



Play inspires research
into roman emperors

Description

A review of New York Red Bull Theater's production of *Sejanus, His Fall*

By **Byron Toben**

One of the fringe rewards of reviewing theatre is the fun of discovering all sorts of facts about related matters to the play at hand. For instance, **Red Bull Theater** in New York, which specializes in revitalizing Jacobean era plays (immediately post-Shakespeare Elizabethan plays). The best of those playwrights was **Ben Jonson**, who knew Shakespeare and may even have collaborated with him or used him as an actor.



Ben Jonson – Image: [National Portrait Gallery](#),
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Red Bull's recent revival of Jonson's *Sejanus, His Fall* (1603), set during the reign of Tiberius, 2nd Emperor of Rome, was live-streamed on May 17 and made available until May 21. My review of it follows but, first, some words about Jonson and the Roman Emperors who figured in the play.

Ben Jonson

Ben Jonson (1572-1637) is considered the most important English dramatist after **Shakespeare** (1564-1616) and of both the Jacobean (1603-1625) and the Caroline eras (1625-1642). He authored 20 plays and many “masques” and poems. He is especially known for his satirical plays.

His father, who died shortly before his birth, was a wealthy Protestant landowner whose property was confiscated under Catholic Queen Mary. His mother then married a master bricklayer and a family friend financed his classical education, cut short by his stepfather's insistence that he become a bricklaying apprentice.

After having done so, he volunteered to join the English regiments fighting in Flanders. Returning to England, he became an actor and playwright. Jailed for producing offensive plays, as well as killing a man in a duel, he became friends with a priest there and converted to Catholicism. He was admired and supported by many lords during the reign of King James I and eventually rejoined the Church of England in 1610.



Shakespeare and Jonson at the Mermaid Tavern –
Image: [Unknown author](#), Public domain, via
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His two tragedies, *Sejanus* and *Catalina*, are outweighed by his 18 comedies. Noted as a brawler and frequent patron of the boisterous literary Mermaid tavern, he remarked at Shakespeare's death, "He was not of an age, but for all time."

Roman Emperors

Julius Caesar was assassinated by the Roman Senate to prevent him from becoming an Emperor, as famously portrayed in Shakespeare's play of that name. After Marc Antony ignites a counter revolt, he is informed that Octavian, Julius's great-nephew, has entered Rome in force to join in with him.

After plotters Brutus and Cassius are slain in battle, as was Marc Antony, Octavian became the first Emperor of Rome, adopting the name of **Augustus**, for 17 years.

He was succeeded by the second, **Tiberius**, for 23 years. It was during his reign that Jesus was crucified on the order of Pontius Pilate, Roman prefect of Judea, so appointed by the machinations of Sejanus.

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The third emperor, **Caligula**, who ruled for seven years, was a real monster as portrayed in **Albert Camus'** 1944 play.

G. Bernard Shaw's 1912 play, *Androcles and the Lion*, about early Christian martyrs, is believed to have been set during the reigns of either Tiberius or Caligula. It was made into a movie in 1952.



Patrick Stewart as Sejanus in the series *I Claudius* –
Image: BBC

Things were relatively quiet under the 4th emperor, **Claudius**, who sat for 13 years, inspiring Robert Graves' novel *I Claudius* and a popular TV adaptation.

However, madness returned with the 5th Emperor, **Nero** (Caligula's nephew), who famously fiddled while Rome burned. Nero was mentioned in passing in two Shakespeare plays, *Hamlet* and *Henry VI, Part One*. Also, quoted by the Devil in the 1955 musical, *Damn Yankees*.

The year 69 CE was a really tough time. Three Emperors during that one year, **Galba, Ortho and Vitellius**, were killed or committed suicide, until the 9th, **Vespasian**, managed to hang on for ten years. Three others reigned for the balance of the first century for a total of twelve emperors that century.

The second-century witnessed nine Roman Emperors. The third century, 27, the fourth century, 19, and the fifth century, 13 until the reign of **Romulus Augustus** in 476 CE ended the institution of emperors, at least in the West. (It continued in the East until later.)

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None of these some 70 Emperors seemed to have inspired theatrical or literary treatment since those in the first century. It would seem ripe to have some such treatment for the fourth century **Emperor Constantine**, under whose reign the Edict of Milan in 313 CE ended the persecution of Christians and who organized the Nicean creed in 325 CE, setting the stage for **Emperor Theodosius** to ordain Christianity as the official state religion in 380 CE.



Emperor Constantine – Image: [Unknown author](#),
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Review Of Sejanus, His Fall

The corruption of the court under Emperor Tiberius with spying, betrayals and deaths is best summarized by discussing the many characters.

In the camp of Tiberius are:

- **Sejanus**, who though used by the emperor for many missions, is not fully trusted by him. He eventually uses Macro to spy on and destroy Sejanus.
- **Drusus**, a son of Tiberius, is murdered on the order of Sejanus to increase his own power. Shades of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Sejanus then courts Drusus' wife, Livia, to become his mistress.
- **Eudemus**, a corrupt barber used by Sejanus in the murder of Drusus.

In the growing opposition compare:



- **Agrippina**, widow of Germanicus, Tiberius's nephew, in whose death Sejanus and Tiberius had a hand. Her son Caligula is forced to flee for safety.
- **Silius**, a noble Roman falsely accused of treason in the Senate, commits suicide.
- **Sosia**, **Silius'** widow and friend of Agrippina.
- **Arruntius**, **Lepidus** and **Terentius**, three noble Romans disgusted by the greed and treachery of Tiberius and Sejanus but seeing no immediate hope

Red Bull's actors all delivered the goods but I must admit that being unfamiliar with the script, it became a bit hard to follow who was who and how motivated. At one point, when the discussion was to burn books, the company cleverly inserted a printed quote from **Heinrich Heine** in 1818, "Those who burn books will, in the end, burn people."

Feature image: Julius Caesar, Pexels

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Byron Toben, a past president of The Montreal Press Club, has been WestmountMag.ca's theatre reviewer since July 2015. Previously, he wrote for since terminated web sites Rover Arts and Charlebois Post, print weekly The Downtowner and print monthly The Senior Times. He also is an expert consultant on U.S. work permits for Canadians.

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