The Horrifying Fascination of Titus Andronicus

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Titus Andronicus
Directed by Michael Fentiman

Critics have not been kind to Titus Andronicus. Writing in 1765, Dr Johnson disapproved of the play so much that he ascribed it to some lesser playwright: “The barbarity of the spectacles and the general massacre which are here exhibited, can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience...That Shakespeare wrote any part...I see no reason for believing,” Edward Ravenscroft in 1687 was even more perturbed: “tis the most incorrect and indigested piece in all his Works; it seems rather a heap of Rubbish than a Structure”.

Even Jonathan Bate (whose 1995 Arden edition did much to rehabilitate the play) begins his introduction by quoting a barbed comment from Peter Brook. Following Brook’s landmark production of 1955 (with Laurence Olivier in the title role and Vivien Leigh as Lavinia), the director issued a mock apology to Shakespeare about his sensationalist tragedy: “When the notices of Titus Andronicus came out, giving us full marks for saving your dreadful play, I could not help feeling a twinge of guilt. For to tell the truth it had not occurred to any of us in rehearsal that the play was so bad.”

The fortunes of Shakespeare’s plays, like skirt-length I suppose, rise and fall with fashion. For the Romantics, Hamlet was the greatest play, refracting their interest in imagination, artistic creativity and the fine line between excessive intelligence and emotional instability. More recently, King Lear has eclipsed Hamlet’s pre-eminent position. The Shakespearean scholar R.A. Foakes suggests that this is because the 20th century is a landscape tortured by old men, infirm of purpose and ever but slenderly knowing themselves - Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Franco, Ceaușescu, Pol Pot, Mao Tse-tung, Pinochet.

The frequently stylised representation of Titus Andronicus - as in Brook’s production or that by Yukio Ninagawa (in Japanese, 2006), in which red ribbons stood in for spouting blood - might be seen to make the play’s pantomimic violence less hysterical, enabling us to take more seriously its treatment of moral and political issues: betrayal, familial loyalties, sexual violence, nationalism, racism. But in a month when video footage was released of a Syrian militiaman cutting out and eating the heart of an enemy, perhaps the violence of Titus Andronicus is not so extraordinary after all.

In the very first scene of the play, Lucius instructs his brothers to chop up one of their prisoners: “Let’s hew his limbs till they be clean consumed.” Who, only last week, would have thought that the streets of Woolwich could be the site of a man being hacked to death with a meat cleaver? It is a truth universally acknowledged that we fashion Shakespeare in our own image, and we are now only too well aware of the violence of religious, ideological, racial, sexual and political spheres that can burst through the polished veneer of culture. As Walter Benjamin put it, “There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

In 1995, when Greg Doran directed the play (a co-production between London’s National Theatre and the Market Theatre of Johannesburg), Antony Sher’s Titus was an Africaans general. The disintegration of his family signified the weakening grasp of apartheid and Aaron’s wickedness became the violent response of a colonised race. As Doran wrote at the time, “in this context [Aaron] began to emerge as a much more complex and intriguing character”. In Silviu Purcărete’s 1997 production (in Romanian for the National Theatre of Craiova), characters were seized by animate backcloths, pulled into stage traps by pieces of fabric and suspended in cargo nets. The source of atrocity was non-human, part of the theatre itself, and the production insisted on the mutuality of cruelty and its representation. From the violence of playground “happy slapping” to the butchering of Drummer Lee Rigby, capturing the event on a mobile phone is part of its rapture.

For all our “civilised” disgust at the Elizabethans’ enthusiasm for public disembowelling and mutilation, are we morally any better than them? Even though the amputations and cannibalism of Titus are not real, is there not real pleasure in their seeming to be? This is entertainment, but entertainment that goads us towards our own depravity - civilisation and barbarity, as inseparable as two sides of a piece of paper.

In the intimate space of Stratford’s Swan Theatre, Michael Fentiman’s production for the Royal Shakespeare Company of Titus is as “in-yr-face” as anything by Edward Bond or Sarah Kane. Aaron (Kevin Harvey) kneels next
to Titus (Stephen Boxer) and saws through his forearm with a hacksaw before cauterising the wrist in a bucket of boiling tar. The aftermath of the rape of Lavinia (played by Rose Reynolds) sees her ascend from the trap flanked by her bloodied assailants, twitching in spasms of agony. The stumps of her wrists are a matted mess of gore and hair, and thick, treacly blood falls in long viscous streaks from her mouth.

Colin Richmond’s design ingeniously insists on the ubiquity, historical and geographical, of the savagery. The play is set in ancient Rome but in this staging it has become a palimpsest, a Christianised Moorish temple, like Cordoba Cathedral built within the Great Mosque. The wounded are tended by nurses attired like nuns but with Muslim veils. Friars in long-hooded cassocks people a state whose insignia, an outstretched eagle, is reminiscent of Nazi iconography. Eclectic military costumes combine Elizabethan hose, Roman breastplates and modern riot police shields and helmets. Katy Stephens’ Tamora is a version of Boudicca, tattooed and feathered. Demetrius (Perry Millward) and Chiron (Jonny Weldon) are English Defence League thugs with drainpipe jeans and hoodies, circling malevolently on BMX bikes.

The climactic cannibalistic banquet is a formal evening-dress dinner that descends with febrile alacrity into bloody mayhem - from Great Gatsby to Grand Guignol. Titus, dressed according to the stage directions “like a cook”, is here a “nippy” from a Lyons Corner House, in black dress and white apron, cheerfully dishing out Sweeney Todd pasties.

But it is the production’s final speechless sequence that arouses the most horror. Aaron the Moor will endure any torture as long as his infant son is spared in return for information. Having made a full confession, he is buried neck-deep to starve to death. Young Lucius (George David, aged about 9) enters carrying the baby. He stoops and picks up a cake-knife, scattered from the previous banquet - black out. As James Bulger’s murder demonstrated, children all too readily re-enact the violence of their elders.