

## Titus Andronicus

By Colin Thomas

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By William Shakespeare. Directed by Jack Paterson. A Mad Duck Equity Co-op production. At the Jericho Arts Centre until March 18

In the abstract, the violence in Shakespeare's first tragedy can sound ridiculous. As this mounting makes clear, however, it's realistic: human beings have always been-and still are-brutal.

Titus Andronicus, which is about war and revenge in the Roman Empire, has never received a full production in Vancouver before. Because of its goriness and supposedly wonky structure, many consider it a problem play. But this judiciously cut interpretation from Mad Duck Equity Co-op reveals it as a deeply satisfying work. **It's one of the best shows in a strong season** and more exciting than most of what you're likely to see at Bard on the Beach.

**Director Jack Paterson makes the play's relevance inarguable.** In their orange jump suits and plastic handcuffs, the prisoners who appear in the first scene look like they're from Guantánamo Bay. Later, when a sleekly dressed government official delivers body parts in plastic bags, it conjures thoughts of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her role in shipping remnants of soldiers home from Iraq. Lavinia, who is Titus's daughter, is raped and disfigured. It's hard to distance yourself from the horror of these acts when you realize that one of the actors in this production is from the former Yugoslavia. Next, you think of Rwanda.

**Paterson has drawn consistently fine work from his large artistic team.** In a racist construction, Aaron the Moor is responsible for many of the play's darkest crimes. With a light, sociopathic touch, Jason Emanuel makes the character insinuatingly charming. As the title character, Keith Martin Gordey delivers a clear portrait of a noble military commander who goes mad when the weight of evil overwhelms his stubbornly rigid morality. (This is a guy who kills one of his own sons when the youth defends his sister's right to marry the man she loves.) Lesley Ewen brings impressive gravitas and passion to Titus's sister Marca, a character who provides a balanced and intelligent counterpoint to her more reactive brother. Mike Wasko, one of Vancouver's best actors, is both credibly subdued and explosively emotional as Titus's warrior son, Lucius, and Josh Drebit is creepily clownlike as one of the rapists.

Anna Cummer's Lavinia is a mixed success. Before the assault, Cummer's characterization is deliberate; afterward, it's frighteningly vulnerable. In the evening's least subtle portrait, Craig Erickson makes the dastardly emperor, Saturninus, a cackling ghoul.

The uneasy rumbling of Jeff Tymoschuk's sound design contributes enormously to the story's sense of dread and sorrow. Costumer Moira Fentum provides detailed desert fatigues but gives Lavinia a dress that makes her look like a geek girl on prom night.

Most of Paterson's risks pay off. Brothers in the original, Lavinia's attackers become an incestuous brother-sister team, and it works. On the other hand, the director's decision to have Aaron dry-hump his mistress, Saturninus's wife, to the point of mutual orgasm, is sensationalistic and obvious.

Having spent much of its violence, the play becomes harder to sustain after the one intermission it gets here, but **this Titus Andronicus always makes horror worth watching-and brings it home.** Throughout the performance, an image of Michael Ignatieff haunted me like a ghost escaped from a TV screen. An intellectual and a recently elected member of Parliament, Ignatieff has defended the U.S.-led incursion in Iraq and supports coercive interrogation.

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