



# Caligula

Reviewed by Robert Shore for Time Out

## Critics' Choice

This event has finished

**Until Jun 23 Union Theatre, 204 Union St, SE1**

Rating: ★★★★★

Anyone hoping for a feast of good old-fashioned Roman depravity and decadence from this study of the notoriously cruel, incestuous and generally insane first-century emperor had better revise their expectations: it

was written by Albert Camus (1913-60), a Frenchman little noted for his sense of fun or love of high jinks.

Camus denied being an existentialist, but if he wasn't quite a philosophical brother to Sartre (currently enjoying a revival of interest on the London stage) he was certainly a close cousin. His imperial anti-hero is a classic homo absurdus, who, jolted from a benign, illusion-veiled view of the human condition by the death of his sister/lover Drusilla, decides to take 'the path of power and freedom' and set himself above conventional morality.

Despite wearing his pants at fashionable butt crack-revealing half-mast, Theo Herdman manages to bring a haughty dignity to the title role. Far from being lost to reason, Camus' 'mad' emperor is in fact the most logical of men, a contradiction well captured by Herdman, who camps it up like the entertainment at an Elton John party one moment and delivers a stern lesson on the morality of death the next.

There's good support from the large cast in Giles Gartrell-Mills' generally persuasive production. The play was written in 1938 at the height of the Age of Dictators, but with its initial glinty eyed talk about grand state projects to be carried in the name of equality and woeful aftermath, Camus' study of the abuse of power is by no means without resonance at the end of the Blair decade.

Robert Shore, Mon Jun 18

# Caligula

## Mary Couzens for EXTRA! EXTRA!

Tunisian/French playwright Albert Camus' *Caligula* written in 1938 could, at the time of its first performance in 1945 have been seen to parallel the rise of Hitler and Nazism.



For contemporary audiences however, this metaphoric play could possibly, be seen to reflect the dualistic nature of any dictatorship anywhere around the world. For Camus' play depicts the infamous Emperor Caligula as a young man with a deceptively gentle exterior which, in reality, houses a cruelly sadistic heart. Literature Prize Winner Camus (1957), whose work often garnered absurdist and existentialist labels he did not welcome, offers a distinctly different ending to Caligula's treacherous tale than is the norm.

Young Emperor Caligula has recently lost his beloved sister Drusilla with whom it is claimed he had an incestuous relationship. Some say he has become deranged by her death, but in his own eyes, he has just come to his senses.

Theo Herdman is riveting as the immoral young Emperor Caligula, his every word, pause and movement speaks of cruel duality. Abigail Longstaffe is similarly mesmerizing as his slavish accomplice and companion Caesonia. It is heart wrenching to see the sorrow in her face at her lover's aberrations. Ben Crystal offers an emotive, sensitive performance as Caligula's senselessly dedicated friend, Scipio and Patrick Ross turns in a solid, multi-layered performance as Cherea, his intensely intelligent enemy. Warren Rusher as Caligula's henchman Helicon acts as a willing pit bull of sorts, ever at the service of his Emperor, whom, he claims, rescued him from slavery. Having praised these performers, I must add that all of the cast members are remarkably effective in their roles. Roy Khalil struggles to be brave in the face of unbridled cruelty as Octavius, Anthony Wise makes a jittery, fearful Patricius, Michael Grinter is forthright and vulnerable as Mereia, David Alderman is alternately resigned and foolhardy as Cassius, and Kevin Kautzman's

Mucius is angry and embittered but, determined. Andrea Cullum and Kerry Fuentes seamlessly switch between being Caligula's playthings du jour, unwilling and agreeable respectively, and respectable Roman wives or companions and also, a pair of coldly mechanized royal guards.

