

TITUS

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

DIRECTOR ADENA JACOBS

ANDRONICUS



SPEED READ

A quick flick through
Titus Andronicus

Flushed with military victory over the Goths, Romans should be enjoying a period of peace, law and order. Instead, Rome is “a wilderness of tigers”.

Tamora, Queen of the Goths, is a prisoner of war along with her three sons. Despite Tamora’s pleas for mercy, Roman war hero Titus Andronicus executes Tamora’s eldest son. She swears revenge.

Two brothers, Saturninus and Bassianus, are vying to rule Rome but Titus is the people’s choice. Titus declines the seat of power and, thrust into the role of kingmaker, bestows the honour upon Saturninus. To sweeten the deal, Saturninus announces his intention to marry Lavinia, Titus’s daughter – but then has a swift change of heart and marries Tamora instead.

This outcome suits Lavinia, who is now free to marry her true love, Bassianus. But Tamora’s lover Aaron has other ideas. He incites Tamora’s sons, Chiron and Demetrius, to murder

Bassianus, and rape and mutilate Lavinia. Aaron then frames two of Titus’s sons for the crimes.

At Aaron’s suggestion, Titus sacrifices his own arm to try and secure his sons’ release – but only their severed heads are returned to him. Distraught and vengeful, Titus sends his only surviving son, Lucius, to raise an army with the Goths.

The story concludes as it began: in bloodshed. Titus has his revenge over Tamora, by killing her sons and serving them up for her dinner. He then kills her too, before Saturninus kills him.

Having murdered the nurse who delivered his newborn baby, Aaron has gone on the run. He remains unrepentant, even after he is captured by Lucius, and sentenced to death.

Lucius invades with the Goths, slays Saturninus and seizes power. An uneasy peace settles over Rome...

LOVERS AND FIGHTERS

Titus Andronicus character lowdown

TITUS ANDRONICUS

A much feared and revered Roman war hero. Titus has seen the very worst of humanity on the battlefield and paid a heavy personal price for victory over the Goths – 21 of his sons have been slain.

LAVINIA

Titus's daughter has her hopes pinned on marrying Bassianus, but she's about to become a bargaining chip in Rome's powerplays and double-crossing.

TAMORA

The Queen of Goths may now be a Roman prisoner of war, but she remains a sly and ruthless politician.

AARON THE MOOR

Tamora's lover and henchman moves through the play like a shark – propelled by bloodlust and a total lack of mercy.

ALARBUS

Tamora's eldest son is a warrior who has been captured alongside his mother. Stubbornly refuses to come quietly.

SATURNINUS

Titus's pick to become the next Emperor of Rome. His sense of entitlement and fickle taste in women make him vulnerable.

BASSIANUS

The brother of Saturninus is more of a lover than a fighter. He has one eye on Titus's daughter Lavinia, and the other eye on political power.

MARCUS ANDRONICUS

Titus's brother is a voice of reason and diplomacy. Struggles to make his voice heard amidst the blood and thunder around him.

LUCIUS, MARTIUS, QUINTUS AND MUTIUS

Titus's sons are deeply loyal. They will do anything to protect one another and their fellow Romans.

CHIRON AND DEMETRIUS

Tamora's sons are violent, misogynistic and morally bankrupt. And those are their better qualities.

PORTENTS OF DOOM

Titus Andronicus was a dazzling example of a young William Shakespeare writing with fearless experimentalism. In many ways, it was a portent of the darker plays that would follow.

Titus was Shakespeare's first foray into epic Roman tragedies, where flawed heroes clash with ambitious politicians. As with his subsequent Roman plays (*Julius Caesar*, *Antony And Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*), Shakespeare imbues his characters with light and shade. We recoil at the violence from Titus and Tamora, yet we empathise with their personal loss and the trauma they suffer.

