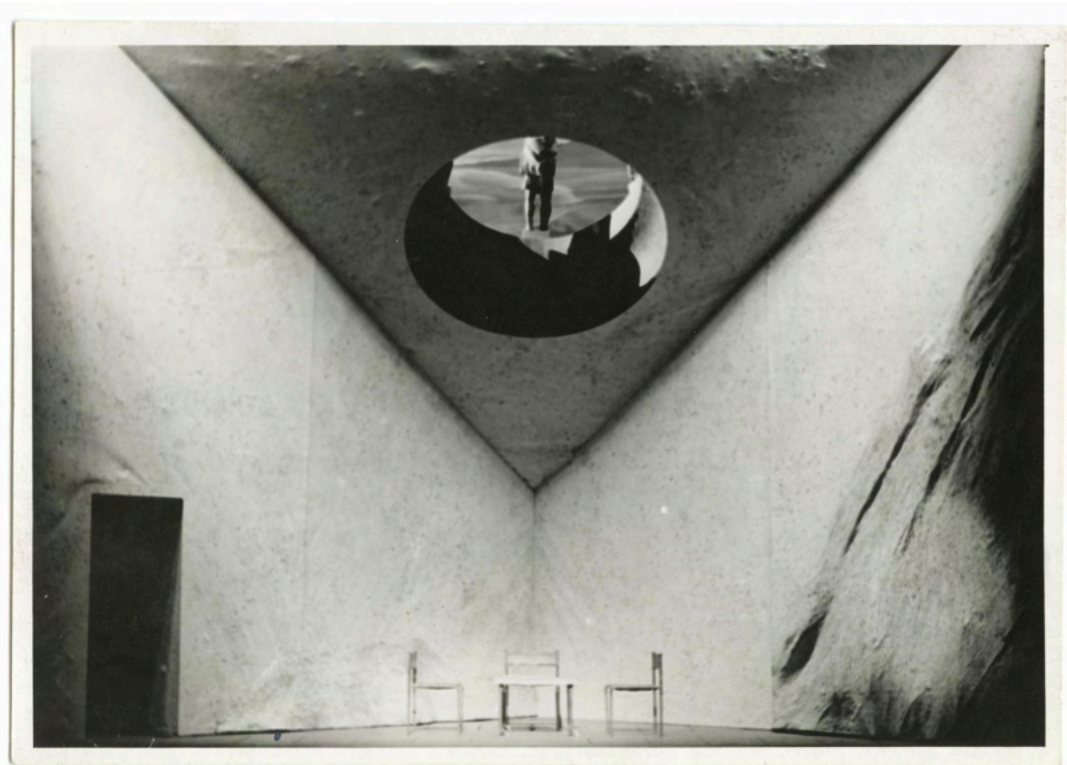


Fig. 22: Set from *Julius Caesar*, photograph, 1941 (Traugott Müller Institute)

However, it is worth noting that the use of Ancient Rome as a backdrop does play into Fascist ideals (as was already demonstrated in the Roman *Caesar*). Mussolini was not the only Fascist government which leaned onto Ancient Rome to legitimise itself; Nazi Germany also frequently made references to Rome, particularly to depict and justify its sought-after “Aryan future”, so in his depiction of Rome, Fehling was “in perfect keeping with the Fascist aesthetic,” (p. 203). The production’s depiction of the pivotal point of the play - Caesar’s murder - also contributes to this. After his murder, harsh white light filled the theatre; the conspirators froze, “immediately struck with horror at the enormity of what they had done,” (Hartley, 2014, p. 169), “long minutes of ‘breathless silence cover[ed] the stage and the auditorium,” (Bassey, 2021, p. 202). Karl Heinz Ruppel described it as “the moment of extreme horror, the moment in which the world [broke] into pieces,” (1968, quoted in Bassey, 2021, p. 202). Viewed in this light, it appears as if the play is, in fact, warning against tyrannicide, and supporting the Fascist reading of *Caesar*, similarly to the Rome production. (Bassey, 2021, p. 200), so in his depiction of Rome Fehling was “in perfect keeping with the Fascist aesthetic,” (p. 203). The production’s depiction of the pivotal point of the play - Caesar’s murder - also contributes to this. After his murder, harsh white light filled the theatre; the conspirators froze, “immediately struck with horror at the enormity of what they had done,” (Hartley, 2014, p. 169), “long minutes of ‘breathless silence cover[ed] the stage and the auditorium,” (Bassey, 2021, p. 202). Karl Heinz Ruppel described it as “the moment of extreme horror, the moment in which the world [broke] into pieces,” (1968, quoted in Bassey, 2021, p. 202). Viewed in this light, it appears as if the play is, in fact, warning against tyrannicide, and supporting the Fascist reading of *Caesar*, similarly to the Rome production.

