

# Bardomania: Adapting Shakespeare within a Canadian Political Context

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## Abstract

In choosing to transpose Shakespeare to a modern Canadian political setting, Canadians articulate a history that is a relevant context for interpreting Shakespeare. As an instance of this sort of transposable history, the inherent drama of the Canadian political landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s is a particularly good match for adapting Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In this essay, Rod Carley, a protean adaptor of Shakespeare's plays, discusses his current work on an adaptation of *Julius Caesar* based on Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the FLQ (*Front de Libération de Québec*), and events surrounding the October Crisis of the 1970. In Carley's interpretation, Caesar is based on Trudeau and, in the transported setting, he is assassinated in Ottawa by members of the FLQ as an act of revenge in the wake of his handling of "Black October" — perhaps one of the most fraught moments in the last fifty years of Canadian politics.

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*"How many ages hence / Shall this our lofty scene be acted over / In states unborn and accents yet unknown." Julius Caesar, 3.1.111-13*

## On Adaptation from a Playwright's Perspective

There is only one reason to adapt a Shakespearean text to another setting, and that is to illuminate it more clearly for today's audience. The question to ask when adapting a Shakespearean text is, "Does the transfer work?" Only when the political, social, and historical elements of the original match with the new setting is your adaptation on the right track. The key is to find a new context for the original in which to explore its themes rather than imposing an externalized directorial concept that is often divorced from the actual text. Contexts are rooted in the original text and serve as an overall blueprint to help a director and actors explore the text organically in rehearsals.

As a playwright seeking to diminish the gap between Shakespeare's world and our own, I find that by choosing an appropriate modern setting, it is easier for an audience to embrace "his" work, as they already have a sense of modern history to which they can relate. Because the visual is familiar, it is easier to get the audience to listen to Shakespeare's text and understand it. But one still has to find a modern setting that is removed enough from the immediate present so that it can serve as an analogy in a way that is not overly didactic.

It is the necessary care taken in editing Shakespeare's text when adapting that is crucial to the adaptation process as a whole. Shakespeare's audience was an aural one, capable of assimilating multiple images in a given speech at lightning speed. Today we are visually based — we can absorb thirty-five to forty edits a minute in a film or music video and think nothing of it. As a result, I try to be very careful in trimming speeches and dialogue so as to get at the key images without sacrificing the subtlety and nuances of the original writing. This process is akin to Shakespearean paleontology — remove the rock fragments of difficult or confusing text so that you reveal a clean bone of text from which a recognizable skeleton can be built. I also approach my Shakespearean adaptations with a cinematic eye. As a result, the theatrical techniques I employ rely heavily on design, itself an often forgotten aspect of the adaptation process. The visuals associated with the transplanted settings have to be in place to support and make the text speak comprehensibly.

When I was directing my adaptation of *The Othello Project* in Miami in 1998, which I found interesting in terms of being a Canadian depicting *Othello* in a very controversial American setting, I was asked by a reporter why we Canadians don't like Americans. I responded by saying, "It's not that we don't like you. It's just that we are not an egocentric nation. We study and appreciate many different countries' histories and cultures and in turn accept these cultures in our country. We don't see the world as being all about us. And because you believe the world revolves around you, you open yourself up to criticism and analogies from the rest of us. So in some ways we are observers of your world, or more actively put, we are interpreters and chroniclers." So, at the end of the day, as chroniclers of our times on the periphery of power, the Canadian perspective is very close to Shakespeare's.

