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The cast of Portland Playhouse's "Titus Andronicus," considered Shakespeare's most violent play, now showing through April 10.

Play Turns Violence Inside Out

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY DARLEEN ORTEGA



What is a responsible way to portray unchecked violence and brutality on stage? How might wrestling transparently with that question humanize both audience members and theater makers, and help us experience the art in a new way?

Portland Playhouse's production of "Titus" presents Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus" with those aims front of mind. It's Shakespeare's most violent play, packed with cycles of revenge that include murder, dismemberment, sexual violence, and cannibalism. The play as constructed externalizes the impacts of violence, turns

violence inside out and takes it to extremes so that its impacts can better be seen. This production follows Shakespeare's logic to a metatheatrical place, confronting us with how playing and watching violence also impacts us.

The story of the play involves a warrior, Titus, returning home to Rome with a vanquished queen, Tamara, as his captive. In the first scene, Tamara's eldest son is killed in retribution for the deaths of some of Titus's sons in wars with her people. Tamara activates her lover (who doesn't require much activating) and her two remaining sons to acts of revenge aimed at Titus, who then aims more acts of revenge at Tamara.

Although the level of gore in this play is extreme, depictions of violence are common on both stage and screen, and are often played with abandon. I just spent three hours watching "The Batman," for example, which is also full of elaborate gore, and my own top 10 list of movies for 2022

puts at number three "The Power of the Dog," the story of a man who aims his toxicity at his sister-in-law, with violent consequences. In the latter film, star Benedict Cumberbatch reportedly remained in character on set and barely spoke to Kirsten Dunst, who played his sister-in-law, while they were filming.

It's possible that working that way improved their performances, but at what cost? Occasionally I have asked myself such questions; when I saw "Detroit," for example, I wondered about a white director filming scenes a violence perpetrated by white actors on Black people in a way that emphasized them as victims. Historically accurate, perhaps, but not a complete of Black experience—and what did the experience of making the film cost those Black actors, not to mention the white ones?

Portland Playhouse moves those questions to the forefront with this production. How does watching scenes of violence im-

pact audience members? What does playing acts of violence exact from members of the cast? This production was built with a priority around those questions. Actor La'Tevin Alexander opens the show with some instructions about how the body processes emotions like fear and trauma and anxiety, and offers some suggestions for audience members to take care of themselves during and after the show. Reactions to the violence, including audible ones, are encouraged. Humor is employed as a tension reliever in some scenes. When a character is killed, the actor's exit from the stage is accomplished with obvious care; often other actors will call the person playing the just-killed character by their given name and help them up, walking them out gently. Care was taken during rehearsals to leave the violence on the stage, and to

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