

THEATRE REVIEWS

Dark and deranged The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius will shock audiences out of their comfort zone

by Andrea Warner on November 24th, 2017 at 12:26 PM



Peter Anderson in the blackly funny *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*. STEPHEN DROVER

Written by Colleen Murphy. Directed by Stephen Drover. Produced by Rumble Theatre at the Cultch Historic Theatre on November 23. Continues to December 3

“The worst revenge is the best revenge,” says one of the characters near the end of the spectacularly debased and shockingly funny new play *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*. While that line isn’t the best life advice, it certainly makes for a great night of jaw-dropping, audacious theatre.

Written by Colleen Murphy, it’s adapted from William Shakespeare’s blood-soaked revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*—also the title of the play-within-a-play staged by the troubled and unhinged five-person bouffon troupe of social outliers that comprise the Society for the Destitute. Upon receiving a \$500 grant, they are tasked with putting on a Shakespeare play, and settle on *Titus* because it “has the most murders”.

Titus is a general in the Roman army whose enemy, Tamora, is Queen of the Goths.

Their family members are casualties of their escalating cycle of revenge, and the graphic violence doesn’t stop at murder: among its many horrors, *Titus* also features infanticide, rape, torture, and cannibalism, all of which are overlapping interests in the Venn Diagram of the members of the Society for the Destitute, a collection of truly grotesque individuals.

There's Sob (Peter Anderson), an older man released from jail four years ago; Boots (Sarah Afful), a recovering alcoholic; Fink (Craig Erickson), whose mother abandoned him when he was a little boy; Leap (Pippa Mackie), a young woman who has grown up in abuse; and Spark (Naomi Wright), who is furious that two of her many children were taken by protective services years ago and she hasn't seen them since.

The cast is fantastic, and they dig into the bouffon style of clowning (great work from bouffon coach Michael Kennard of Mump & Smoot, as well as direction from Stephen Drover) with relish and glee. Madness glints from their eyes and their twisted smiles as they engage in a ceaseless barrage of heinous acts, some hilarious and some bleak, all of them disturbing. Mackie handles some of the toughest material. Her Leap is a sex worker, but she's also deeply damaged from her background of being abused. When Leap's character, Lavinia, suffers a horrific fate and can no longer speak clearly, Mackie not only rises to the challenge, she shines.

In this play, the audience is shocked outside its comfort zone. It's forced to, well, if not contemplate then at least contend with the horrors of violence alongside larger moral questions about honour, our complicity in war, and the lengths we'll go in order to justify pursuits of power (fighting for religion, for land, to gain freedom by suppressing the will of others). *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius* is deranged, darkly funny, and perverse, but its subversiveness also serves a purpose, and it makes for an unforgettable experience.

The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius: Just how dark do you want it?

November 24, 2017 by Colin Thomas

At the beginning of *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*, I was so stimulated—so shocked, laughing so hard—that I was afraid I was going to start shouting things. Unplanned, random shit. You've got to love a show that makes you feel like you might lose your mind.

The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius is playwright Colleen Murphy's bouffon adaptation of Shakespeare's grisly *Titus Andronicus*. Bouffon is a dark inversion of clowning that was developed by the French movement master Jacques Lecoq. Bouffon emphasizes parody and grotesquery: the body of the performer is often distorted through costuming. As Lecoq said in his definition of the bouffon, "There are echoes in the paintings of Hieronymus

Bosch.”

Bouffon embraces the discarded and ridicules accepted norms. In the framing device of *Titus Bouffonius*, we meet the marginalized characters who are going to perform for us. Sob, who is playing Titus, has done a lot of jail time. Leap, who will become Titus’s daughter Lavinia, is a victim of sexual abuse. She sucks cock to earn money because she wants to get a rescue dog—hopefully a German shepherd or a Labrador. As they introduce themselves to us, all five players thank the taxpayers who have made their \$500 production grant possible. And they express their gratitude for a charitable organization that supports the rights of a long list of the dispossessed including “people who self-identify as pineapples.” Then these characters launch into the script. Having lost 21 sons in battle, but ultimately victorious in war, Titus returns to Rome dragging his prisoner, Tamora, Queen of the Goths, behind him. In revenge for his losses, Titus slaughters one of Tamora’s sons. And so the cycle continues. Tamora bides her time, marrying the wicked Saturninus, who has recently been made emperor. But fury will out. *Titus* contains 14 murders and a nauseatingly brutal rape and dismemberment.

