

Q.E. Boys Impress in "Julius Caesar"

BY W. H. GELDER

QUEEN Elizabeth's Boys' Grammar School Dramatic Society is not bound to Shakespeare. Of 22 full-length plays performed since 1930, five have been by the Bard and the others have reflected a variety of tastes. It was surprising, nevertheless, to realise last week, just before the Ides of March, that "Julius Caesar" was being performed by the school for the first time, especially when one remembers that the austerities of "Coriolanus" were not eschewed.

"Julius Caesar" was easily the best of the three Shakespearian plays I have seen at the school. Although it is an exciting murder play, with plenty of suspense and variety in the narrative, it remains a very ambitious thing to tackle, from every point of view. I think Mr. J. Covington, the producer, may well be proud of the result. The drama was clear in shape and always flowing. There was quite an astonishing number of adequate supporting performances as well as the expected handful of more than adequate leads. The play had striking visual as well as auditory impact, and one's general impression was of colour and movement, passion and conflict, and the destinies of men in the balance.

FUSSY DECOR

My chief criticism would be of the décor, which I thought fussy and "bitty," as though it had been improvised, piece by piece, rather than designed as a variable entity from the beginning. The stage at Queen Elizabeth's School is so shallow, and the numbers in "Julius Caesar" so large, that every possible square inch was needed for the actors.

We had the three pillars, which were all right (though why black?) and we had a backcloth, part blue and part pink, which looked odd. We had another backcloth for Brutus' garden when a single suggestive, possibly formalised tree would have done. We had, throughout, angled walls on each side of the stage with some kind of arch peeping over the top, which seemed to serve no valid purpose, æsthetic or dramatic. And in the battle scenes at the end there was another backcloth, of a hill, which fixed the locale when it should have varied.

What was really needed was a set of stage rostra, of different shapes and sizes, which could have served the whole play in changing patterns. Hertfordshire County Council could purchase these — they are available — and let them out to schools on request.

The lighting was used interestingly if not always successfully. It was a compli-

cated plot, devised independently (it seemed) by an enthusiast intent on giving himself as much to do as possible with sometimes scant regard for dramatic probability. Why douse all the lights in Brutus' tent? A single additional green spot on Caesar's ghost would have been simpler and better. Why put an extra spot on Antony? Why muck about at all with the lighting for purely arbitrary reasons? If some legitimate theatrical purpose is to be served, it must be served without the audience realising it is being served.

INTERESTING PROJECT

"Julius Caesar" is an extraordinarily interesting play to produce and it is no doubt better for stage designers and technicians to show evidence of too much life rather than none at all. There were, of course, instances in Mr. Covington's production — some stemming from interpretation — with which one could argue. In his death scene Caesar approached Brutus, whereas some may think that Brutus should approach Caesar, to give added point to the "Et tu, Brute" line. In the speech scene, Mark Antony was downstage of the crowd, rather, when his domination of them would have been better expressed by being upstage of them. But this scene, nevertheless, was very spiritedly done, with good, rowdy crowd work. The murder scene, I thought, had not come off as excitingly as it should. The later quarrel scene was excellent.

In general, Mr. Covington handled his large cast very well, with a nice balance between stillness and movement. He had the liveliest co-operation from the crowd and, at the back, I think I heard every word from the principals. There are far too many names in the programme, and in the supplement, to mention more than a few here. The 40-odd others I salute collectively.

ADULT POISE

The Brutus of M. A. Spence had an adult poise and authority, unforced and very dignified. P. C. Aston's Caesar had weight but not enough vanity. I thought B. S. Smith was too slowly spoken as Cassius, but the ungenerous spirit was there and depth of feeling at the end. T. E. Carroll was a strong and passionately voiced Antony, really letting himself go at climactic moments: a most admirable effort. I liked G. H. Smith's Portia better of the two women in the play and B. K. Pettitt gave an individually engaging touch to the small part of Lucius.

Incidental music for the play was exceedingly well chosen from modern composers and added excitingly to anticipation between scenes. A word of praise should be given for the many excellent poster designs submitted by the boys throughout the school. That by the winner, J. R. Whitney, was on the programme. Others were on show in the hall and elsewhere.