



Titus Redux

-- Theater Review

By Laurence Vittes, August 31, 2010 04:08 ET

Bottom Line: Identifies the land mines being shipped home from the war in Afghanistan.

The world premiere of "Titus Redux," playing a limited run at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City, continues John Farmanesh-Bocca's use of Shakespeare as a lens on the West's abuse of power.

His source is "Titus Andronicus," an early play of uncertain authorship that, as was the popular fashion during the early 1590s, boils over with violence, blood and unrepentant evil.

What Farmanesh-Bocca adds to Shakespeare is a disorienting nonchronological story that exposes the hypocrisy of a world that sees the Middle Eastern wars as just another reality show.

In Farmanesh-Bocca's retake, co-produced by Circus Theatricals and Not Man Apart, the references are to the U.S. in Afghanistan, from where Titus (Jack Stehlin) is returning after five tours of duty to bury a son. In some ways, the play is a twin to Rajiv Joseph's "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo" (of which the Douglas also gave the world premiere): Both paint a picture of unremitting horror that we know is true. Both say that the real-time bombs are our men and women coming home.

Despite Titus' compromised position and overwhelming grief, he is the one called on to maintain equilibrium between conflicting geopolitical and human demands, and he breaks down along fairly predictable ways, with an extreme amount of gore. Given the responsibilities handed to him, however, despite his rigid moral compass and his eventual unsuitability for the job, Titus is nothing less than a tragic hero, and Stehlin projects the pain of every gut-wrenching blow he is forced to witness and assist.

The cast members, each of whom can handle the Shakespeare with clarity and 21st century phrasing, are particularly expert at athletic outbursts of energy. When the two living sons (Dash



Jack Stehlin and John Farmanesh-Bocca photo: Ed Krieger

Pepin and Vincent Cardinale) galumph around the stage, the whole cast moves with them. When the mother (Brenda Strong) flies across the stage like Wonder Woman, her movement catches the cast in her updraft.

Nicholas Hormann as the old retainer brings a wonderful kind of fragile warmth to the proceedings. Farmanesh-Bocca as a one-man Greek chorus adds an unsettling mix of menace and dignity. Margeaux L. London as the raped, pillaged and mutilated daughter sings a painfully wordless aria of unanswered cries for release from life.

The minimalist settings are dynamic in their flexibility. Using two tables and a few other bits and pieces, the nearly two-hour narrative, unbroken by intermission and strewn with terrible soliloquies, create the pain, suffering and grief that few of us would dare even to imagine.

Venue: Kirk Douglas Theatre, Culver City (Through Sept. 12)
Cast: Jack Stehlin, Brenda Strong, Margeaux J. London, Dash Pepin, Vincent Cardinale, Nicholas Hormann, John F. Bocca
Conceived, choreographed/directed by/film direction/editing: John Farmanesh-Bocca
Costume designer: Allison Leach
Lighting designer: John Rousseau
Sound designers: John Farmanesh-Bocca, Adam Phalen
Special effects: Jason Collins

