

# The New Criterion

## Theater

April 2008

### Signs of the times

by [Brooke Allen](#)

On *Conversations in Tusculum* at the Public Theater, *The Cherry Orchard Sequel* at LaMaMa ETC., *Gray Area* at the Barrow Group, and *Next to Normal* at the Second Stage Theater.

History may be more than bunk, and more than one damn thing after another, but unfortunately it does not consist of a series of neat, comprehensible lessons; even those who *do* know history appear doomed to repeat it. Still, the temptation to draw occasionally sententious parallels between present and past seems hard to resist, and the historical period which by common consent seems most nearly parallel to twenty-first century America is that of the end of the Roman republic and beginning of the empire, with George W. Bush usually compared either to Julius Caesar or to the Emperor Augustus.

This theme has been the inspiration for Richard Nelson's *Conversations in Tusculum*, now playing at the Public Theater with a dream cast that includes Brian Dennehy as Cicero, David Strathairn as Cassius, and Aidan Quinn as Brutus. It is 45 B.C.: Pompey is dead, Cato has killed himself rather ...

**Brooke Allen's** latest book is *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Ivan R.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 26 April 2008, on page 38

Copyright © 2008 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/signs-of-the-times-3812>