

Everything Old is New Again: how can directors stage the violence in *Titus Andronicus* using effective stylistic choices to engage audiences in contextually relevant social, moral and ethical issues?

Contemporary directors have the opportunity to use William Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* as a platform to comment on the dangers of basic human responses to social distrust and injustice relevant to the context in which they are working. The violence in the play is vital; directors must not discount it. To understand the rationale for the inclusion of such violence, it is essential to know the characters and how they influence each other's actions based on internal triggers and vengeful desires. Understanding the Elizabethan relevance of the violence allows directors to make connections to their audience's context and use a range of techniques and make stylistic choices to ensure the true meaning of the violence is not overlooked as merely graphic acts. A detailed exploration of Peter Brook's 1955 production, in which he symbolised the nature of the violence to visually communicate the deeper meaning of the play, and the heightened stylised violence in Julie Taymor's 1999 film adaptation, can enable directors to better understand how different directorial choices regarding the presentation, and representation, of the violence in the play can resound strongly with contemporary social, moral and ethical issues. Though the presentation may be altered to be more or less gory from production to production, the violent

deeds in the play are essential to successfully exploring the danger of hasty responses to social distrust and injustice.

Directors must understand that the development of relationships between characters is key to appropriately motivating the violent actions in the play; regardless of the style of presentation. Irrespective of their social and cultural contexts, directors must work with their actors to make clear the characters' intentions and relationships within the plot. Aaron the Moor is an example of the necessity of effectively crafted and convincingly motivated characters, so much so that the character, when cut from a heavily-reduced version of the play produced by Kenneth Tynan and Peter Myers in 1951, inspired J. C. Trewin to write in the *Illustrated News* November 24, 1951 that "a *Titus* without the figure of Aaron the Moor can hardly be counted" (qtd. in Waith 51) as a respectable part of the play's production history. The interactions that Aaron has with other characters stimulates or otherwise directs much of the violence, providing grounds for the actions of other characters; he is, as stated at one point, the "Chief architect and plotter of these woes" (V.3.121). He is responsible for spurring on Demetrius and Chiron to rape Lavinia and to "strike her home by force" (II.1.119) which ignites the fire of revenge in Titus, further fueled by Aaron's framing of Titus' two sons for the murder of Bassianus. The central role of the Moor in the tragic downfall of Titus cannot be understated; physically symbolised when Aaron manipulates Titus enough to convince him to sever his own hand. While the Moor is

central in his connections to all key characters and his self-professed ability to “kill a man, or else devise his death” (V.1.28), he is also the sole character which the audience has difficulty sympathising with for the majority of the play. He kills and plots for enjoyment, until acting to protect his new-born son: “This maugre all the world will I [Aaron] keep safe” (IV.2.110). The perception of Aaron as a vindictive and spiteful being, and his goal to protect his child, is timeless and not bound by geographic context. A director will understand, and stage the play to communicate, that the Moor is the antagonist based on the lack of justification for his violent actions and schemes, which audiences in any context will understand.

If a director was to remove or downplay the violence, the characters’ motives and responses would weaken as a result of the interconnected reasons for the vengeful actions that are performed. Titus seeks revenge for vengeance sought against him. He sets his tragic plight in motion upon sacrificing Tamora’s son despite her desperate pleas to reverse his decision. Titus maintains the ruling that “die he must” (I.1.25), believing it will prevent the deceased causing ominous activity amongst the living (Hilaire 312), as encouraged by Lucius who justifies the sacrificial ritual “That so the shadows be not unappeased, / Nor we disturbed with prodigies on earth” (I.1.100-1). Titus’ actions foreshadow the revenge sought and actioned by Tamora, ordering the beheading of two of his remaining sons in Act 3, Scene 1. A director needs to communicate the essential nature of these relationships and interactions, ensuring that

no character is branded as ‘evil’, but rather that it is clear what motivates them or, in the case of the Moor, that some brains are wired for violence. The audience should not be led to view the violent acts as senseless and unmotivated, they must be left with an impression of the dangerous outcomes of hasty reactions to social distrust and injustice. This is a concept relevant to any social or cultural context, linking to base human emotions and desires for equity and validation. The play’s violence must be portrayed in such a way that the director conveys this message to their particular audience. Tamora’s ‘eye for an eye’ reaction to the murderous sacrificing of her son is representative of the gang or mob mentality of certain radicalised violent extremist groups that exist in many contexts, and is a reminder of the need for effective processes of persecution, judgement and punishment.

