

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Titus Andronicus

William Shakespeare

Shakespeare's Globe

Shakespeare's Globe (Sam Wanamaker Playhouse)

19 January–15 April 2023

With its multiple murders and mutilation performed on stage, Shakespeare's early play seems to have been a box-office hit with its bloodthirsty first audiences but poses a challenge to a modern director.

Its last Globe outing, [Lucy Bailey's gory 2006 production \(revived in 2014\)](#), saw faintings and walkouts. This time, Jude Christian makes the blood-letting entirely symbolic, not the poetic image of red ribbons used by Ninagawa but, suggested perhaps by the Wanamaker Playhouse's signature feature: its lighting, candles that represent lives which can be extinguished, broken in pieces, melted, even drilled into. It sounds like a good idea, but I found it awkward and not well enough established; you only slowly cotton on to the possibility that remains deposited in two small upstage vats mark the balance between the losses sustained by the Andronicae and by their enemies in this invented Roman history of two factions, both seeking revenge on the other.

Goth Queen Tamora, captured by veteran general Titus Andronicus, who becomes Empress to Saturninus (whom Titus supports as imperial successor), wants revenge for the sacrifice of her eldest son by Titus as part of his returning triumph. Tamora's younger sons rape Titus's daughter Lavinia then cut out her tongue and chop her hands off to stop her saying whom by. This is only one of the reasons why Titus seeks revenge against Tamora and her faction.

This production opens with a song and dance number written by George Heyworth and Liv Morris (aka cabaret duo Bourgeois and Maurice) telling us we are about to see "men killing men killing men killing women killing men killing men killing men killing children" and promising "a bloodbath to wash your worries away... delight in someone else's pain" and that "after this cathartic nightmare, your life will seem a dream."

The text is quite heavily cut, including the whole last scene which resolves the situation after all the bloodshed, but with three more songs with repetitious lyrics, it still runs nearly three hours. There is no attempt to suggest Ancient Rome. Designers Rosie Einile and Grace Venning provide a white floor and backing with modern props and ZN ALL costumes an all-female cast in pyjama-like outfits in bold colours. To help identify characters, each names themselves to the audience on their first appearance, but it is not always easy to keep track of what is going on despite the text being mainly delivered clearly.

Katy Stephens makes an impressive Titus, giving weight to the words. His concepts of honour and duty could be made clearer, but as revenge seems to unhinge his reason, we see a man cracking. Georgia-Mae Myers's Lavinia too is at her best in her howls of pain and her frustration at being unable to communicate. In this Grand Guignol mix of a play, with its couple of clown scenes, Lucy McCormick presents a comic Saturninus twisting himself into odd poses, but Kirsten Foster's

Tamora steers well clear of a clichéd evil queen; nor does Kibong Tanji play up the evil in Tamora's love Aaron; indeed his scene with their baby son (represented, of course, by a candle) is rightly moving.

Beau Holland pops up in a number of small parts, including Andronicae brothers Quintus and Martius in a horrific scene that is made laughable, and as a buzzing fly (it is in the script but not as a character) that gets squashed—candle too, killed in this and all other roles. There is in no place for pity, though; she is the clown here.

The actors are not helped by the lighting. Low candlepower and a white set behind them don't make it easy to read faces. Pre-COVID productions developed considerable skill in naked-flame lighting—have those lessons been forgotten?

After a build-up of horrors, the first half ends with a song and the second opens with another: the tale of a rabbit who eats her own kittens, a prediction of what will follow and a final song rounds off the performance. All the songs get a great response from the audience; what comes between them isn't always as easy to follow and doesn't generate the same level of involvement.

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)