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Cal Shakes Opens Season with Titus Andronicus

By Lou Fancher



Costume sketch for Cal Shakes' upcoming production of Titus Andronicus; drawings by costume designer Paloma H. Young.

The California Shakespeare Theater's 2011 season gears up with the first ever Titus Andronicus in previews June 1st through 3rd and opening night festivities Saturday, June 4th.

Led for the past ten years by Artistic Director Jonathan Moscone, the regional theater group promises to make Shakespeare and the classics relevant to the lives of every man, woman and child willing to brave the elements in Orinda's outdoor amphitheater.

Last year, a stunning renovation made that a whole lot easier and resulted in the opening of the Sharon Simpson Center. With a "living roof", trendy cafe, open plaza perfect for sipping pre-show wine or spinning in the setting sun if you are under the age of 12, (or even, if you're not!) the additions were crowd-pleasing.

Artists benefited too, with a true green room for receptions and dressing rooms that no longer required traipsing along muddy paths to reach the stage.

Moscone's voracious appetite for outreach did not diminish amidst the ladders and lumber and this year is no different. Cal Shakes is adding a special Teen Night for Titus, as well as the standard Grove Talks, Tasting Nights, InSight Sundays and Meet the Artists matinees.

And then there's Inside Scoop, the Monday night Loard's ice cream and Peet's coffee hours held at the Orinda Library before each production opens.

May 16th, Director Joel Sass, Dramaturg Philippa Kelly, and actors Stacy Ross and Shawn Hamilton lined up on the small stage, sandwiched between a black, robe-like costume and the modern, gray-walled set model for Titus Andronicus.

Sass said it was fantastic to be back at Cal Shakes, after directing Macbeth last season.

"Twelve years ago, funded on a \$3,000 credit card, I thought [Titus] was an incredible show," he said, about the first time he directed the production.

"Having grown up as a child with a violent imagination, it seemed the perfect play to investigate," he added lightly.

Philippa asked Hamilton why he wanted to accept the role of Aaron.

"It was the chance to play a ruthless, violent man who got to wear charming clothes," he joked.

"I've never seen Titus," Ross admitted, when confronted with the same question. "I wanted to work with Joel again, so that was a draw. I had the idea that Tamora was a Goth, that she was savage. Then I found out that she was witty, pragmatic. I found that to be a delightful surprise."

She paused, reflecting on her answer, then added, "And of course, I get to be surrounded by hot men, so that's a fringe benefit."

Titus is a simple revenge drama, Kelly explained. The complexity lies within the overt plot, with subplots that inject racial, class and gender story lines.

"There are twisting coils of plots and you see these [characters'] minds weaving amidst each other," she said.

Questions from the audience fill the second half of Inside Scoop evenings. Here are a few of the highlights:

How does a director determine how far to go [with violence and bloody scenes]?

"There are revenge actions, so I don't think it's going to be a dry show. However, it's important you don't overindulge in histrionic blood letting. A director needs to be aware of that," Sass answered.

Hamilton explained that stage blood was made of Karo syrup with red food coloring in it, adding, "And peanut butter-if you want some chunks in it," which was greeted with both laughter and groans.

Is there a historical antecedent for the story of Titus?

"There are no historical events, but there are stories with shared mythology that are found in the play," Sass said.

Another question returned to the violence and criminal behavior and how it reflects headline stories of today.

Sass suggested that although the play has heroes and villains, helping an audience understand the characters' actions-whether despicable or honorable-is important for a director to achieve.

What should I pay attention to immediately, at the start of the play, to get the most I can out of the show?

"Watch the bodies," Philippa answered.

"It's tough, I think the language is hard to get used to," Ross agreed.

"The first scene is like the pilot episode of a miniseries. It comes right out and addresses you [the audience] as citizens of Rome," he said. According to him, the directness will make it possible for viewers to jump right in to the plot.

Was it difficult for you to humanize these very larger than life, ancient citizens? Will I relate to them? I like to cry."

"It's very primal and if you like to cry, bring a bucket," Hamilton replied.

The season will also include Amanda Dehnert directing *The Verona Project* in July, Moscone leading the cast through *Candida* in August, and former Associate Artistic Director Shana Cooper making her directorial debut with *The Taming of the Shrew* in late September/Octob

Cal Shakes'

Titus Andronicus

June 1 through June 26, 2011

Go to www.calshakes.org for tickets and show times.

Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way, Orinda.

Complimentary shuttle from Orinda BART beginning 90 minutes prior to curtain.

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Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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