

## Titus Andronicus



**By William Shakespeare. Red Phoenix Theatre & Butterfly Theatre Production. Holden Street Theatre. 18-27 August, 2016.**

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* is what is called in theatrical terms a "pot-boiler"; deliberately sensational, excessive, and thoroughly entertaining. This production by Red Phoenix Theatre and Butterfly Theatre, which is (surprisingly) the South Australian premiere of this play, completely honours the sensational bloody "pot boiler" aspect of this play. With its cast of seventeen highly committed actors it is most certainly worth the price of admission. Furthermore, it exemplifies Red Phoenix Theatre's wonderful dedication and mission to present the premiere productions of plays hitherto unseen in South

Australia.

*Titus Andronicus* was probably first written and performed in the early 1590s; the exact date is unknown. This was Shakespeare's first 'revenge' tragedy, written in the shadow and under the influence of Christopher Marlowe, particularly Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the first major English 'revenge' play. Whilst enormously popular in its time, *Titus Andronicus* has had a rather checkered stage history. For centuries it was either ignored or dismissed as an inferior work by Shakespeare, primarily due to its excessive violence. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, however, *Titus Andronicus* has been produced numerous times, championed by such respected theatre and film artists and critics as Peter Brook, Julie Taymor and A. L. Rowse. Its acts of violence are now deemed no longer excessive or improbable in light of known and/or experienced 'modern' atrocities.

This is a very 'modern' production of *Titus Andronicus*. In his 'Director's Notes', Michael Eustice states that the play is 'a rollicking good action thriller, and a brilliant tale of lust, murder, and revenge'. On this level the production works very well – it is fast moving, and the text is clearly spoken – a major achievement. Eustice goes on to state that it is also a 'deeper study of human behaviour'. Here, however, this production is less successful – whilst 'rollicking' and fun, I was entertained but not moved.

This 'modern' production goes for the melodrama – there is a lot of shouting and playing attitudes of rage and despair. You don't get much else. For the most part the actors talk 'at' and not 'to' each other, which is a shame as well as exhausting. These characters are not presented as 'thinkers', but as emotionally outraged and indignant. Very rarely is anyone just simply still. In a play that is seemingly obsessed with 'hands' (or lack of) there is an awful lot of gratuitous gesturing, hand waving and finger wagging that has some theatrical effect but in excess had little meaning and was often distracting. This is slightly in contradiction to the text, exemplified by Titus' observation that neither he nor Lavinia can 'passionate' (i.e. emotionally demonstrate) due to their severed body parts. In other words, every gesture has meaning, or should have.



There are, however, some who do keep their gesturing



under some form of discipline, allowing the words to carry effect, notably Brant Eustice as Titus and Tracey Walker as Marca. Both these actors are terrific in these challenging roles. There is also Aldolphus Waylee who is very engaging in the pivotal role of Aaron the Moor. This is a young actor to watch out for. There are other highlights to this production; notably the fun with some of the quirkiest scenes in this play, exemplified by the notorious 'fly' killing scene with Titus and Marca, a scene that was not in the original 1594 quarto publication of the play but a later addition.

Whilst I thoroughly enjoyed this energetic and 'rollicking' production of Shakespeare's 'pot-boiler' *Titus Andronicus*, nonetheless, I missed the more sombre and sinister 'thinking' of the characters that too often was

overwhelmed by melodramatic emotional and physical excess. Subsequently, the general reaction to the violence by the audience in which I was a member was laughter. Justifiable laughter as it was often grotesquely and deliberately funny. The laughter, however, was not a fun-filled 'belly-laugh', but rather a snort of disbelief and discomfort.

The production references *Game of Thrones* as an equivalent. However, the types of people that inhabit this violent world of Shakespeare's play have their equivalents in our 'modern' world. Whilst not disagreeing with the idea, but due to the physical expressiveness of the respective actors and the overall 'modern' interpretation, I was reminded not so much of *Game of Thrones* but rather *Snowtown*, with Tamora and her sons as chief 'bogans'. Considering the *Snowtown* atrocities, as well as the mystery surrounding the disappearance of the Beaumont children, and the unknown 'Somerton Man', the violence in *Titus Andronicus* is not so improbable; which this 'modern' production makes very clear.

These characters are killers, and they consciously and deliberately set about to destroy others not only with heated passion but also with cool rational 'thinking'. It is the coolness of their violence that makes the play so chillingly relevant. This was most successfully achieved in the scene in which Aaron murders the Nurse, which produced a gasp from the audience – not laughter.

To quote Francis Bacon, the contemporary lawyer and essayist of Shakespeare (not the 20<sup>th</sup> Century artist), and at the risk of an unsavory pun in regard to this production of *Titus Andronicus*, it should always be remembered that 'Revenge is a dish best served cold'.

*Tony Knight*

Photographer: Richard Parkhill.



**To keep up with the latest news and reviews at Stage Whispers, click here to like us on [Facebook](#), or follow us on [Twitter](#).**