

Julius Caesar Via Game of Thrones in the West Valley

<http://www.lastagetimes.com/2012/10/julius-caesar-via-game-of-thrones-in-the-west-valley/>

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I hated



Antonio D. Charity and Jake Suffian in "Julius Caesar"

Shakespeare. This was not a neutral feeling or a mild sense of disregard — I hated him. My problem was not with literature and fiction in general. By the time I reached high school, I was already an avid reader with an extensive book collection (for a 15-year-old). I loved words and was in love with words; I just hated Shakespeare's words.

If he had been introduced to me as "a guy you should give a shot, because there might be something interesting there", it might have been different. But Shakespeare was introduced to me as the greatest writer of the English language, and I didn't believe it. Here's why — I didn't get him. When I first read *Julius Caesar*, for example, I didn't get why Portia stabbed herself in the leg (or swallowed hot coals, for that matter); I didn't get why people would kill a guy for something he "might" do in the future (this was before the "pre-emptive strike" doctrine); I didn't get why a character would need to make a speech several pages long (see Mark Antony); and I certainly didn't get why several characters would kill themselves by the end of the play.

I did eventually find something in the work that has now

made Shakespeare one of my favorites. And I think the goal of any new production of his work must be to help new and returning audiences discover or reaffirm what is so compelling about his plays.

In 2011, when my wife Sabah and I decided to create a new professional theater in the West Valley, we looked to answer the question of what kind of work we would produce. We knew it would be called [Griot Theatre](#), in homage to the West African storytellers who preserve the history and culture of their communities through an oral tradition. It seemed fitting that, as modern-day griots, we should preserve our theatrical history with the production of Shakespeare and other classics, while pointing to the future of theater with the production of new plays.

My job was to select our first production. This would be our introduction to the community, and it had to represent the kind of theater we would produce. I reached back to my high school experience in search of what impeded my appreciation of Shakespeare and what finally made the work accessible to me. I began to warm to the work when I first saw it performed. We often say that Shakespeare is meant to be performed, not read, and as an ex-Shakespeare hater, watching that first performance of *The Merchant of Venice* helped me to understand why. Actors breathe life into the work and reveal what can remain obscure on the page.

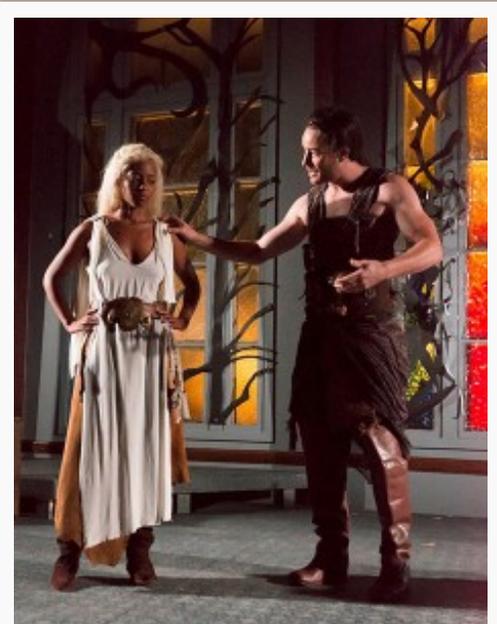
But there are some assumptions that must be made about an audience's experiences which affect their ability to "get it". For this reason, I decided to eliminate Shakespeare's history plays, which assume a certain understanding of the history of the British monarchy to grasp the storyline (see *Richard III*). I then eliminated the comedies as there is often a risk of overshadowing the story with the jokes and humor. This left me with the tragedies for consideration.

To explain why I finally landed on *Julius Caesar*, I'll remind you of my love of literature and fiction. In particular, science fiction and fantasy have been mainstays of my literary diet since elementary school. And so, when one of my favorites, *A Game of Thrones*, was adapted into a television show by HBO, you can imagine my excitement. I happened to be re-reading Shakespeare's tragedies at the same time Season 1 of [Game Of Thrones](#) (GOT) was airing, and the parallels between it and *Julius Caesar* were striking.

Both stories deal with the assassination of the world's leading figure by the people closest to him. And both worlds are thrown into chaos as the assassins clash with loyalists for control of the realm. I further found that by changing some of Shakespeare's characters from men to women — which is in line with Griot Theatre's mission — we were able to track even more closely between the two stories (for GOT fans, that means we were able to include Daenerys Targaryan and Cersei Lannister). This GOT concept would provide a clear and strong framework for our costume, set, light and sound design and, hopefully, justify another run of a play that has



Malik B. El-Amin



Erica Peebles and Daniel Ball

been performed for hundreds of years.

I do this work to play my role as a griot, a storyteller within my community. I do this work because my own personal journey with Shakespeare and his text compels me to do so. But mostly, I do this work in hope that some 15-year-old who has just decided that she hates Shakespeare gets dragged along to this production and discovers that there might just be something there. I do this work to increase the ranks of ex-Shakespeare haters everywhere.

***Julius Caesar*, [Griot Theatre of the West Valley](http://www.plays411.com/julietcaesar), on the campus of Bethel Encino. 17500 Burbank Blvd., Encino 91316. Thu-Sat 8 pm; Sun 3 pm. Dark Oct. 19 and Nov. 2. Through November 11. Open Captioning Oct. 12 and 21. ASL Interpretation Oct. 27. www.plays411.com/julietcaesar. 323-960-7740 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting 323-960-7740 end_of_the_skype_highlighting.**

*****All photos by Eugene Powers**

Malik B. El-Amin is artistic director and co-founder of Griot Theatre of the West Valley. After losing his hearing as an adult and regaining hearing with a cochlear implant, he has sought to make Griot Theatre the most hearing-accessible theater in the Southwest. El-Amin received his MFA in Theatre Arts from Brandeis University and is a member of Actors' Equity Association and SAG-AFTRA.