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Caesar and Cleopatra Study Guide

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The Stratford Story



That Stratford, Ontario, is the home of the largest classical repertory theatre in North America is ultimately attributable to the dream of one man, Stratford-born journalist Tom Patterson.

In the early 1950s, seeing the economy of his home town endangered by the withdrawal of the railway industry that had sustained it for nearly eighty years, Patterson conceived the idea of a theatre festival devoted to the works of William Shakespeare. His vision won the support not only of Stratford City Council and an enthusiastic committee of citizens, but also of the legendary British actor and director Tyrone Guthrie, who agreed to become the proposed festival's first Artistic Director. The Stratford Shakespearean Festival of Canada was incorporated as a legal entity on October 31, 1952. A giant canvas tent was ordered from a firm in Chicago, and in the parklands by Stratford's Avon River work began on a concrete amphitheatre at the centre of which was to be a revolutionary thrust stage created

to Guthrie's specifications by internationally renowned theatrical designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch.

From the balcony of that stage, on the night of July 13, 1953, actor Alec Guinness spoke the opening lines of *Richard III*: "Now is the winter of our discontent/ Made glorious summer by this son of York." Those words marked the triumphant end to what had sometimes seemed a hopeless struggle against the odds to turn Patterson's dream into a reality – and the beginning of an astonishing new chapter in Canadian theatre history. The other production of that inaugural six-week season, a modern-dress version of *All's Well That Ends Well*, opened the following night, confirming the opinion of celebrated novelist Robertson Davies that the new Festival was an achievement "of historic importance not only in Canada, but wherever theatre is taken seriously – that is to say, in every civilized country in the world."

Time proved the truth of Davies' words, for the Festival's pillared, porticoed thrust stage revolutionized the performance of classical and contemporary theatre in the latter half of the 20th century and inspired the design of more than a dozen other major venues around the world, including the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, the Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Centre and, in England, the Chichester Festival Theatre, the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield and the Olivier Theatre at the Royal National Theatre in London. Over the years, the Festival has made some amendments to the original design of Moiseiwitsch's stage, without changing its essential format.

At the end of the 1956 season, the giant canvas tent that had housed the Festival's first four seasons was dismantled for the last time to make way for a new and permanent facility to be erected around the existing stage. Designed by architect Robert Fairfield, the new building would be one of the most distinctive in

the world of the performing arts: its circular floor plan and crenellated roof paying striking tribute to the Festival's origins under canvas.

In the years since its first season, the Stratford Shakespeare Festival has set benchmarks for the production not only of Shakespeare, Molière, the ancient Greeks and other great dramatists of the past, but also of such 20th-century masters as Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams. In addition to acclaimed productions of the best in operetta and musical theatre, it has also showcased – and in many cases premièred – works by outstanding Canadian and other contemporary playwrights.

Its artists have included the finest actors, directors and designers in Canada and abroad. Among the internationally renowned performers who have graced its stages are Alan Bates, Brian Bedford, Douglas Campbell, Len Cariou, Brent Carver, Hume Cronyn, Colm Feore, Megan Follows, Lorne Greene, Paul

Gross, Uta Hagen, Julie Harris, Martha Henry, William Hutt, James Mason, Eric McCormack, Seana McKenna, Loreena McKennitt, Richard Monette, John Neville, Nicholas Pennell, Christopher Plummer, Sarah Polley, Douglas Rain, Kate Reid, Jason Robards, Paul Scofield, William Shatner, Maggie Smith, Jessica Tandy, Peter Ustinov and Al Waxman.

Drawing audiences of more than 500,000 each year, the Festival season now runs from April to November, with productions being presented in four unique theatres, and includes a full program of Beyond the Stage activities including concerts, discussion sessions, lectures and readings. It offers an extensive program of educational activities for students, teachers and other patrons, and operates its own in-house school of professional artist development: The Birmingham Conservatory for Classical Theatre.



The original Festival tent is draped over the thrust stage in preparation for the first season, 1953.

The Playwright

George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw was born in Dublin, Ireland, on 26 July, 1856, the youngest child of a grain merchant and his wife, a professional singer. Emerging from a succession of Dublin schools with a lasting dislike of formal education, the young Shaw took a job as a clerk.

