

British Theatre Guide

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Titus Andronicus

William Shakespeare

Royal Shakespeare Company

Swan Theatre, Stratford-Upon-Avon

17 April–7 June 2025

Max Webster's production is an impressive RSC debut, and he has been astonishingly brave in choosing one of Shakespeare's more challenging plays.

Titus Andronicus has an intriguing history: it was very well received by late 16th century audiences, but then disappeared from the canon for over 300 years. The play reappeared post-First World War, and regular revivals followed throughout the rest of the 20th century. Yet, in little more than 10 years, there have been three new productions at the RSC alone.

Titus is classed as a tragedy, but, in reality, it has more in common with revenge plays and the much later gothic horrors. Webster embraces the challenge of dealing with the gore by maximising its impact through the judicious use of writhing hoses of blood and buckets of gore, punctuated by occasional stop-motion strobe action. The scene where Aaron brandishes a chainsaw to remove Titus's left hand is shockingly effective; the fact that Aaron and his chainsaw remained front-stage many yards from Titus in centre-stage in no way diminishes the effectiveness of the tableau. This motif of 'detached violence' is repeated throughout the play to excellent effect.

Much is made in the programme notes of methods for dealing with fainting audience members, yet the violence and bloody excess is strangely non-vomit-inducing. It may be the case that *Titus* has become an appropriate metaphor of our times in an increasingly dystopian 21st century, where our televisions are dominated by blood-drenched images from violent films and news footage of global conflicts. Webster challenges our increasingly blasé reactions to the daily horrors which are presented to us.

Simon Russell Beale moves around this production as a careworn warrior bearing the weight of his personal loss of 22 sons (sic). He endures the amputation of a hand with the casual annoyance normally reserved for a chipped fingernail! Nevertheless, his embracing of his raped and mutilated daughter, Lavinia, has all the poignancy of Lear's reunion with the hanged Cordelia.

This is not, however, the Simon Russell Beale Show—he is supported by a very strong cast, from the angelic tones of Young Lucius (Tristan Arthur) and a powerfully engaging anti-heroic Aaron (Natey Jones). Although he presents as a sometime comic-book villain, his scene with his newborn child, the fruit of his clandestine relationship with Tamora, the Goth queen (Wendy Kweh), is unexpectedly affecting and imbues Aaron with an unanticipated empathy. There are strong performances from the female leads, not just Tamora, but also Marcia Andronicus (Emma Fielding) and Lavinia (Letty Thomas). Joshua Thomas's creepily camp Saturninus is also strangely powerful.

The production's various scenes are linked by a thrumming, simian ballet, for which the entire creative team deserves credit. It seems to emphasise just how close the actions seen on stage are

to the relative anarchy of the animal world.

Although this production is universally strong, I did wonder if my lack of emotional reaction to the 'gore-fest' was more reflective of a world-weary response to the violence of our times than to an arguably cartoon-like depiction of violence on the stage.

Max Webster has truly brought us the *Titus Andronicus* 'de nos jours', and his future contributions to the RSC oeuvre will be much anticipated.

Reviewer: [Paul Clark](#)