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A World of Cruelty in *Titus Andronicus*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing) by Joshua Kahan Brody

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2013
The thesis of Joshua Kahan Brody is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013
DEDICATION

To my family, whose support and never ending love and faith in me leads me to believe in the possibility of impossibility. To Gabor Tompa, for believing in me and without whom none of this would have been possible. And to Alireza Moaddel, projections operator, who left us long before his time during the run of the show.
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I am extremely grateful to everyone I have had the opportunity to work with during my time at the University of California, San Diego. Our company of misfit artists has provided me with inspiration, comfort, and love throughout my time here. I am especially thankful for the entire class of 2013 who have been my family here since day one.

Many thanks to the incredible faculty and staff of the UCSD Department of Theatre and Dance who instruct, inspire, and make the daunting seem manageable. And of course, most importantly, thank you to my entire Titus Andronicus family: cast, creative team, and crew. Without them, these pages would be blank.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A World of Cruelty in *Titus Andronicus*

by

Joshua Kahan Brody

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair

*Titus Andronicus* scares me. It scares me because it presents a world so far from what I hope our world is, but so close to what I fear our world is. It is a world of cruelty, of a perverse and violent logic driven by insatiable revenge.

The challenge of the production was to create a clear and cruel world that forced the audience to deal with the reality of the horror of the events of the play. We sought to create a space where there was nowhere to hide, a harsh and unflattering lighting design that exposed rather than pleased the eye, a sound design that instilled a feeling of creeping horror. Through the style of acting, we strove to eliminate self-pity and lament from the emotional language of the play. Only in its final moments is the audience granted a kind of catharsis, when the young woman playing Young Lucius
removes her boy’s wig to reveal the actor, alone, weeping at the tragedy and the cruelty of the world that surrounds her.

At my advisor’s urging to challenge myself, I chose to take on a play that is largely devoid of the redemptive qualities of life. The world of *Titus Andronicus* is replete with cruelty and violence. It is a profane world, one driven by a perverse logic that perpetuates its hatred and barbarism.
A World of Cruelty in *Titus Andronicus*

In 2004, I played Demetrius in a production of *Titus Andronicus* during my freshman year at Yale. It seems fitting, then, that I chose to tackle this unwieldy play as my thesis project for my Master’s degree at UC - San Diego. When it came to choosing a thesis, I knew I wanted to deal with Shakespeare in some way. As André Antoine said, “a man of the theatre, whether an actor or director, had finally to measure himself in Shakespeare.”¹ Much of my recent work during my graduate studies and outside of them, has been in the sacred theatre, the ritual theatre, as well as in plays that deal largely with hope, love, and other redemptive qualities of humanity. At my advisor’s urging to challenge myself, I chose to take on a play that is largely devoid of those qualities. The world of *Titus Andronicus* is replete with cruelty and violence. It is a profane world, one driven by a perverse logic that perpetuates its hatred and barbarism.

**WHY *Titus Andronicus***

This play scares me. It makes me deeply uncomfortable. It posits a world that I desperately wish to be not reflective of our own. And then we see tragic and cruel events such as the Newtown, CT school shooting and subsequent response that occurred during our rehearsal process. Such events led me, in my darker, more despairing moments, when I was unable to keep the play at arm’s length, towards a truly abysmal view of the world.

We walk around in a kind of willful blindness to the horrors that it presents. This is a human necessity. Were we to be in a constant state of awareness of the cruelty that

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people are capable of, the only rational response would be despair. But, as I learned over the course of my work on *Titus Andronicus*, it is an absolutely essential function of art to remind us of the universal fact of cruelty, if only to inspire us to fight against such impulses. Generosity, kindness, and compassion are the enemies of cruelty. It is only when we are shown such cruelty, in the heightened way that theatre can, that we can aspire to do better. By allowing the horrors of the world to truly affect us, we allow ourselves a necessary examination of the darker aspects of humanity.

For me, personally, it was crucial that I direct a play for my thesis that put me in the uncomfortable place that this play does. It was an unpleasant world to live in for the length of time that I had to in order to direct the production. But it stretched my creativity and imaginative capacities in ways that I could not have imagined.

CONCEPT

The word and idea of “cruelty” was at the core of our production of *Titus Andronicus*. At every turn, in the development of each situation, we returned to a cruel dynamic.

The characters of this world are so enveloped in a cruel and perverse logic that it never occurs to them to stop and try to put an end to the cycle of violence in which they participate. Peace and love are never an option. Each cruel action requires a greater reaction. What begins as brutal murder masked by sanctity ends with cannibalism and wholesale slaughter.
This is a world of moral and physical decay. Titus and his sons return from the wars that Rome has sent them to as broken men. Whether they are aware of it or not the horrors of their lives have rotted them from the inside out. Titus himself is a decaying specimen, losing his status, his family, and his hand before eventually surrendering his life in order to perpetuate the order of a cruel world. The one bastion of light in the world of darkness is Lavinia, and she is quickly stained, deflowered, maimed, and utterly destroyed. Even acts of seeming kindness, such as Titus’ killing of Lavinia are, in fact, very cruel actions.

