

TITUS ANDRONICUS. By William Shakespeare. Royal Shakespeare Company, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, England. July 16, 1987 (Production opened on April 28, 1987).

The rarely seen *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's first tragedy, has had only three previous Royal Shakespeare Company productions (1955 (Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh), 1972 (Colin Blakely and Janet Suzman), and 1981 (Patrick Stewart)). Certainly Shakespeare's most gruesome play, *Titus Andronicus* has returned to the RSC repertory in a new production that has already generated considerable controversy. Although purists might disagree with director Deborah Warner's piercingly cerebral interpretation, the new RSC production is so strikingly performed and directed that it captivates an audience despite its relentless, and often gratuitous, violence. Deborah Warner's stark and minimalist staging eschews superfluous pageantry. Limiting herself to a few highly anachronistic properties and generic costumes of cheesecloth, she successfully disconnects the play from any obvious allegiance to an historical setting, allowing the play's core of random and meaningless butchery to serve as a temporal metaphor for the violence of our own time.

Warner, the first woman to direct at the RSC's new Swan Theatre, continually surprises the audience with her audacious and brilliant touches. From the beginning, when a grinning Titus delivers Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and her sons before Saturninus, Emperor of Rome, yoked in an aluminum ladder, it is clear that this will be no reverently staged academic production. Warner insightfully capitalizes on Shakespeare's odd mix of tragedy and farce, and turns this possibly catastrophic liability into the production's greatest strength. As the characters revel in their mindless, extravagant killing, Warner manages the delicate balance of ferocious tragedy and bizarre comedy. When Titus, bedecked in a chef's hat and apron, and his men, whistling and marching in unison like Snow White's dwarves, deliver a pie made of the remains of Tamora's sons, the grotesque is leavened by the comic, and the audience is left wondering if it should laugh or cry.

The play's central plot involving the rape and vicious mutilation of Titus' daughter, Lavinia, is emblematic of the emphasis Warner places throughout the production on the eroticism of violence. This is best exemplified by Estelle Kohler's lethal virago Tamora, who encourages her sons in their attack on Lavinia (in revenge for Titus' sacrifice of one of her sons). Kohler's Tamora is in a constant state of voracious sexual arousal, extending her viciousness well beyond her lust for revenge against Titus, making it clear that she is no stranger to the ferocious barbarism that has cost her a son, and ultimately costs her all of her sons and her own wretched life.

Although she pays for her crimes, Tamora dies without comprehending the futility of violence. But through the relentless tragedies visited on him and his family, Titus Andronicus begins to face the futility of his violent life. In a role that would be a warm-up for King Lear, Brian Cox's bullish and endearingly boisterous Titus is, not surprisingly, the heart of the production. Cox quite incredibly wrings sympathy for Titus, making the tragedies that befall him almost unpeakably cruel. Like a punch-drunk boxer staggering under each successive blow, Cox's Titus understands too little, too late. Caught up irrevocably in the spiral of destruction, Titus' life ends in the turmoil of a final and absurd bloodbath.

In the uniformly fine supporting cast, Sonia Ritter, as Lavinia, makes a frighteningly effective transition from Titus' beautiful and favored daughter to a traumatized and pathetic monstrosity. Jim Hooper creates an oily and malignant Saturninus and Donald Sumpter portrays a reasonable Marcus Andronicus, who can only despair at his inability to end the chain of murder and mutilation that has caught up his brother and is systematically destroying his hope of a rational and gentle world. Also fine are Steven Elliott, Piers Ibbotson, and Richard McCabe as Tamora's vile sons.

The bleakness of Isabella Bywater's bare, faintly Japanese, setting and Wayne Dowdeswell's blinding lighting underline the revealing clarity and simplicity of Warner's staging as well as the unremitting isolation of Titus' tragic and highly personal struggle. A simple door in the stage floor doubles as an horrific trap for victims and a convenient grave for their disposal, leaving the impression that the carnage will soon bulge through the cracks between the dusty stage planks.

One could hope that Warner's spare and insightful production would help find *Titus Andronicus* a more respected place in the Shakespearean canon, but if not, she has at least offered a riveting treatment of a work that is likely to continue to generate the controversy it has for several centuries.

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