And this is funny? Well, it’s consistently hilarious at first and then intermittently so. The hilarity derives from a giddy combination of transgression and inventiveness. Generic plastic baby dolls represent many of the children. When Titus sacrifices Tamora’s son, he rips the doll’s legs off. Later, when Aaron, Tamora’s Moorish accomplice, is watching a romantic scene, he mimes jerking off, using the doll’s leg as a penis. Okay, maybe you have to be there for that one. How about this? When Tamora is giving birth to a child she has conceived with Aaron, little brown doll legs start to appear beneath the hem of her mini-skirt.

Even for me, *Titus Bouffonius* isn’t entirely successful. After its thrilling opening, the show hits a bit of trough and never entirely recovers. That’s because it doesn’t keep topping itself. The script largely abandons the framing device of the players’ stories. And it doesn’t know quite what to do with the mechanics of Shakespeare’s plot. In that plot, two of Tamora’s sons rape Lavinia, then chop off her hands and cut out her tongue so she won’t be able to identify them. Stylistically, *Titus Bouffonius* enters a kind of no man’s land at this

point, mining the horror both for absurdity (Lavinia's assailants challenge her to sing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" without a tongue), and for pathos (playing Lavinia, actor Pippa Mackie's eyes well with tears). Yes, a certain amount of disorientation is interesting, but, for me, there wasn't enough serious context to make Lavinia's plight deeply affecting; there was only enough to make it unfunny. Strengthening both sides of this dynamic—by allowing for deeper horror and more distinctly defined absurdity—might help.

There are also a couple of points at which *Titus Bouffonius* gets disconcertingly earnest. Lavinia delivers a self-described feminist speech and Titus goes on a rant about power structures. There's nothing wrong with these politics, but making them explicit weakens them and, stylistically, it messes up the evening.

Some of the performances are thrilling. With surgical precision, Naomi Wright flips between playing Tamora and being Spark, the actor who performs her. And Mackie is dizzyingly liberated as Lavinia/Leap, fearlessly propositioning audience members. Both of these actors combine complete commitment to the irrational with extraordinary timing. Craig Erickson plays Fink, who takes on the roles of both Saturninus and his gentler brother Bassianus—and Erickson's rhythms are fabulously weird. He feels totally in the moment, unhinged from the usual expectations of theatrical timing—and it's fascinating to watch internalized, fucked-up Fink as he tries to negotiate reality on his own terms.

Surprisingly, Peter Anderson, who is a gifted and experienced physical comedian, doesn't come up with much as Sob/Titus. And, although Sarah Afful (Aaron) sports an infectiously wicked grin as her player character Boots, there's not a lot of depth or surprise in her portraits. That said, there's enough going on with both of these performers to sustain the life of this ensemble piece.

Thanks largely to set and costume designer Drew Facey, *Titus Bouffonius* looks fantastic. (This video will give you a taste of it.) Lavinia has bony shoulders, and she wears filthy tights with the pink ribbons from ballet slippers wrapped around her calves. Tamora stalks the stage in a ragged, leopard-print ensemble and little black suede boots that look like hooves. The set—with its rickety staircase

and balcony, with its tattered red curtains—looks like the haunted-house version of something that might have been up at The Cultch a hundred years ago.

After the show, when I asked pals if they would recommend it to friends, they were surprisingly hesitant. I have no such hesitation. *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius* isn't perfect, but it has a vision. There is extraordinarily original work on all levels of director Steven Drover's production. And I can't remember the last time I saw a show that got me so excited I thought I might lose my marbles.



REVIEWS **The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius**

Tickets from \$22 at thecultch.com Posted November 29, 2017

If you need a really good laugh and you're okay with dark, grisly, bloody, grotesque, rude and crude – all wrapped up in the French clowning style called *bouffon* – you will love *Titus Bouffonius* as much as I did. How else can we get through these dreary, rain-sodden winter days?

Commissioned by Stephen Drover, artistic director of Rumble Theatre, playwright Colleen Murphy takes Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* by the tail and spins it around. Shakespeare's story is still there: Titus Andronicus, a Roman general, returns from ten years of war, having lost twenty-one of his twenty-five sons (obviously he believes in making love not war at least some of the time). With him, he brings his prisoners Tamora, Queen of the Goths, her three sons and her lover Aaron, the Moor. After Titus Andronicus sacrifices Tamora's eldest son to appease the deaths of his twenty-one sons, all hell breaks loose. It gets worse. Much worse. There's a rape. A beheading – like a beheading but it's hands. Bodies pile up.

