

# TITUS ANONYMOUS

[fragments of]  
a process

by johnmichael rossi

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## **TITUS ANONYMOUS: THE PROCESS**

by Sarah Mullan

*TITUS ANONYMOUS: fragments of...* is the product of a collaborative process between the staff and students at the University of Northampton in 2017. When writing on his own work with fragments Tim Etchells advocates for an approach that reflects the practice suggesting 'so too should the writing be in fragments – fragments between which the reader must slip and connect if she is to get anywhere'.<sup>1</sup> By way of an introduction to the playtext, this essay shares fragments from the performance making process which unfolded over four months, as part of the 12-week undergraduate module 'Specialist Study' and a culminating 80-hour intensive rehearsal period.

'Specialist Study' asks second year drama students to work with staff and guest artists to produce a new piece of performance. It aims to equip students with a greater understanding of professional performance practices and enable them to gain a deep working knowledge of a particular creative form, in this instance D.I.Y. Theatre and Deconstructive Devising. Robert Daniels' D.I.Y seeks to capture what is meant by a 'do it yourself' approach to performance making by way of a series of reflections from contemporary theatre makers on how they create work. Throughout the collection DIY is positioned as both an ethos and a style. The former is a belief that skill can be acquired (in the vein of Do It Yourself manuals) and the latter is allowing an aesthetic to emerge and build from the materials that are accessible to the performance makers. Alongside this, William Shakespeare's rarely staged *Titus Andronicus* was selected by director johnmichael rossi as the play that would be deconstructed and utilised as the starting point for devising. The combination of a DIY approach to a Shakespearian text offered a series of challenges to the creative team particularly in regard to illuminating its contemporary relevance.

rossi's production concept orbited around five themes (revenge, self-destruction, the grotesque, madness and spite) and two research queries: how do we address and unpick the role of Aaron and a history of racism inherent in Renaissance drama? How do we address the prevailing language and actions of rape in the staging of the play? These questions, provoked by the original text, became more pressing in view of creating a performance for a contemporary audience. In particular, the emergence of the 2017 #METOO movement immediately prior to beginning rehearsals set up and the continued global #BlackLivesMatter campaign offered contemporary counterpoints to the research questions that generatively underpinned the devising process.

Prior to beginning rehearsals students were invited to identify and present their own area of interest in response to original text. A series of interconnected research areas emerged that addressed cubist portraits of characters, the role of conflict, previous productions approaches to staging rape, the value of gore without blood, the animalistic behaviour of characters, and the cyclical nature of the five production themes. Emily Whitehouse in her essay *On Reflection of Titus* points to how this aspect of production development enabled students to weave their knowledge from beyond the subject of drama into the project in true DIY fashion. These presentations drew out a series of interrelated concerns that the cast and creative team then navigated through the initial 12-week rehearsal period.

In the rehearsal room, the cast worked on developing their spirit animal, based on a combination of Chinese and Western Zodiacs. Each cast member was required to research and subsequently develop movements and behaviour based on their animal's distinct characteristics. Throughout the weeks these features were gradually refined and eventually cast members hybridised these qualities into their characters' behaviour. Catherine Pratt points to how this process

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enabled cast members to interact differently in the space and develop rehearsal room connections with others who they may not encounter in the play itself in her essay *Once You Think, You Do*. Alongside this, the cast worked through the first draft of Titus Anonamous both in table reads and on the floor. This process not only familiarised the cast with the new world of Rome complete with Bastardz and Anonymi (in lieu of Goths and Romans) but also introduced debate into the production process. Each rehearsal was peppered with discussion regarding the inclusion or exclusion of original plot devices and debates on how to transfer characters positions from one world to the next (for instance, the Bastardz belief in gods, in contrast to the Anonymi's single God to reflect the original text). And as addressed above, the original stimulus Titus Andronicus poses pertinent questions for contemporary theatre makers particularly surrounding race and gender. As part of navigating these issues, it was important for the cast and creative team to debate the approaches that we would take and understand the choices we were making as a collective. In *Reflections on Titus Anonamous: A Personal and Collaborative Awakening*, Andrew McIntosh thoughtfully examines a rehearsal room discussion regarding whether to continue to utilise the term moor (from the Shakespearian text) or replace it with a term with more immediate contemporary resonance. The discussions surrounding contentious ideas or moments in the script became teachable moments for us all, demonstrating the need to fully unpack the weight and significance of the cultural coding embedded in these texts when trying to align such plays with contemporary experience

This period of rehearsals ended with a work in progress showing to an invited audience, followed by a series of feedback activities curated by the student members of the cast. In his essay *Do it yourself, it won't be done for you* Ryan Ferguson highlights the value of this aspect of process which enabled the creative team to identify

which aspects of the production immediately resonated with the audience and others that needed to be further developed. Following this the cast expanded to include a number of new members from first and third year. Additionally, one of the guest artists', sculptor and scenographer Rachael Champion joined the team to construct the set during the 80-hour production intensive. In line with the projects DIY ethos and aesthetic, the set emerged from the objects, materials and skills at hand. Towering columns constructed from cardboard populated the stage, inoperative white goods were heaped together to form the tomb of Anonymi and rostra was stacked high to construct a looming House of Democracy.