### Adapting Shakespeare in Canada's Political Contexts

In choosing to transpose Shakespeare to a modern Canadian political setting, Canadians are articulating a history that is exciting and interesting enough to be used as a relevant context for interpreting Shakespeare. As an instance of this sort of transposable history, the inherent drama of the Canadian political landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s is a particularly good match for adapting Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

My current work is on an adaptation of *Julius Caesar* that is based on Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the *Front de Libération de Québec* (FLQ), and events surrounding the October Crisis of 1970. In my interpretation, Caesar is based on Trudeau and, in the transported setting, he is assassinated in Ottawa by members of the FLQ as an act of revenge in the wake of his handling of "Black October" — perhaps one of the most fraught moments in the last fifty years of Canadian politics. My adaptation involves both official languages of Canada and thereby addresses in a material way the linguistic duality that is so crucial to defining Canada's national sense of identity (and, moreover, a duality that played a key role in the events surrounding the so-called October Crisis). The October Crisis was caused by two terrorist kidnappings of government officials by members of the FLQ in the province of Québec, in October 1970. The kidnappings led to the short-lived use of the War Measures Act by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, which saw the national Army deployed both in Québec and in the national capital of Ottawa.

The spirit of Caesar (Trudeau) that dominates my adaptation is associated with an exercise of supreme, sovereign power — much debated in Canada after Trudeau's unilateral declaration of what has been mistakenly called "martial law" to deal with the crisis expeditiously. When Caesar (Trudeau) dies, power is masterless, and as such, indiscriminately destructive. Each man, in his turn, tries to grasp the lightning that has been set free, and is fearfully transformed, until finally it comes to rest upon Octavius (Jean Chrétien, a Trudeau acolyte also to become a Canadian Prime Minister) who alone, by force of personality and through a legitimate succession, may wield power unscathed.

The idea for adapting *Julius Caesar* within a Canadian political context has been germinating for the past decade, since I adapted and directed a version of the play based on the JFK assassination for an outdoor festival in 1996. At the time, I also began researching newspaper and *Macleans* articles from the late sixties and early seventies concerning Trudeau, Québec, and the FLQ. What first struck me was how often Trudeau was compared to Julius Caesar by Canadian journalists — not just for his physical appearance, but for his self-created, emperor-like status in Canadian politics. He was more than Canada's pale imitation of and variation on JFK: Trudeau was an individualist at a time when that was what Canada badly needed in order to address issues of decolonization and proximity to the U.S. In the fifteen years and five months that Trudeau served as Prime Minister, he conjured up every emotion in the Canadian people except indifference.

Esteemed Canadian journalist Walter Stewart wrote an article for *Macleans* in June 1970, entitled, "Pierre Elliott Trudeau is the President of Canada," in which he put forth the argument that in the two years since his election victory of June 1968, Trudeau had come to exercise what was virtually the power of a president (Stewart 1970). He dominated the Canadian political stage

— Trudeau was producer, stage manager, and matinee idol rolled into one. His predilection for a presidential style of government had won him unprecedented power. "No PM has ever made more of his muscle than Trudeau" (37, column 1). "We have a government by terror," announced one senior civil servant interviewed by Stewart, "The De Gaulle fist in the Kennedy glove" (p. 37, column 1). The hazard implied in the new power structure was that there really was no check on Trudeau beyond the threat of retaliation at the polls on some future date — a date to be set, incidentally, by the Prime Minister himself, to his own best advantage. Politically, in other words, Trudeau was vulnerable. His power, his style, his once-admired romantic image were now making people nervous and edgy.

This political backdrop provides the context in which I adapt and explore similar thematic in *Julius Caesar*. Trudeau's governing style, his federalist view of Québec, and his handling of the October Crisis of 1970 had garnered him many enemies — many of whom were former political allies. Who was safe to trust? As a result, Trudeau isolated himself more and more. Likewise, Julius Caesar's governing style made many Roman politicians nervous to the point where he was assassinated. It is an easy leap of the theatrical imagination to see the plausibility of a scenario in which a revenging FLQ cell, for his application of the War Measures Act, might have assassinated Trudeau. This is the working premise for my adaptation of *Julius Caesar*.

The opening scene of *Julius Caesar*, involving the tribunes interrogating the plebians, will serve as prologue to the piece. Set in October 1970, this scene stages two RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) officers interrogating working class Quebecers in Montreal on the night the War Measures Act was implemented. The second scene jumps to late February 1971 in Montreal, with Trudeau/Caesar making his first public appearance since the October Crisis. The tone is similar to the near-separatist riot surrounding Trudeau at the 1968 Saint Jean-Baptiste parade in Montreal — an annual event associated with the nationalist, separatist movement in Québec. In this scene, it becomes clear that the separatists are more than *simply* "rankled" by the events of the past October.

