



Titus Andronicus at the California Shakespeare Theater

by Jim Volz. Written on 2011-07-11. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Titus Andronicus (2011, California Shakespeare Festival, USA).

WITH OVER 200 AMERICAN SHAKESPEARE FESTIVALS VYING FOR THE ATTENTION OF SUMMER audiences, it doesn't hurt to combine the great California outdoors with a core company of seasoned professionals and the bloody revenge tale of Titus Andronicus. California Shakespeare Theater Director Joel Sass certainly understands the fine art of ripped out tongues, spurting blood, impaled warriors and brassy staging. He also knows how to cast a few good men and a strong supporting cast and inspire them to tell one hell of a story.

It took 37-years for Cal Shakes to tackle Titus and Sass's flamboyant touches, Paloma H. Young's creative costume designs and Emily Green's simple, yet exquisite scene design surrounded by the brown hills and luscious forests of Orinda's Siesta Valley made it worth the wait. Cal Shakes Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone set the stage with his program note and asks all the right questions: "Titus Andronicus was written when revenge plays were all the rage. Was it because everyone was turned on by gore and bear-baiting? Or was there something subversive going on with Shakespeare and his contemporaries? Were they showing their audience what the world would be like without a reigning moral compass; without a sense of human responsibility for the actions rendered upon others; without a societal imperative to end the cycles of aggression, each apparent victory only fueling the next act of revenge?"

Both Shakespeare and Sass fuel the age-old quandary about revenge, justice and mercy and unleash their own brand of Aeschylus' furies on the family of Titus Andronicus. How wonderful to partner with a dead playwright who provides the plot, characters and words and allows the spirit, imagery and madness of the tale to be shaped by a director and the creative talents of a 21st century team of actors, designers and craftspersons! No wonder Shakespeare continues to be America's most produced playwright, drawing millions to indoor and outdoor venues from Maine to Florida to California and Washington.

It has actually been trendy to produce Titus Andronicus in the 21st century and the reason is most likely in the play's fairly obvious contemporary political parallels (the mocking soldiers of Guantanamo, the torture allegations that haunted the Bush/Cheney regime, the endless stream

of Iraq/Afghanistan revenge bombings and the surprise rise of Obama, fall of Saddam, discovery of Osama and slew of other recent high profile international power struggles, assassinations and executions. As usual, America's West Coast has led the way with both wacky and woeful productions. Darko Tresnjak's 2006 production of *Titus Andronicus* at the revered Old Globe in San Diego was a rock 'n roll tragi-comedy. An audience favorite was Tresnjak's use of the Beatles *I Want to Hold Your Hand* as the disgusting Aaron used a chainsaw to sever Titus's hand. Vancouver, Canada's 2008 *Bard on the Beach Titus Andronicus* (directed by Kim Collier in a tent in Vanier Park overlooking the Pacific Ocean) was a wonderfully horrific bloodbath that had this reviewer wishing he'd skipped the pre-show bouillabaisse. Feisty and provocative, both productions were proclaimed the "must see" shows of season. Based on the early reviews for the Cal Shakes production ("terrific" ... "rare and surprisingly potent staging" ... "a bloody good show"), *Titus* was ripe for production by the Berkeley-based company.

James Carpenter's *Titus* is the glue that holds the production together. A veteran actor (whose myriad credits include San Diego's Old Globe, Oregon Shakespeare, 12 years at Berkeley Rep and 11 at Cal Shakes), Carpenter masterfully illuminates the story from beginning to end, has the acting and vocal chops to carry both intimate family moments and regal proclamations, and adeptly addresses Shakespeare's almost agonizing public mercy/justice debate while answering Moscone's program questions and embracing Sass's directorial panache (right down to allowing himself to be impaled in a raw downstage dénouement).

The brilliantly cast Rob Campbell (Saturninus) provides the rare moments of comic relief with hilarious personal discoveries, internal musings, and character reactions that threatened to stop the show. Stacy Ross finds a nice balance of grieving mother, retaliatory opportunist and merciless plotter as Tamora, Queen of the Goths and Shawn Hamilton, as Tamora's lover, Aaron, is at his best protecting his baby and confessing his insatiable appetite for all things disgusting. As a whole, the acting company is a seasoned bunch, although a few struggle with the vocal necessities of working in an outdoor arena.

Clever visuals solved the various demands of the script with amusing panache as the Goth's pithy makeup and costumes provide an immediate, almost frightening contrast to the Roman garb of Titus and company and giant, swiftly appearing screens create a nifty human "pit" for the murder of Bassanius (Liam Vincent) and entrapment of Titus's sons, Martius (Galen Murphy-Hoffman) and Quintus (Delia MacDougall). Lavinia's severed hands, tongue and overall blood-bath are well-staged and managed with horrific grace by Anna Bullard and Sass's hyena-like staging of Chiron (David Mendelsohn) and Demetrius (Chad Deverman) as Tamora's predatory sons offers both actors opportunities to show off their ruthless ways. Dan Hiatt's Marcus, Nicholas Pelczar's Lucius, Caleb Alexander's Young Lucius and ensemble members

Jody Christian, Willem Long, Geoffrey Nolan, Paris Hunter Paul and Valerie Wagenfeld keep the play moving at a quick pace, create a seeming army of Romans and/or Goths and add heft to the weighty affairs.

Lighting Designer Russell H. Champa carefully and successfully negotiates the tricky California sunset with nary a distraction and skillfully finds a way to illuminate the ever-changing, often personnel-powered moving scenery, battle scenes, abductions, bodily part deliveries and general anguish and angst of the evening's proceedings. Sound Designer Andre Pluess adds marvelously to the overall wild aural spectacle that is Titus Andronicus and David Maier's fights and Marybeth Cavanaugh's choreography blend intricately with the raucous staging of director Joel Sass.

Titus Andronicus petrifies many of the world's Shakespeare directors and artistic directors are loathe to add it to a season, especially during tough economic times when maximizing audiences through much more popular fare (think *Midsummer/Shrew/Twelfth Night*) is often the call of the day. Jonathan Moscone and California Shakespeare Festival aren't known for playing it safe and their reward was an enthralled audience in moment-to-moment discoveries of one of Shakespeare's most engaging revenge plays in the remarkably intimate Bruns Memorial Amphitheater in Orinda, California.

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