

Only When in Rome?: Albert Camus' *Caligula* at the Theater Basel



Albert Camus' *Caligula* is suddenly very topical. As a U.S. resident, I wake up every morning to a world governed by the 3 a.m. tweets of our Commander in Chief. He instates in the White House family members for whom nobody voted; precipitously bombs Syria while insisting on a travel ban that includes its refugees; has his Supreme Court Justice nominee confirmed by his party's senators blithely yet radically changing the approval process; and proceeds to dismantle important government agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, by calling for their defunding and putting sworn enemies of said agencies at their head—all while ignoring any factual evidence that doesn't fall in line with the mood du jour. Suddenly the presidency has acquired traits ominously reminiscent of imperial Rome, whose emperors had absolute power over its people and a Senate that followed their every whim.

Camus' *Caligula*

Albert Camus sketched out *Caligula* in 1937, had a complete first manuscript in 1939, and finished a three-act version in 1941. Influenced by his experience of the Third Reich, Camus heavily revised the play, and the production at the Theater Basel is based on the version first staged in 1945. *Caligula* is part of what the author called his "Cycle of the Absurd," along with the novel *The Stranger* (1942) and the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). (Some include the 1944 play *The Misunderstanding*.) Camus denied *Caligula* was an existentialist work; as far as he was concerned the only nugget of philosophy could be found in its line "Men die; and they're not happy," and that was no more than a cliché. Rather, Camus calls it a "superior suicide" in his "Author's Preface" to the 1958 U.S. edition:

"Caligula, a relatively attractive prince up to then, becomes aware, on the death of Drusilla, his sister and mistress, that this world is not satisfactory. Thenceforth, obsessed with the impossible and poisoned with scorn and horror, he tries, through murder and the systematic perversion of all values, to practice a liberty

that he will eventually discover not to be the right one. [...] But, if his truth is to rebel against fate, his error lies in negating what binds him to mankind. One cannot destroy everything without destroying oneself. This is why Caligula depopulates the world around him and, faithful to his logic, does what is necessary to arm against him those who will eventually kill him.”

Camus' *Caligula* in Basel

Although Camus in his preface seems to grant Caligula some level of moral insight, his play shows nothing of the kind. It is a progression of violent acts, humiliations of Caligula's senators and patricians, making their world increasingly unreliable, as he cannot be held accountable for his actions.



Ingo Tomi (Cherea), Katja Jung (Caesonia), Martin Hug (Mucius), Thiemo Strutzenberger (Caligula), Steffen Höld (Helicon), Thomas Reisinger (Lepidus), and Vincent Glander (Scipio) in Albert Camus's *Caligula*, directed by Antonio Latella at Theater Basel. Photo: Theater Basel | Sandra Then.

The world around Caligula (Thiemo Strutzenberger) becomes an absurd universe, and the play follows his wife Caesonia (Katja Jung) and the main players of his court—the freed slave Helicon (Steffen Höld), the moral center Cherea (Ingo Tomi), the patricians Scipio, Lepidus, and Mucius (Vincent Glander, Thomas Reisinger, Martin Hug)—in their different reactions to Caligula's increasingly violent volatility. Intent on keeping their hold on what power they have, personal or political, they try to respond flexibly to their ruler's increasingly arbitrary and dangerous actions, his more and more ridiculous decrees and

horrific crimes. But nothing works. In the end they all lose their power, their dignity, and their lives. Only Cherea survives, but in a most reduced state: despairing, circling on a turntable, devoid of hope or agency, masturbating—a clear departure from the 1945 text, in which Cherea and Scipio jointly stab Caligula in the face at the play’s end. Perhaps having a “happy ending” like that seemed too optimistic.

Director Antonio Latella’s production insists that there is no answer to the question of what is absurd, since to answer it would deny the essence of absurdity. Instead he calls it an experience. Living in Caligula’s orbit means being trapped in various changing triangles, which is reflected in the scenic design by Simone Mannino.



Thiemo Strutzenberger (Caligula) and Steffen Höld (Helicon) in Albert Camus's *Caligula*, directed by Antonio Latella at Theater Basel. Photo: Theater Basel | Sandra Then.

“The Patrician Cherea, Lepidus, and Mucius are one triangle, as are the freed slave Helicon, the poet Scipio, and Empress Caesonia. Caligula is opposite these two big triangles. Add to this the triangulations with Caligula at the top: the connections Caligula–Scipio–Caesonia, and Caligula–Helicon–Caesonia. In the course of the action there are always new constellations, new connections, and axes of power. The program of the production notes that the set uses the geometric form of the triangle because transposed to a three-dimensional space, a triangle is a corner, a tight angle, a trap. There is no escaping this system and all who enter are inexorably caught.”

Walnuts rain from the sky, creating a slippery and noisy surface for a court that finds its stable ground more and more unmoored. Is this an allusion to the plague of raining frogs? That heads will roll? Can the hard-shelled nuts hurt? If not one nut, then maybe many? If you crack them, they are edible; but if you step on a number of them, you slip and fall. It's a metaphor that is very open, which may well be what Latella had in mind.

Caligula's violence is all in the narration, and the production keeps it that way or presents it in an abstracted fashion, which makes it all the more effective. There is no blood or gore except for the dead bodies in evidence at the end of the play. Singled out by Caligula several times for particular nastiness is Mucius, whom he humiliates by reducing the senator to a slave, a clown, then raping his wife (offstage) before finally putting him to death after a mock trial. The story of Mucius, with its trial and execution, is the most moving, as he is the only character whose progression of suffering the audience is allowed to tap into and empathize with. Mucius can't let go of being at the court, so he allows himself to be stripped of his position, his dignity, and finally his humanity.