The character of Brutus is based on René Lévesque. Lévesque was an ex-Liberal, who in 1970-1971 was leader of the MSA or *Mouvement Souveraineté-Association* (Sovereignty Association Movement), the most moderate of the four separatist groups then operating openly in Québec, not to mention such underground terrorist gangs as the *Front de Libération du Québec* (FLQ). Lévesque himself was a moderate among the moderates. A member of the Québec legislature, Lévesque had been spending his energy and risking his prestige to defend the rights of the English minority in a sovereign Québec. It's quite wrong to assume, as many English Canadians did, that Lévesque and Trudeau represented opposite extremes. In actuality, both he and Trudeau were fighting for their own definitions of a "just society." Indeed, to an English Canadian,

Lévesque's words sounded quite convincing: "In my humble opinion, it is a question of simple justice. A nation is judged by its fairness to minorities. A free Québec must be a just society, a people serene and self-confident" (July 1968). But his words were heard in stony silence. Lévesque argued that he wasn't trying to make another Cuba and that he wanted to make the sovereignty issue as normal as possible, something to discuss between friends. He wanted Quebecers to be North Americans first, for Quebecers didn't feel themselves to be a French colony and more often defined themselves by their differences from the French and their similarities with North Americans.

But Lévesque's arguments fell on increasingly deaf ears, and his moral authority soon began to wane. If his moderate approach failed, if the English reaction was too harsh, even Lévesque might be pushed into positions he would rather not accept. Certainly, by May 1969 the emotionalism of his speeches now touched a nerve among audiences. The strongest applause followed his attacks on Trudeau's notion of a "just society" — almost as if Lévesque were releasing a collective sense of guilt at having been swept away by Trudeaumania only a few months before. The parallels between Lévesque and Brutus are evident: they are men of private conscience and honor crossing the line by letting passion rule their reason. As Brutus leaves himself wide open to Cassius's advances and political manipulations, so does Lévesque to the more violent preachings of the FLQ.

This adaptation asks the Stanislavski magical question, "What if?": What if Lévesque's own frustrations with his failure at bringing sovereignty to fruition by moderate means led him to violate his moral principles and adopt a more violent agenda, one that might even include assassinating his newly perceived nemesis, Trudeau?

Cassius is loosely based on Pierre Vallières, author of the book *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* [translated into English as *White Niggers of America*], who joined the FLQ in 1965 and was generally considered the "philosopher" behind the revolutionary movement. The FLQ used propaganda and terrorism to promote the emergence of an independent, socialist Québec. It was founded in March 1963, when Québec was undergoing a period of remarkable change. As mentioned earlier, it was involved in over 200 bombings between 1963 and 1970, and in 1968 the FLQ began using larger and more powerful bombs, setting them off at a federal government bookstore, McGill University, the residence of Jean Drapeau (the infamous Mayor of Montreal), the provincial Department of Labour, and the Montreal Stock Exchange, where twenty-seven people were injured. In the fall of 1969, the movement split into two distinct cells: the South Shore Gang (which became the Chenier cell) led by Paul Rose (Cinna is based on Rose); and the Liberation cell, under Jacques Lanctot (Caska is based on Lanctot). Both of these Montreal-based cells claimed about twelve members.

It was Trudeau's performance in several crises in Québec that most endeared him to his admirers and provoked his adversaries. Just before the 1968 election, during the Saint-Jean-Baptiste parade in Montreal — a traditional time of nationalist expression (somewhat akin to the American celebrations round July 4) — Trudeau faced down bottle-throwing separatists in a symbolic gesture of his determination to oppose people who would break up the country. "I am trying to put Québec in its place," he said to cheers during that campaign, "and the place of Québec is in all of Canada." The magic lasted until October 5, 1970, when the *Front de libération du Québec* terrorists in Montreal kidnapped British diplomat James Cross. Their demands, communicated in a series of public messages, included the freeing of a number of convicted or detained FLQ members and the broadcasting of the FLQ manifesto.