Playwright Murphy's framing of this play is truly inspired: five ragtag, down-on-their-luck street people apply for and get a \$500 grant to produce a play that will

have just one performance. “Thank you, taxpayers”, they chortle, leering at us. They read a bunch of Shakespeare plays and choose Titus Andronicus. Sob (Peter Anderson) will direct, narrate and play Titus; Fink (Craig Erickson) will play both Bassianus and his brother, the Emperor, Saturninus; Spark (Naomi Wright) will be Tamora; Leap (Pippa Mackie) will be Lavinia, Titus’s daughter and one who gives “blow jobs for five bucks” (she’s saving up to get a rescue dog); and Boots (Sarah Afful) will be Aaron, the Moor.

Sob, Fink, Spark, Leap and Boots are all cracked and they are well aware – like kids in a Christmas pageant – that they are in a play. Sob, recently released from prison, is the most together and keeps everyone more or less in line although Boots repeatedly makes an entrance with a pie and is told again and again, “not yet”. It’s all completely anarchic.

The set, Sob tells us, was salvaged from the Vancouver Playhouse. It’s roughly put together by designer Drew Facey with askew planks and an old theatre curtain. The various sons that come to a violent are all naked, plastic baby dolls that Leap/Lavinia tells us are hers all except the “coloured” one. Red plastic knives, for stabbing, abound – some are handed out to the audience. The costumes that Sob, Fink, Leap, Boots and Spark have chosen to wear look like they’ve come from a battered strip mall clothing bin and the makeup they’ve put on by themselves is ghoulish.

Under the direction of Stephen Drover, this is a very tight ensemble piece and each actor is simply perfect for the part. Did anyone suspect that Craig Erickson could do *bouffon*? As Bassianus, he’s mild and slightly fey; as Saturninus, weirdly always wanting his “mommy”, he’s bizarre. Creeping about, legs always slightly bent, Naomi Wright is, well, creepy. And what she does with a repeated silent, frozen, “Hah” to the audience is perfection. With a partly green-painted face, Sarah Afful holds a goofy but malevolent grin throughout and Peter Anderson, the weary but still enthusiastic director of this little band of misfits, keeps the story going to its inevitable conclusion. On a chalkboard, he crosses off the dead. Composer Mishelle Cuttler introduces the play with a sort of German underground cabaret music and also writes several little hymn-like ditties performed by the ensemble all clustered together. It sounds great.

There’s serious intent deeply buried in Titus Bouffonius with songs like, “Willingly we suffer for our children” and lines like, “Black lives matter, motherfucker, “Revenge is the sugar in my blood” and especially, “I am so full of sorrow I want to kill the world.” With the seeping through of each of the players’ shabby, destitute lives into Shakespeare’s characters, we get a real sense of the despair and hopelessness of outcasts. What revenge will the poor and desperate of the world wreak upon the rest of us when their time comes? But the packaging is very funny and very clever. And, ironically, even a wild and crazy spoof of Shakespeare carries truth: “An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind” – Mahatma Gandhi.

Copyright ©2017 Jo Ledingham

The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonious: Just how dark do you want it?

November 24, 2017 by [Colin Thomas](#)



Peter Anderson (Titus) should not be allowed to play with dolls.
(Photo by Steven Drover)

At the beginning of *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonious*, I was so stimulated—so shocked, laughing so hard—that I was afraid I was going to start shouting things. Unplanned, random shit. You’ve got to love a show that makes you feel like you might lose your mind.

The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonious is playwright Colleen Murphy’s bouffon adaptation of Shakespeare’s grisly *Titus Andronicus*. Bouffon is a dark inversion of clowning that was developed by the French movement master Jacques Lecoq. Bouffon emphasizes parody and grotesquery: the body of the performer is often distorted through costuming. As Lecoq said in his definition of the bouffon, “There are echoes in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch.”