Inspired by Christopher Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta, in which all men (not just Jews as the title might suggest) are equally cruel and duplicitous, it was very important to me that the Romans, and the Andronici specifically, not seem innocent of the same cruelty that Aaron, Tamora, and her children are. Lest we forget, the first act of brutality is carried out by the Andronici in vengeance for their slain brethren. The irony, then of Marcus’ line “Thou are a Roman, be not barbarous,” is not lost on us. The inclusion of the humiliating “dance” that the Goths are forced to perform for the newly crowned emperor also serves to highlight the barbarity of the Romans. Not only are they not exempt from the cruelty of the world of the play, but also they enforce and perpetuate it. It is then inevitable and necessary that the Goths perform acts of cruelty on par with those of the Romans.

2 Titus Andronicus, I.i.375.
PRE-SHOW – “Let good men call for grace”

In my initial work on the play, I began with a prologue that had Aaron performing an edited version of William Butler Yeats’ “The Second Coming.” In particular, the lines “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” seemed apropos as an introduction to this world. The poem, along with several others by Yeats, served as early inspiration for me. However, as rehearsals progressed, the poem felt tacked on and outside the world of the play. I ultimately chose to cut the poem, but beginning the play with Aaron still seemed necessary. Aaron is the embodiment of the cruelty and evil of the play. As such, it needed to be him that drew us in. I chose to have Maurice Williams, the actor playing Aaron, out on stage standing in the center, his face half-hidden by a hood as soon as the audience began filing into the theater. After a curtain speech written (by me) in shoddy iambic pentameter, Aaron introduces the play with a line from later in the play, a threat of things to come: “Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace: / Aaron will have his soul black like his face.” He is led away and the floodgates of cruelty are opened.

ACT I – “Thou art a Roman, be not barbarous”

From the very start, I had a very clear image of the beginning of the play: Saturninus and Bassianus performing their text to the audience in the form of political stump speeches that are then repeated in an increasingly aggressive way as they overlap and devour one another. Violence has even permeated rhetoric in this world. We began the process with the idea that these speeches would be filmed by people with cameras and

\(^3\) *Titus Andronicus*, III.i.203-204.
projected as live news feed. Due to technical problems involving the projection surface and the quality of projections, we ended up cutting the cameras and achieved the same effect of a public, political brawl simply by using wireless microphones. Cutting the cameras was an easy decision and a very hard one. It was difficult because it meant me letting go of an idea I had held on to for a very long time, a very early idea for the play. It was easy because anyone watching could see that it simply didn’t work in the space: the projections were unclear, the cameras didn’t know what to film and the gesture became illustrative. The effect of the crescendo of the music along with the increasing volume of the microphones achieved the same effect in a much stronger fashion. They are silenced by Marcus, who cuts off their microphones and reduces them to street brawlers. The playing field is even and Saturninus begins to become almost clownish in his pursuit of power and status.

Using an image that came to me in a dream, Titus’ fallen sons are carried through the audience, represented by funeral urns with lit candles in them. This moment of sacredness and ritual sets up the brutality to come. Before they are even buried, Titus, at Lucius’ behest, has ordered the torture and murder of Tamora’s eldest son Alarbus. They “hew his limbs and on a pile / sacrifice his flesh.” The actor playing Alarbus also later plays Young Lucius, hoping to echo the sacrifice of a son and highlight the inexplicable disparity of the way life is valued (or not) in the play. Though the act is carried out offstage, Alarbus is dragged off in a violent manner, kicking and screaming and accompanied by sound and music that instills terror in the audience. The silence after his death

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4 Ibid, I.i.97-98.
death is the silence of awe. The Romans have shown their cruelty and the Goths have felt it. The stage is set for the tragedy.

Titus removes his shoes as Tamora begs for Alarbus’ life in a gesture of both dismissal and of letting down his guard. Everyone else is in solid boots while he will remain barefoot, vulnerable in a sharp world, until putting his boots back on after Quintus and Martius’ heads are returned to him.

The politics of Rome continue and Titus, like Lear, cedes his power with the pride of a man who does not know that without his power, he is nothing. What is a soldier without a war? Now that they are not at war, Titus’ last opportunity to salvage himself is lost when he abdicates his own populist claim to the throne in favor of Saturninus. He cannot conceive of a world in which he is not a powerful man, the king of a cruel tribe. What Titus fails to realize is that without such power, he is in a situation that he cannot win. Or, at least, he cannot win and survive.

The Romans present the Goths to Saturninus as the final gesture of Titus ceding power and authority. Adding insult to injury, only a few minutes after the sacrifice of Alarbus, the Andronici force Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius to perform a humiliating dance. They expose their bodies to the emperor; they terrorize and debase them in public. This “dance” piece is clearly not in the original text of the play, but it helps to play against the text and its ideas of honor and civility. We keep hearing about the “barbarous” Goths and the “noble” Romans, but in the first act of the play it is the Romans who seem barbaric and cruel. The Goths are almost pitiable. The “dance” is an expression of the cruelty of the Romans that transcends physical violence. They are not content to merely
be the victors in combat and physically dominant over the Goths. They must also destroy them emotionally, reduce them to the lowest point possible. Theatrically, this serves to dramatize Tamora’s rise more strongly. She is actually at the emperor’s feet, kissing his shoes while he touches her sexually. In just a few moments, she will be up on the elevated space and made empress of Rome.

