



Bloody Titus Brings New Meaning to "Breaking Bad" at Utah Shakespeare

by Jim Volz. Written on 2012-07-05. First published in the *ISE Chronicle*.

For the production: Titus Andronicus (2012, Utah Shakespeare Festival, USA).

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT TITUS THAT'S OBVIOUSLY RESONATING WITH PRODUCING Shakespeare Festivals in North America. Is it that he's so heroic, so selfless and so loyal—only too quickly to be branded so naive, so condemning, and so insipid—only to rebound as so clever and so revengeful? Are modern audiences really looking for and savoring a revengeful Act V finale from hell (which may explain the popularity of Marvel's *The Avengers*, the endless reruns of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and anticipation over the final season of AMC's *Breaking Bad*)?

Roman General Titus Andronicus returns from a decade of war with only four of his twenty-five sons still alive. The spoils of war include Tamora, Queen of the Goths, who he immediately enrages by offering her oldest son as a sacrifice per Roman ritual. In turn, she (along with her sons and lover, Aaron the Moor) wreaks havoc upon Titus, his family and all he values.

Part Agamemnon, part Sweeney Todd, Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is a horrific tale from top to bottom and one of the most popular in the Shakespearean canon in recent years. When Titus borrows from the Greeks and the House of Atreus to slash, kill, chop and cook Tamara's sons into a surprisingly tasty meal (and serve it to their mother), he somewhat redeems himself. Still, audience members have to wonder—can he ever be forgiven his role in the fate of his two dearest children? That said, the "last supper" when he invites Saturninus and Tamora to dinner is still Titus's most delicious stage moment as he talks of the Goth queen's sons:

*"Why, there they are both, baked in that pie;
Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,
Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred."*

This literal potboiler of a play is one that would have pleased Mrs. Lovett (or Quentin Tarantino for that matter)—though Victorian audiences reportedly felt the play that the six severed body

parts, fourteen killings, rape, cannibalism and other unspeakable acts were somehow socially unacceptable.

This is a Shakespeare play that is definitely as fun to watch as it is to hear. Kevin Copenhaver's costumes are stunning. The costuming of the opening debate of emperor candidates, Titus and sons return to Rome, the Goths first appearance and especially, Tamora, the Goth queen's glorious garb during her Act V dinner with the kids are all character enhancing, defining revelations. Scene designer Robert Mark Morgan and lighting designer Donna Ruzika complete their three-show outdoor rep extravaganza with some nice touches, clean scene changes and clear space definitions that keep the show moving quickly.

Henry Woronicz, former Artistic Director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, is obviously no stranger to revenge tragedies. He keeps a solid handle on the narrative, drives the action for maximum audience impact, and thankfully takes a conservative but effective approach to flying body parts, spurting blood and the glut of on-stage violence. This isn't the Greeks (where the violence is mostly off-stage)—but it's not Pulp Fiction either. Gerald Rheault' Music Direction and Barry G. Funderburg's work as Composer/ Sound Designer assists in setting the generally gruesome mood of the play and Choreographer Christine Kellogg and Fight Director Jason Armit assist in staging some wonderful moments in the high impact moments of TITUS.

Dan Kremer is a veteran actor and plays a nicely confused Titus early on in the play and a fairly conservative Titus (considering the circumstances) throughout. The sparks start flying when the emboldened Saturninus (artfully played by John G. Preston) and the devilish sons of Tamora (Matt Holzfeind, Jeb Burris, and Steve Wojitas) take the stage along with the disgustingly evil, Aaron, played with panache by Corey Jones. Chris Amos as Bassianus, Leslie Brott as the Nurse, Christopher R. Ellis as Lucius and the assembly of supporting men are all top notch (and that includes Marshall Hunt as Young Lucius). Holding it all together at times is a superb performance by A. Bryan Humphrey as Marcus Andronicus, tribune of the people and brother of Titus.

Of course, all eyes are eventually on Lavinia, daughter of Titus, and Melisa Pereyra handles this difficult role with restraint, sensitivity and clarity. Her scene with Tamora (expertly played by Jacqueline Antaramian) and Tamara's two sons (Burris and Wojitas) is one of the most chilling scenes in the Bard's collection of on-stage, off-stage bloodbaths.

This is one rollicking, raucous slaughter and, from the audience's cheering ovations, should be one of the summer's great hits (along with the hilarious Kent Thompson directed Bill Irwin and Mark O'Donnell version of Moliere's *Scapin* starring David Ivers and Matt Zambrano).

Artistic Directors Brian Vaughn and David Ivers recently announced plans to complete Shakespeare's 38-play canon over the next twelve years. How bold to start with the risky Titus Andronicus and the wordy The Merry Wives of Windsor. Being sassy, daring and audacious is obviously working for this new artistic team as Utah Shakespeare's 2012 season of shows, artists, craftspersons, volunteers, management and educational events is one of the most engaging one will find in America's regional theatres. –Jim Volz

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