Bouffon embraces the discarded and ridicules accepted norms. In the framing device of *Titus Bouffonious*, we meet the marginalized characters who are going to perform for us. Sob, who is playing Titus, has done a lot of jail time. Leap, who will become Titus’s daughter

Lavinia, is a victim of sexual abuse. She sucks cock to earn money because she wants to get a rescue dog—hopefully a German shepherd or a Labrador. As they introduce themselves to us, all five players thank the taxpayers who have made their \$500 production grant possible. And they express their gratitude for a charitable organization that supports the rights of a long list of the dispossessed including “people who self-identify as pineapples.”

Then these characters launch into the script. Having lost 21 sons in battle, but ultimately victorious in war, Titus returns to Rome dragging his prisoner, Tamora, Queen of the Goths, behind him. In revenge for his losses, Titus slaughters one of Tamora’s sons. And so the cycle continues. Tamora bides her time, marrying the wicked Saturninus, who has recently been made emperor. But fury will out. *Titus* contains 14 murders and a nauseatingly brutal rape and dismemberment.

And this is funny? Well, it’s consistently hilarious at first and then intermittently so. The hilarity derives from a giddy combination of transgression and inventiveness. Generic plastic baby dolls represent many of the children. When Titus sacrifices Tamora’s son, he rips the doll’s legs off. Later, when Aaron, Tamora’s Moorish accomplice, is watching a romantic scene, he mimes jerking off, using the doll’s leg as a penis. Okay, maybe you have to be there for that one. How about this? When Tamora is giving birth to a child she has conceived with Aaron, little brown doll legs start to appear beneath the hem of her mini-skirt.

Even for me, *Titus Bouffonius* isn’t entirely successful. After its thrilling opening, the show hits a bit of trough and never entirely recovers. That’s because it doesn’t keep topping itself. The script largely abandons the framing device of the players’ stories. And it doesn’t know quite what to do with the mechanics of Shakespeare’s plot. In that plot, two of Tamora’s sons rape Lavinia, then chop off her hands and cut out her tongue so she won’t be able to identify them. Stylistically, *Titus Bouffonius* enters a kind of no man’s land at this point, mining the horror both for absurdity (Lavinia’s assailants challenge her to sing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” without a tongue), and for pathos (playing Lavinia, actor Pippa Mackie’s eyes well with tears). Yes, a certain amount of disorientation is interesting, but, for me, there wasn’t enough serious context to make Lavinia’s plight deeply affecting; there was only enough to make it unfunny.

Strengthening both sides of this dynamic—by allowing for deeper horror and more distinctly defined absurdity—might help.

There are also a couple of points at which *Titus Bouffonius* gets disconcertingly earnest. Lavinia delivers a self-described feminist speech and Titus goes on a rant about power structures. There's nothing wrong with these politics, but making them explicit weakens them and, stylistically, it messes up the evening.

Some of the performances are thrilling. With surgical precision, Naomi Wright flips between playing Tamora and being Spark, the actor who performs her. And Mackie is dizzyingly liberated as Lavinia/Leap, fearlessly propositioning audience members. Both of these actors combine complete commitment to the irrational with extraordinary timing. Craig Erickson plays Fink, who takes on the roles of both Saturninus and his gentler brother Bassianus—and Erickson's rhythms are fabulously weird. He feels totally in the moment, unhinged from the usual expectations of theatrical timing—and it's fascinating to watch internalized, fucked-up Fink as he tries to negotiate reality on his own terms.

Surprisingly, Peter Anderson, who is a gifted and experienced physical comedian, doesn't come up with much as Sob/Titus. And, although Sarah Afful (Aaron) sports an infectiously wicked grin as her player character Boots, there's not a lot of depth or surprise in her portraits. That said, there's enough going on with both of these performers to sustain the life of this ensemble piece.

Thanks largely to set and costume designer Drew Facey, *Titus Bouffonius* looks fantastic. (This video will give you a taste of it.) Lavinia has bony shoulders, and she wears filthy tights with the pink ribbons from ballet slippers wrapped around her calves. Tamora stalks the stage in a ragged, leopard-print ensemble and little black suede boots that look like hooves. The set—with its rickety staircase and balcony, with its tattered red curtains—looks like the haunted-house version of something that might have been up at The Cultch a hundred years ago.

After the show, when I asked pals if they would recommend it to friends, they were surprisingly hesitant. I have no such hesitation. *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius* isn't perfect,

but it has a vision. There is extraordinarily original work on all levels of director Steven Drover's production. And I can't remember the last time I saw a show that got me so excited I thought I might lose my marbles.