Defending Bassianus and Lavinia from Saturninus, Titus’ son Mutius incurs his father’s wrath. I cast a young-looking woman as Mutius to create a greater contrast between this innocent looking boy and his grizzled warrior-father. In response to Mutius’ betrayal, Titus kills him. In our production, a simple death by stabbing seemed insufficient. Titus brawls with his son and ends up strangling him, killing him with his bare hands in an action that takes just a little too long for the audience’s comfort. Again, we see a gesture of cruelty perpetrated by the Romans before the Goth revenge has really gotten into full swing. I chose to have Chiron and Demetrius watch gleefully as Titus commits infanticide. They do not learn this cruelty from Titus, but it is a moment when they begin to feel at home in Rome. If this is a world where a father can kill his son in public, maybe they’ll fit right in. Tamora has several moments of incorporation into Rome. Chiron and Demetrius do not have one in the text, so this moment of them enjoying the upswing in their situation is important for me in the storytelling.

After some negotiation, Mutius is buried and quickly forgotten about. We do not grant him the same ceremony as his brothers in urns. He is unceremoniously disposed of, and the conflict dissipates as Tamora induces Saturninus to pardon Titus so that she might have her own revenge. She uses her sexuality on him like he is a horny teenager,
stroking his penis while vowing revenge upon the Andronici. He is easily seduced and performs a public version of generosity and clemency to keep up an imperial image for the people of Rome. This relationship to the public (the audience) is crucial for Saturninus and is prevalent in the entire first act.

When Aaron first begins to speak, he has actually been sitting on stage the whole time. While the Folio calls for an exit and re-entrance, it didn’t make sense in the concept of our production. Since Aaron exists as a kind of a priori presence of evil and cruelty, we need to feel that he has never left. One of the powerful effects of this choice is that the audience has mostly forgotten that they ever saw Aaron placed there in the first place. When the light comes back up on him, it serves as a reminder of the cruelty that has been there from the beginning. Since cruelty cannot be stopped and all measures to try to stop it are merely pretense, Aaron removes his own handcuffs as if they were toys. He sheds his “servile weeds” on stage and we see a man attired in clothing that doesn’t firmly lock him into either a Roman or Goth world. He can shift and move between worlds with ease as he sews the seeds of discord throughout the play.

The first act ends with Aaron steering Chiron and Demetrius towards the plot to rape Lavinia and murder Bassianus. Having a female Chiron was something of a controversial choice prior to casting. Our Chiron is a woman and there was some question as to the viability of a female rapist and what that says, politically. For me, a female Chiron sets up an important feature of the rape of Lavinia. Rape is a crime of power and violence, not an act of lust or love. Although our Chiron is tacitly assumed to be a lesbian, the sexual desire is not the significant feature of the crime. They rape
Lavinia because it is the cruel thing to do, because it fits so soundly within the logic of their world. And so, the rape need not be about male-female sexual violence as much as it is about the most vicious and violent act they can commit. By leaving her alive after her attack, we know that their cruel intent is to induce suffering. The rape is not the end goal, merely the first step towards an unrepentant and cruel end.

**ACT II – “Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand”**

With the second act of the play, we begin on a cacophonic, upbeat note. All past grudges have been seemingly forgotten for the first scene as Titus and Marcus lead the Romans and newly adopted Romans on a hunt. We staged this as a procession across the elevated space to contrast with the openness of the downstage area. Up on the platform, the bridge, there is movement of great speed and enthusiasm, but only in a narrow confine and in a singular direction. It strikes the feeling of confinement that a cruel world creates. This is not a world of boundless possibility. It is one in which all roads lead inexorably towards cruel ends.

Tamora and Aaron share what might be considered the only moment of love in the play. They are passionately sexually interested in one another. They both love each other and lust after one another to the point that they can’t anticipate each other’s betrayals later in the play (her telling him to kill the baby and him disobeying and fleeing the city).

Lavinia and Bassianus happen upon Tamora as her congress with Aaron ceases. Far from being gracious or even just immediately leaving to tell Saturninus, they stay to
torment her. They taunt, humiliate, and dehumanize her before Demetrius and Chiron arrive to wreak their bloody havoc. When it comes to Bassianus’ death, we enter a slightly abstract space. I was inspired by the Greek myth of Antaeus and Hercules. Antaeus was a demi-god whose strength was derived from the Earth, his mother. So every time he was thrown to the ground in combat, he would spring up again, his strength renewed. As Hercules discovered this, he lifted him off the ground until his strength ebbed away and then crushed him in his arms. This is how I envisioned Bassianus’ death. We used a gesture of breaking the spine to create a more concrete finale to the death, but the idea remained.

