

Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome

The Bell Shakespeare Company's new production brings bloody vengeance to the stage with a contemporary twist

By Jason Catlett

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John Bell is glad that nobody seems to be bored by his company's latest production. "We've had very good reactions with the Brisbane audiences," Bell says. "Not always positive: we get people walking out; we see people with their heads in their hands because they can't bear to look at the stage. And there are others standing up cheering." He's grateful for all these reactions. "I enjoy scaring the socks off people," he laughs.

Bell is talking about *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome: A Shakespeare Commentary*. The play is based on the Bard's notoriously gory Roman revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, with the black comedy turned up to 11. Bell plays title role of the Roman general whose vengeance against the Goths extends to baking two children into a pie and feeding it to their unsuspecting mother. "It was very popular in Shakespeare's day, but in the 18th and 19th centuries it was regarded as too barbaric. After the Second World War, suddenly all the cruelties and horrors didn't seem so very far fetched at all. And more recently since Darfur, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Baghdad, it's become a very important play for now; it faces these things head on."

The all-male adaptation was written in 1985 by East German theatre director Heiner Müller, now regarded as one of Germany's most important dramatists. "Just as Shakespeare was reflecting the violence around him, Müller was reflecting the collapse of the Third Reich and life under the Stasi," Bell says. "Müller paraphrased the whole of the first act of *Titus*, which was maybe not by Shakespeare. He kept the bulk of the rest, but keeps interrupting the action with commentary, digressions, and actors stepping outside the action to make political or social comment, just to keep it edgy, and to remind us that it's still the world we're living in."

The production is directed by Queensland Theatre Company artistic director Michael Gow, better known in Sydney as the author of plays such as *Away* and *Toy Symphony*. Gow chose the highly stylised setting of a rehearsal room. Despite the many varied means of fighting and killing in the story, no armour or weapons are used. "We're just nine guys in our street clothes," Bell says. "We have a bucket of stage blood that gets sloshed around, but there's no attempt at any reality. Yet in the theatre people find even stylised violence harder to take than in movies."

Bell can think of at least three reasons why the production is worth seeing despite its extreme content. "It's a rarely performed and interesting Shakespeare, in an adaptation by an important German writer who is little known in Australia. Plus it's directed by one of Australia's greatest dramatists."

Does Bell have any advice for audience members? Should they wear raincoats, for instance? "Come along with an open mind," he says. "Be prepared to get knocked around, and see how you like it."

Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome: A Shakespeare Commentary runs 22 Oct-22 Nov at the Playhouse, Sydney Opera House