

Titus

UK : 1999 : dir. Julie Taymor : : 162 min
 prod: : scr: Julie Taymor : dir.ph.:
[Osheen Jones](#)
 Anthony Hopkins; Alan Cumming; Jessica Lange; Harry Lennix; Colm Feore;
 Angus MacFadyen; Jonathan Rhys-Meyers; Matthew Rhys; Laura Fraser; Geraldine McEwan

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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

"Potent, time-bending adaptation of Shakespeare's *"Titus Andronicus"*, with Hopkins as a victorious Roman general whose rigid code of honour and duty proves to be his downfall. Lange is his prisoner, Tamora, queen of the Goths, who plots revenge. Impressive work by innovative theatre director Taymor, who also wrote the screenplay as an examination of violence - its cause and effect - as it relates to modern society. Lennix is a standout as Aaron, the Moor. Filmed in Super 35. *** "

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"Julie Taymor wowed Broadway with her musical version of Disney's **"THE LION KING"** and this epic meeting of Shakespeare's gory tragedy, based on another stage production, has a similar knockout impact. It's a shame that the attention lavished on the visual elements wasn't equalled by that given to the performances. These range from the gruff

(Anthony Hopkins' wronged Roman general, Titus) and the camp (Alan Cumming's Hitler-esque emperor, Saturninus) to the downright bizarre (Jessica Lange's Amazonian warrior queen, Tamora). Still, there are enough jaw-dropping scenes here to excuse the extravagant running time and Taymor's decision to give her elaborate design concept precedence over the bard's verse. *** "

Cast:

Titus AndronicusAnthony Hopkins
 SaturninusAlan Cummings
 Queen Tamora Jessica Lange
 Aaron the Moor Harry Lennix
 MarcusColim Feore
 LuciusAngus MacFadyen
 Chiron Jonathan Rhys-Meyers
 Demetrius Matthew Rhys
 LaviniaLaura Fraser
 Young Lucius**Osheen Jones**

Of very slight interest to us, except that from the first sequence to the very last, hovering about - in attendance or discreet observance - is a boy of 10 or 12 (Osheen Jones), unidentified for half the running time of the film. In fact he's young Lucius, grandson of Hopkins and, by the end of it all, practically his only surviving descendant. He's a peripheral character, but the director employs him in a Puckish capacity, spying from the sidelines on events as they unfold.

Almost by common assent, *"Titus Andronicus"* is Shakespeare's worst work, a shambolic retinue of murders, rape, mutilation, betrayal and revenge - King Lear meets **"THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE"** - and none of its dramatis personae have the same subtleties of shading as in *"Macbeth"*, but for that very reason productions of it are seldom, and this is a handsome effort to flush it onto the screen.

The visual conceit demands considerable patience. This film is set in a putative imperial Rome of the twentieth century. The opening scene has Titus Andronicus returning to Rome from a victorious war to consecrate the fallen knights to their ancestral tombs – all of this done in period armour and settings – but in the next scene young Lucius is squatting on the steps of the forum, watching competing motorcades of contenders for the vacated slot of emperor. This is ancient Rome but with P.A. systems, automatic weapons and video game machines. Preposterous of course, but scarcely more preposterous than Shakespeare's plot, heaping tragedy upon tragedy until the climactic feast where Andronicus serves up to vengeful queen Tamara her own sons cooked in a pie.

Maltin says Taymor wrote the screenplay, pretentiously enough, "*as an examination of violence – its cause and effect – as it relates to modern society*". Her film hasn't the least thing to say about violence, not even that it's sickening to behold (few of the violent acts that riddle the play are acted out on screen, and none of them lead to remorse), but she does use it as a platform to allow a black actor (Harry Lennix as Aaron the Moor) to articulate all the hostility and race-hate of contemporary rap. Lennix delivers one of the film's stronger performances in fact, but his gloating over the pain and horror he has inflicted on Andronicus' family, his smug satisfaction at having got a black baby on the queen herself, comes across in this contemporary setting – and is surely intended to – as the bragging scorn of yet another Jamaican street gangster, spitting contempt even as he's brought to the dock. It relates to modern society alright, but it also flatters those who think street violence and gene-pool rape are the way to get ahead in the contemporary world. Taymor makes Aaron as proud and dignified a figure as Andronicus himself, whose sons are murdered, exiled or beheaded, and whose only daughter is raped, her tongue torn out and hands cut off. If "examination" of violence leads to the conclusion that culprit and victim are in any sense interchangeable, that's not a conclusion I'd agree with.

Hopkins is dignified, settling comfortably into his new status as the Olivier of his day, but his performance carries unfortunate reminders of Hannibal Lekter (the jig of glee as he tells the queen what she's just eaten) and Van Helsing (in the garden scene where he ensnares the queen's sons, masquerading as "murder" and "rape"). Hopkins, like Jack Nicholson, is watchable good or bad, subtle or peach-fed ham, and he's one of the few cast members – Lennix, as I've said, being another – capable of articulating the richness in the text. The film has too many camp turns for comfort (the emperor and both the queen's sons), again flattering those who please to think all homosexuals flounce and pout that way.

Finally it's hard to see how any other director could have wrestled such intractable material onto the screen and rendered it believable. "**TITUS**" is by fits and turns visually arresting, and certainly less annoying than many recent modern-dress translations of Shakespeare. Because the film does not, probably could not, convey to audiences today the absolute ancient imperative of *fielty* (my king, right or wrong), or the concepts of fate and justice as a caprice of the gods, Andronicus's dilemma is flatly incomprehensible to modern eyes. Nothing else is known of Osheen Jones.

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