Chiron and Demetrius’ use of the GoPro video camera was the single instance of live video feed that didn’t get cut from the show. Our projections designer, Ryan Brady, used a high contrast black and white filter to increase the clarity that helped with visibility. The camera remains because it is a nod to the perversity of witnessing. There is a huge difference between the role of a witness to an atrocity like the Holocaust, for example, and the cruel voyeurism of witnessing in the YouTube age. Chiron and Demetrius are filming themselves committing murders and rapes as casually as one might post a video of oneself singing on YouTube. It speaks to the callused way in which we view violence as entertainment. Moreover, there is an added humiliation for Lavinia’s woes to be caught on video. She dreads the publicity of her shame and her downfall and so Chiron and Demetrius make it that much more visible, that much more public. This is true in the scene where Bassianus is murdered, as well as in the scene where she is revealed after being raped.
In what is probably the most aesthetically arresting and emotionally horrifying moment of the production, Lavinia is discovered by Marcus. In the original text, Marcus has a cumbersome monologue in which he bemoans her fate and poetically describes her wounds and her suffering. Since Marcus is the character who most relies on his words instead of his actions, I wanted to take away his words. Just as the play asks who is the warrior without a war, I wanted to ask who is the orator without his words? I began by cutting the text down to a kind of nonsense poem, using only the last word or two of each line. In the first read through it was striking, a kind of homage to some of Antonin Artaud’s poetry. However, on our feet, in space, even those words felt unequal to the moment. We ended up cutting the entirety of the text. The only sounds to cut through the painful, oppressive, and seemingly never-ending silence were the flickering fluorescent bulbs, a single scream and finally Marcus trying to shush her. The final line of Marcus’ monologue in the original text is “O, could our mourning ease thy misery!” And that is exactly the situation. No amount of mourning could possibly ease her misery just as no text can contain the enormity of the moment. A naked woman, raped, hands and tongue cut out, muzzled is on stage trying to escape her uncle’s comfort. She would like to just be left to die but this world is too cruel for even that mercy. The image is enough and the text would only serve to weaken it.

ACT III – “Worthy Andronicus, ill art thou repaid”

This is the nadir of the play for Titus. Again the elevated bridge is used as a one-way passage, this time for Quintus and Martius on their way to execution. The spatial
difference between Titus and his sons (him below, them above) makes rescue impossible. He can only look on and lament in vain while they march towards a predetermined end. This image was another early one for me: Titus, below, trying to get at his sons and being unable to physically even reach them. It helps to dramatize Titus’ situation and also lifts his speeches out of self-pity and self-lament. He is striving for something; he is in conflict against the very distance that separates him from his sons. He “tells his sorrows to the stones”⁶ because Rome is deaf to his pleas and he cannot engage in physical action to free his sons from their doom. He is metaphorically unarmed in the play long before his hand is literally taken from him.

When Lavinia is revealed, maimed and deflowered, to Titus and Lucius, there is an interesting gap in Lucius’ text. There is a long period, between when Lavinia is revealed and when Aaron arrives, when he has no lines. There were two obvious options here: firstly, that he is speechless with the shock and horror of seeing his sister in this state, which his text, “Ay me, this object kills me,”⁷ seems to suggest. Secondly, that he is moved to rage and revenge immediately and struggles to contain it. Given our concept, the second choice seems the more active. Lucius’ first impulse is of revenge, not of sorrow. So he removes himself from the group and moves all the way upstage of the back wall and begins to pace back and forth in impotent fury. He is already in the full swing of cruelty and anger. The ante has been upped.

Aaron arrives to trick Titus into chopping off his hand. There are two moments in this brief scene that are very important to the concept and both were discoveries in the

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⁶ Titus Andronicus, III.i.37.
⁷ Ibid, III.i.65.
rehearsal room. When he first arrives, Aaron says “Let Marcus, Lucius, or thyself, old Titus, / Or any one of you, chop off your hand.”8 But the only people in the space at the time are Aaron, Marcus, Lucius, Titus, and Lavinia. In a rehearsal, Maurice made the excellent choice of directing the “or any one of you” to Lavinia. This is a very cruel twist on a seemingly innocuous line. Aaron knows, of course, that Lavinia has no hands to give to the cause and yet he directs this text to her as an added barb. The other discovery came with the method of removing Titus’ hand. As originally staged, I had an abstract idea of Titus’ hand being put into a bucket and Aaron hitting it on the side with a knife to produce a loud, metallic sound and Titus pulling the hand out covered in dark red powder or paint that would obscure his hand and hint at blood. Even writing it out now, it seems a terribly stupid idea. Instead, we have Aaron use a tiny suitcase that conceals an elaborate hand-cutting machine with a hand crank that plays “Pop Goes The Weasel!” when it’s turned. Not only is this a twisted and perverse machine, but it also says a lot about the world of the play. After all, how cruel must a world be for someone to have the necessity to invent a miniature hand-cutting machine? And how close are the echoes of that world to our own? The course of human history is the story of us inventing more and more cruel and elaborate ways of killing one another.

Once his sons’ heads are unceremoniously deposited at his feet, dropped from the bridge by the Messenger character, Titus has reached his lowest point. At the nadir, he is also at his maximum capacity for revenge. He laughs at his fate and puts his boots back on. He is preparing for war. Which means, of course, that he is right back where he

belongs. The warrior Titus has returned; he has found his place again. Once he sets himself to the task of cruel revenge, equal or greater than that which has been perpetrated against him, he is unstoppable. What others take for madness is actually Titus at his cruel and calculating best. Lucius runs off to raise an army, leading us into intermission with a renewed vigor for violence.

