

'Julio Cesar' opens

By CHRISTINE ARNOLD
Herald Theater Critic

The time is 1994. The place the fictional Republic of Corba. All the debt-ridden Latin American countries are about to be united under the leadership of Julio Cesar, a guy who could pass for Fidel Castro's twin.

We have heard carnival music, seen pictures of bloody bodies, watched a colorless Hispanic-American secretary of state answer a barrage of reporters' questions with "no comment." Then the characters open their mouths and proceed, despite the Hispanic trappings and reconceptualizing, to do a fairly straightforward if trimmed version of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

The South Florida Theatre Company fired its major dramatic guns Thursday when it opened *Julio Cesar*, the only non-comedy in this year's Shakespeare Festival at Vizcaya. This new version of Shakespeare's play of political intrigue has been adapted by director John Briggs and R.H. Deschamps, one of the company's founders.

And it works, sort of, but not because the adapters' recasting has transformed *Julius Caesar* into a vibrant play for our time. It works because *Julius Caesar* is timeless, and they have tampered so little with its major elements that Shakespeare speaks to the audience as powerfully as ever. Seeing *Julio Cesar* days after turmoil in Haiti and the Philippines is an eerie juxtaposition of art and life.

Briggs and Deschamps have sprinkled Spanish here and there,

Theater Review

Julio Cesar

CAST: Cal Winn, Robert Hefley, Daniel Oreskes, Michael Mauldin, Roger Preto, Carol Cadby, Claudia Robinson, Marilyn Downey, Tom Ehas, John P. Deianey, Rick York, Tom Ryan, Juan Sanchez, Joe Gargiulo, Barry Mann, Rudolph Marrocco.

CREDITS: Playwright: William Shakespeare; Adaptation: John R. Briggs and R.H. Deschamps; Sets: Ken Kurtz; Costumes: Robin Murray; Lighting: David Martin Jacques. Shakespeare Festival at Vizcaya, 3251 S. Miami Ave., Miami, in repertory through April 6; \$14.50; 854-1983 or 447-1516.

changed the soothsayer to a santera, added the useless secretary of state character, had costume designer Robin Murray clothe the soldiers in fatigues, and so on. But the changes are largely cosmetic, probably to Shakespeare's benefit.

As director, Briggs has whipped up a noisy, flashy battle scene that doesn't always help illuminate the dialogue — nor does lighting designer David Martin Jacques do much to illuminate the actors. But the punched-up pace and chaos of that battle scene are a welcome respite from the static nature of too many other scenes.

Michael Mauldin makes Casca a delightful cross between Don Novello's Father Guido Sarducci and Martin Short's sleazy lawyer, Nathan Thurm. His derisive laugh speaks volumes. Daniel Oreskes is a crisp and powerful Cassius. But Cal Winn is an uncharismatic Cesar, Robert Hefley an unmemorable Brutus and Roger Preto a mourning Antony who sounds more like Edmund Kean declaiming.