

## **Review of Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus (directed by Blanche McIntyre for the Royal Shakespeare Company) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 17 August 2017**

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**Review of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (directed by Blanche McIntyre), at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, 17 August 2017**

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In the programme for the RSC's latest production of Shakespeare's (and, according to many, Peele's) revenge tragedy, Jonathan Bate tells us that *Titus Andronicus* is definitely "a play for our time", situated as we are in an age of "accusations and counter-accusations of barbarism", with an internet "saturated with violent and abusive pornography", ritual murder in the name of empire, and divisive arguments about the rights of various groups or nationalities (Royal Shakespeare Company). Blanche McIntyre's 2017 production in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre certainly reflected the notion of the play's modernity in its opening pre-set, which featured an array of people in hoodies, walking across the stage talking on mobile phones, pushing prams and shopping trolleys, dealing drugs, and exchanging angry looks (and then scuffles) with police officers. Presumably, they were intended to provide a general representation of "the poor", and "the disaffected", whose lives are adversely impacted, but swiftly forgotten, by Rome's powerful leaders. Indeed, the presence of a "austerity kills" placard suggested we might be in for an evening of references to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century conservative government but, once the hoodies dispersed, they were never to be seen again, and this initial statement struck me as potentially the result of an afternoon of tone-setting at the beginning of rehearsals which we could probably have done without in the finished production, given that the focus would now be fixed quite firmly on the rival political and familial factions amongst Rome's leadership. As Michael Davies points out, despite this being a modern dress production, McIntyre actually "side-steps the potential for real-world comparisons", in favour of a dissection of the dangers of blind honour, revenge and bloodlust.

The stage set, which was adapted from Robert Innes Hopkins's design for the *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* of the same season, retained the statues, pillars and steps of Rome's ancient capitol, but incorporated the glass windows (presumably bullet-proof) and protective metal fencing (presumably electrified) of the

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presidential palace-cum-parliamentary building, which served as the No.10 Downing Street of the Emperor, and provided a platform for press conferences and pronouncements. This is where imperial hopeful Saturninus (Martin Hutson) was very much at home, in his sleek blue suit and bullet-proof vest, appearing charming and capable in front of his audience.

Into this 21<sup>st</sup>-century atmosphere of microphones, photographers, and sharp suits walked David Troughton's dutiful Salvation-Army-styled general, returning from ten years of warfare, complete with trophy prisoners, a stiff back, stiff buttons, a stiff upper lip, stiff knees, and his own bracing brass band. Despite the fact that he had supposedly lost twenty-one of his twenty-five sons in the wars, he gave the impression that he had been marching around the Empire in triumph, accepting grateful acknowledgment of his achievements, exuding stoicism, and rallying the troops, before returning to Rome in expectation of a right royal welcome, and a well-earned semi-retirement. However, a little like Julius Caesar and Coriolanus, whilst his bullish arrogance is admired from a distance, on returning to Rome, Titus is regarded as a threat by his peers. His popularity with "the people" (1.1.20) means he is in the running for the post of Emperor, and, despite his turning down the role in favour of his pipe and slippers, he is seen as a menace by those with more political ambition.

In valuing duty, honour, family name and reputation, far above personal relationships, Troughton's Titus clearly understood the importance of bloodlines, but couldn't appreciate what it meant to be part of a family, and he expected the same adherence to duty and tradition from his offspring. Despite posing briefly for a family selfie, he showed little emotion on being reunited with his daughter, his remaining sons, and his grandson, only really taking note of them once his own values were threatened by their disobedience. For Mutius, the punishment for backing his sister Lavinia's bid to escape marriage to Saturninus by running off with Bassianus was death at the hands of his own father and, to Titus, it seemed perfectly reasonable that he should follow tradition by carrying out a ritual sacrifice, in memory of the somewhat severe reduction of his extended family at the hands of the Goths. Here, he made his biggest mistake. In rejecting the heartfelt pleas of Nia Gwynne's Tamora, the captive Queen of the Goths, Titus unwittingly secured his place in a

