

Julius Caesar

US, 1950 – 93 mins (B&W)

David Bradley

Shot on 16mm for just \$15,000, the first English-language feature version of *Julius Caesar* was rightly hailed by the *Los Angeles Daily News* as ‘a triumph of ingenuity and imagination’. David Bradley had already produced a film of *Macbeth* (1946) at Northwestern University, Chicago, and again used fellow students as cast and crew, fitting eighteen-hour shooting days around campus commitments for six months.

His masterstroke was to use Chicago’s Romanesque architecture: the long colonnade of Soldier Field Stadium as the Coliseum; the Rosenwald Museum of Science and Industry as the Forum; the Elks Veterans Memorial rotunda as the Senate chamber. All this marble creates a far more authentic backdrop than the sets built for the 1953 and 1970 *Caesars*, and Bradley and professional cinematographer Louis McMahon use it imaginatively, often dwarfing the protagonists against imposing classical structures. They favour high angles, natural light and shadowy contrasts, and deliver arresting, varied imagery from the opening shot, a swirling soothsayer repeating ‘Beware the Ides of March!’, to the final silhouette of Marc Antony standing over Brutus’s corpse.

Only during the battle sequence, shot on desolate dunes beside Lake Michigan and driven forward by fanfares and timpani, does Bradley’s tiny budget become obvious. He can deploy only a dozen extras, their ‘Roman’ helmets remodelled from GI surplus, yet the horrors are more visceral than in many epics, with brief snatches of close combat and an almost abstract final montage of fallen soldiers’ heads, hands, chests, discarded swords, shields.

As adapter, Bradley trims intelligently, makes only one damaging cut (without the debate in Brutus’s orchard the conspiracy feels too easily

(Opposite page) ‘Cry “Havoc”, and let slip the dogs of war.’ – Marc Antony (Charlton Heston) contemplates revenge in David Bradley’s *Julius Caesar*



cemented) and splits the action into two parts, separated in American cinemas by an intermission: 'The Death of Caesar', which ends on Marc Antony crying 'Let slip the dogs of war', and 'The Revenge of Caesar'.

He makes selective, telling use of voiceovers for soliloquies and asides and as narration for flashbacks showing Cassius rescuing Caesar from drowning and the Emperor rejecting the crown. All the men speak with impeccable diction, like so many Edward R. Morrows, and move with statesmanlike grace, although Bradley's monotonous delivery and doughy, Dan Aykroyd-like features make for a weak Brutus. Neither he nor the lean, hollow-eyed Cassius of Grosvenor Glenn seem comfortable with an unquestionably homoerotic take on their impassioned exchange after the revelation of Portia's death. Charlton Heston, a recent Northwestern graduate who was the only actor to be paid (\$50 a week) delivers a restrained yet charismatic performance that helped him win his star-making contract from Hal Wallis.

Julius Caesar shared top prize at the Locarno Film Festival and earned Bradley a directing contract from Dore Schary at MGM, but after leaving the studio he made only low-grade fare such as *Dragstrip Riot* (1958). He became a distinguished instructor in Film History and Aesthetics at UCLA and died in 1997.

Dir/Prod/Scr: David Bradley; **DOP:** Louis McMahon; **Score:** John Becker; **Main Cast:** Charlton Heston (Marc Antony), Grosvenor Glenn (Cassius), David Bradley (Brutus), Mary Sefton Darr (Portia), Harold Tasker (Caesar), Helen Ross (Calpurnia), William Russell (Casca).