

## Case 11: Outrage Us

Theatre has examined and provoked political contention since at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Thespis of Athens, a priest of Dionysus, was the first actor recorded as portraying another on stage. During one annual festival honoring the god, according to legend, Thespis stepped forward alone from the priestly chorus, and wearing the mask of Dionysus, spoke as the god himself. The audacity and blasphemy of this portrayal must surely caused an uproar. Nonetheless, in 534 BCE, Athens held the first competition to select the best tragedy, and Thespis was declared the winner.

The philosopher and scholar, Allan Bloom, asserts that Shakespeare is profoundly political in his timeless examinations of power and leadership. Over the centuries, directors have often given Shakespeare's works contemporary treatment to reflect current political realities and provoke discourse on public concerns. Numerous theatres across the country staged *Julius Caesar*, following the 2016 presidential election.

In June 2017, a Shakespeare in the Park production by Manhattan's Public Theater portrayed Julius Caesar with characteristics suggestive of President Trump: lots of blond hair, overly-long ties, hand gestures identical to Trump's, a wife with a Slovenian accent, and a gold bathtub. Breaking with long-standing tradition, the *New York Times* reviewed the play before it opened, resulting in outraged protesters at the first show, who claimed the production encouraged assassination of the president. Director Oskar Eustis accused the newspaper of inciting hatred, but the *Times* defended its decision as responding to a developing controversy. Bowing to the protests, Delta Airlines and Bank of America withdrew their sponsorship from Public Theater.

Public Theater had staged the play in 2012, portraying Julius Caesar with characteristics suggestive of President Obama, with no protests.

*The New York Times* reported on June 12 that Donald Trump, Jr. tweeted, "I wonder how much of this 'art' is funded by taxpayers? Serious question, when does 'art' become political speech & does that change things?"

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