What Happens in

Julius Caesar

A tragedy by William Shakespeare

The play is set in ancient Rome, a little more than 2000 years ago. At this point in its history, Rome is a Republic: about 500 years earlier, the Roman Senate abolished royal families because they were too powerful. In the Republic, power is shared by members of the Senate, as well as by elected Tribunes. In the years before the action of the play, Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompey had been political allies who together had become extremely powerful. However, conflict between them developed into a full-blown civil war, which Caesar has just won.

As the people of Rome celebrate Caesar's victory, the tribunes Marullus and Flavius scold them for forgetting how they once loved Pompey. When Caesar arrives, a Soothsayer warns Caesar to beware the Ides of March (what we would call March 15th). Two Senators, Cassius and Brutus, discuss their fear that Caesar's ambition is to be crowned. They learn from another Senator, Casca, that Caesar had refused a highly staged offer of a crown. However, Brutus and Cassius remain concerned and agree to discuss the problem further.

A terrible storm hits, bringing with it strange, unnatural events. Casca, Cassius, and Cinna meet and agree they need to convince Brutus to join their cause: the assassination of Caesar. Brutus meanwhile has been reflecting on the dangers of having Caesar crowned, so when the conspirators arrive at Brutus' house Brutus agrees to the plot to kill Caesar.

On the morning of March 15th Caesar's spouse, Calpurnia, is frightened by dreams and by unnatural events from the night before. Calpurnia tries to persuade Caesar not to go to the Capitol where the senate will meet. Caesar agrees to stay home, but Decius arrives and reinterprets the omens in a favourable light. Decius suggests that Caesar might be considered a coward for staying at home and that the senators might change their minds about offering Caesar a crown. Caesar ignores Calpurnia's concerns and follows Decius to the Senate. Outside the Senate house, Caesar ignores a warning from Artemidorus, and tells the Soothsayer, "The Ides of March have come," suggesting the warning was nonsense.

The conspirators surround Caesar, pretending to kneel. One by one they stab Caesar, and before Caesar dies, Caesar sees that even Brutus has been a part of the plot. The Senators celebrate what they believe is their triumph over tyranny and give Caesar's friend Antony permission to speak at the funeral. Brutus speaks first, explaining that the conspirators killed Caesar for the good of the Roman Republic, and the people cheer. Antony then delivers a speech that rouses the people's pity and inspires them to riot against the conspirators. Brutus and Cassius flee. The dangerous mob seeks to kill every conspirator, and even kill an innocent poet named Cinna, simply because one of the conspirators shared the same name.

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The Story, continued

Antony joins forces with Caesar's great-nephew, Octavius Caesar and with the general, Lepidus. They condemn a list of their political rivals to death and form an army to challenge Brutus and Cassius. After a parley, the battle begins. Thinking their group is defeated, Cassius runs onto a sword held by a friend and dies. It is then revealed that the news was misleading, as Brutus's group had gained an advantage. A further battle leads to Brutus' defeat, and Brutus too dies by suicide. Antony and Octavius acknowledge Brutus' nobility and return to Rome to celebrate their victory.

Questions for you to consider

- Although the play concerns historical events, theatre productions often set the play in other time periods and in other places. Why do you think theatre artists make these choices?
- What sort of setting do you imagine for the play? Think about time, place, and stylistic qualities. What type of setting would you find most compelling and resonant?
- Choose a character you find especially interesting. What part of their story do you want to explore? How do you imagine the character feels about the different events in the story?
- What did you find surprising about the events in the play? Which parts would you find most interesting to see on stage? Which events would you want to bring to life?
- If you were to sum up the story of the play in three simple statements representing the beginning, middle, and end, what would you say?

A note about our style

In the Discovery Zone resources, we've done our best to provide descriptions of the plays' characters and events that are as open as possible to your interpretations. We hope this will make room for you to identify with more characters and imagine the stories in ways that resonate for you.

To learn more about the characters in the play, see our Discovery Zone resource, Who's Who in *Julius Caesar*. You can also learn more through the rest of the Discovery Zone collection.