In 1873, Shaw's mother moved to London with his sisters, Lucinda and Elinor, to live with her music teacher, George Vandeleur Lee. Three years later, Elinor died of tuberculosis, and Shaw joined his mother's household in London. He set about improving his education in the reading room of the British Museum, became an ardent socialist and, in 1884, joined the left-wing Fabian Society. He also began writing novels, completing his first, *Immaturity*, in 1879.

It was as a critic, though, that Shaw first achieved literary success. In 1888, he began writing music criticism for *The Star* under the pen-name "Corno di Bassetto," transferring in 1890 to *The World*. An early champion of Henrik Ibsen, he served as drama critic of *The Saturday Review* from 1895 till 1898, by which time his own career as a playwright was well under way.

His first play, *Widowers' Houses*, was produced in 1892. It would be followed by more than 60 others, including *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (written in 1893 but banned until 1902), *Arms and the Man* and *Candida* (both written in 1894), *You Never Can Tell* and *The Devil's Disciple* (both 1896), *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898), *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* (1899), *Man and Superman* (1902), *Major Barbara* (1905), *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906), *Androcles and the Lion* and *Pygmalion* (both 1912), *Heartbreak House* (completed in 1917 but not produced till 1920), *Back to Methuselah* (1920), *Saint Joan* (1923) and *The Apple Cart* (1928).

In 1898, Shaw married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress and fellow Fabian. They moved in 1906 to the Hertfordshire village of Ayot St. Lawrence, where they remained for the rest of their lives.

Shaw received the Nobel Prize in 1925 for his contribution to literature and an Academy Award in 1938 for his screenplay for the film of *Pygmalion*. (Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe later adapted *Pygmalion* into their hit musical *My Fair Lady*.)

Shaw's wife died in 1943, and in 1947 he completed his last play, *Buoyant Billions*, at the age of 91. He died at home three years later, on 2 November, 1950, after falling from an apple tree whose branches he was pruning.

Director's Note

Egypt and Empire

Caesar and Cleopatra serves up surprisingly paradoxical and complex portraits of two of the most renowned characters in history. Shaw's play at times seems like a domestic comedy, but we are also witnessing the last chapter of the Ptolemaic Dynasty and a significant step towards the foundation of the Roman Empire and the stillcontinuing pattern of Western interference in the affairs of the Middle East. After Julius Caesar's short time in Alexandria with his protégé, Cleopatra VII, the world would never be the same.

Rome's interest in Egypt was longstanding. The fertile Nile valley was the principal source of grain for its expanding territories. In Shaw's play, Lucius Septimius is part of the Roman army stationed there years earlier to ensure the continuity of the supply. By the time the play begins, however, the Roman soldiers had married local women and their loyalties had become divided.

Shaw wrote his play in 1898 at a time when the British army occupied Egypt to protect the flow of Western commerce through the recently built Suez Canal, and some form of English control lasted well into the 20th century. Of course, we have a Western army occupying a country in the Middle East today, at a time when oil has replaced grain and the Canal as the preoccupation of the West.

Shaw's unflattering portrayal of the Egyptian court now seems like a remnant of the British imperial age. His portrait of the 16-year-old Cleopatra, however, is more insightful. She may not become the queen that Caesar envisions, but she does become a ruler. She understands the danger that Pothinus represents perhaps better than Caesar, even if we disagree with the manner in which she dispatches him. Caesar returns to Rome and to his death, but Cleopatra lives on to have the celebrated affair recorded in Shakespeare's play.

Rome, of course, had the final word. Antony and Cleopatra were defeated at Actium by the man who would become Rome's first emperor, and Egypt officially became part of the Empire in 30 BC.