THE SOCIETY FOR THE DESTITUTE PRESENTS TITUS BOUFFONIUS By Colleen Murphy. Adapted from William Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus. Directed by Steven Drover. A Rumble Theatre production presented by The Cultch. In The Cultch's Historic Theatre on Thursday, November 23. Continues until December 3, 2017.

12thNight.ca

Liz Nicholls on theatre



A riotous black comedy from Colleen Murphy at Theatre Network: Titus Bouffonius is all good unwholesome fun.

A review

Posted on January 31, 2020

by Liz Nicholls



Robert Benz, Bobbi Goddard, Hunter Cardinal in *The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*. Photo by Ian Jackson, Epic Photography

By Liz Nicholls, 12thnight.ca

It's a rare evening at the theatre that gets you laughing out loud, gives you a good smack upside the head — and makes you wonder later whether you might have dreamed the whole thing. AND whether you should have your mind checked out for major structural cracks.

There are comedies that are black; there are comedies that are very black. And then there's *The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*: it's *riotously* black. All good unwholesome fun. And yours for a Theatre Network ticket.

A 2015 commission from Vancouver's Rumble Theatre, it's by the Canadian star playwright Colleen Murphy (*Pig Girl*, *Armstrong's War*, *The December Man*). Which should be a hint that it'll be theatrically inventive and taboo-resistant. It's a play-within-a-play, a bit like a cross between the inmates of the insane asylum putting on a historical drama in *Marat/Sade* and the rustics who put on a show for

the courtiers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Titus Bouffonius* is what happens when a ragtag band of misfit outsiders with nothing to lose, no budget to speak of, and no proprieties to uphold are let loose on Shakespeare's blood-spattered, grisly early revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*.

These eager amateurs in the theatre have chosen it for impeccable scholarly reasons: of all the plays in the sacred canon, "it's the one with the most murders." What happens is a madcap black comedy containing assorted neck-breakings, rape, beheadings, crucifixions, dismemberments and maimings, infanticides, cannibalism — and that's just the stuff lifted from *Titus Andronicus*. (Which, by the way, is A Timeless Classic since it's by the greatest playwright who ever lived and also wrote *Romeo and Juliet*).

The style of choice is bouffon (a macabre and physically distorted clown sub-species of the genus Euro). They're outliers who enter the world with a jaundiced eye and a spirit of mockery. And the bouffons of Bradley Moss's go-for-the-gusto Theatre Network production have been coached by a celebrated master of the genre, Michael Kennard, aka Mump, of the horror clown duo Mump and Smoot fame.

Since the homeless arrive at destitution for diverse reasons, each of the five characters taking on roles in *Titus Bouffonius* has particular sources for their thespian urges. All five, however, are diligent from the outset about thanking the taxpayers for their \$500 arts grant to put on the play.



Robert Benz in The Society For The Destitute Presents *Titus Bouffonius*. Photo by Ryan Parker

The cast enters, sidling, in a misshapen clump. And although they return to ensemble configuration to deliver morbid odes to the gods (score by composer Darrin Hagen), that's the last tiptoeing that will happen in an evening when the mounting body count is tallied on a clothesline of tiny corpses. They're led by Robert Benz as Sob, the aging urchin ex-con who stars as Titus, a father of an ever-dwindling supply of 25 sons. "I love the smell of an open tomb...."

Titus's nemesis Tamora Queen the Goths is played by snarly Spark who's played by Bobbi Goddard as a toxified goth party girl (decked out by designer Tessa Stamp). She self-identifies as a "recovering mother" since "I'm trying to recover my two kids from fuckin' Children's Aid." Boots (Helen Belay), a "recovering alcoholic" with a psycho glint, plays Aaron, the relentlessly evil Moor in *Titus Andronicus*.



Marguerite Lawler in The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius.
Photo by Ian Jackson, Epic Photography

Marguerite Lawler plays Leap as a kind of toxic kewpie, a sex worker with tattered romantic dreams who plays Titus's daughter Lavinia. The latter, who has a horrifying time of it in Shakespeare, gets raped, then has her hands cut off and her tongue cut out so she can't accuse her attackers, Tamora's sons Donny and Kevin.

At the worst possible moment Leap, who's playing a character getting divested of major body parts in the shredder of a plot, makes a little set speech about violating her personal body space with unwanted touching. Yes, this is a play where the bouffons make fun of everything sacred, including off-the-rack political correctness.