Titus also gave Shakespeare an early chance to flex his muscles in the 'revenge tragedy' genre. The terrors that Titus and Tamora wreak upon one another are driven by their own personal sense of injustice and their desire to rebalance the scales. Shakespeare returned to this potent formula in several of his later plays, perhaps most famously in *Hamlet*.

Elsewhere in *Titus*, Aaron The Moor is like a blueprint for Shakespeare's most infamous villain of all – Iago in *Othello*. Both characters revel in making the audience complicit in their malevolent plans. Both lack remorse or pity for their victims. And both remain a source of morbid fascination for audiences to this day.

A WARNING

Like many contemporary stage productions of *Titus Andronicus*, we expect that the confronting and horrific themes will challenge modern audiences in a way it didn't when originally written – a time when public hangings were entertainment. Notoriously the on-stage atrocities have caused audiences to feel queasy (Deborah Warner's production in 1986), faint (Shakespeare's Globe's production in 2014)

and vomit (the Royal Shakespeare Company's production in 2017). Rape, cannibalism, infanticide, amputation – these visceral images that Shakespeare wrote are difficult to view, and audience members are encouraged to consider carefully whether this subject matter, when viewed on stage, might trigger an emotional or physical response.

BODY COUNT

By the time the curtain comes down on *Titus Andronicus*, the stage is littered with bodies. Here's a quick countdown of casualties.



Before the play even starts, Titus has lost 21 sons in battle.



Tamora's son Alarbus is sacrificed by Titus's sons.



Titus kills his own son, Mutius.



Aaron murders the nurse who has just delivered his newborn child.



Titus kills Chiron and Demetrius, then cooks and serves them up in a pie for their unwitting mother Tamora.



Chiron and Demetrius murder the emperor's brother Bassianus.



In his final act of revenge, Titus kills Tamora.



Tamora's husband, Emperor Saturninus, kills Titus.



Emperor Saturninus has Titus's sons, Martius and Quintus, beheaded.



Chiron and Demetrius rape and mutilate Lavinia, who is eventually killed by Titus, to end her suffering.



Emperor Saturninus orders the death of a Clown.



Lucius, Titus's sole surviving son, kills Emperor Saturninus.



Newly crowned Emperor Lucius orders the death of Aaron.



SAY WHAT?

Post-show conversation starters to make you look smart

THAT WAS THEN

Records suggest that *Titus Andronicus* was the first ever tragedy Shakespeare wrote and that it was immediately a box office smash. The blood and gore wouldn't have discouraged the Elizabethan audience at all. After all, they used to flock to see convicted criminals being hanged, drawn and quartered.

Like many of Shakespeare's plays, *Titus Andronicus* has fallen in and out of favour with audiences down the years. After its initial popularity, the play was considered too violent to be staged from the mid-17th century until the early 20th century. Since then, it's become a cherished collector's item for many theatre lovers.

Titus Andronicus is not based on actual events in Roman history, unlike Shakespeare plays such as *Julius Caesar* and *Antony And Cleopatra*. Instead, the playwright borrowed elements from Ovid's *Metamorphosis VI* and may have drawn inspiration from an old Italian tale called *The History of Titus Andronicus*.

THIS IS NOW

This new production offers the rare chance to see female actors take the lead roles in *Titus Andronicus*. For Director Adena Jacobs the play "is really about parents and children" and the transference of violence from parent to child. "I wondered what it would be like if there were three mothers at the centre of the play" she says. Titus, Tamora and Aaron will not be gendered as women in the production, Jacobs adds, "but nevertheless the audience will know they are women".

Titus Andronicus has been described as "Shakespeare's Tarantino Play" and it's easy to see why. Just like Quentin Tarantino's movies, *Titus Andronicus* draws upon the comedic potential of violence, ratchets up the tension and then delivers a bloody climax.

When casting for the 1999 movie adaptation of *Titus Andronicus*, director Julie Taymor found the ideal lead: Anthony Hopkins, who had played serial killer Hannibal Lector in *The Silence of the Lambs*.