Des McAnuff
Director, *Caesar and Cleopatra*
Artistic Director, Stratford Shakespeare Festival

Timeline of Historical Events

Before, During and After the Action of the Play

- 304 BC: Ptolemy I, a general in the army of Alexander the Great, declares himself king of Egypt.
- 200 BC: Rome sends a nobleman to Egypt to act as guardian to the young king Ptolemy V. Egypt soon becomes an independent state in name only.
- 81 BC: Ptolemy IX dies. The Roman dictator assigned to Egypt, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, places the late king's nephew, Ptolemy XI Alexander I, on the throne and forces him to marry his predecessor's elderly wife. After 19 days of marriage he murders her, for which the citizens of Alexandria strike him from the throne and kill him. They summon Ptolemy XII, the bastard son of Ptolemy IX by a concubine – later to become Cleopatra's father – from Syria and hastily place him on the throne.
- 70 or 69 BC: Cleopatra VII (our heroine) is born, following her sisters Cleopatra VI Tryphaena and Berenice IV.
- 60 BC: Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar form the First Triumvirate. Pompey and Caesar demand the sum of 6,000 talents from Ptolemy XII in exchange for protection from his rivals. He borrows the money from a Roman financier and plans to pay it back by levying a new tax.
- 58 BC: The people of Egypt revolt against the new tax. Ptolemy XII flees to Rome. The people of Egypt place his eldest daughter, Cleopatra VI Tryphaena, on the throne.
- 57 BC: Cleopatra VI dies and the next sister, Berenice IV, succeeds her.
- 55 BC: Ptolemy XII returns to Egypt, puts Berenice to death, and assumes the throne again.
- 51 BC: The 18-year-old Cleopatra VII and her father rule jointly for a few months until his death, whereupon Cleopatra's 10-year-old brother, Ptolemy XIII, becomes her co-ruler.
- 49 BC: Pompey is appointed the guardian of the young Ptolemy XIII. They depose Cleopatra.
- 48 BC: Pompey, now engaged in a war with Caesar, decides to set up a base in Egypt. On his arrival, Ptolemy XIII's government (led by his chief advisor, Pothinus) sends an envoy into the harbour to greet him. Pompey steps onto the welcome party's boat and is assassinated, his body thrown overboard and his head kept to present to Caesar.

Caesar arrives in Alexandria. Rather than leaving immediately, as the Egyptians hoped he would when he found Pompey already dispatched, he decides to enforce Ptolemy XII's will that his son and daughter should rule together. He summons Ptolemy XIII and Cleopatra to the palace, and, at age 52, is instantly smitten with the 21-year-old Cleopatra. They begin an affair.

Pothinus calls 20,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry to lay siege to the palace, shutting in Caesar, Cleopatra, Ptolemy and another sister, Arsinoe. Caesar places Ptolemy under house arrest, whereupon the army attacks the palace. Caesar's forces capture and torch 72 Egyptian ships in the Alexandrian harbour.

Arsinoe escapes the palace and flees to Achillas, the head of the military forces, who declares her queen of Egypt. Later, Caesar releases Ptolemy from house arrest. Ptolemy takes over command of Arsinoe's armies.

47 BC: Ptolemy's army loses a battle with Caesar's army, and in the retreat Ptolemy, aged 15, drowns in the Nile. To prove to the Egyptian people that he is really dead, Caesar has the Nile dredged and his body recovered. His golden armour is put on display. Caesar calls up Cleopatra's youngest brother, 12-year-old Ptolemy XIV, to be her new co-ruler.

Caesar returns to Rome. Shortly thereafter, Cleopatra's son (whose paternity is inconclusive) is born and she names him Ptolemy Caesar; Alexandrians nickname him Caesarion, "little Caesar."

46 BC: Cleopatra travels to Rome to sign a new treaty of friendship between Rome and Egypt – and to continue her affair with Caesar.

44 BC: Caesar is assassinated. Cleopatra returns to Egypt. Ptolemy XIV dies later that year and Cleopatra's toddling son joins her as co-ruler.

41 BC: Mark Antony becomes governor of the territories bordering Egypt, and arranges an official meeting with Cleopatra. She becomes his mistress.

40 BC: Antony returns to Rome. Later that year, Cleopatra gives birth to twins fathered by Antony, and names them Alexander and Cleopatra.

36 BC: Antony and Cleopatra meet in Antioch and spend the winter together.

35 BC: Cleopatra gives birth to another son by Antony, named Ptolemy Philadelphus.

32 BC: Antony divorces his wife, Octavia, in favour of Cleopatra. He writes his will and deposits it with the Vestal Virgins. His rival, Octavian, seizes it and informs the Senate that it contains three atrocities: Antony declares that Caesarion is Julius Caesar's son, leaves large sums of money to Cleopatra's children, and asks to be buried in Egypt. Octavian declares war on Cleopatra.