As Fink (a "recovering kid because my mother left when I was five"), Hunter Cardinal has the double fun of playing two brothers. One is the pumped-up replacement emperor and the other more of a chill

dude, with the expertly timed miscues that constantly leave him stranded as the narration rolls on.



Robert Benz in The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius. Photo by Ian Jackson, Epic Photography

In the chaos of misplaced entrances, wrongly timed props and near-misses, and the tangle of prompts and improvised lines and insertions from the wrong play, a story with a high mortality rate, especially for kids, emerges (thank you sweet swan of Avon). The expendable younger generation is represented onstage by a battalion of small cheap plastic dolls who meet grisly ends. You know that the gore quotient is hitting red alert when the front rows surrounding the stage in Moss's production are equipped with a splatter shield and bibs. Ooo, I do love a play with a good splatter shield (a lot of ketchup gives up the ghost in this show, just saying).

It all happens on a set (by Tessa Stamp, lit by Scott Peterson), as crooked as the characters' teeth and apparently thrown together from rejected junk found in a dumpster behind the Roxy, according to participants.

From the macabre hilarity — which comes with a “trigger warning” for the traumatized: “be warned that our performance may contain a few moments of interpretive dance” — pulses a question from a smart and witty playwright. And it's maybe THE question of our time (along with how on earth we choose our leaders so disastrously). What are you supposed to do with vast repositories of grief and rage? How do you contain the uncontainable?



Robert Benz in *The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*, Theatre Network. Photo by Ian Jackson, Epic Photography

A sense of absurdity will only take you so far. Titus says the answer is revenge. And more revenge. But “revenge is a snake that eats its tail and shits it out then eats that same shit and shits it out again and again and again. It must taste good.”

You have to be up to it. But in an age with an appetite for vague disapproval and a diminished and dwindling capacity for outrage, it’s kind of heartening to feel the jolt of a shock coursing through the veins of a play — and your own. “We chose this play because it’s about grief, vengeance and the relish of murdering children — your own and other people’s,” say the bouffons by way of introduction. And the ante gets upped.

It takes a pack of first-rate death clowns to follow through, with . Fun fun fun (thank you taxpayers).

REVIEW

The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius

Theatre: Theatre Network

Written by: Colleen Murphy

Directed by: Bradley Moss

Starring: Robert Benz, Helen Belay, Hunter Cardinal, Bobbi Goddard, Marguerite Lawler

Where: Roxy on Gateway, 8529 Gateway Blvd.

Running: through Feb. 16

Tickets: 780-453-2440, theatrenetwork.ca



Shakespeare's murderous revenge play meets comic chaos at Theatre Network's new show

Comic chaos at the heart of new Theatre Network production by award-winning playwright Colleen Murphy

LIANE FAULDER Updated: January 31, 2020

Trigger warning for Edmonton theatre-goers considering Titus Bouffonius, playing at The Roxy on Gateway until Feb. 16. The show contains both clowns and Shakespeare. Also strobe lights. And tampons.

Happily, it's all gloriously mashed together in an uproarious send-up of struggling theatre groups and demanding audiences and various taboos, including society's fascination with violence, penned by one of Canada's most celebrated playwrights, Colleen Murphy.

There is blood, and sex, and a meat pie. Pustules are prominent. If you struggle with Shakespeare's convoluted and just generally annoying plots, Titus Buouffonius offers no comfort. But you won't care. And, indeed, you may travel some distance on your journey to appreciate the clown.

The play was commissioned in 2015 by Vancouver's Rumble

Theatre, which asked Murphy to pen an adaptation of Titus Andronicus, one of Shakespeare's less popular plays. At the time of the commission, Murphy was working at the University of Alberta as the Lee Playwright in Residence. There, she connected with her friend and colleague, associate professor Michael Kennard, one of the co-creators of Mump and Smoot and a practitioner of the physical comedy/bouffon style of clowning. Murphy began to see the potential for combining bouffonery with Shakespeare, and Titus Bouffonius was born.

The five actors in the play, directed by Bradley Moss, work as an ensemble, playing multiple roles and often clumping together to move in tandem across the stage like a slightly apologetic Volkswagen Beetle — lumpy, rusted and threatening to collapse. As bouffons, they are there to charm and mock the audience. Their teeth are appalling.