Elizabethan audiences would not likely have been shocked by the violence in the original productions, the sharp and vengeful nature of the legal system of the time would have been similar to the private vengeance sought by characters in the play. While the brutal nature of the actions may have been familiar to the initial audience, the seemingly senseless and sensationalised number of violent acts were likely to have made onlookers take note (Cook 271). It is likely that Shakespeare was using his play as a platform to present a dim view on the fundamental human tendency to seek ultimate revenge for wrongdoings. From a New Historicist and Reformist perspective, it can be argued that a political statement was being made about the

inadequate Elizabethan system of law and punishment in an attempt to campaign for changes and updates to the clunky and unfair processes, which carried harsh punishments with little need for fair trials (Rowse). In contemporary theatre practice, as Waith explains in her introduction to the play, dramatic practitioners would link Shakespeare's intention to shock the audience into an awareness of their social state to Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (Gordon 114). This is a style of theatre which "inspires us with the fiery magnetism of its images and acts upon us like a spiritual therapeutics whose touch can never be forgotten" (Gorelick 263). What Shakespeare provides to directors in all eras is the stimulus with which they can build these images to engage audiences in socially and culturally relevant concerns. It may be argued that the playwright's purpose has been served and is no longer relevant, though in many respects it is a purpose that, being to confront audiences with base human desires and fears, remains necessary on modern stages. It is a responsibility of theatre directors to apply their talent and skills in such a way that the violence in the play highlights particularly relevant social, moral and ethical concerns of the time and location in which their production is produced. To fulfil this duty, directors must be able to interpret the play in the original Elizabethan context as well as apply it to the context in which they are working, and in which their audience experiences the play. Working from a New Historicist interpretation, directors can come to understand how Shakespeare might have been staging ideas and concerns about the system of law,

judgement and punishment of the time. Robson's theory of Presentism can then be applied in order to provide scholarly reflections on the matter of violence in the play as a way of enabling directors to create relevant adaptations. Presentist critics ascertain that we must acknowledge the present when researching the past (Grady & Hawkes 3); a director must make the past relevant to issues and concerns important to the present audience. These reflections can guide directors of modern productions of *Titus Andronicus* to make the violence and gore, which is inherent to the plot, work to serve contextually relevant purposes that extend upon the playwright's original ability to raise awareness of the dangerous outcomes when reacting to injustice and "depicts the threat of endless private vengeance that calls the law into being" (Yoshino 206); a stronger force for promoting more sophisticated forms of judgement and law as opposed to being a solely reactive process.

It is the successful combination of perspectives that led to Peter Brook's 1955 production of Shakespeare's first tragedy. Heavily influenced by the Avant Garde movement initiated in the late nineteenth century, Brook sums up the aim of his work nicely when he states his goal to "capture in our arts the invisible currents that rule our lives" (Brook 45). Artaud's approach of visually 'shocking' audiences into a social and cultural awareness also resonated with Brook and inspired his work (Marowitz 152). The creation of visceral images that are central to this type of theatre were very present in Brook's production, where the highly stylised acts of violence

allowed focus to be on the lingering pain following, rather than on, the violent deeds. Understanding that the play is not only about the violent acts that result from impulsive reactions to mistreatment, but more to do with the long-lasting impact of such vengeful behaviour, provides directors a certain creative freedom in which they can manipulate the showcasing of the violence to emphasise their key message.

While modern audiences are not prevented from seeing acts of extreme violence, evident in television programs such as *Game of Thrones*, and even relatively recent productions of this play have had a “gleeful emphasis on [the] horrors” (Waith 51) and been met with great acclaim. If we consider Brook’s production, staged at Stratford with Laurence Olivier in the title role, we can learn how mesmerising and effective symbolic acts of violence can be. According to a review from Richard David, “the staging was powerfully simple” (qtd. in Waith 54) and highly symbolic, using subdued colours punctuated with shades of red to visualise the rising action and tension. Brook stylised the acts of violence to boost the perceived horrors resulting from these actions (55) – the scarlet streamers spewing from Lavinia’s mouth served as a constant visual reminder of her ongoing struggle. While there is little research specifically into the design of Brook’s production, the social and political context in which he was working aligns with the point made earlier about directors needing to interpret the play both from New Historicist and Presentist perspectives. Brook is certainly no stranger to Shakespeare, having directed numerous productions prior to,