Returning from intermission, Lavinia is at a table trying to drink water without the aid of hands or tongue. She has been fitted with completely impractical prosthetics. Like something out of a perverted Dr. Seuss book, her hands have been replaced with warped, over-sized silver representations of a woman’s hands. They are purely for ornamentation, as Lavinia herself is. The process of objectification is complete and she is left with horrific reminders of her formerly whole self. The actor playing Alarbus returns, now playing the role of Titus’ grandson Young Lucius. The return of the actor’s presence, now implicated in the cruelty of revenge as opposed to its victim, reminds the audience of an awareness of the omnipresent cruelty of the world. Titus begins to make a meal for his family with only one hand. The comic façade of the scene belies a very cruel slant in the text. Titus is now consumed by his desire for revenge. He no longer cares if he is cruel to his brother, his grandson, or his daughter. Only revenge remains, and it is his single purpose.

Lavinia’s disclosure of her attackers is her only act of true subjective agency in the play. As such, we step out of the reality of the play for an instant and the words she writes are projected on the back wall. In the original text, Titus speaks the words. In our production, Lavinia’s powers of speech are temporarily restored and she is able to
divulge to her father, and to the audience, who her attackers were. The audience knows their identity already, but has been powerless to halt the onslaught. Titus, however, armed with this knowledge, now has a target on which to train his murderous eye. Mere murder, however, is not enough. He lays out the plans for a plot that is inscrutable to Marcus who thinks Titus mad and unable to revenge.

**ACT IV – “What wrongs are these”**

I cut the entire text of the clown scene (it simply doesn’t fit in the concept) and all of the words of the scene where the remaining Andronici shoot arrows around Rome asking for justice. Instead, Titus gives his servants and his brother flyers to distribute to the audience. Simultaneously, Saturninus and Tamora begin their scene reacting to the distribution of this propaganda in the house right seats. This puts a private scene in a public space, and puts the audience in the same space as the emperor. They are the silent, inactive public, unable or unwilling to carry out justice. The audience’s presence also serves to put public pressure on Saturninus. He is always afraid of public opinion turning against him. Like all dictators, he fears most the public that he keeps under his thumb. His clownish behavior hides the fact that he is the only one in the play who vocally suggests that Titus’ madness is a ruse. The situation of him getting a massage in his underwear subverts the fact that he knows the truth and Tamora’s treatment of him invalidates his correct deduction. He has been completely subjugated by his queen; he is a ruler ruled by his wife.
ACT V – “If there be devils, would I were a devil”

Lucius begins the fifth act of the play a foreigner. He is in a strange land, among people who were once his enemy. Due mostly to casting restraints, we cast an entirely female army of Goths. This works, I think, in the production. I envision Tamora as the Queen of Goths not because she was married to the king, but because they have the antithesis of a Roman society. The Romans are patriarchal; the only Roman woman we see is Lavinia and she is relegated to the status of chattel. Tamora is a powerful, wild, sensual woman. She is used to power, used to being in control and having power over other human beings. It makes sense, then, that her society should be controlled by and run by wild warrior women. Lucius doesn’t know how to deal with it at first. And the women assert their superiority and playfulness by speaking the same text to him in three different languages, none of which he understands. The Arabic, German, and Tagalog words come at him and disorient him. Finally, a fourth Goth arrives who saves him with the English translation.

The moment of decision to hang or not to hang Aaron was a difficult one. I had originally envisioned Lucius kicking the step-ladder out from under him, Aaron hanging there for a minute or so and then Lucius cutting him down with his line “Bring down the devil, for he must not die / So sweet a death as hanging presently.” But when we went to the shops and the powers that be to try to make the moment work, it began to seem impossible. Our solution is cruel in a very different way. Lucius calls for the noose but has no intention of hanging Aaron; he is more premeditated than that. And so he takes a

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9 *Titus Andronicus*. V.i.145-146.
perverse pleasure in the moment when Aaron, his confession finished, tries to kill himself and fails because the noose isn’t tied to anything. Aaron’s successful suicide would make him the victor; Lucius would be robbed of revenge. But he doesn’t get that chance. He is branded, bound, gagged, and taken back to Rome so that Lucius can carry out his final act of vengeance on his home turf.

The Revenge, Rapine, and Murder scene, the play’s penultimate scene, is perhaps the apex of revenge, if not the apex of cruelty in the world. Certainly, the feeding of children to their mother can claim a level of cruelty that their brutal execution alone cannot, but the aesthetics of that scene are singular in their brutality in our production. After a Titus Andronicus notable for its lack of stage blood, Chiron and Demetrius’ murders are a glut of gore. Titus has delayed his gratification in the slaughter of the play’s antagonists and so delights in it when the hour arrives at last. In a moment inspired by Tomas Ostermeier’s production of Hedda Gabler and Quentin Tarantino’s Reservoir Dogs, Titus puts on the music of the Grateful Dead as he prepares to kill Chiron and Demetrius. As the sweet sounds of “Sugar Magnolia” spill into the space, much to the Goths’ confusion, Titus bobs his head and shakes his stump in time with the music. He is readying himself for enjoyment of his revenge. In a mirror of the attack visited upon his daughter, Titus first rips out Demetrius’ tongue denying him the ability to beg for his life. Finally, he reveals a torture device made from an adapted neck brace to drain the blood from Chiron’s neck. As he tightens the screws, the music morphs into the terrifying cello strings that have accompanied us for much of the play. Blood sprays from her neck, onto
the floor and into the basin at her feet. A small but functional hatchet remains to do the work of murdering Demetrius.