I will not presume to explicate the plot, except to say it begins with a small theatre group (The Society for the Destitute) which has been awarded a \$500 grant by the government to put on a play. They studied several works by Shakespeare before selecting Titus Andronicus, and sometimes they get mixed up, delivering famous lines from exactly the wrong play at exactly the wrong time, and from surprising locations.

The ramshackle castle at the heart of the set was created by Tessa Stamp, as noted by the cast, from an old set found in the dumpster behind the Roxy. There are two sons competing for the love of the same woman, multiple murders and a rape. The sacrificial children peppering the plot are represented by small plastic dolls attached to the costumes of the cast members, and there is an abacus strung with tiny figurines to keep track of their deaths. Some hands are cut off, and a tongue, too. Murphy (a winner of the Governor General's Literary Award for English Language Drama) gives each of the bouffons something special. While Robert Benz (Sob/Titus) and Hunter Cardinal (Fink/Saturnius and Bassianus) are particularly and hilariously

adept, Helen Belay (Boots/Aaron), Bobbi Goddard (Spark/Tamora) and Marguerite Lawler (Leap/Lavinia) contribute mightily to the comic chaos. Tamora's description of giving birth made me giggle; who among us has not yearned to share the horrifying and gory details of our own labours at an otherwise tedious cocktail party?

The writing by Murphy is just a treat. It was her trigger warning that inspired my opening paragraph, although she presages interpretive dance. As a talented librettist, Murphy crafts a series of harmonious ditties that draw cast members tightly together to reground the story just when we need it most.

"Kiss our boo-boos, hug our stains, soothe our throbbing membranes," was my favourite. Murphy is also a master of name-calling. ("You merciless piss-flapping dick-weed twat-waffle slug" is a doozie, don't you think?)

Theatre Network provides an excellent tutorial on the original play, Titus Andronicus, and the bouffon style of clowning, in its program. You may want to arrive a little early to the show to get up to speed on that. But even if you arrive late, and find yourself breathlessly confused — you will be in good company, and happy to remain so.

For further information and tickets, call Theatre Network (8529 Gateway Blvd.) at 780-453-2440 or visit theatrenetwork.ca.
lfaulder@postmedia.com

THEATRE REVIEWS

Dark and deranged The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius will shock audiences out of their comfort zone

by Andrea Warner on November 24th, 2017 at 12:26 PM



Peter Anderson in the blackly funny *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*. STEPHEN DROVER

Written by Colleen Murphy. Directed by Stephen Drover. Produced by Rumble Theatre at the Cultch Historic Theatre on November 23. Continues to December 3, 2017

“The worst revenge is the best revenge,” says one of the characters near the end of the spectacularly debased and shockingly funny new play *The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*. While that line isn’t the best life advice, it certainly makes for a great night of jaw-dropping, audacious theatre.

Written by Colleen Murphy, it’s adapted from William Shakespeare’s blood-soaked revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*—also the title of the play-within-a-play staged by the troubled and unhinged five-person bouffon troupe of social outliers that comprise the Society for the Destitute. Upon receiving a \$500 grant, they are tasked with putting on a Shakespeare play, and settle on Titus because it “has

the most murders”.

Titus is a general in the Roman army whose enemy, Tamora, is Queen of the Goths.

Their family members are casualties of their escalating cycle of revenge, and the graphic violence doesn't stop at murder: among its many horrors, Titus also features infanticide, rape, torture, and cannibalism, all of which are overlapping interests in the Venn Diagram of the members of the Society for the Destitute, a collection of truly grotesque individuals.

There's Sob (Peter Anderson), an older man released from jail four years ago; Boots (Sarah Afful), a recovering alcoholic; Fink (Craig Erickson), whose mother abandoned him when he was a little boy; Leap (Pippa Mackie), a young woman who has grown up in abuse; and Spark (Naomi Wright), who is furious that two of her many children were taken by protective services years ago and she hasn't seen them since.

The cast is fantastic, and they dig into the bouffon style of clowning (great work from bouffon coach Michael Kennard of Mump & Smoot, as well as direction from Stephen Drover) with relish and glee. Madness glints from their eyes and their twisted smiles as they engage in a ceaseless barrage of heinous acts, some hilarious and some bleak, all of them disturbing. Mackie handles some of the toughest material. Her Leap is a sex worker, but she's also deeply damaged from her background of being abused. When Leap's character, Lavinia, suffers a horrific fate and can no longer speak clearly, Mackie not only rises to the challenge, she shines.