Later scholars did qualify this production as pro-Fascist. One regularly cited argument for this point of view is the casting of Werner Krauss as Caesar, an actor who had starred in “some of the period’s most anti-Semitic films,” (Hartley, 2014, p. 168), a striking example of actors’ past roles haunting and following them to other productions, ultimately impacting audience reception and interpretation of the whole production (Carlson, 2001, pp. 8–9). On the other hand, actor Bernhard Minetti (who played Brutus), claimed after the war that the production was anti-Fascist, and dangerous to the regime, with Brutus depicted as having to take

the “heavy yoke of killing his friend for the good of the nation”, a yoke which may have made him sympathetic to the audience (Bassey, 2021, p. 207). Furthermore, Bassey points out that the texts that Fehling chose to include in the programme for the production indicate that the production is more of a “grey zone” when it comes to pro- or anti- Fascist readings. The texts included letters from Cicero to Caesar, full of admiration for Caesar on the surface - but upon closer inspection, the letters could be read as being political criticism of Caesar (2021, pp. 194 - 196). In comparison, another production of *Julius Caesar* in Germany, in Bochum in 1937, included in its programme an essay from its director declaring Caesar the true hero of the play, explicitly refuting the “French” view of the play where Brutus is the hero (p. 196). Comparing this version of the programme to Fehling’s does highlight some potential subversion in Fehling’s production; in a period where the Second World War is ongoing and the Nazi regime would be more careful than ever to not be undermined, this would’ve been a viable, potential way to critique Fascism.

Overall, however, it is difficult to classify the production as being either critical or supportive of Fascism; the production, at its surface, reads as more politically ambiguous with some Fascist leanings, but the context of the period and knowledge of Fehling’s past experiences, as well as comparisons to other German productions, seems to indicate the production had a different effect.

Therefore, all these productions employ different tools to communicate different ideas, to different degrees of ambiguity. Some of these productions use the same tools, but to vastly different effects, such as lighting forming the core of Welles’ blatant anti-Fascist concept, while also supporting Tumiatì’s pro-Fascist Italian production. Prague and Berlin lie somewhere in between those two productions, on a spectrum of “pro” to “anti” Fascist ideals, with Fehling’s production seeming to land directly in the middle, with consensus being difficult to reach.

## Conclusion

Though it feels simple enough to identify the specific political leanings of most of these *Caesars*, it is difficult to outright, unequivocally consider any of the productions as being fully pro- or anti-Fascist, particularly in a period contemporary to the rise of Fascism, as is highlighted by the reception and criticisms of each production. Part of this difficulty stems from the complexities of the play itself; indeed, as discussed earlier, *Julius Caesar* is not a play which takes sides; it is preoccupied with political performance and power, the impact on or over a crowd, with rhetoric, with honour; but it does not obviously choose a political belief to align itself with. Different directors, editors, translators have focused on and interpreted a variety of different topics from the play; from Raffaello Piccoli, translator of the 1935 Italian production's text, and his focus on the passions and angers of mortal men, to Welles' ideas on the power of the mob and the root causes of war, or even the Fascist reading about the play highlighting the power of Caesar and the Empire, and the violent consequences of attempting to stop Caesar.

*Julius Caesar's* complexity is especially evident in Fehling's 1941 *Caesar*. Though in the 21st century it feels as though the quote "in the Third Reich, pieces like *Julius Caesar* - when played straight - became political plays," (as said by Bernhard Minetti, 1985, quoted in Hartley, 2014, p. 168) must be true, the reception of this production indicates otherwise. The production garnered interest from scholars after the war, particularly with the comments made by Minetti - although one must remember that after the war, it is unlikely any of the actors would have wanted to claim active participation in something favourable to the regime (Bassegy, 2021, p. 207). Where Fehling's *Richard III* is generally considered anti-Fascist by a range of scholars, his *Caesar* is just as likely to be qualified as Fascist, with Fehling's steadfast focus on the catastrophe of Caesar's death and his casting of Werner Krauss. Nonetheless, other scholars have highlighted that, when considering the situation of theatre under the Nazis as well as the specific context of the production, Fehling was likely not aiming for a deliberately pro-Fascist reading. Still, in a context as politically charged as 1941 Nazi Germany, it is surprising that Fehling achieves what is the closest thing to an apolitical *Julius Caesar* as is reached in comparison to the other productions discussed in this thesis.

The Italian production and what followed it also contains interesting political implications. Bigliuzzi (2020) claims that with the invasion of Ethiopia two months after the production, the Fascist regime moved from a “crisis” of needing to justify expansion and into one of needing to consolidate and uphold the aspiring empire. No more major productions of Shakespeare’s *Caesar* were staged after 1935, with the exception of an opera based off the text which opened a short while after the Rome production. Additionally, the regime’s more general Mussolini-as-Caesar metaphor shifted to Mussolini-as-Augustus - Caesar’s failure and death, as well as the fact he had not actually become a Roman emperor, meant he was unsuitable as a model for Mussolini in the long term, unlike Augustus, the first Roman emperor and a successor of sorts to Caesar (Bigliuzzi, 2020, pp. 97-98). Indeed, in hindsight, it almost appears as if the production was simply to contribute to Mussolini’s propaganda and consolidate a vision of the Fascist regime as being a successor of Ancient Rome moving forward into a glorious future - rather than a production in its own right.

