# Simon Russell Beale’s Titus Andronicus confronts modern violence with stark theatricality



Simon Russell Beale delivers a layered and deeply compelling performance in Max Webster’s production of Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, a play notorious for its graphic violence and dark themes. The production, recently staged with a stark, monochrome aesthetic by designer Joanna Scotcher, brings the blood-soaked tragedy into a contemporary resonance that frames its brutal scenes within the shadow of modern-day torture and conflict zones.

Set in a minimalistic environment marked by grey trousers, overcoats, and frosted glass doors, the stage is surrounded by a metal grille that symbolises the imminent and inescapable violence throughout the play. Sound design by Tingying Dong, coupled with compositions by Matthew Herbert, adds a nerve-jangling, gothic atmosphere, punctuated later by pulsating club beats as the action intensifies. The use of hi-tech torture equipment on stage heightens the chilling effect, evoking imagery reminiscent of contemporary torture chambers such as those in Bagram, Guantanamo, Syria, and Iran.

Russell Beale’s Titus is portrayed with nuanced complexity. He balances the dignity and duty of a Roman general with the emotional turmoil of a father facing unimaginable loss. Dressed in civilian clothes rather than military attire, Titus embodies a man caught between his public responsibilities and private grief. His sorrow is most palpable in scenes mourning his daughter Lavinia’s brutal assault, portrayed by Letty Thomas, which becomes a poignant focal point of tragedy and injustice in the play.

The narrative unfolds alongside the rise of Saturninus, the new emperor played with “excellent arrogance” by Joshua James, whose marriage to Tamora—Queen of the Goths, played by Wendy Kweh—triggers a relentless cycle of revenge and violence. The production’s depiction of the dismemberment of Tamora’s son takes place off-stage but remains haunting through sound effects, while subsequent scenes are explicit and graphically staged, though with a stylised approach that balances shock with theatricality.

Natey Jones delivers a potent portrayal of Aaron, whose expressions of absolute hate contrast sharply with the poetic and melancholic language woven throughout the play. The script explores themes of sacrifice, suffering, and the futility of revenge, as Titus repeatedly seeks to understand the reasons behind the chaos engulfing him.

The play also makes use of physical theatre to express a feverish psychological reality; actors sometimes transform into a dark, growling ensemble, symbolising both the animalistic side of humanity and the ghosts that perpetuate cycles of vengeance. When characters die, they rise again as part of this shadowy group, reflecting the persistence of trauma and rage.

Though there were occasional issues with sight lines in the first half, the overall production was widely praised for its powerful staging and ability to fuse the grotesque with poetic richness. The Guardian reports that the production's modern design and visceral imagery, including the unnerving presence of body parts in plastic bags reminiscent of contemporary war footage, lend an acute immediacy to one of Shakespeare’s most harrowing works. The play’s brutal narrative, set against a backdrop of striking lyricism and contemporary relevance, challenges audiences to confront the chaos and futility of violence across time.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ft.com/content/43de7d8f-d00e-48f9-98ba-f383bab5fd06> - This Financial Times article discusses Simon Russell Beale's performance in Max Webster's production of 'Titus Andronicus,' highlighting the minimalist grey-marble set that evolves into a grim abattoir, underscoring the theme of escalating violence.
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/may/11/titus-andronicus-globe-review> - The Guardian's review of the 2014 Globe Theatre production of 'Titus Andronicus' describes the stage enveloped in black, creating a glowering intimacy appropriate for the play's themes of violence and revenge.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/feb/02/titus-andronicus-review-sam-wanamaker-playhouse-london> - This review from The Guardian discusses a 2023 production of 'Titus Andronicus' at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, noting the use of candles and the play's exploration of a patriarchy bent on self-destruction.
4. <https://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/titus-andronicus-shakespeares-globe> - The Arts Desk's review of the 2006 Shakespeare's Globe production of 'Titus Andronicus' highlights the use of black fabric to envelop the stage, creating a void that enhances the play's dark themes.
5. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/titus-andronicus-59847/> - Backstage's review of a production of 'Titus Andronicus' notes the transformation of the set into a stark, scary space, almost like a police interrogation room, enhancing the play's atmosphere.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/jun/01/theatre2> - The Guardian's review of the 2006 Shakespeare's Globe production of 'Titus Andronicus' describes the transformation of the Globe Theatre with a canvas awning and black pillars, creating a cavernous, mourning atmosphere.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/apr/30/titus-andronicus-review-simon-russell-beale-swan-theatre-stratford> - Please view link - unable to able to access data