In this play, the audience is shocked outside its comfort zone. It's forced to, well, if not contemplate then at least contend with the horrors of violence alongside larger moral questions about honour, our complicity in war, and the lengths we'll go in order to justify pursuits of power (fighting for religion, for land, to gain freedom by suppressing the will of others). The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius is deranged, darkly funny, and perverse, but its subversiveness also serves a purpose, and it makes for an unforgettable experience.

REVIEW: Evil Clowns Slaughter Shakespeare in Disturbing New Play

Posted on January 31, 2020

By Colin MacLean

Entertainment, Front Slider, Theatre



The audacious new production from Theatre Network will have you helpless with laughter – as long you don't mind humour that is outrageous, dark and discomforting.

It's called The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Buffonius – and it's a clown show. There are no red noses or seltzer bottles. It's bloody, bawdy and grotesquely perverse. If that sounds to Fringe

fans like the “Son of Mump and Smoot,” it happens that Michael Kennard (Mump) coached these players in the sardonic, pitch-black style of clowning called “Bouffon.” There hasn’t been this much blood spilled on an Edmonton stage since our last visit to Ummo.

The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Buffonius plays **at the Roxy on Gateway through Feb. 16.**



The “Bouffon” method of clowning was developed by the French master Jacques Lecoq. It features distorted bodies (and minds) and includes elements of burlesque, commedia, farce, gallows humour, parody, slapstick and satire.

The play by Colleen Murphy – well known around these parts as having been writer-in-residence for both the Citadel and the U of A – is actually play within a play. A group of misfits is given a grant to stage a show, so they choose Shakespeare’s bloody and seldom-performed revenge opus Titus Andronicus. Mostly because, as they observe, “It is the play with the most murders.”

The leader of this basket of deplorables is Sob (played by a commanding Robert Benz), recently released from jail. His followers include the creepy Boots (Helen Belay), who often gives the

impression that screaming madness is not far away. Fink (Hunter Cardinal) was abandoned as a child. He has mother issues and can't keep his entrances straight. Leap (Marguerite Lawler) is a sad, damaged sex worker performing oral sex so she can buy a rescue dog. She shamelessly works the audience while delivering a lecture on female rights. She hates the play and keeps breaking into dialogue from Romeo and Juliet. Spark (Bobbi Goddard) is in "recovery" after having her children taken by Children's Services. All of the actors play several roles.



Under the inventive direction of Bradley Moss, this motley band of antic fools tear into the Bard with great glee. Madness certainly seems to be an element here. Twisted in body and bent in mind, they feast on Shakespeare's grisly tale. You can't fault this troupe for holding back or from taking great delight in each indignity. The acting is overwrought – but that is the style.

We are not allowed to watch from afar. The audience is challenged to set aside notions of theatre and surrender to outrage and confrontation. We laugh because all this is barbarically funny, and also disturbing. Shakespeare inspired horror in his audiences with

this play. Here the characters substitute absurdity for terror. Plastic dolls representing children are dismembered. Lavinia (Lawler) has her tongue cut out – and is then challenged to sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star – tongueless. Some 14 characters meet grisly deaths – all dutifully counted off by a series of small plastic dolls on a wire in much the same way a snooker game is governed.



All of this is carried out in the play's distinct style and context, and can't be summed up in a series of described anecdotes. You know something's up when the climax begins and the characters drape front row audience members in bibs and sheets.

Despite the chaos on stage for much of the evening it is obvious that the anarchy is carefully calibrated by director Moss. The entrances and exits may appear messed up but they all happen just the right way, the jokes connect and the sound and music cues are bang on. The sound design and music come from the indispensable Darrin Hagen. He also wrote a series of small ditties to advance the action. Moss stages the show in the round – so beware of flying body parts. The wooden crazy-quilt but extremely serviceable set is from Tessa

Stamp (assembled, the cast tells us, from old wood they found in a dumpster), with atmospheric lighting from Scott Peters.

This may not be for everyone. You may find yourself outside of your comfort zone, but The Society for the Destitute Presents Titus Buffonius is strikingly original and delivered with enough verve and “you-can’t-do-that-on-stage” style to take your breath away – while leaving you with lots to talk about after the show.

Photos by Ian Jackson