The use of Ancient Rome is nonetheless extremely interesting - particularly when compared to the Czech production a year later. Both this production and the Italian one utilise the Roman ruins in their designs, with this element being a major part of how each production is read (whether pro- or anti-Fascist). In the introduction to the European Review of History’s volume on *Antiquity and the ruin*, Kahane writes that (2011, p. 632):

In the ruin’s material presence – neglected or preserved and therefore paradoxically ‘unchanged’ – we seem to observe the ‘thing’ of memory, the literal flux of time which is otherwise invisible and beyond reach (the past gone, the future not yet here, the ‘now!’ of the present passing away at every moment).

The paradoxical images of the ruins of Antiquity are especially evident in the two productions: in Rome, the ruins are deliberately highlighted to recall “the ‘thing’ of memory” - Ancient Rome - as well as the ghosts of the Empire that linger in the Italian consciousness, ghosts which have lingered from the Risorgimento to Mussolini. On the other hand, in Czechoslovakia, the ruins are much more literal. They appear in front of the audience’s eyes, allowing the audience to witness destruction and the creation of ruins in real time, paralleling what Czech citizens

felt they were experiencing outside of the theatre. The ruins represent fragments, consequences of destruction (“the ‘now!’ of the present”) rather than a memory - although the Ancient Roman element means they also represent the collapse of a civilisation, the destruction of the “status quo”; a near opposite implication to the Roman production.

Ancient Roman imagery being utilised to represent multiple different ideas is not unorthodox for Roman Shakespeare productions; Cartelli and Rowe describe Rome as incorporating “many fragments of time and space,” as well being “not so much a specific location of city but an environment, a memory, and a set of texts for recycling,” (2007, p. 73). Holland (2018) highlights how depictions of Rome are more preoccupied with *history* and the passage of time than Ancient Rome’s actual geography. *Caesar* in Rome, 1935 and in Prague, 1936 highlight some of the complexity of Ancient Rome on the stage of Roman Shakespeare fairly effectively.

Mercury Theatre also had a complicated reception. It is likely the most famous *Caesar* production (though some of the celebrity of the production is likely due to Welles’ fame from his later projects, rather than due to the production itself), and was immensely successful. However, its popularity did lead to scrutiny and criticisms of the themes of the production - a left-wing publication qualified it as pro-Fascist due to its negative depiction of “the masses,” (Hartley, 2014, p. 52) while others found the “logic [...] [was] not clear,” (Atkinson, 1937). Later Shakespearean scholars felt it popularised concept *Caesars* and watered down the original text, taking it “away from Rome [...] as if the only way now to make sense of it were to make Caesar a modern Fascist dictator,” (Daniell, quoted in Andereg, 2004, p. 300). However, Welles’ Julius Caesar resembled Mussolini more than Hitler (Atkinson, 1937), a characterisation which, even with the references that were more specific to Nazi Germany than Fascist Italy (such as the lighting design), did nonetheless place *Caesar* in Rome - but a contemporary Rome - a different fragment of the memories of Rome than the Prague or Italian productions play on. Particularly, Welles’ production was not simply interested in comparing Caesar and Mussolini and Hitler, but rather, as Hartley indicates, it focused on the “root causes” of war and the control over a crowd (2014, p. 43), which was particularly poignant in 1937, with the groundwork for the Second World War being rapidly laid.

However, despite the success and impact of this production, subsequent productions - even ones linked to Fascism - are still fairly different, unique to their specific contexts and directorial vision. For example, in Calcutta, Utpal Dutt staged and directed two productions of *Caesar*, one in English in 1949 and one in Bengali in 1964; both were in modern dress, with “Fascist overtones” (Hartley, 2014, p. 179), but in the context of a newly independent India, they become post-colonial discussions rather than criticisms of Fascism itself. Therefore, despite the same, singular text, despite - or perhaps thanks to - the ghosts of past productions and interpretations, *Julius Caesar* is constantly reinvented on the stage, with meaning and resonances shifting constantly; the symbols and memory of Fascism, as well as these different productions of *Caesar* join the palimpsest of the stage; a new element haunting *Caesar*.

So where Mark Antony “[came] to bury Caesar, not to praise him,” (Shakespeare, 1623, p. 123) so have countless directors, designers, and government officials approached *Julius Caesar* with their own plans, their own ideals about his legacy and Shakespeare’s text. In the 1930s and 1940s, where European Fascism rises, consolidates its power, and fights wars, the figure of a powerful Roman ruler is an impactful one. With the stage in Europe and North America rich with recent design and developments, rising to meet the challenge of film - and in the process emphasising the importance of theatre’s unique relationship to the audience - combined with Brutus’ “how many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be played over,” (Shakespeare, 1623, p. 105) - a declaration which seemingly invites audiences to draw connections to their own times and worries (Anderegg, 2004, p. 303)- means that *Caesar* has experienced a multitude of ways to be linked to Fascism through stage production and design.

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