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BWW Review: TITUS ANDRONICUS At Long Last Has Its Adelaide Premiere

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Reviewed by Barry Lenny, Thursday 18th August 2016

The first production for a new company, Red Phoenix, which is the first resident company at the Holden Street Theatres, is the first time that Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus has been produced in Adelaide. It was worth waiting 400 years. It is a new company, but the wealth of experience in those behind it, and those involved in this performance, is best left to a dedicated accountant to assess.

The company took the bold decision that it would only perform plays that had never been seen before in Adelaide, and the artistic director of the company, Michael Eustice, was amazed to discover that there was a play by Shakespeare that had never seen the light of day here. It was decided that this would have to be the starting point.

To perform only works that had never been produced here, and so are unknown to Adelaide audiences, was a bold decision and, some might say, crazy. Crazy like a fox, that is. The opening night of Titus Andronicus was packed to the hilt and, at the end, the audience stayed in their seats, applauding madly, even after the house lights had gone up. The house lights eventually went down again, and the cast returned for several more bows before the audience allowed them to leave. But I have jumped from the start to the finish, so I must now fill in the intervening part of the evening, the magnificent performance that caused this incredible reaction by the audience.

Brothers in arms, Michael and Brant Eustice, have been responsible for numerous highly acclaimed productions of the works of Shakespeare in Adelaide, many for the University of Adelaide Theatre Guild. For the most part, Michael has directed and Brant has played major roles, although they have been known to reverse those roles to good effect. With Michael

directing and Brant in the role of Titus Andronicus, they brothers were in familiar territory. Michael Eustice has always had great skill in casting a production, and this is no exception, with so many of Adelaide's most respected performers in this cast.

Michael Eustice has done a sterling job of taking what is often called an inferior work, well, it was Shakespeare's first play, so give the Bard some leeway, and creating a thoroughly exciting and very professional production. If this is what we can expect from Red Phoenix, and I am willing to wager that this will be their standard of work, Adelaide has a new company to be proud of.

Brant Eustice will, I am certain, count his portrayal of Titus Andronicus as one of his best performances, as everybody else who saw this production will do. This is an incredibly complex and nuanced character and Brant Eustice does it full justice. His experience with playing Shakespearean roles and his through understanding of the Bard's works go a long way toward his exceptional performance.

Having returned from ending the long war, with important Goth prisoners, Titus lends his support to Saturninus, the older of the two brothers vying for the position as Emperor. Titus presents the Goth Queen, Tamora, and her three sons to the new leader as tribute, and kills her eldest son as payment for those that he lost in the war. His sister, Lavinia, is affianced to the younger brother, Bassianus, but Titus offers her to Saturninus as his new wife. She runs to be with the man she loves and Saturninus takes Tamora, who was to be a concubine, as his wife and Empress. This puts her in a position of sufficient power to take her revenge on Titus.

Saturninus is played by Matt Houston, interpreting the role as self-indulgent, foolish, and so full of himself that he has no idea that he is being cuckolded by Tamora. Houston's carefully balanced character is a pompous Emperor, but one who fails to command respect other than that attributed to his title; a figure of ridicule by Tamora's retinue.

Rachel Burfield is full of fury and terrifying in the role of Tamora, more so because of the way she presents the character as calculating and as cold as ice, warming up only for her lover, the Moor, Aaron. Burfield is superb in the role, capturing the many aspects of Tamora.

Lavinia is played by Anna Bampton in a marvellous performance in which she conveys everything with remarkable clarity, whilst no longer able to speak. Wracked with pain from her disfigurements at the hands of Tamora's sons, and frustrated at being unable to tell her story, she is filled with tears until she manages to get Titus to understand what happened, and who was responsible, with the chance of her own revenge in sight.

Joshua Coldwell plays Bassianus, leaving us in no doubt that Titus picked the wrong man for the job. He is a man of compassion, honesty, and nobility in the hands of Coldwell, an upright citizen who accepts his fate with dignity as his brother takes the throne.

Aaron leads Tamora's sons, Chiron and Demetrius, in taking revenge on Titus and his family for Tamora's downfall and capture, but more so for himself. Adolphus Waylee is strong in the role of Aaron, if a little difficult to understand at times because of rushed dialogue. Chiron and

Demetrius are played by Kyron Weetra and Joshua Mensch, respectively, and they give us two barbaric and vicious thugs, more than happy to rape, mutilate, torment, and murder.

The role of Marcus is changed to Marca and falls to Tracy Walker, who presents us with a mediator and moderator who tries hard to prevent much of the bloodshed, but ends up caught up in the final, appalling revenge that Titus takes on Tamora and Saturninus.

There are, of course, numerous others in the cast, and they, too, contribute very fine performances ensuring that the production is impressive at every level.

Among all of the other firsts in this endeavour is their costume designer, Isabelle Zengerer, in the Early Stages of study for a professional career in this area. Thrown in at the deep end to design the costumes for a complex work and a large cast, to be staged on an all black set, the results are pure magic. With the help of a goodly sized team of sewers, after designing, pattern making, and cutting everything herself, the costumes for this production look a million dollars.

The set is little more than the Bard would have had in The Globe Theatre, a space. An assortment of differently sized black school drama blocks are moved around by the cast between scenes to create all of the locations, everything else relying on the marvellous lighting design by Richard Parkhill.

This production is a phenomenal effort by this new company, matching the best companies around this city with decades of productions behind them, and it deserves to be sold out every night, as it was on opening night. If there are still tickets available, book now.

Addendum: The final week is now completely sold out, with all available tickets bought well in advance. It would be very wise to book early for future productions. Now, would be a very good time.

These are the forthcoming productions.

Don Parties On by David Williamson, November 2016

Two Brothers by Hannie Rayson, May 2017

The White House Murder Case by Jules Feiffer, August 2017

The Conspirators by Vaclav Havel, November 2017

Photography: Richard Parkhill.

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