

## **L.A.'s Warriors For Peace Theatre Company Stages Shakespeare's Julius Caesar with a Majority Black Cast**

By Kaci Hamilton

\*Featured as Portia

An African-American male Calpurnia. An African female Mark Antony. An African-American male Cassius. At a time when "diversity" can feel like a catchphrase for the nouveau woke, Warriors for Peace (WFP) Theatre company isn't just breaking the mold, it's shattering the notion of how classical theater should look, feel, and accomplish.

In its upcoming production of Julius Caesar, WFP flipped the script, literally, and features a cast where the majority of actors are African American - a rare feat for Shakespeare - along with more of the traditional male roles being played by women. Set during modern warfare, the production also takes casting a step further, embodying its mission to help returning veterans through theater, and includes a cast collaboration of civilians and war vets.

Leading the charge is Tori Danner in the role of Mark Antony. Born in Benin City, Nigeria, Danner was raised in Kuwait, cut her teeth at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and brings her uniquely African perspective to this timeless story about morality and altruism. "Being a black woman at the center of this piece, playing Mark Antony, is certainly not lost on me," says Danner. "He's a character that represents resilience - like a flower growing through concrete. Despite the odds set against him, he chooses to push his way through." For Danner, the play echoes the plight of African-Americans in the US, and some may go as far as to say, the plight of veterans returning from combat. Danner, like her character, seems to issue a call to arms. "This play is a reminder that despite how things look, take a leap of faith and rise up. Rise up, and speak truth to power." See Video message from Tori Danner here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if8Ay5s\\_tPE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if8Ay5s_tPE)

WFP was founded by Christopher Loverro, former Iraq War veteran, now actor and Executive Director, who is especially excited about the array of actors, and the gender-bending style of the production. "We have a great group. Nathan Nonhof, a civilian actor and company member, plays Cassius, bringing consummate Shakespearean experience, while we also get some fresh voices, like Vikrant Sahdev, a native of India, as Cinna, Oscar Best's Calpurnia casting a tall shadow over acclaimed Asian actress Leah Zhang's Caesar, and a host of ex-military, like Marine combat veteran Jay Jee as Lepidus, and dancers Trevor Shelms, a former Army medic, and Filipino immigrant Alex Meridy, a veteran of the Navy."

For African American Marine Corps Veteran-turned-actor Jay Jee, his military experience gives him an appreciation for the similarities, and the differences, between the play and active duty. "There are many," he insists. "Levels of authority, the detailed planning and strategizing of all aspects of battle. However, nothing can prepare you for a drill Instructor screaming you off the bus at zero dark thirty on a cold winter morning." Nevertheless, for Jee, the military has done a

better job of 'blind casting' than the stage. "Through it all, the good times and the bad, the U.S. military is one of the most level playing fields that Americans of color will ever play on."

Since its inception, WFP has consistently staged productions that challenge the role of theater beyond the stage, and Julius Caesar will be no different. The company plans to focus on the themes of veteran suicide and homelessness over the next year. In honor of the production opening over Thanksgiving weekend, and running through the holidays, the company will be giving 10% of all tickets sales to the Midnight Mission and The Giving Angels, organizations that provide food, shelter, and additional services to the homeless population.

WFP's Julius Caesar runs from Saturday, November 30 thru Sunday, December 22, 2019 at the Hudson Theater in Hollywood, located at 6539 Santa Monica Blvd. Performances are Friday and Saturdays at 8:00 PM with Matinees on Saturday and Sunday at 2:00 PM. Tickets for Friday and Saturday evening performances are \$30 (General Seating) and \$25 (General Seating) for Matinees. Veterans and Active Duty Military with ID are \$15.00 for all performances as well as Students with ID for \$15.00. Seniors are \$25.00 for all shows. For tickets and info go to <http://bit.ly/wfptheatre>, and [www.WFPtheatre.com](http://www.WFPtheatre.com)