



***Titus Andronicus*: New York Shakespeare Exchange at the HERE Performing Arts Center**

By Gavin Hollis. First published in the ISE Chronicle.

For the production: *Titus Andronicus* (2015, New York Shakespeare Exchange, USA). See production details at the end of the review.

PERHAPS OF ALL SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS, *TITUS ANDRONICUS* OPENS ITSELF UP TO A conceptual approach. So strange and uneven is its plotting and its tone to modern eyes and ears that it almost cries out for interpretation. But at the same time, as Michael Billington observed in a review of Michael Fentiman's 2013 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company in *The Guardian*, it's a play which requires its director "to take a clear line." Although I didn't see Fentiman's production, Billington's description of it being "not exactly being the model of intellectual coherence" could well apply to Ross Williams' staging of the play for New York Shakespeare Exchange at the HERE Main Stage Theater. That's not to say there aren't ideas. We can tell from the get-go that we are in the realm of Directors' Shakespeare. The production begins with what Williams calls "a disheveled clown" (Kerry Kastin), wearing white make-up and ruff in the style of a *pierrrot* and overalls in the style of a children's entertainer, sitting at a dressing table in a set that looks like the backstage of a two-bit circus. She is joined by the rest of the ensemble. The atmosphere is one of bonhomie initially, with the actors greeting each other like long lost friends, but the mood is punctured when, unprovoked, one actor kills another. This act that leads to more actor-on-actor violence, what Williams calls in his stage directions "a parade of death." Each death is punctuated by sound: a feed chute is positioned downstage left, which, when its cord is pulled by the clown, emptied out corn for each act of slaughter (a trait that continued throughout the play). After five minutes or so of escalating, if unbloody violence, left the clown was the last person standing. And then *Titus Andronicus* as we know it began.

The opening sequence is visually and aurally arresting (the production has its own Violence Designer). Williams' purpose here seems to be to highlight how quickly violence escalates in *Titus Andronicus*, how quickly family members turn on one another,

and how ritualized the play's violence is. Moreover, the presence of the clown—out of whose imagination the action of the play seems to spring—underscores how Shakespeare's play so frequently veers between comedy and tragedy. This is a play after



Fig. 1: Kerry Kastin as The Clown. Photo: Kalle Westerling

all which features its title character at his lowest point laughing, “ha ha ha,” because “I have not another tear to shed.” Kastin’s clown keeps reappearing throughout the play and taking on minor roles, including many of victims of bloodshed (Alarbus, Mutius, Martius, the Nurse), recalling one of the most famous frequent “die-ers” in popular culture, Kenny from *South Park*. Death hangs over the clown in act four, of course: she confuses “Jupiter” with “gibbet maker” and only just manages to talk her way out of hanging at the hands of Saturninus and Tamora. But beyond pointing to how frequently the tragic and comic modes are operative in *Titus Andronicus*, it was not entirely clear what Williams is going for by focusing so heavily on the clown figure and in having her link so many of the scenes together. It is true that the play is frequently self-conscious of itself as drama, and having a clown serve as bridge between audience and stage can be a vehicle for making this evident. However, as with much of this adaptation, the ideas don’t really develop or particularly cohere. Many of Williams’ choices look and sound cool, especially given the small space (HERE is a blackbox space). But there is a sense

that they aren't all that substantial, and the production doesn't have much of substance to say about violence, theatricality, or *Titus Andronicus*.



Fig. 2: Kate Lydic as Lavinia. Photo: Kalle Westerling

Another concern for the production is the nature of violence. In his stage directions, Williams rationalizes that the lack of blood as follows: “Ours is a world in which violence is so commonplace that the inhabitants do not even bleed real blood.” I confess to not having got this sense from the opening sequence, nor do I understand how the commonplaceness of violence would be rendered by not having blood, especially as the establishment of this world is through self-conscious theatricality. Just before the interval, which in this production is marked at the end of act three scene one, the blood starts flowing: “Suddenly, real red liquid blood begins to flow from the stump of TITUS’

severed arm. Lavinia begins to scream as blood flows from her mouth and wrists ... the bags containing the heads [of Quintus and Martius] also begin to soak with blood.” Williams’ choice conveys the body-horrors of the scene; but it is not clear why this moment is the one where the blood start flowing, and not the bloodbath at the beginning of the play, the death or Bassianus, or the rape and mutilation of Lavinia. The bloodiness of this moment is a neat theatrical trick, and drew audible gasps from the audience, but it’s not clear what it all adds up to. It also doesn’t seem consistent with the earlier statement in the stage directions about a world so accustomed to violence that it doesn’t need or see blood. That said, the closing scene of the play was a considerable success: for all the stylization of violence in the play, the sight of Titus killing Lavinia was shocking, perhaps even more so than the revelation of the contents of the pies. Williams deserves credit for marshaling this complex, horrific scene so well.