31 BC: Octavian's fleet meets Antony and Cleopatra's fleet for the Battle of Actium. Antony and Cleopatra are bested, and flee to Alexandria.

30 BC: Octavian wins control of Alexandria.

Cleopatra hides in her mausoleum; Antony receives a message that she has committed suicide. He plunges his sword into his stomach to follow her. As he slowly dies, he receives another message that she is alive and wants to see him. He is conveyed to her mausoleum, where he dies.

To escape capture by Octavian, Cleopatra kills herself. Her method has never been conclusively proven, but legend says she smuggled a venomous snake into the mausoleum and ended her life by allowing it to bite her.

Octavian has Cleopatra's eldest son, Caesarion, and Antony's eldest son, Antyllus, put to death.

Cast of Characters

Caesar

Cleopatra, *16 years old*

Ftateeta, *her nurse*

Ptolemy, *her younger brother*

Pothinus, *his guardian*

Theodotus, *his tutor*

Achillas, *his general*

Rufio, *Caesar's chief officer*

Britannus, *Caesar's secretary*

Lucius Septimius, *with the Roman army of occupation*

Wounded Soldier

Apollodorus, *an artist*

Roman Sentinel

Centurion

Blind Musician

Iras

Charmian

Major-Domo

Belzanor

Persian

Courtiers, Soldiers, Slaves and Gods

Plot Synopsis

Wandering alone in the Egyptian desert, the invading Roman general Julius Caesar comes upon a statue of the Sphinx – and, sleeping between its paws, the 16-year-old Queen Cleopatra. Upon learning who Caesar is, the girl is initially terrified of him, her fears subsiding only when she sees for herself that Romans are not the child-devouring monsters of rumour. Intrigued by Cleopatra's political potential, as well as by her youth and beauty, Caesar becomes her mentor in her struggle to defend her throne against the rival claim of her 10-year-old brother, Ptolemy. He attempts to broker a compromise between the two siblings, whose political rivalry is exacerbated by their personal dislike of each other, but the situation soon degenerates into armed conflict. And, as the tide of war turns against him, Caesar discovers to his chagrin that, for all his careful tutoring, his young protégé has a mind and a will of her own.

Sources and Origins

Shaw's major source for this play was German historian Theodore Mommsen's *History of Rome*, published in the 1850s. His work was known for the contemporary feel it gave to Roman life and the image he gave Julius Caesar as a democrat, republican and social reformer. Shaw maintained that he stuck closely to Mommsen's description of Caesar as a hero while writing the play.

Stage History

The first London production of *Caesar and Cleopatra* was at the Savoy Theatre, opening November 25, 1907, starring Johnston Forbes-Robertson and his wife, Gertrude Elliott. Another early production took place at Drury Lane Theatre, opening in April 1913.

Forbes-Robertson and Gertrude Elliott played 49 performances of the play at the New Amsterdam Theatre in New York in 1906.

Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh played the title roles in 1951 at the St. James Theatre and later on Broadway.

A 1977 revival featured Rex Harrison and Elizabeth Ashley at the Palace Theatre on Broadway. The play has also been presented at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.

Discussion Topics for Your Class

For classes reading the play before seeing the film:

1. What do you expect to see in the Stratford Shakespeare Festival production? Have each student make a list of predictions about what they expect. Save these predictions. After you see the film, revisit them to see how they compared to the actual production.
2. Create a character web showing how all the characters are connected to each other. Discuss the complexity of these relationships and how they affect the progression of the play.

After seeing the film:

1. The literary and dramatic characters of Caesar and Cleopatra have appealed to artists and audiences around the world for hundreds years. Why do you think this is?
2. What parts of the play did you respond to most?
3. Were there parts you wished were different? How?

For drama-based classroom activities adaptable to the study of any play, complete with instructions, materials and Ontario curriculum expectation links, visit

stratfordshakespearefestival.com/teachingmaterials.