

A Bloody-Good Mess: "Titus Andronicus," through April 7 at the Stern Center

Written by Thom White
Tuesday, 03 April 2012 12:33

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Many cast members in the Prenzie Players' current offering, *Titus Andronicus*, are at their best expressing physical and emotional pain. There's Aaron E. Sullivan's shift from utter despair to cackling insanity as the title character, Catie Osborn's post-rape brokenness as his daughter Lavinia, and Jessica White's shrieks as she watches her character's son slaughtered. The desperation is so penetrating in its realism and sincerity that I was often uncomfortable during Friday night's performance – which is to say that the production is shockingly effective at delivering the darkness of Shakespeare's work. I walked away in awe.

Directed here by Jake Walker, the tale of back-and-forth revenge by Titus and Tamora, Queen of the Goths, is a bloody mess – literally, with several throats slit, hands chopped off, and a tongue cut out. Titus returns to Rome after fighting a decade-long war with the Goths, bringing a group of prisoners that includes their queen, her three sons, and her secret lover Aaron. The blood begins with Titus killing one of Tamora's sons to avenge the war deaths of his own children. Despite being the people's choice to become emperor, Titus turns the throne over to the deceased emperor's son, Saturninus – an arrogant man who chooses Tamora as his bride, unknowingly putting her into a better position to exact her revenge on Titus.

Osborn has the daunting task of portraying a victim of rape – the queen's first act of revenge. With cries and screams as she's dragged behind a curtain to be violently abused, the actress attempts to claw her way out, with the audience catching glimpses of her fright-filled face before she's pulled back by her assailants. With a torn and bloodied dress and stumps instead of hands after the rape, Osborn constantly trembles and wears a vacant look.

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Sullivan sent shivers down my spine with Titus’ descent into madness. He is delivered the severed heads of his two sons alongside his own hand – which he’d hacked off in a bargain to save his boys’ lives. He receives this “gift” as he’s holding the recently widowed, raped, and maimed Lavinia. Claiming he’s unable to shed any more tears, his laughter bounced hauntingly around the room, making clear Titus’ mental condition.

It is to the credit of “gore master” Alaina Pascarella that I couldn’t linger long on Osborn’s mutilated Lavinia, or watch as Titus cleaved his hand, or look too closely at the sons’ heads. Her work is stunningly grotesque and disturbing if not fully realistic. (Lavinia’s stumps are a bit too big and spherical for the ends of her arms.) Pascarella’s inventive handling of the slitting of Tamora’s sons’ throats is sickening, with blood bags hidden in plastic grocery sacks that are used to gag the men before their slaughters. As if this weren’t enough, a large, white board is placed under the actors’ chins so that the blood can flow down to be collected in a chalice. Showtime’s Dexter would be proud.



As Tamora, Jessica Nicol-White blends sexuality, cunning, and debauchery, reminding me of “new money” – a person rushed to a higher station who doesn’t let go of her coarser personality. White never fully maintains her composure, with hints of anger and scheming in her eyes even as her body language suggests submission to her new husband and position.

Andy Koski, as Tamora’s son Demetrius, showcases a range beyond the confident nobility I’ve seen from him in previous Prenzie shows. He seems to relish his base nature here, swaggering across the stage and dry-humping the air while talking about sexual things.

Maggie Woolley, in reverse-gender casting as Saturninus, provides the evening’s unexpected but welcome comic relief. I’ve long been impressed with her ability to deliver Shakespeare’s words as everyday speech, with a casual clarity of meaning. Here, she speaks the emperor’s lines with an entitled flippancy, eliciting most of the evening’s laughs.

The Stern Center, a new venue for the Prenzie Players, lends itself well to Walker’s work, with the large space echoing not only Sullivan’s laughter but Bryan Woods’ and David Cabassa’s

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already deep, thundering vocals. For Woods, the sound strengthens the nobler nature of his Lucius, son of Titus, giving more authority to his already commanding delivery. With Cabassa, the room adds an ominous air to his Aaron – a vicious, cunning, evil man. This is the most subtle I’ve seen Cabassa; his character is angry and loud, but the actor maintains his emotions at a believable level.

Although no designer is listed in the production’s program, the minimalist set – little more than a platform and a set of movable stairs – is masterfully used. Through movement and different colors of cloth, the platform becomes a raised throne space, a grassy hill and cliff, a table, and even a prison.

The Prenzie Players’ *Titus Andronicus* is full of such thoughtful detail, and it’s presented lucidly. While I was unfamiliar with the play, the direction and the portrayals made it easy to follow even the finer points of the plot. I now count *Titus Andronicus* among my favorites of the Bard’s work.

Titus Andronicus runs through April 7 at the Stern Center (1713 Third Avenue in Rock Island).

For more information, visit PrenziePlayers.com . For tickets, call

(309)278-8426 or e-mail

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