The manifesto, a diatribe against established authority, was read on Radio Canada, and on October 10, the Québec Premier, Robert Bourassa, offered safe passage abroad to the kidnappers in return for the liberation of their diplomatic hostage. But on the same day, a second FLQ cell kidnapped the Québec Minister of Labor and Immigration, Pierre Laporte. On October 15, Bourassa requested the assistance of the Canadian Armed Forces to supplement the local police. Trudeau was defiant when asked how far he would go to fight the FLQ, saying "Just watch me." On October 16, Trudeau and his Justice Minister, John Turner (himself a future Canadian Prime Minister), proclaimed the existence of a state of "apprehended insurrection" under the War Measures Act.

Canada, truly, had come of age.

### Further Contexts for Adapting *Julius Caesar* to Canadian Politics

The Canadian army took over the streets and authorities had unlimited powers of search and arrest. More than 450 Quebecers were swept into jail without formal proceedings: editors, singers, intellectuals, unionists, even a piano tuner. Trudeau's response rankled the separatists and civil libertarians, but proved to be one his most admired acts in the public opinion of English Canadians. Of the 450 people arrested, 150 were "suspected" FLQ members. On October 17, the body of Pierre Laporte was found in a car trunk near St. Hubert airport. In early December 1970, police discovered the cell holding James Cross, and his release was negotiated in return for the provision of safe conduct to Cuba for the kidnappers and some family members. Four weeks later, the second group was located and arrested — subsequently to be tried and convicted for kidnapping and murder. "What if," however, this second group wasn't located and they subsequently raised the stakes of their terrorist activity by making Trudeau a target of revenge?

After the crisis, the Federal Minister of Justice in 1970, John Turner, justified the use of the War Measures Act as a means of reversing an "erosion of public will" in Québec. But over time came a profound questioning that challenged the wisdom of the action, particularly revelations made in the 1971 book *Rumours Of War*, by columnist Ron Haggart and civil rights lawyer Aubrey Golden. They reconstruct, moment by moment, what happened to four Quebeckers that night in October. These facts, in my adaptation, further fuel the fire for FLQ retaliation towards Trudeau.

The remaining conspirators in *Julius Caesar* tie in with their 1970s counterparts as follows: Trebonius is a female university student and a radical who has previously bedded both Caesar and Mark Antony, Decius Brutus is the political insider in Trudeau/Caesar's Cabinet, and Metellus Cymber is a member of the Black Panthers working with the FLQ in Québec. (The Black Panthers recognized the FLQ as another minority group fighting oppression with violent means and backed the FLQ by providing weapons and other forms of support — and it must not be forgotten that one of the key philosophical forms of positioning for Québécois radicals was as the "white niggers of America.") The other possibility for Cymber is to make him a Cuban radical supporting the FLQ, for he is the one who arranges their safe transport out of the country after the assassination. The character of Caska, as well as being loosely based on Jacques Lanctot, also serves as the teamster/union connection in the piece — especially important given the powerful socialist impetus behind the drive to separation.

Marc Antony is based on the previously mentioned Federal Justice Minister John Turner who, in 1970-1971, at the age of 39, was the dashing young man of the new Liberal machine. His image was immaculate. It combined gravity (he was once a respected corporation and trial lawyer in Montreal), playboy cool (this is the man who whirled Princess Margaret around a dance floor), and guts (as demonstrated by how he hung in, to the end, during the 1968 Liberal leadership convention in the face of overwhelming Trudeaumania associated with Trudeau's leadership charisma). It was believed by the political journalists of the day that, if John Turner could not push through the long overdue reforms to Canada's judicial system, then no one could. Turner was quoted in *Macleans* as saying:

The *idea* of justice is an absolute. We move towards the absolute with limitations. I'll be trying to move us forward. I think that the Trudeau administration will be noted for its reforming and revising of some of the inequalities existing between citizen and citizen, as well as the relationship between the citizen and the state. This involves a reworking of the Bill of Rights. There should be an early reform on bail and detention before trial.

