

I'll find a day to massacre them all

I saw Simon Bell's *Titus Andronicus* on its opening night, July 13th, and then again at the Saturday matinee performance. I felt it was even better on Saturday than it was on Monday and the following review is based mainly on that performance, though it generally holds true for both. Graham Hall has kindly reviewed the Monday night for this site already, in any case.

On the opening night, the crucial dagger in the last scene went missing and therefore the death of Tamora was very difficult to understand as nothing seemed to have killed her, and the death of Titus was via an ineffectual push in the back. However, these things happen in live theatre, and although it was distressing for the director to see his play end that way, the overall tenor and quality was not shattered, it was just a jarring moment or two at the end. So, it was not seeing the play correctly ended (though of course that was an improvement) that was the biggest change for me between the two experiences. It may be that the biggest change was in me; I had never seen Titus live before Monday, and it is quite a shocking experience even if you know the story. However, even taking this into consideration, I think that objectively Saturday's performance showed considerable improvement on what was already a strong opening night. This is only natural and it wasn't so much any one thing as an overall improvement in tightness and depth. For example, the character development of Titus which I *thought* I got the point of on Monday night, was absolutely clear in Saturday afternoon's performance.

James Law's Titus is very robotic at the beginning. I was going to say he was 'tunnel visioned' in his devotion to what he sees as duty, however he wasn't so much suffering tunnel vision as looking everywhere *except* at the human suffering all around him, especially that of his own family. As the mutilated Lavinia bounced off him, shrieking and screaming, Titus stared in all directions except at her, bringing a deep irony to the lines: '*what shall I do/Now I behold thy lively body so?*'- as he was looking anywhere but at her. In passing, I should note that the way the deflowered Lavinia was ignored by one and all, not just Titus, was a cutting social and gender comment.

Then there came that strangest of scenes where Titus and Lavinia (well played by Amanda Madison) break out into laughter. It was expertly done here and felt surprisingly 'right'. As their shattered bodies knelt together on the ground, their already racked frames were being shaken by, of all things, laughter. This incident brought the human side of Titus from below the surface and into full play. The transformation in James Law's performance perfectly fitted the structure of the play as it is performed in this production. And Titus finally grew into a character able to match and even overcome the dynamic Tamora who had stridden across the stage in tremendous dominance.

I would have to stress that both times I saw it the stand-out character and performance, with apologies to all the rest of the cast who put on fine ones too, was that of Tamora. What an incredible villainess she is, only Lady Macbeth with her lines:

*I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,*

*And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.*

comes anywhere near the passionate evil that pours from Tamora, brilliantly portrayed by Kate Hunter. Her delivery of such key lines as these two following pieces, really struck home, shaking one to the marrow (an apt phrase for this play.)

TAMORA

*I'll find a day to massacre them all
And raze their faction and their family,
The cruel father and his traitorous sons,
To whom I sued for my dear son's life,
And make them know what 'tis to let a queen
Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.*

----- and -----

LAVINIA

*'Tis present death I beg; and one thing more
That womanhood denies my tongue to tell:
O, keep me from their worse than killing lust,
And tumble me into some loathsome pit,
Where never man's eye may behold my body:
Do this, and be a charitable murderer.*

TAMORA

*So should I rob my sweet sons of their fee:
No, let them satisfy their lust on thee.*

Another sterling performance was that of Aaron by Adam Courting. Cultural and social contexts over and above that of the play mean that the sight of a black man with a hangman's noose around his neck is very hard to take on every level.

Despite this, Courting's depiction of Aaron, a character who easily outdoes Iago in 'motiveless malignancy', and who is well described as 'the incarnate devil', gave Tamora a good run for her money as the most compelling character on stage. (As an aside, how interesting that Shakespeare's 'earlier Iago' is a black man, what resonances that sets off in your mind *vis-à-vis Othello*.) Aaron's famous lines as he is led away to a slow death by starvation reverberated around the garden and around my head:

AARON

*O, why should wrath be mute, and fury dumb?
I am no baby, I, that with base prayers
I should repent the evils I have done:
Ten thousand worse than ever yet I did
Would I perform, if I might have my will;
If one good deed in all my life I did,
I do repent it from my very soul.*

Yet Courting contrived to convincingly play the unexpectedly delicate part too, that is, Aaron's love for his baby. To top it all off, Courting paused brilliantly, just the right length of time, as he searched for the mysterious word, in the following lines:

AARON

Yet, for I know thou art religious

And hast a thing within thee called...

...'conscience'..

Spoiler Alert!!!

OK, there has to come one point where I wasn't so impressed. (Spoiler Alert!!! It is best not to read this part if you have not yet seen this production.)

I found the attire of Titus in the final scene inappropriate. I understand the desperate need to play anything that you can for laughs in such a gruesome play and I grant that the lines "I'll play the cook" and "Why art thou thus attired, Andronicus?" did fit perfectly. I grant you too, that his attire, and lack of attire, raised a laugh, particularly on Monday night (though also from watching cast members from other productions on the Saturday afternoon).

Yet, still, it was too much for me. Perhaps one humorous element would not have struck me as so out of place but we had three here all at once: yet another bare male backside, the clown's red nose and, plus the words emblazoned on the front of the apron, "Danger Men Cooking" seemed excessive to me and out of keeping with the Festival ethos of 'full period costume' and authenticity to Shakespeare so eloquently detailed in interview by organiser Dave Crilly last week.

(<http://cambsedition.co.uk/index.php/arts-culture/theatre/926-cambridge-shakespeare-festival-david-crilly>)

I encourage the director to pop into the site and tell me why I'm wrong to feel this way.

He could start by telling me – and I certainly could not deny it, quite the opposite – that immediately after the startling appearance Titus is involved in the most poignant of dances with Lavinia, which ends with his maimed stump beside her maimed mouth. It was beautifully done and it came just before he kills his daughter (I glanced at Tamora and she was smiling at this moment – as I had anticipated she would be.)

And then the final minutes, like the opening minutes, are full of death. This is certainly not one for the fainthearted.

I feel negligent in not praising more of the cast, so, in closing, I would just like to say how effective Jon Bolitho Jones's Lucius was; you felt in your bones that he was the right person to be in charge as the play ended and that Lawrence Ward cut a very impressive and powerful figure as Marcus. The scene where these two were in feverish competition with Titus as to who should lose a hand, was so well played that it all seemed very believable and in keeping with their characters throughout the play. Apologies to those not credited above but I feel I have gone on for long enough already.

As an aside it was quite something to see all the gore and horror of Titus on a beautiful sunny afternoon in a quiet garden.

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