In a small extra-textual moment, Young Lucius emerges sullenly to do his chores of mopping up the house and setting the table in preparation for the feast. While the video of the meat grinder fades, we see his delight when he sees the blood of his family’s enemies on the floor and resumes his task with increased joy and enthusiasm.

We have Chiron and Demetrius cooked into chili, not into pies. Chili has always reminded me a little of something barbaric, something cannibalistic. And I also don’t buy that the Titus of our world has any idea how to cook a tasty meat pie. Anyone can make a delicious chili, and I think that Titus knows how to make it. In addition, the video of the meat being pushed through the grinder is too gruesome to pass up, especially after Chiron and Demetrius’ murders.

Lavinia’s death at the hands of her father is not an act of mercy, but yet another act of cruelty. By this point in the play, she no longer wants to die. She has learned revenge and cruelty well, and wants to see her enemies’ fall. Her father denies her this. The logic presented for killing her is that the shame of her rape causes her father sorrow. He takes out further rage on his daughter, proving that this cruel world has no place for victims. Survivors and witnesses must die. Titus then kills Tamora by choking her on the very chili that contains her children, but not before he reveals the dish’s contents to her and delights in her reaction. Lucius looks on as Saturninus kills his father, and then kills the emperor himself to assume the throne.
The play, in its final moments, denies the audience a sense of completion. Much like in *Macbeth* where we see Malcolm with the throne but know that more war and death awaits if Banquo’s descendants are to be kings, *Titus Andronicus* seems to suggest that The Who were right: “meet the new boss, same as the old boss.” In an image mirroring the beginning of the play, we see Lucius, aloft, microphone in hand, with a projected propaganda image behind him. Next to him is the token of a broken promise: the coffin containing Aaron’s infant son’s corpse. Lucius promised to let the child live and yet it comes as no surprise to us that he reneges on that promise. Even in death there is no mercy for Tamora and the slow and torturous death Lucius prescribes for Aaron begs the question, “did we trade one cruel tyrant for another even more cruel?”

As Aaron gives his final paean to cruelty and evil we are finally allowed a momentary catharsis. The play is over; Young Lucius removes his wig and hat to reveal a young woman with beautiful blond hair. She weeps. She weeps for the fallen players, she weeps for the audience, for the state of the world. As one spectator put it “that moment dropped me back into my seat.” We are finally granted the tears, the appreciation of the horrors that we so desperately craved. Yes, the play says, we know. We know how cruel this is, but we must not forget that this is our world too. This is world that the character lives in, but also the actor, masked in a costume. She escapes one world of cruelty only to emerge into another.

**INSPIRATION**

My initial inspiration from the play undoubtedly came from my first reading of it and the production I was in 10 years ago. Directed by Peter James Cook, it was set site-
specifically in a medium-sized lecture room in Street Hall at Yale University. Peter conceived of the whole play as a collective nightmare experienced by college students during a lecture. All of the objects in the play could be found in a classroom and everything emerged from that room. Obviously our production was very different, but the nightmarish quality of the work remained with me.

More recently, I was reading a lot of Yeats poetry as I was preparing for the production. In particular, “The Second Coming,” “Sailing To Byzantium,” and “Byzantium” provided poetic inspiration.

Some of the crueler, less silly and titillating aspects of Quentin Tarantino’s films inspired me, though I chose to leave the gore aside for the most part.

As far as theatrical inspirations go, a few stand out to me. Robert Woodruff’s production of Notes From Underground served as powerful jumping off point as to theatricality of cruelty. And it also provided me the inspiration for Lavinia in the post-rape scene. In the Woodruff production, the prostitute is objectified, made into a kind of gorgeous porcelain doll in a glass case. The gaze of the audience assaults her before even the Man does. When her body is subsequently exposed and she throws herself violently against the glass until she draws blood, we are punished for our objectification of her. There is some of that in what we’re trying to do with Lavinia naked after her rape and the lights becoming blindingly bright. Woodruff’s productions have a certain in-your-face, end-of-the-world cruelty that feels at once very distant and also very close to us. In that way, his productions that I have seen (Notes From Underground at La Jolla Playhouse and Celebration at Hungarian Theatre of Cluj) have been enormously inspiring. For the
dance, the repetition of a callous action came from Pina Bausch’s “Café Muller” when
the man repeatedly drops the young woman as she repeatedly jumps into his arms.

I’m not sure if they can be considered inspirations per se, but Peter Brook’s
*Evoking and Forgetting Shakespeare* and Jan Kott’s *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*
were absolutely essential to my thinking about the play as well as to my communications
with the actors. Brook’s treatise is the most succinct explanation of the acting and
producing of Shakespeare that I’ve read and he has a pithy and personal style that I think
helped the actors enjoy the learning of a new style in a way that remained accessible to
them. Kott’s book in many ways feels dated and very much of its place. However, his
analysis of the mechanism of Shakespeare’s staging and the way that the dramaturgy
works was absolutely essential reading for me.

