



Killing Cinna the Poet in Your Own Classroom

By **Michael LoMonico**, *Shakespeare* Editor

Of all the scenes my students have performed, none is more accessible and successful as 3.2 from *Julius Caesar*. Remember the scene? Caesar has been assassinated, Brutus has delivered the second best speech in the play, Antony has delivered the best speech in the play, and the crowd has gone wild. Cinna, the poet is mistaken for Cinna, the conspirator, and after some serious hassling and jostling, the crowd literally tears him to pieces. This scene is related in Plutarch's *Lives*, but it is often left out of high school textbooks, stage productions, and films. After a disastrous dress rehearsal, Orson Welles decided to put the scene back into his 1937 Mercury Theatre production, and according to the critics, it became the most important scene in the production.

The great thing about using this scene is that it works out of context. I rarely teach the play, but I always use the scene early in my Shakespeare unit to get the class to look at text interpretation and movement. Although there are only five speaking parts, I take the four plebians' lines and give them to 21 different readers, creating a 22-person scene.

Here are the steps I use in the lesson:

1. I have the class read the lines in the round, switching readers at every end stop (; ? !).
2. I ask questions such as: Who are these guys? Where are they going? What kind of mood are they in?
3. Then we read it again, still sitting in a circle, but each time a speaker switches, we switch readers. The lines still do not intimidate students because each one only has a tiny piece of the scene to read. We discuss the mood of the scene, the attitude of the plebeians as well as the attitude of Cinna. Students start to see that Cinna had a premonition but goes out anyway.
4. Now we get it on its feet. I ask for 21 volunteers and tell the rest of the class that they are the directors. I ask questions like:
 - Where does Cinna enter?
 - Which way is he going?
 - Are the plebeians on stage when he enters?
 - Are they all together?
 - Do the plebeians stroll onto the stage or are they rushing?
5. As the scene is acted out, the class offers more suggestions to the actors. I prod them with questions about movement, voice inflection, physical gestures, etc.

6. Before I know it, the scene builds to a feverish pitch, the voices get more intense, Cinna is jostled and terrorized, and the class sees the intensity of one of Shakespeare's shortest scenes.

*Enter **CINNA the poet**, and
after him the **PLEBEIANS**.*

Cinna

I dreamt to-night that I did
feast with Caesar,
And things unluckily charge
my fantasy.
I have no will to wander forth
of doors,
Yet something leads me
forth.

1. Plebian

What is your name?

2. Plebian

Whither are you going?

3. Plebian

Where do you dwell?

4. Plebian

Are you a married man or a
bachelor?

5. Plebian

Answer every man directly.

6. Plebian

Ay, and briefly.

7. Plebian

Ay, and wisely.

8. Plebian

Ay, and truly, you were best.

Cinna

What is my name? Whither am I going? Where do I dwell? Am I a married man or a bachelor? Then to answer every man directly and briefly, wisely and truly: wisely, I say, I am a bachelor.

9. Plebian

That's as much as to say, they are fools that marry. You'll bear me a bang for that, I fear. Proceed directly.

Cinna

Directly, I am going to Caesar's funeral.

10. Plebian

As a friend or an enemy?

Cinna

As a friend.

11. Plebian

That matter is answer'd
directly.

12. Plebian

For your dwelling -- briefly.

Cinna

Briefly, I dwell by the
Capitol.

13. Plebian

Your name, sir, truly.

Cinna

Truly, my name is Cinna.

14. Plebian

Tear him to pieces, he's a
conspirator.

Cinna

I am Cinna the poet, I am
Cinna the poet.

15. Plebian

Tear him for his bad verses,
tear him for his bad verses.

Cinna

I am not Cinna the
conspirator.

16. Plebian

It is no matter, his name's
Cinna. Pluck but his name
out of his heart, and turn
him going.

17. Plebian

Tear him, tear him!

18. Plebian

Come, brands ho, fire-
brands!

19. Plebian

To Brutus', to Cassius'; burn
all!

20. Plebian

Some to Decius' house, and
some to Casca's; some to
Ligarius'.

21. Plebian

Away, go!

*Exeunt all the Plebians
[dragging off Cinna].*

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