and following, this landmark version of *Titus Andronicus*, so it is viable to believe that he would have been well aware of the Elizabethan context in which the plot was developed. Additionally, his own context, and therefore that of his audience, allowed for parallels to be drawn between the fear of the characters and the communal fear of the Western world in a war-torn environment. A Presentist interpretation of Brook's production makes it very plausible to link the recurring symbolic use of the colour red to the all-consuming fear of communism experienced by the Western world in the years bookending Brook's production – the end of WWII, The Korean War and the beginnings of the Vietnam War, as well as the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, which was at boiling point (Deighton 112) at the time Brook would have been working on his production. Brook expertly proved that *Titus Andronicus* can be directed to engage audiences in contemporary matters of high importance by utilising the violence within the play to link to social issues relevant to the context in which he and his audience lived; making directorial choices to showcase this relevance.

A Presentist approach to interpreting and directing the play would certainly have to acknowledge the current global climate in which many fear the threats of terrorism, unstable gun laws and social and civil unrest caused by discrimination, violence, and inequities. The “endless private vengeance” (Yoshino 206) is now becoming a very public style of vengeance; it is widespread news as a result of the differing beliefs and values of extremist groups and individuals in the global community. Yoshino

explains that “our times are more like Elizabethan times along a crucial dimension: the sense of the fragility of the rule of law” (208). Consider the public demonstrations of religious extremists who behead members of the public, arrange and carry out mass shootings in public places, attack clubs and recreational places in response to their own opinions of the demographic that frequent such places. Additionally, much of the unrest and terrorist acts are in response to feeling threatened and attacked in the first place; resembled by Tamora’s acts of revenge. Directors can take a presentist approach to their work by playing with the idea that the play becomes an extended game of tit-for-tat. As previously explained, the initial trigger for revenge is “the burial of Titus's sons that includes as part of the ritual the sacrifice of Alarbus, [providing] Tamora with the impetus to seek revenge against Titus” (Hilaire 311). This is an example of a social and religious belief causing personal loss, an overly simplified example of what can go on to cause acts of terrorism that seem justified on one hand (Crenshaw 380) and as acts of pure evil on the other. Hilaire also makes the relevant point that “having just ended one war outside the walls of Rome, Titus returns to find Rome on the brink of a new war - this time within the city - as Saturninus and Bassianus fight over the rights of succession” (312). The political bickering in the opening scene seems unfit to be the cause of war, though provides contemporary directors with inspiration to utilise the theatrical techniques of Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski in their staging of the play to emphasise the moral

corruptness of, many times, unwarranted wars that take place over acts of terrorism – themselves a result of the inability to accept different beliefs and opinions. Applying Artaud and Grotowski’s techniques, directors can hone in on the specific images they want to show audiences, to which the violence, and what results from it, are central; removing all that seems superfluous to achieving this end (Grotowski, Wiewiorowski & Morris 62).

Julie Taymor successfully avoids meaningless exposition, highlighting the significance of the violence in Shakespeare's text by actually adding extra snippets of violence into her 1999 film adaptation of the play. She adds “flashbacks and visions of the experiences of violence the protagonists undergo. In these flashbacks, violence is portrayed in a hyperbolic, stylised manner” (Augusti 58). Taymor has successfully taken the motivations for revenge provided by the script and grounded the actions of key characters in deeper psychological reasoning. Effectively, this version provides somewhat of a prequel to Brook’s staging in that the audience is privy to the experiences that have moulded the characters into agents of violence and get to see the lasting impacts represented in the actions of the play’s characters, whereas Brook provides lingering memories of these acts as the play progresses. Taymor has utilised the capabilities offered by the film medium, including jump-cuts, flashbacks, angles, fades and time-lapse, to emphasise an increasingly relevant social issue: the ongoing impacts of abuse and discrimination. Lavinia is presented “as a glamourised victim;

as a Marilyn Monroe that fearfully and passively accepts the siege to which she is submitted by the exacerbated masculinity of Tamora's sons" (59), shocking the viewer into a realisation of the sexist biases that have existed in countless rape cases throughout time. The concept of a learned culture and taught hatred is clearly shown on screen when Young Lucius obviously tries to please his father by killing a fly, believing he is justified in his actions because of subconscious racist views engrained into his culture, motivating him to remark that "It was a black, ill-favoured fly, [...] therefore I killed it" (III.2.72-3). The audience is forced to deconstruct the violence presented to them and categorise it into its various motivations; the seeds of hatred and violence that grew into the vengeful acts in the plot. Not only is the audience asked to understand the violence as more than passive observers, they are forced to consider their place in society and what role they have played in building, or at least not reducing, the violence and abuse taking place. Taymor, like Brook, uses a range of directorial approaches to connect the play with the social and cultural contexts of her intended audience.