game of tit-for-tat retribution, as Saturninus was recruited to the post of Emperor, and Tamora, as his new bride, was offered the perfect opportunity to exert her influence. Thus, in a dizzying turn of events, which David Troughton described as “nought to a hundred in 5 lines”, Titus’s hopes for a role as head of what was left of his family (and presumably a potential lucrative consultancy role in the cabinet) began to disappear. His dutiful followers were dispersed, and it wasn’t long before he was kissing Tamora’s shoes, in the first of a long line of situations which saw him kneeling (at considerable physical discomfort, owing to Troughton having artificial knees) and begging for mercy. In this production, it was clear that Troughton’s Titus was used to operating in a manly world of plain dealing, straightforward manly fighting and no-nonsense manly physical suffering, and that this had left him ill-prepared for the womanly wiles of Gwynne’s captivating, slinky, devious, grudge-bearing, self-motivated, and highly dangerous Tamora, who set about making the most of her influence over Hutson’s slimy, petulant, media-savvy and power hungry but naiive Saturninus, and over-indulging her spoilt, selfish, cruel, thuggish sons, Luke McGregor’s Chiron, and Sean Hart’s Demetrius. As Michael Billington points out, the production highlighted the play’s “clash between a discredited militaristic imperialism and a new barbaric individualism”, which saw Tamora seeking revenge for the loss of her son Alarbus, by capturing Titus’s sons Quintus and Martius in exchange, and Tamora’s sons Chiron and Demetrius calmly indulging in some topless sunbathing shortly before brutally assaulting, torturing, maiming and effectively destroying the unsuspecting Lavinia, egged on by their revenge-fuelled mother.

The scenes just before and after the vicious rape and mutilation of Hannah Morrish’s Lavinia were handled with appropriate gravity and were not gratuitous, much to my relief. Here, the destruction of Lavinia was not presented for the purposes of seedy entertainment and, when she appeared afterwards, bleeding, and with her underwear still around her ankles, the horror of her ordeal was made apparent to the audience by her visible state of shock. The moment was perhaps somewhat spoiled, however, by her uncle, Patrick Drury’s Marcus Andronicus, who discovered her, since he delivered his ensuing speech about her piteous state (2.4.11-57) as though it were a bible reading at a local church service. Perhaps this was a result of a conscious attempt to avoid tipping over into melodrama, but it failed to fully convey

the pathos which was Lavinia's due. The scene in which Lavinia was reunited with her father was extremely moving in this production, though. When Titus responded to his brother's "This was thy daughter" with "Why, Marcus, so she is" (3.1.62-63), it was as though he seemed to notice for the first time she was in fact a human being, and not just a bargaining chip, and when he sank to the ground and cried "What shall we do?" (133), it felt like an expression of his despair, as a father incapable of protecting his family.

However, as events began to spiral out of control, McIntyre began to weave into the production a number of darkly comic elements, which seemed to reflect the deterioration of Titus's own mental health. The moment in which he is asked to sacrifice his own hand in order to save the life of his imprisoned sons was cleverly staged, with Marcus Andronicus and Titus's son Lucius squabbling over which of them would be happier to lop off their own hand with an axe, whilst Titus calmly invited in a couple of obliging nurses in plastic aprons with surgical instruments to chop off his own hand and place it on a silver platter before the others could return with an appropriate instrument. Apparently, this was the point at which someone in the audience would usually faint, vomit, or leave the auditorium but fortunately this reviewer managed to listen to the squelch of the hand-chopping with little more than a wince.

Unfortunately for Titus, the limb-lopping instruction was just Tamora's way of being playful, and she had no intention of releasing his sons, who were duly despatched, following which their heads (together with Titus's hand) were brought out in carrier bags, and the one-handed Titus, and no-handed Lavinia, had to work out who was going to carry which bag, and how. It was from this point that Troughton truly began his audition for the role of King Lear. He managed to convey weariness, despair, anger, and madness, all at once, laughing at the ridiculousness of his own tragedy, and sharing a tender moment with his daughter, as he clearly declared his intention to right her wrongs.

