



Titus Andronicus

A Titus Balancing Humor and Horror

[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Va.
Saturday, August 22, 2009 (Seats D-9&10, middle stalls)
Directed by Jim Warren

Of course, the ASC troupe was going to play up the comic aspects of this play as much as the blood sport. The audience was even prompted to take part as cheering factions when Saturninus and his brother Bassianus came on stage to state their cases for the "imperial diadem of Rome." Yet, when Demetrius and Chiron were about to rape Lavinia, spurred by their heartless mother, Tamora, the mood in the audience was grim, its fun fascination with the bodaciously sexy Tamora giving way to disgust at her mercilessness. Then, when Lavinia later appeared, bloodied and handless, and blood poured from her mouth when bid to speak, it was grippingly emotional theater.

Somehow, ingeniously, this Jim Warren-directed production did not tilt so far into farce that the rape and mutilation of Lavinia was anything but poignant tragedy. And the rest of the way, the play maintained a balance of slapstick, grim humor, gross action, and touching tragedy. Even when Lavinia carried Titus' severed hand in her mouth, the audience's laughter was sympathetic. That the production maintained this balance to the end is all the more amazing, given that during the intermission the cast sang a spirited version of the Beatles hit, "I Want to Hold Your Hand."

Particular credit goes to Victoria Reinsel as Lavinia. Jocular and haughty in the first part of the play—our sense is that she could be as cruel as Tamora, given any reason—she carried out her mute scenes with passion and compassion (for Titus, for her nephew, for her uncle, and for her dead brothers), superbly acting through her eyes and posture. The look of love and gratitude she bestowed on her father at the moment he kills her is, for us, the searing image of this production.



Victoria Reinsel as Lavinia after her rape and mutilation in *Titus Andronicus* at the Blackfriars Playhouse. Photo by Tommy Thompson, American Shakespeare Center.

This is not to diminish any of the other performances. James Keegan in the title role took us along Titus' tragic road from proud and deluded to sputtering and bewildered to confident and wickedly wily. Sarah Fallon was a bewitching Tamora, even after we hated the character, and René Thornton Jr. gave Aaron such a heroic reading that we would gladly have saved his life and invite him to join our army. John Harrell pulled off another tour de force in our books with a slimy Saturninus.

This company just seems to get better and better in performance, and deeper and deeper in

WILL POWER ON STAGE

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talent. With this *Titus Andronicus*, they also prove that they can present richly textured Shakespeare on par with any troupe.

Eric Minton
August 24, 2009

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