Fig. 3: Brendan Averett as Titus, Kate Lydic as Lavinia, and Kerry as The Clown. Photo: Kalle Westerling.

The production reminded me of Michael Sexton’s production at The Public Theater in 2012. Both were heavily conceptual, and both had a unifying figure. But Sexton chose Young Lucius as the unifying figure (like Kastin, the actor playing the boy also plays many minor characters, most of whom die), to bring out how much the play’s violence is predicated on father-son relations, and how Rome’s new dawn at the end under Lucius is bathed in blood. Sexton’s version, while imperfect in many ways, seemed attuned to

the play's dynamics and brought out aspects that otherwise may have remained oblique. By fixating on the clown, Williams by contrast offers no such depth but rather a generalization, both about the play and about the world. Young Lucius becomes an important figure in the second half of the production. His first appearance is striking: he lies in the grain bin center stage, covered in dried blood, and when touched by Titus he “gasps like a newborn drawing his first breath.” Young Lucius is a symbol of innocence, and my guess would be that his bloodied appearance would suggest, as in Sexton's production, that we are all born in blood. The point however was somewhat lost by the execution: Sean Hinckle appeared dirty rather than bloody, and his first breath did not seem particularly newborn; nor was it clear why Young Lucius was being born right at this moment. As with the opening sequence, an arresting image did not clearly signify.

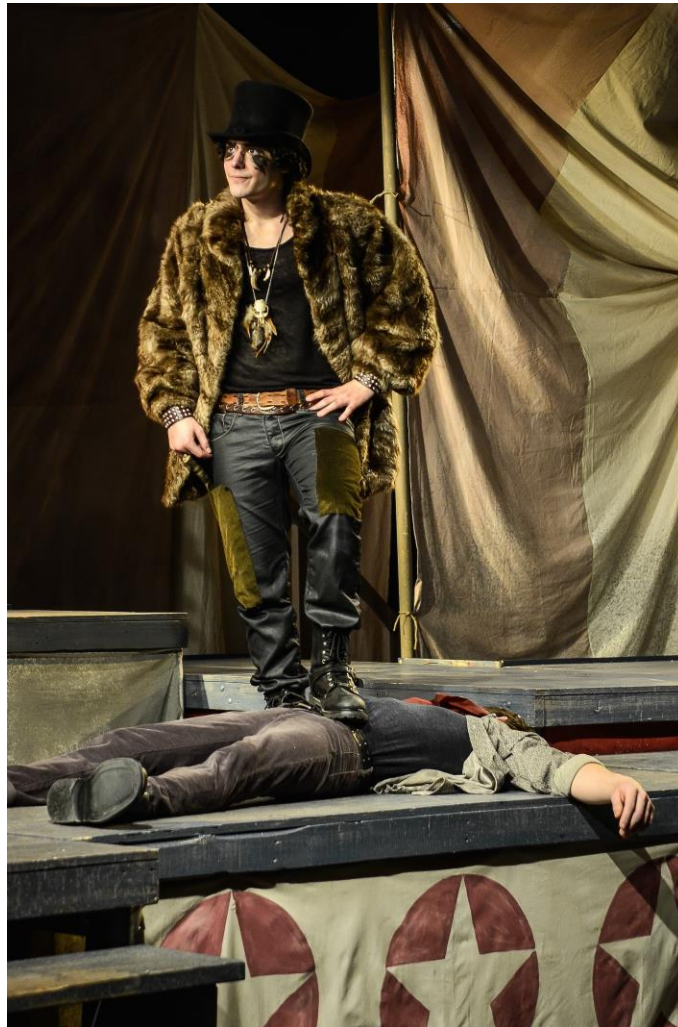


Fig. 4: Ethan Itzkow as Demetrius. Photo: Kalle Westerling.

In the midst of these concepts many actors struggled, in particular younger members of the company. I was left with the feeling that so intent had the director been in establishing his concept that he hadn't quite found time to aid some of these actors through a difficult play. Brendan Averett's Titus seemed if anything too naturalistic for a staging that seemed to demand more stylization. Only in his interactions with Revenge, Rape, and Murder in act five did he seem to be reveling in the manic extremes of the character—extremes that have been evident right from act one where he kills his son for standing up to him. Otherwise, his was a surprisingly quiet, contemplative Titus, far from the Roman fundamentalist war-machine of, say, Anthony Hopkins in Julie Taymor's film version or Jay O. Sanders in Sexton's production. While Averett should be applauded for attempting a different reading of the character, in particular in the opening scenes, I'm not sure that Titus is so multi-dimensional. Averett's frequent quietness seemed to slow down the production rather than add additional layers to it.