From there on, Titus's primary companions were a well-meaning but fairly ineffective brother, a grandson who wasn't yet old enough to be of practical use in a knife fight, and a mute daughter who couldn't even prepare a meal. Quite a change

then, from the military life amongst large groups of fighting men in the prime of life. His piteous state was highlighted by the attempt to have a “normal” family dinner, at which Lavinia sat with a sippy cup, trying to find the story of Philomela in her book (in order to explain what happened to her), Titus lost his temper with a fly and upended the table, and Marcus finally shouted “Look to my house” (4.1.119) in a voice which suggested Titus should clear up the mess he’d created on the dining room floor. Later, Titus spent some quality time with his grandson, wearing a plastic breastplate, waving a water pistol, and encouraging his son to dig with a small plastic beach spade. The dark humour of these scenes ended as the stuttering “Deliveroma” messenger boy arrived on his bike with pigeons in burger boxes, and a note for Titus from Tamora, and Titus asked members of the audience for pen and ink with which to produce a reply.

With Titus seemingly becoming more unhinged, Tamora decided it was time to strike at him again. So far, she had done a great job of slinking sound Saturninus, charming him into submission, and calming his tendency to fidget about like an excited puppy, offering him a games console as a pacifier. She had also managed to retain the attentions of her lover, Stefan Adegbola’s Aaron, who relished his involvement in adding to Titus’s suffering, and riled angrily against his captors when the safety of his baby son was threatened by Tom McCall’s Lucius. However, Tamora made a serious misjudgement in assuming that when Titus appeared before her seemingly dressed only in a cardboard box, with a wild hair wig and a scruffy stick-on beard shouting “I am not mad!” (5.2.21), he was now completely at her mercy. Even when he referred to Chiron and Demetrius as Rape and Murder, she assumed they were perfectly safe in the company of a harmless old man, and didn’t suppose for a moment that they were about to be hung upside down by their ankles and have their throats slit, whilst Lavinia stood underneath them with bowls to catch their blood.

Ever since Lavinia’s traumatic experience, Hannah Morrish had done an excellent job of ensuring that, despite her silence, she was very much present on stage, and an integral part of Titus’s rather small nuclear family. She was expressive and showed quiet determination in her efforts to ensure that her father understood what needed to happen next. Their shared trauma brought about a new bond of

understanding and mutual compassion between them, which David Troughton described as a suicide pact. At the point of the murder of Chiron and Demetrius, Lavinia was able to release some of her pent-up fury when she was left alone briefly with their corpses, and gave a heart wrenching, and highly satisfying, primal scream, aimed directly at her attackers.

The production's final scenes seemed to demonstrate a freedom of expression for Lavinia and Titus which had been denied them whilst Titus's position of power had necessitated an adherence to strict codes of conduct. Troughton left us in little doubt that Titus was fully committed to every action he took, and that he believed in his own reason and sanity, however much others might choose to question them. So, safe in the knowledge of a job well done (in dispatching Rape and Murder), Titus prepared for his *pièce de résistance* in the final scene. Helpfully accompanied by members of the Army band (who were now playing a Mexican party tune), Titus minced onto the stage in a chef's hat and coat to deliver his signature dish to his dinner guests, closely followed by the hostess, Lavinia, dressed as a waitress, and wheeling on a trolley on which was placed an enormous pie. Shouting "ding" as he banged the ladle against his head (to announce that dinner was served), Titus began to dish out a nutritious meal. His brother Marcus offered Titus's only remaining son Lucius the salad bowl, with a look which recommended he abstain from partaking of the pie (Lucius having recently returned from hiding away somewhere at a safe distance), and Titus finally embraced his daughter, just before plunging his knife into her stomach. He then lifted the heads of Chiron and Demetrius out of the pie for one last farewell glance at their mother, before stabbing Tamora, and being shot by Saturninus. Saturninus was then shot by Lucius, and the rather tame but highly resilient Marcus was left to give a media interview and call for Lucius to be made Emperor, as the numerous dead observed him through the windows, and the new Emperor announced his intention to "order well the state, / That like events may ne'er it ruin".<sup>1</sup>

All in all, McIntyre's production succeeded in establishing a coherence to this notably jagged play, by following Titus's downfall as a through-line, punctuated with moments (sometimes entire scenes) of dark farcicality and pauses for pathos and human connection amongst the violence and horror. Troughton was strikingly well-

supported in his task by the women who turned out to be far more central in Titus's life than he had anticipated, and by a cast who were, for the most part, highly convincing in their portrayal of the dangers of following one's drive for revenge and personalised sense of justice. A play for our time indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> These final words of the Folio text are omitted in *The Oxford Shakespeare*.