

# Sleek, gender-bending Titus solid Shakespeare

## TITUS ANDRONICUS

Jericho Arts Centre, 1675 Discovery,  
to March 18  
Tickets \$20/18, call 604-227-8007 ext. 3

BY MELISSA POLL

**REVIEW** | Too often, theatre companies shy away from *Titus Andronicus*, blaming the inexperience of a young Shakespeare's pen or the script's affinity for Tarantino-style gore. Thankfully, in Vancouver's premiere production of *Titus*, Mad Duck Equity Co-Op proves that this early offering from our boy Bill deserves far more credit.

Simply put, the play is Shakespeare's ode to revenge tragedy: a leader on the battlefield, Titus returns home, defers Rome's emperorship to the worst possible candidate and spends the ensuing period literally picking up the rather bloody pieces while seeking restitution.

Director Jack Paterson gives *Titus* a slick edge by moving the play's narrative, (an unidentifiable mishmash of Roman history), into the modern-day arena of philandering politicians and Middle Eastern unrest. In this context, characters take on an uncanny resemblance to our neighbours down south; as the emperor's brother Bassianus, (Paul Herbert) embodies the innocuous John Kerry while Lesley Ewen summons a certain Hillary C. as the backbone behind Keith Martin Gordey's Titus.



Lesley Ewen (from left), Anna Cumber and Keith Martin Gordey co-star Mad Duck Equity Co-Op's production of *Titus Andronicus*.

Paterson further tweaks the play via gender-bending. Titus's brother Marcus becomes his sister Marca; and Chiron, the empress's son, is now her daughter.

At first, this concept had me shaking in my conservative boots. How could the rape of Lavinia, Titus's daughter, pack the same dramatic punch when perpetrated, in part, by a woman? To my surprise, the assault retained its resonance thanks to Paterson's direction and Laura Jaszcz's performance.

Jaszcz transforms Chiron into a scrap-happy schoolgirl hell-bent on pleasing her wicked mum (Teryl Rothery). Teamed with her incest-loving brother Demetrius, played with delicious petulance by Josh Drebit, Chiron is no small threat.

Anna Cumber and Mike Wasko also deliver outstanding perfor-

mances. Cumber flexes her impressive chops, transforming Lavinia from a self-assured young woman to a trembling shell while Mike Wasko is unwavering as her militant brother Lucius.

Other characterizations, however, aren't nearly as nuanced. Although Gordey offers a very human Titus, he fails to embody the manic behaviour of Act 2's revenge-driven father. Gordey also struggles in Act 1, endowing Titus with too much heart; initially, the character is wholly dedicated to the state, willing to kill his son to protect Rome's honour.

Craig Erickson and Jason Emanuel are also out of tune here. Although Erickson is clearly a talented actor, he makes the mistake of playing the emperor Saturninus as the really bad guy. The trouble with *Titus Andronicus* is that many characters may appear slightly one-dimensional on the page; nevertheless, in performance they demand nuance.

Nonetheless, despite some imbalanced performances and a lack of urgency in Act 2, *Titus Andronicus* is solid fare. Jack Paterson has adeptly tackled one of the Bard's toughest tales through innovative staging and an overall strong design concept. Moreover, by framing the play through the eyes of Titus's young grandson, (played here by Una Memisvic), Paterson makes a powerful comment on revenge's destructive, self-perpetuating cycle.

Melissa Poll is a Vancouver freelance writer.

*Titus Andronicus* runs until March 18 at the Jericho Arts Centre. Call 604-224-8007 for tickets.