Vincent Glander (Scipio), Thomas Reisinger (Lepidus), Steffen Höld (Helicon), Martin Hug (Mucius), Thiemo Strutzenberger (Caligula), and Katja Jung (Caesonina) in Albert Camus's *Caligula*, directed by Antonio Latella at Theater Basel. Photo: Theater Basel | Sandra Then.

The scene in which Caligula sentences Mucius to death in a mock trial is diabolically brilliant. Mucius is seated on a turntable, and Caligula embraces him while holding his asthma inhaler as incriminating

evidence just out of reach. The inhaler is termed an *antidote*, to be used should Mucius be poisoned by Caligula. This is a punishable offense: your emperor has the right to poison you, and you have no right to resist his wishes. Mucius, completely befuddled, keeps repeating, “But it’s an asthma inhaler!” which Caligula ignores. He strangles him, very lightly, abstractedly. The dead Mucius stays seated in the same position as when he was alive, while Caligula turns to Caesonia, holding out the inhaler, and asks her: “What is that?” “An asthma inhaler,” she answers. Caligula shrugs and throws the inhaler away. Same difference. Mucius’s death was a foregone conclusion for everyone, just as it was equally clear that nobody of the court would interfere on his behalf. This scene shows in a nutshell (!) how the relationship of ruler and ruled is one of codependency. Not even the poet, Scipio, whose father Caligula had killed in a ghastly way, can tear himself away from the place of power, and Cherea is held in place by his ingrained belief in the legitimacy of the rule of emperor. In *Caligula* there is no outside world in which to take refuge: the characters do not see that as an option.

The performances

The production is the opposite of demonstrative: all the characters, from Caligula (Thiemo Strutzenberger) on down, are kept as low key as possible. All performances are well tuned, with Steffen Höld (Helicon) having the opportunity to ingest significant quantities of mortadella, obviously relishing every slice. Martin Hug is given the most opportunity to form a relatable character as the suffering Mucius. Ingo Tomi as Cherea expresses the razor’s edge of gun-shy moral rectitude that in the end leads to his destruction. Thiemo Strutzenberger’s Caligula is from the beginning tired and indolent, with little change. If the scene doesn’t allow him for more variation (as in the execution scene of Mucius), his desire for the moon leaves everyone cold yet uneasy, since an unfulfilled emperor is a dangerous emperor.



Thiemo Strutzenberger (Caligula) in Albert Camus's *Caligula*, directed by Antonio Latella at Theater Basel. Photo: Theater Basel | Sandra Then.

Caligula in Latella's production is not a real focal point of energy, but rather the lack thereof. This unfortunately makes the evening feel long and repetitiously tedious, since nobody really expects things ever to take an upswing. And of course it ends badly.

Opening night audiences in Basel

"Ah, we're doing *that* again" was the long-suffering and amused response overheard at intermission, uttered by a very genteel lady of the Basel haute bourgeoisie to her friends. They weren't outraged at finding that the play they'd come to see bore little resemblance to the one they'd read or seen before, but they weren't surprised either. There was hardly an aspect of Latella's production that was in any way out of the ordinary for theatregoers in Switzerland or Germany. The set was abstractly triangular in orange, the costumes contemporary in equally bright colors—no nuance for the wicked. There were some textual updates (asthma inhaler versus medicinal flask), changes in the final body count (Caligula stays somewhat alive), masturbation, aborted sex acts, and finally, the most tried and true of anti-illusionistic devices, actors climbing over audience members to communicate a universal implication. It's hard for a director to break boundaries when there are hardly any boundaries left to break, especially when the play you're dealing with has at its core the running on empty of broken barriers. Although Latella's interview in the program book is enlightening and interesting, the production itself has few highlights. It seems that

for Latella, living in an absurd universe is a soul-quenching experience resulting in tedium and death. While I agree with the process, I beg to differ as to the emotional progression. Before numbness there is stress, tension, anxiety, fear, and loathing. These are very active human emotions, and *Caligula* the play allows for the exploration of these human states, whereas the production chooses to minimize them. The result is an overall blandness that even the brightest colors can't alleviate.

Reviewing in hindsight

Caligula at the Theater Basel improves with time. While attending opening night on November 11th, two days after the U.S. election, I found myself at first intrigued, then underwhelmed. There were too many passages that, despite poignant content, seemed to glide by uneventfully.

Now, five months into the Trump régime, *Caligula* the play has acquired a chilling relevance. Suddenly his Rome seems only a few bridges removed from us. Caligula's patricians are a case study for the behavior of many Republican politicians, twisting themselves beyond recognition to retain whatever power they'd accrued. If what I missed in the Theater Basel production of *Caligula* was a pervasive sense of the anxious dread that is part of living in an absurd universe, today I can confirm that such is indeed the experience of the absurd.

Katrin Hilbe is a director of opera and theatre working both in the U.S. and in Europe. Her production of Julia Pascal's *St Joan* was awarded "Best Direction and Adaptation" at the Dublin International Gay Theatre Festival, and her staging of Richard Strauss's *Salome* for New Orleans Opera was awarded "Best Opera Production." Select credits include *Fremd bin ich Eingezogen ...* (Konstanz), *Die Schumann Sonate* (Liechtenstein, Basel, and Zürich), *In Bed with Roy Cohn* (New York), *Breaking the Silence* (Edinburgh), and *Falstaff* (Frankfurt). During 2007–2010 Katrin was the primary Assistant Director for Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* under the direction of Tankred Dorst at the Bayreuth Festival.



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