During the year or so that I lived with this play in anticipation of production, I
dreamt a lot. I had a lot of pseudo-nightmares, and many completely terrifying dreams
that I wouldn’t classify as nightmares but certainly had this play’s stamp on them. Many
of the images that are on the stage in our production came from these dreams. And in
contrast, most of what I was reading and watching during the pre-production period for
the play was filtered through the lens of this play. Jean Baudrillard’s *America*, which I
read last spring, began to have resonance within *Titus Andronicus*. Dreams of nuclear war
and set that resembled the carcass of a society destroyed by an atomic holocaust were
triggered by memories of Peter Sellars’ *Doctor Atomic* but wormed their way into the
scenic design.
More than anything, my inspiration came from the events of our own world. The Sandy Hook school shooting and the NRA’s response, the nanny killing on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the New Delhi gang rape: these events described the world of the play and its connection to our time in vivid and horrific detail. They are the background to our viewing of the play, our frame of reference, and therefore were the most immediate way into the play.

**DESIGN**

Scenic

It seems nearly impossible to do *Titus Andronicus* without a space that has three distinct elevations. This is derived from the Shakespearean dramaturgy that calls for an aloft space, a stage space, and a pit. This being the third show I’ve directed in the Forum, I was excited by the opportunity to use the space in a new way. The “bridge” that cut out into the auditorium and removed the seats from that area revealed the space in a new way to me. The line and angle of that bridge also provided exciting new compositional opportunities for me.

The concept for the set was born out of the idea of how this world might have decayed. That is, if this world of cruelty existed in perpetuity, what does it reduce the physical space of the world to? I spent a lot time driving around to construction and demolition sites at night, taking pictures and sending them to Chris Murillo, my scenic designer. The space, I thought, should look like the spare skeleton of a once great edifice. Ultimately, the sparseness of the space was slightly corrupted by the amount of supports required by the construction. All the diagonal pipes needed to support the structure
complicated the simplicity of a bare stage with a pit, a turntable middle section of the bridge, and the lengthy bridge itself. This was a regrettable necessity of the process, but one that I feel we made the most of by trying to activate and engage the supports by climbing on them, swinging on, and making them a useful part of the set. I do wish we had had more time to rehearse on the set, as we might have been able to find even more moments where the characters could engage with the set.

The enormous wall upstage was made mostly for the fluorescent bulbs. Kristin Hayes, the lighting designer, Chris, and I had talked about the reveal of Lavinia moment from the beginning and so we knew that we needed a wall of fluorescents. The wall was to also serve as a projection surface. Unfortunately, the texture of the main surface didn’t take projection well. This is one of my major disappointments with the design. There must have been some breakdown in communication since Chris and I had been talking about that space from the beginning as “the main projection surface.” So how we ended up with a projection surface that didn’t show projections is a little baffling to me.

The metal grating covering the opening hopefully achieved the dual function of the under-stage space as both pit and prison. The Plexiglas on top was another necessity of safety. We were told that the performers couldn’t be barefoot on the grating and so we used Plexiglas to cover the unopened part of the pit. The pit space in this play is universally a place of death or impending death. So while the imagery of a pit may evoke a womb or birthing, the reverse is true. The metal covering and jagged shape of the opening is intended to contrast against the soft curve of the Forum’s thrust section and ward off the feminine significance of a pit.
In terms of props, I strove, as I did in my second year show, *The Dybbuk*, for a minimalist aesthetic, one in which only the bare essentials of props remained. By reducing the “extra,” space-filling props, the existing props in the space, such as the hand-cutting machine have a surprising and exciting reveal.

**Costume**

The goal with costumes, by Orli Nativ, was conceptually linked to the scenic design. What kind of costumes does this world of cruelty lead to? Function is first and foremost, and the patchwork quality of the Andronici’s uniformity comes from the same question of decay. They have fixed their own clothing; it is a collage of old-world line and new-world fabric. The non-functional pieces, such as Lavinia’s grotesque metal “hands,” stick out as ornamentation and that is their goal. The Romans, especially the Andronici, are layered, armored against the world’s assaults and battering. The Goths on the other hand, are bare to the world, their bodies exposed and displayed. They come from a wilder place, a less “civilized” place and their clothing and hair reflects this.

**Sound**

Emily Jankowski, our sound designer, had the ambitious goal of scoring the entire play musically. While this turned out to be not only impossible but also overkill, she did score much of the play with a specific and exquisitely limited sonic vocabulary. Almost all of the music in the play comes from a digitally unprocessed series of recordings that Emily did of an experimental cellist and contrabass clarinetist. Using a variety on non-traditional methods of playing, they created a sonic landscape that was bodily, foreboding, and terrifying.
These musical arrangements are used to underscore action in contrasting and evocative ways. When Titus kills Mutius, the music is composed to match the fight choreography exactly. The musical instruments assault the action, joining with Titus’ bare hands to murder Mutius. A movement of music accompanies each death so that we grow to associate the instrumentation with murder and cruelty.

