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'Titus Andronicus' not for the faint of heart

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In the mid 17th century, the dramatic world pretty much turned its back on "Titus Andronicus."

At a time when extreme violence far less shocked people than it does now, this first tragedy from the pen of William Shakespeare was considered too brutal and gory for general audiences and was subsequently ignored for the next three centuries by all except a handful of scholars. Many even claimed the play was not entirely the work of Shakespeare.

"Titus Andronicus" was revived in 1923, but it wasn't until the 1950s it began to achieve a measure of acceptance. However, the filter of 300 years had done nothing to lessen the shock of two hours of nearly unremitting, gratuitous brutality and bloodshed, and the play remained -- and remains -- one of Shakespeare's least-performed works.

The American Shakespeare Center's production of "Titus Andronicus," now at the Blackfriars Playhouse, has been well directed and, for the most part, is well acted. But there is just no way to get around the fact that this play features 14 killings (nine of which occur onstage), six severed members (hands, heads and one tongue), one rape, one live burial, insanity and cannibalism.

A critic once averaged everything out to 5.2 atrocities per act, or one for every 97 lines.

That's a lot of blood and screaming and agony and upheaval. It is reported that more walkouts and faintings have occurred in "Titus Andronicus" than in any other Shakespeare play. The night I saw it, one lady, handkerchief to lips, quietly made her way out of the theater during one of the play's more gruesome scenes.

For me, however, there came a time when I found it hard to take all the violence seriously. There was just so much of it that, when the bloodletting continued and escalated, I found myself chuckling a little -- not wanting to see it as a comedy, but not being able to help myself. It's really the only defense you have in a play that's not unlike a Mel Gibson movie on steroids.

And if I had to see one more man lip-kiss another man -- well, a little of that goes a long way. Call me a Philistine, call me not fully sensitive to the drama, but some good old-fashioned hand-shaking would have been welcomed in several of those instances.

On the plus side, James Keegan is in customary brilliant form as the title character, and Rene Thornton Jr. seems to take a delicious delight in portraying a villain that challenges all other Shakespearean villains for sheer, unrepentant maliciousness. Luke Eddy, as usual, commands the stage whenever he is upon it, and Sarah Fallon is wicked and voluptuous and tattooed and all the things a Goth queen should be.

A number of theories exist as to why Shakespeare wrote "Titus Andronicus," which was wildly popular in 1594. Perhaps he was trying to capitalize on other, similarly successful works by Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Kyd. Perhaps he was trying to burlesque those plays. And perhaps he was just trying to find his stride as a playwright.

Whatever the reason, it does not translate as well over the centuries as most of his other plays and should, perhaps, be viewed out of curiosity as simply the forerunner of great things to come.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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