

Theater



David A. Baker, Elizabeth Atkeson and Sheffield Chastain in "Titus Andronicus."

Grisly 'Titus' pulses with energy

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THE black chill in UCSC's Festival Glen isn't just a matter of the weather these August evenings. The cold which works through your sweater, down your spine and into your bones emanates from Shakespeare Santa Cruz' surprisingly affecting production of "Titus Andronicus," now in performance on the outdoor stage.

This is surprising, because "Titus" is barely mentioned in the Bard's collected works, and never among his best. Written early in Shakespeare's career — it was his first tragedy, actually — "Titus" is a work of raw, unpolished energy. Mark Rucker's interpretation — costuming the cast in "Mad Max" chains, denims and leathers; staging the work on a bare rock slab which maximizes the spooky effects of night in the redwoods — gives a contemporary punkish spin to the vicious events unfolding on-stage.

Shakespeare's tale of treachery and revenge in ancient Rome is bathed in blood and increasingly gory scenes. Murder is tame compared to the dismemberments, rape, throat slittings and cannibalism depicted with an abundance of blood capsules and realistic-sounding blows to various parts of the anatomy.

In one of those fatal character flaws Shakespeare would polish to perfection in his later plays, military hero Titus (J. Kenneth Campbell), returns to Rome after triumphing on the battlefield only to be done-in by mistakes in his own judgment.

Turning down the emperor's robes himself, Titus backs the wrong prince, Saturninus (Bryan Torrington) for the job. Not only that — he also offers his daughter Lavinia (Elizabeth Atkeson) to become the emperor's wife. This is mistake No. 2, since Lavinia really loves Saturninus' better brother Bassianus (Joe Polhemus).

The sight of children paying the price for their parents' errors runs throughout the play with increasingly awful consequences. Titus buries a son, slain on the battlefield, early on. In response, he sacrifices one of the imprisoned sons of the captive Goth queen Tamara (Molly Mayock).

That act seems cold-blooded enough, but Titus will shortly pay a far greater price for his efforts at kindness after he frees Tamara, her two sons, Demetrius (David A. Baker) and Chiron (Sheffield Chastain), and her slave, the Moor Aaron (Bruce A. Young).

Roman democracy — illustrated by characters on-stage directing addresses to the audience as "the citizens" — offers a flimsy deflection before caving in entirely to the onslaught of pure evil once the Goths are set free to tear at the social-political fabric.

The specter of pristine amorality is embodied in Tamara initially, before it is usurped by her even more powerful servant-lover Aaron. Making her entrance literally like a caged animal, Tamara — resembling a Roman Joan Collins — quickly rises to become Saturninus' queen and guide for his own none-too-noble impulses.

Her sons are vicious lust-driven louts, dispensing their sadistic idiocy in the first act. But they, too, give way to Aaron — masterfully played with icy humor and hints of humanity under his unrepentant voracious destructiveness — to illustrate what can happen in a society which loses its its vigilance and sense of purpose. A very rough draft for Othello, Young's Moor is a product of racism who has channeled its sting into his own unbridled treachery.

Young's characterization superbly encompasses the poles of Rucker's staging: the frightening look of amoral chaos on one hand; the tension-relieving, almost campy humor, painted very black, at the other.

The disintegrating Titus comes to head a rag-tag bunch, including his philosophical brother Marcus (Brad Myers) and his victimized daughter Lavinia. He prefigures Lear in his spiral into apparent madness. While Campbell's portrayal sometimes seems too archly Kirk Douglas-ish, the grand gestures are ultimately appropriate for the extremes between word-play madness and his unfolding role as heroic avenger.

Rucker's mounting of the work is always focused, occasionally ingenious — as when Titus confronts Tamara and her sons as apparitions — and quite effective. Aspects of the play suggest Shakespeare's talent was still-forming when he wrote it. The production superbly conveys the Bard's impulse to make up for raggedness in the writing with horrendous events and outrageous effects guaranteed to get a reaction.

"Titus Andronicus" is the Elizabethan answer to a slasher movie — but the gore conceals deeper themes far more worthy of an audience's attention. Thanks to this strong production, the play's strengths arrive as urgently as its grisly outrageousness and offer a terrific evening's entertainment in the process.