Aaron’s actions are underscored by a leitmotif that we came to call “Aaron’s theme.” Like the pre-show, this puts Aaron both inside and outside of the play. His theme is made of the same musical vocabulary, but he is the only character with a specific theme and music that serves to foreshadow his machinations.

In the play’s final act, the Grateful Dead music and the harpsichord used in the final “feast” scene were employed discordantly to fight against illustrative sound in these climactic moments. The same effect happens when the hand-cutting machine plays “Pop Goes The Weasel” when the crank is turned.

**Lighting**

The harshness of fluorescents was Kristin and my main inspiration. The colorless, cold light of a fluorescent bulb exposes and illuminates without flattering the subject of the light. As tech went on, we systematically removed much of the saturated color from the world of the play. With the colors of the floor, this was often a difficult task. Using color-corrected sidelight, Kristin’s design creates spaces for scenes that mirror the movement of the bridge, slashing across the space, causing disruption and collision of shadow and object.
We tried to create a high-contrast space in which the bright lights are blinding and the darkness is suffocating. The best example of this is undoubtedly the use of the fluorescent wall after Lavinia’s rape.

**REHEARSAL PROCESS**

Paradoxically for a work so cruel, the key to this rehearsal process was a very loving, supportive, and focused room. Working on this play weighs on the collaborators and to carry out the actions I was asking of them with conviction and commitment, they had to feel very safe in the room.

As usual, I didn’t allow cell phones in the rehearsal room. They serve only as distractions that pull attention away from the work of rehearsals. Borrowing from Peter Sellars, I begin each rehearsal with a short attention exercise that is also a ritual in which the assembled company dedicates their work for the day to someone outside of the room. This is also partly influenced by Lewis Hyde’s theories from *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. We closed rehearsal every day with the same ritual of support and care so that no one felt unresolved or injured before leaving the room.

Throughout rehearsals I emphasized the importance of situation over text. Given the actors’ training in Shakespeare, they have a tendency to play the lines, not the situations. This was, at times, a struggle. Peter Brook’s *Evoking and Forgetting Shakespeare* was invaluable to me and to them in communicating the way I believed that Shakespeare should be performed.
The actors derived the form of the post-rape Marcus/Lavinia scene from a non-
text improvisation. Once it became clear that my original cut of the Marcus speech was
untenable, they made amazing strides without the text and came to the ultimate shape of
the scene almost entirely on their own.

ASSESSMENT

I am enormously proud of this production. It was far from easy, it was far from
perfect, but it was a tremendous challenge for me and well outside of my comfort zone.
In particular, I consider Titus’ first entrance, Lavinia’s reveal to Marcus, Aaron taking
Titus’ hand, the execution of Chiron and Demetrius, and the play’s final scene to be great
successes in terms of both aesthetic value and their following through with the concept.

I do feel that I could have held a tighter hand on design, particularly scenic and
costume design. There are some details that should not have escaped me that did and
some elements that I did not try to correct until it was too late. Tamora and Saturninus’
costumes made many small improvements during the course of our tech period but
ultimately didn’t fit in the world in the way that the Andronici’s did.

In terms of acting, I am overwhelming proud of the work that the cast did. For
many of them, I believe this is their best work that I have seen at UCSD. Danvir did the
best I’ve seen him do, Matt and Scott both lived up to their enormous potential and Sarah
really grew in a very strong and vital interpretation of the role. I believe that I never
accomplished a bold enough performance from Maurice and am not exactly certain of
why. Certainly there was some resistance on his part to my interpretation of the character,
but that cannot account for all of the reluctance I perceived in his performance. My
greatest disappointment in terms of performance is the scene that immediately follows Bassianus’ death. First, I probably should have cut more of the text to eliminate some of the doubling of actions that happens. But also I never managed to get the performance out of Kim that is required by the situation. She seemed unable to be weak without being self-lamenting and the final performance of the scene is endowed with a strength and defiance that is incompatible with the situation. I realized this scene was going to be a problem for Kim early on and yet I didn’t deal with it efficiently. Her performance is mostly very strong and an interesting interpretation of the role, filled with defiance and as much cruelty and revenge-lust as her father. But in this one scene, we never got to the performance that it should be.

I learned a great deal from the failure of the live feed projections. It was my first time trying to use that technology and I had not thought through all of the consequences of such a choice. In that failure, however, there is also a success. I managed to not be defensive about choices that didn’t work in the production and made some drastic changes to fix them before we opened. The live feed projections were cut, I moved Saturninus and Tamora’s private scene out into the house as a result (which ended up being much stronger than the original choice even if the projection had worked well), and completely changed the last moment of the play. All of these changes made the production better and show a growth between my first year and now. During my first year, I would have clung to the choices, even in the face of their failure. I have learned to be cruel to myself, to be honest with myself about what I’m seeing not what I want to be
seeing. This is hardly a pleasant growth to go through, but the growing pains have helped me improve as an artist.

It is this attitude, “cruel to myself” as Artaud says, that I will most take with me as I move into the world beyond graduate school. The cruelty of Titus Andronicus taught me, first and foremost, to be cruel to myself, kind to my collaborators, and rigorous in my pursuit of what I believe to be consistent with the concept.