The combination of New Historicist and Presentist views on the play suggests that all productions will be, to an extent, Reformist by nature. Accounts of many successful versions of the play, particularly those by Brook and Taymor, confirm that they do not downplay the violence – they testify as to its vitality! What these directors prove is that it is not effective to present straight violence to an audience; it is not shocking

enough. Sadly, it is too close to reality and regular contemporary viewing to have a strong impact that can inspire reform. Taymor made this point when editing particular scenes to resemble violent video games, highlighting the cultural regularity of violence (Augusti 63). This is why it is now more common, and more highly regarded, to present highly stylised or exaggerated violence, a refined representation of violence that can sustain audience engagement in a deeper meaning of the staged actions. It can be argued that both Brook and Taymor have a Reformist, or at least a public awareness raising, intention, as can be said for Shakespeare himself.

Arguably, Shakespeare wrote *Titus Andronicus* to campaign for a revision of the illogical criminal justice system that existed in Elizabethan society. Brook has an emphasis on the lingering impacts of hasty decisions and hatred relevant to a world which feared communism, and Taymor directed her film adaptation to demonstrate how abuse and discrimination can have long-lasting effects on an individual and a ripple effect on the people with whom victims associate. To view each version of the play separately would prove very distinct points, however, collectively they confirm the essential nature of the violence in the play. This is the key point that directors must remember when staging the play – the true meaning is lost if the violence is removed. The creative freedom comes in determining the best methods of communicating the violent actions of the play, and this depends on the social and cultural context within which the director is working. It must be decided what

contextual issue will be in focus in order for the most effective styles and techniques to be employed in the creation of meaning for specific audiences. What allows the play to maintain relevancy in different eras is the underlying exploration of base human emotions and desires and the different ways that these are enacted and responded to. Brook's 1955 production links to global fears, and Taymor's more recent link to personal and learned fears that exist in many communities, suggest that society will always have issues that are relevant to *Titus Andronicus*. The director has the responsibility to find the best means of representing these issues through a Presentist approach to the play in order to actively promote social and cultural reform.

Works Cited

- Aronson, A. "Peter Brook: The Empty Stage." *The New York Times* 24 April 2005. Web. 24 July 2016.
- Augusti, C. E. "Julie Taymor's "Titus" (1999): Framing Violence and Activating Responsibility." *Atlantis* 28.1 (2006): 57-70. Print.
- Brook, P. *The Empty Space*, New York: Touchstone, 1968. Print.
- Cook, A., J. *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare's London*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981. Print.
- Crenshaw, M. "The Causes of Terrorism." *Comparative Politics, Ph.D. Programs in Political Science, City University of New York* 13.4 (1981): 379-399.
- Deighton, A. "Britain and the Cold War, 1944-1955." *The Cambridge History of the Cold War Volume 1: Origins*. Ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Arne Westad. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 112-132. Print.
- Gordon, M. "Kestutis Nakas: Serial Maker." *The Drama Review* 29.1 (1985): 113-115.
- Gorelick, N. "Life in Excess: Insurrection and Expenditure in Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty." *Discourse* 33.2 (2011): 263-279.
- Grady, Hugh, & Hawkes, Terence, eds. *Presentist Shakespeares*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Grotowski, J., Wiewiorowski, T. K., & Morris, K. "Towards the Poor Theatre." *The Tulane Drama Review* 11.3 (1967): 60-65.
- Hilaire, D., A. "Allusion and Sacrifice in 'Titus Andronicus'." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 49.2 (2009): 311-331.
- Marowitz, C. "Notes on The Theatre of Cruelty." *The Tulane Drama Review* 11.2 (1966): 152-172.
- Robson, Mark. "Presentism." *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*. Ed. Michael Ryan. Blackwell Publishing. Web. 24 July 2016.
- Rowse, A. L. *The Elizabethan Renaissance: The Life of the Society*. England: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2000. Print.
- Theriault, S., A. "The Development of Theatre: Peter Brook and the Human Connection." *Inquiries Journal* 1.12 (2009): 1.
- Waith, Eugene, ed. *The Oxford Shakespeare Titus Andronicus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- Yoshino, K. "Revenge as Revenant: Titus Andronicus and the Rule of Law." *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 21.2 (2013): 203-225.