In *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony speaks of honor, yet incites the plebians into a violent mob at Caesar's funeral, and he himself reveals his own true expediency and private ambitions. Turner's speech on judicial reform is in direct contrast to his actions in this adaptation — which is also true of Mark Antony in the original.

In terms of the triumvirate that is formed in the play after Caesar's death, Mark Antony joins forces with the easily-handled Lepidus, based on Québec Liberal Premier Robert Bourassa, who was perceived as weak, unimpressive, a failure in his handling of the October Crisis, and merely a mouthpiece in Québec for the Federal Liberals; and Octavius Caesar, the personification of impersonal rule and the only legitimate successor to Julius Caesar. He outplays Mark Antony and Lepidus and is Emperor by the play's end. Octavius is based on the young, personable Jean Chrétien, who was part of Trudeau's inner sanctum. As Canadian politics unfolded in the ensuing years, Chrétien did indeed become the new Caesar of the Liberal party and Canada (serving as Canadian Prime Minister from 1993 to 2003).

One of the briefest, but most powerful, scenes in *Julius Caesar* is when Cinna the Poet is mistaken for Cinna the conspirator and is torn to pieces by the enflamed mob. I found a fascinating contemporary touchstone to this scene in the *Montreal Star's* Friday October 16, 1970, edition: "Police . . . this morning detained 163 persons in the Montreal and Québec City area and in Rimouski. They have picked up Michel Garneau, a poet, a friendly and articulate man I knew last year, when I worked with him at the CBC. Garneau is a terrorist?" Ironically, Garneau was to go on to become one of Québec's most talented adaptors and translators of Shakespeare, and someone who was to work with Robert Lepage on an acclaimed series of tradaptations.

In my adaptation, after the funeral oration the conspirators escape to Cuba and are eventually gunned down by the Canadian and Cuban military, playing on Castro's well-documented close and sympathetic relationship to Trudeau. Castro may very well appear in the final scene — if only because this might be the first Shakespearean adaptation in which Fidel makes an appearance. The tent scenes in acts 4 and 5 of the original text are being adapted to the Cuban jungle setting.

*Julius Caesar* will unfold in both official languages of Canada. Scenes with the separatists will be primarily in French; the funeral orations take place on Parliament Hill in Ottawa. Brutus blunders by speaking in both French and English, whereas Mark Antony knows he is playing to an English-speaking majority and governs himself accordingly to achieve his objective. (It is an English-speaking mob that eventually goes on the warpath.) I believe this adaptation of *Julius Caesar* to be relevant to contemporary audiences, Canadian or otherwise, for a number of reasons. In the wake of recent world events after the Air India bombing of Flight 182 in 1985 and, of course, 9/11, it is important to examine acts of terrorism in different historical contexts. The separatist

debate still exists and will most likely continue (however muted in its current phase in Canada). Trudeau is a worthy Canadian icon for this kind of artistic interpretation — to date, he is the only Canadian Prime Minister truly to have caught the imagination of the international community. The events of the early '70s are now distant enough in Canadians' past to serve as a working analogy for other political situations, other analyses that hindsight allows. Canada's political history is complex and needs to be voiced onstage. Shakespeare is perhaps never more alive and accessible than when adapted to new contexts that make new meanings of his work possible. Finally, in terms of my being a mid-career artist, I feel that the adaptations I now create must reflect the politics and issues of the day, with an emphasis on Canadian story-telling — hence, the *Julius Caesar* project.

### Online Resources

Carley, Rod. *The Othello Project* (1995). Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare (CASP) [cited 1 November, 2007]. [http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/a\\_othello.cfm](http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/a_othello.cfm).

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