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TITUS ANDRONICUS BY LI RURU, UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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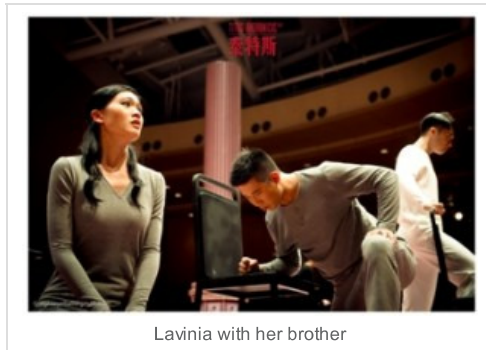


Titus Andronicus performed in Cantonese by Tang Shu-wing Theatre Studio (C) Simon Kane

Minimalism: *Titus Andronicus* in Cantonese

At variance with a worldwide craving for multimedia and theatrical spectacle, Hong Kong based Tang Shu-wing Theatre Studio's *Titus Andronicus* adopts the minimalist approach to Shakespeare's most violent and bloody tragedy. 'Minimalism is not only an artistic choice, but is also the attitude to life.' Director Tang said at the interview. [1]

The performance at London's Globe Theatre started with twelve members of the cast walking from the Tiring-House to chairs arranged in an arc across the stage. They sat with their eyes tightly closed. A minute passed, then another minute, and then another The stark scene, the motionless actors and the five-minute silence froze the air and perturbed the audience. Suddenly a horn blared from the balcony. No sooner had the audience's attention followed the sound than a woman in black shouted out the very first line of this production: 'Titus! I beg you, spare my first-born son!', and the four actors in black started to move: one leaping onto a chair; the others forming tableaux with their chairs rather than with each other.



Lavinia with her brother

Between narrating the plot and performing the characters the twelve actors, in the manner of Chinese story-telling, economically covered the first act of the original play; the victorious Roman general, Titus, returns with the captured Queen of the Goths, Tamora, and her sons; Titus refuses the throne and gives it to the undeserving Saturninus; Mutius helps rescue his sister Lavinia from marriage to Saturninus; then Titus kills his son Mutius; and finally Saturninus takes Tamora for his wife. The audience quickly realized that the four actors in black were the Goths while those in grey were the family of Titus. The new emperor Saturninus and his brother Bassanius were in white. Narration and dialogue were accompanied by exaggerated and stylized movements, gestures and tableaux. Actors were firmly attached to their chairs, either sitting or standing or moving around them, with running being expressed by stamping on the floor. The actors never interacted, even in dialogue, but looked out directly at the audience.

Strong passion and physicality appeared in the rest of the performance. For example, Titus's sons, falsely accused of the murder of Bassanius, walked through the Pit with their hands tied to a log across their shoulders, and the two moving cross-shaped figures were followed by their desperate father. Groundlings were emotionally dragged into the scene and had to react to the three piteous men, especially when Titus begged the public for mercy. Again, when Lavinia shorn of tongue and hands revealed the rape and mutilation, the scene conveyed this young woman's strength of will. Another well-constructed scene showed Aaron pleading for his baby's life, offering a glimpse of this most devilish character's human feeling for his own son. In these scenes almost every line was accompanied by a series of movements to generate a powerful physicality. As the actors commented at the interview, scenes of the production were devised through meditation and physical exercises. Director Tang believes that 'Everyone has a body and it is a container of emotion. ... Creative process starts from one's body, which brings out the actors' inner feelings.' When minimalism was adopted in the theatre, actors were in relief and their power was the focus on the stage.

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Aaron holding his baby tightly

Aspects of the production may be criticized. Indeed, I would question why the potent style of story-telling in act one did not continue through the rest of the performance, while the chairs were not used again. Yet it should be noted that the Cantonese *Titus Andronicus* was not tailored for the 2012 'Globe to Globe Festival' but had originated some years previously to address the diverse perspectives and cultures of Hong Kong's inhabitants. First presented in 2008 and then recreated in 2009 after receiving comments from local audiences, the production expressed the practitioners' understanding of Shakespeare's play and the way that this work – overcoming its cultural distances from the era and locale of Shakespeare's life – could assist twenty-first-century Hong Kong artists to explore their concerns about today's society and to pursue their individual artistic style. Not only an example of the diversity of today's theatre in Hong Kong, it is also a statement that Shakespeare is 'not of an age, but for all time' and for everyone in the world.

A quote from Director Tang Shu-wing:

The play is cruel. Yet the cruelty is not limited to one's body but in one's thoughts. That is to say both the language and ideas can be cruel. Everyone has also the chance to be cruel and violent. As Buddhism believes 'an idea derives from one's heart; an idea can make a person a Buddha.' Thus I feel the spirit behind the plot and story is relevant to us today. ... Today's world is full of violence that we can see. Yet there are hidden ones. Violence can be the language, concrete behaviour or even the eye expressions. I hope that this production shows how we should control our own violence and make the world in peace. (AMCNN.com, URL: <http://amcnn.com/node/240>)

Captions:

Fig. 1 Lavinia with her brother.

Fig. 2 Aaron holding his baby tightly.
Images courtesy of Tang Shu-wing Theatre Studio

[1] Tang Shu-wing and his team members gave an interview on 4 May 2012.

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