

Lend Me Your Ears

JULIUS CAESAR

(M.G.M.)

FILMOGERS, countrymen (I hope I may also call you friends), lend me your ears; I come not to bury Caesar, but to praise it. Here is stern, uncompromising Shakespeare; a producer unflustered by super-colossal imaginings, a director conscious of his responsibility to the text, and a cast dedicated to a high endeavour. If this is not the most exciting Shakespeare filmed—and I think both *Henry V* and *Hamlet* made my pulses beat a little faster—it is the truest to the word. There are accents which are not of Oxford, though some I would believe are closer to the tongue that Shakespeare spoke; there are no camera tricks so smart that the eye steals attention from the ear; there are cuts, but no unkind ones. The lynching of Cinna the poet (Act III, Scene 3) has gone entirely (it was a sop to the groundlings, anyway), and Octavius forfeits his last word, but beyond that nothing of any consequence seems to have been lost. Nor, to my knowledge, has aught been added. The book, this time, is not "by William Shakespeare, with additional dialogue by Sam Taylor"—to quote the credit-line which is

BAROMETER

FINE: "Julius Caesar."
OVERCAST: "Beneath the 12-Mile Reef."

about all that is now remembered of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Full marks, then, for the scripting.

The camera closely suits the image to the word. Both the director (Joseph L. Mankiewicz) and his director of photography (Joseph Ruttenburg) have suppressed the temptation—unresisted by Olivier in *Hamlet*—to add the camera to the cast of characters. Here there are no swooping "dolly-shots" to leave the dialogue panting in the rear; the camera, like a good accompanist, is almost invariably unobtrusive, carrying the words with it. And yet in this I found some cause for disappointment. I have a base-born love of excitement, a thoroughly plebeian joy in the dramatic picture. Because of it, I could forgive Olivier and Alan Dent their wholesale cutting of *Hamlet*. I can forget the loss of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when I remember the excitement of the throbbing heartbeat and the dilating images as Hamlet climbed to meet his father's ghost. For the screen can recall Shakespeare with advantages—advantages

that Shakespeare himself would revel in. Mankiewicz and his producer (John Houseman) might have gone farther as filmmakers and (with care) done no damage to Shakespeare. They certainly have not put us off with mean and ragged foils; they have given us Rome, but not quite room enough.

Yet they have contrived one superb moment that I will not forget; a dramatic stroke impossible outside the screen. Brutus is in the pulpit and the mob is almost in his hand—on the stage they would be. Then one becomes conscious that the plebs are looking not at Brutus but over his head. His oration peters out into silence as he, too, turns around. Then the camera swings round and up, and we see—not "Antony and others, with Caesar's body" (as the stage direction has it), but Antony alone, with the muffled corpse of Caesar in his arms, standing at the top of the Senate steps. It is a magnificent entry. Whoever devised it, and the slow ominous descent that follows, deserves a laurel for that alone.



Brando's Antony

On the other hand, the last scene of all seemed skimmed. The film ends with Antony's noble oration over the body of Brutus—a far nobler *hic iacet*, I now feel (having seen the film and re-read the play with older and more disillusioned eyes), than the subject deserved. But the camera no more rises to the occasion than Brutus does. Even melodrama, when it involves the choice and master spirits of an age, deserves some pomp in its climax, but the corpse lies unimpressively in the foreground as the screen slowly dims out.

What of the actors? Calhern's Caesar is a shade overblown, sometimes just a thought too petulant for one who felt he was master of the world. But there is justification in Shakespeare for it. He died well. Edmond O'Brien made a good Casca (apparently to the surprise of some people). I did not expect too much of Mason's Brutus. You can't make a brooding Hamlet out of Brutus and Mason seemed to me infirm of purpose. What he did do, I thought, was to strip some of the specious nobility from off

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