Director Giles Gatrell-Mills has done a fine job with a decidedly difficult piece of theatre; enabling his actors to rise to the challenges their roles present. Input from Assistant Director Sarah Sigal must have also proved valuable. Movement Director Kitty Winter allows the project to ripen more fully with her imaginative staging ideas. Lighting Designer Steve Miller performs his usually reliable job of shedding light wherever it is most effective at any given moment. Ben Hampson's Sound Design heightens tension and strengthens scenes in all the right places, without overshadowing the action, further emphasizing the fact that this is a collaborative production. The contributions of Production Manager Emma Beeb, Production Assistant Agnes Costa-Correa and Designer Tomasin Cuthbert are also factors in the production's understated, tasteful presentation. The sparsely propped performance space boasts two contemporary versions of classical busts on plinths which Caligula seems to confer with in moments of decision and a tarpaulin-covered, grit strewn floor. Forties styled costumes are very effective, but the women's dresses are an especially elegant blending of WWII era detailing and ancient Roman flavours. My only complaint about the set is that the placement of one of the busts partway back along one side of the theatre prevents a whole row of audience members from witnessing one particularly crucial scene in the play, a problem which could be quickly resolved were it to be moved from its current, off-centre spot to either end of the theatre.

Talon Arts production of Caligula is a gripping experience and its talented cast, director and crew offer a fine example of high powered, high caliber fringe theatre.

# Caligula

## Reviewed by the Stage

Wanton, destructive and appallingly abusive of his absolute power, the Roman emperor Caligula was by many accounts one of the worst of a bad bunch.

But French absurdist Albert Camus elevates him to the status of a courageous anti-hero, who confronts the ultimate pointlessness of a life that ends in death and rejects the consolation of love as sentimentality.

Directed by Giles Gartrell-Mills, Caligula's march to the logical conclusion is gripping and exhilarating, however bleak.

As Caligula, Theo Herdman is commanding and compelling.

We're torn between longing for him to revert to a romantic human being, true to his Armani-model good looks, and waiting for him to commit his next outrage.

Accompanying him on his bitter journey, is Abigail Longstaffe as a cool Caesonia and Warren Rusher as the ice-cold Helicon.

The saintly Scipio (Ben Crystal) is left behind and Patrick Ross, as an august Cherea prefers to have no truck with Caligula's desperate logic.

It's all set against an appropriate backdrop redolent of 1940s Provence. We could just be relaxing around the central square, watching the petanque, but for the unnerving soundtrack of spare piano chords and a beating heart.

# CALIGULA

**Reviewed by Sarah Monaghan for Theatreworld Internet Magazine**

According to history this infamous Roman emperor was OK until his beloved sister died.

The play opens with the patricians of Rome wondering what has become of Caligula who has done a runner after witnessing the death of his sister (with whom he enjoyed a incestuous relationship) (as you do).

When Caligula does reappear it's not long before they wish that he hadn't. He is much changed, dirty, dishevelled and filled with existential angst he rants on about wanting the moon. But the trouble really starts when he comes up with a novel way of increasing the size of his coffers namely; getting all patricians to make wills out in favour of himself and then having them summarily executed (arguably more honest than bugging around with council and inheritance tax).

Everybody is having a thoroughly rotten time under Caligula's rule (apart from his jewel clad mistress and the sort of men who enjoy wearing black leather and being cruel) (I've dated a few of them). Meanwhile, wives are being raped, children are being murdered, patricians are being forced to work as servants but worst of all everybody is being forced to laugh at Caligula's jokes.

Camus successfully gets inside the head of this infamous, salacious, bloodthirsty madman (or to use PC speak "troubled person with issues") and offers an alternate worldview and morality.

Successfully played in traverse you really do feel part of the action. Director Giles Gartrell-Mills does a wonderful job at keeping the energy and action going through a play that has more than it's fair share of two handers. The cast look great in 1930's costume, especially the women in their glorious bias cut evening gowns. The 1930's clothes and Caligula's decline into megalomania put me in mind of Hitler's climb to power.

The large cast all did superbly but the play lives and dies by the quality of the central character's performance. Caligula is a very demanding role but Theo Herdman gives it his all and the result is fantastic.