

THEATRE REVIEW: Anatomy Titus Fall Of Rome

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Picture a bare stage, the walls and floor covered in blood. Upstage is a three dimensional free standing wall about ten metres long and three meters high, also covered in blood. Centre stage is a deep bucket of blood that all the characters will 'dip their hands in' sooner or later.

It is an arresting first impression given to us by Director Michael Gow and his designer Robert Kemp. It is spare and apposite for the gory tale that is *Titus Andronicus*.

It is only after the play begins that one notices stacks of books atop the wall. They are to become the metaphors for the violence to come. They are missiles and swords and the bloodied pages of history.

It takes a while to come to grips with this, but eventually one sees as much threat in these projectiles as in any piece of flashing steel.

Titus Andronicus is Shakespeare's first play. It is the story of the Roman General Titus who returns victorious from the wars with the Goths. His decisions back in Rome to refuse the Emperorship and to sacrifice the eldest son of his captive, the Goth Queen Tamora, unleash a whirlwind of deceit and revenge, horror and counter revenge, involving amongst other things the brutal rape of Titus' daughter Lavinia, the severing of her hands and the cutting out of her tongue.

Gow deals well with the difficult problems of staging such graphic violence, by the metaphorical use of the blood bucket. It makes the point very well without the risk inherent in 'stage tricks'.

This co-production by Bell Shakespeare and the Queensland Theatre Company is an adaptation by German playwright Heiner Muller. In it, Muller replaces the original first Act with a running summary of the plot which in the script is attributed to no character in particular and has no clear narrative.

Gow deals with this by a highly energetic, but also highly confusing romp amongst the all male cast, in which even the great John Bell (who plays Titus) looked stiff and uncomfortable.

The core problem with *Titus Andronicus* centres around the question of what Shakespeare was looking to achieve. It has often been suggested that the ambitious young playwright was doing little more than seeking attention with an extremely violent provocative piece, and that the result was little more than an immature blood fest.

It is unimaginable that Gow believes this to be the case. If he did he would presumably not want to direct it, and certainly would not have the two major theatre companies involved commit the funds of their benefactors to an extensive national tour.

So what does he believe Shakespeare is trying to tell us? His best chance to let us know this was during Muller's introduction which could have been used to build character, hint at themes, to lead us to an understanding.

But the way it was done had me thinking Gow has not worked it out, and wanted only to distract us from the problem with cheap humour and monkey masks.

I am left to wonder too why Gow has chosen an all male cast. If he were looking to replicate 'authentic' Elizabethan theatre where men played women, this radical reworking would be a strange time to choose.

But if that were his choice, he would need to have his 'women' dressed as women, not as very masculine young men, in skateboarding clothes and with short hair.

And if he wanted them masculinised in order to emphasise the testosterone nature of the piece then he should have let them use their own voices. As it is, a very fine actor like Thomas Campbell, who gives a heart rending performance as the mutilated daughter Lavinia after his tongue is cut out, is, prior to that, forced to speak in a silly voice that is just distracting.

There are some weaknesses in the casting and that too is distracting, but at the same time Gow has the benefit of John Bell in the lead, a man who remains for me one of the two or three leading stage actors in the world, the very charismatic and powerful Timothy Walter as the villain Aaron, Robert Alexander as the carefully and gently crafted Marcus (Titus' brother), and the amazing comic and dramatic timing of Nathan Lovejoy as the Emperor Saturninus.

How many directors would cut off their own hand to have such talent at his or her disposal?

Gow could have used them to build a fascinating exploration into the psyches of real people and into the haunting questions of power, trust, and the terrible question of why and how consequences can so far outstrip the errors of choice.