Fig. 5: Kerry Kastin as The Clown, Vince Gatton as Saturninus, and Gretchen Egolf as Tamora. Photo: Kalle Westerling.

More effective was Gretchen Egolf's Tamora, who finds a vein of something close to compassion when Lavinia pleads for her life, only to remember the loss of her sons and the catalyst for her revenge. Both Egolf and Katie Lydic's Lavinia find unusual depth to this exchange. Nathaniel P. Claridad and Ethan Itzkow play Demetrius and Chiron with

manic glee—their portrayals are energetic, if a little one-note (although in fairness the characters are hardly the subtlest in the Shakespeare canon). Warren Jackson's Aaron revels in his linguistic flourishes, even though his tendency to wander around the stage somewhat aimlessly and to punctuate imagery with physical movement can get wearing. Vince Gattton as Saturninus is the production's trump card, however. A quiffed dandy with daddy and mummy issues, a spoilt whiny brat who can't fathom why he can't get the crown and to marry Lavinia, Gattton's Emperor is a narcissistic and paranoid delight. His interactions with Tamora are great insights into a husband-wife dynamic that seems more mother and son. Kerry Kastin is saddled with perhaps the most difficult role in the play—a unifying image rather than a character, and one whose presence in the production doesn't seem to offer much coherence—yet she portrayed the clown's strained optimism well.

On this evidence Ross Williams is a director with considerable visual flare, and he has assembled a talented design team (albeit that the stage set is possibly too elaborate for the small theatre space, and sometimes traps actors upstage). But rather than provide an interpretation of the play, he has bolted on imagery and ideas that do little to shed light on its considerable complexities. Yes the play is violent and comic, but given the amount of extra-textual business added to the production we might expect more insight. Indeed, while the production is labeled an "adaptation," Williams has done very little to the text. Only act five scene one veers from the Shakespearean original, and this, unfortunately, is a confusing scene without Lucius's Goth Army in attendance. Williams' approach could be said to betray a lack of faith in the play: while we often read it now as a black comedy (Jonathan Bates' influential edition for *The Arden Shakespeare* argues as much) it is also possible to do it "straight," as Lucy Bailey's much-lauded (and much-fainted-at) production for *The Globe* has shown. Adding on stage business can open all kinds of new understandings of a play; but it can also indicate a production trying to mask its flaws through flair.

Directors' Shakespeare can seem like a slur, although many of the finest productions of Shakespeare could be thus monikered. But the best experimental adaptations offer something new to the source material by being in conversation with it. Williams' conversation with *Titus Andronicus* has its thrills and occasional wit, but the production is reduced to mainly small talk.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Titus Andronicus
<i>Year</i>	2015
<i>Theater Company</i>	New York Shakespeare Exchange
<i>Theaters</i>	HERE Performing Arts Center

Cast

TITUS ANDRONICUS	BRENDAN AVERETT
MARCUS ANDRONICUS	TERENCE MACSWEENEY
LUCIUS	JOSEPH MITCHELL PARKS
QUINTUS	CODY LEROY WILSON
LAVINIA	KATE LYDIC
YOUNG LUCIUS	SEAN HINCKLE
SATURNINUS	VINCE GATTON
CLOWN	KERRY KASTIN
BASSIANUS	ADAM KEZELE
TAMORA	GRETCHEN EGOLF
DEMESTRIUS	NATHANIEL P. CLARIDAD
CHIRON	ETHAN ITZKOW
AARON	WARREN JACKSON

Creatives

DIRECTOR	ROSS WILLIAMS
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	CRISTINA LUNDY
DRAMATURG	SHANE BREAUX
COSTUME DESIGNER	ELIVIA BOVENZI
SCENIC DESIGNER	JASON LAJKA
LIGHTING DESIGNER	DREW FLORIDA
PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER/SOUND DESIGN	JACK CUMMINS
FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHY	ALICIA RODIS
PRODUCTION MANAGER/TECHNICAL DIRECTOR	JOSHUA SHAIN
ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER	BEN SHIPLEY
PROPS/VIOLENCE DESIGNER	CASSIE DORLAND