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Griot Theatre Co-Founder Talks About Its Inaugural Production in Encino

'Julius Caesar' is now playing at Bethel Encino.

By [Anna King](#) | [Email the author](#) | October 8, 2012

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Griot Theatre's production of *Julius Caesar* opened Oct. 4 at Bethel Encino. Patch caught up with Malik B. El-Amin, artistic director & co-founder of Griot Theatre, to talk about its inaugural production.

Griot Theatre is new. Can you tell me a little about how it came about? and who the team behind it are?

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in Los Angeles for some time
t was a natural evolution for
sion to leave her corporate
I worked as a professional
, I received a cochlear implant,
place where our endeavor is to

create magic every day.

And why did it start here in the West Valley?

Sabah and I live in the West Valley. I also work as a Program Manager at the Woodland Hills offices of Farmers Insurance. Yet, every time we would audition for, perform in or go see a play, we found ourselves driving to Hollywood, Pasadena, Downtown and North Hollywood. Despite the huge population residing and working in the West Valley, we had yet to produce a venue committed to professional live theatre, originating locally, rather than jobbed in from other cities. As we began to talk to business owners and residents of the West Valley it became immediately clear that people were hungry for something that could become a cultural gem within our own community.

The inaugural production, Julius Caesar, will be performed here in Encino. How did you discover the venue?

Finding the venue has been the most difficult part of the journey thus far and began over a year before we settled in Encino. Part of the advantage we were offering was also a huge obstacle: we were creating the first theatre of its kind, and so there were no existing theatres from which we could operate. We had the additional challenge of working under a plan with the union of professional stage actors (Actors' Equity Association) which requires that our venue have no more than 99 seats. This agreement allows us to use professional acting talent without putting things out of reach from a budgetary standpoint. And so, we did look to see if there was any place to rent, we also looked at leasing commercial real estate and were on the verge of signing with a couple locations before things fell through. Finally, we revisited an earlier plan, which was to call every school and church within the area. A number of major theatres across the country started out in a church: Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago and the St. Louis Black Repertory Theatre among the notable examples. When we spoke to Bethel Encino Church, the connection was immediate. Pastor Rustin Comer had a theatre background and the church had been involved in the arts for some time. Bethel Encino gave us use of their old sanctuary, which we've converted into

a 63 seat theatre. They have been a wonderful partner throughout this process.

The production is billed as Julius Caesar against a Game of Thrones backdrop. Tell us about it!

After having been around for several hundred years, the challenge of producing any work of Shakespeare is to make it fresh and relevant to modern audiences. As I was re-reading some of Shakespeare’s plays for consideration, I saw that HBO had adapted a popular book series into a television show. I was already a fan of the books, and so was thrilled to learn that *Game of Thrones* would hit television. Watching the show and reading *Julius Caesar* made clear to me the strong parallels between the stories. I thought it would be great fun for fans of the show to see some of their favorite characters on stage and it also provides a strong unifying theme for the design elements of costumes, lights, set, and sound. Because *Game of Thrones* is part medieval and part fantasy, it gives us room to play and highlight the magic and mysticism within *Julius Caesar*.

Tell us about the performers and creative team.

Our overriding principle is to provide professional and compelling theatre for our audiences. The designers on the team are all theatre professional who make their living practicing their craft. The actors have varying degrees of experience with most of them being members of the stage and television unions for actors. Some, you will have seen at the movies and on television, others you may have seen at theatres in LA. The cast is led by Cynthia Beckert and Jake Suffian, who both have degrees from graduate acting programs as well as significant classical theatre experience.

Anything else you think our readers should know?

This production of *Julius Caesar* will be different from the norm in number of ways. Outside of the *Game of Thrones* concept, the most significant differences are our use of women and actors of color in non-traditional roles. The cast is evenly divided with five women and five men playing a total of 25 characters. By casting women in significant roles, we broaden the range of choices available to us for interpretation. And rather than “color blind” casting, I believe the ethnicities of the actors and the roles they are playing help deepen the story we are telling.

Julius Caesar at Bethel Encino, 17500 Burbank Blvd., Encino 91316. Preview on Thursday, October 4 at 8pm; opens: Saturday, October 6 at 8pm (reception to follow). Runs: October 6 – November 11 (Dark 10/5, 10/19, & 11/2). For tickets, visit www.plays411.com/juliuscaesar.

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