*TITUS ANONYMOUS: fragments of...* is the product of four months' curiosity and questioning. Of identifying a fragment of interest and running with it. Of taking what's in the room as a starting point and continually experimenting.

This is the result of collaboration.  
This is the point of intersection.  
This is the text.  
This is DIY.  
This is Titus today.  
This is a fragment.

***Dr. Sarah Mullan is a Lecturer in Drama & Acting for University of Northampton's Drama Programme.***

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment*, (London: Routledge, 1999) p.23

**#BEINGTITUS**

by Rory O'Neill

My intention with this reflection is for it to be fragmented. The process of creating the work in this module was an intersection of my knowledge and my desire for learning something new.

It was November 2017, the Undergraduate Drama program at The University of Northampton was going through a period of change. The malaise of routine was up-ended, there was a palpable sense of (r)evolution on multiple levels, especially to the teaching of modules. The familiar beep of a *WhatsApp* message from johnmichael rossi texted to say he had an idea that he wanted to 'run by me'. This 'idea' would throw me into a process of theatre-making that would have me collaborate with my students as part of their *Specialist Study* module, and into a world of fragmented reality and hybridity. rossi had decided that he wanted to stage Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* – not a common choice given the bloodthirsty nature of the play and the potential complexities of staging these aspects. Not to mention the inherent difficulties of expecting younger students to realise some of the complex emotional and cultural aspects of the characters contained within it.

*Titus Andronicus* is a play that (for me) is dark and difficult. I found myself looking at Anthony Hopkins in Julie Taymor's film version. In a BBC interview, Hopkins discusses the fact that he struggled when cast as *King Lear* as a younger man, because he lacked the experience that age gives you.<sup>1</sup> This resonated deeply with me; At first, I assumed that rossi cast me as Titus because I looked older than the rest of the cast, a fitting visual aesthetic. I felt I had some shortcomings in the same way that Hopkins described: lacking the experience of complex emotions that Titus experiences. Titus is a warrior, a leader, a respected figure, a lover of order, and a father. The latter of these, fatherhood, is

where I had the most difficulty. I am not a father. I can only imagine the pain it would cause to have your daughter brought to you with her limbs hacked off and her tongue torn out so she couldn't communicate who perpetrated the deed. I remember distinctly, the rehearsal where we began to stage this moment and feeling as though I was not really getting it right – it didn't feel genuine to me, the pace of the rehearsal got the better of me and left me feeling slightly hollow – this was something I would experience on more than one occasion throughout the process.

Playing the lead role in a Shakespeare play is not something that is foreign to me. I have played *Macbeth* and *Richard III* in the past. I have also collaborated with students in these contexts. It is interesting to work collaboratively with my students, to develop an environment of equality in the making of the work. The perceptions they have are always evident, feeling like they do not have the skills or the experience to be able to live up to 'our' expectations. Little did they know, this feeling ran both ways as the process was requiring to see me in a different light; to get to know me in a new context, away from a particular image they have of me as their lecturer. There was an interesting conversation in the Student Union, following the final performance; one of the cast members talked about not knowing certain things and feeling limited in his character development, especially when he watched myself and my colleague, Gerrard Martin (who played *A-Ron*) develop our roles. I explained that his age was the only thing that limited him. This is perhaps obvious, but the fact that he just hasn't had the opportunities in his early twenties that Gerrard and I had already lived through, was obviously going to create a feeling of inadequacy that was not really true – it was only a transient perception, a flash of 'imposter syndrome.' I also pointed out to the student, that in any creative collaborative space, we all learn from each other.

Exposure and vulnerability were things I felt acutely aware of during the process. What if I couldn't achieve the level that perhaps my students thought I should? What if Rossi, the director and new Program Leader for Drama, thought I was not up to the job? These were high stakes. The process threw me into a hybrid world, one where I was not entirely the lecturer and not entirely a company member in the truest definition. My students, as open the relationship, would not entirely share the truth of their own experience. I did not find myself at lunch with them talking through my frustrations or concerns. I also felt that I could not truly express these concerns to my colleagues. *Titus* was a multi-faceted roleplay where we all had different responsibilities that overlapped and were underpinned by a desire to bring about the vision of the work, whilst still getting to know one another as colleagues.

It is my experience that creative people are often riven with insecurity. I find myself in situations where I have 'imposter syndrome' – waiting for someone to tap me on the shoulder and point out that I shouldn't be here. I felt this at times in the process, especially when I was dealing with the pressures of learning lines, or chords and lyrics for songs that I did not know. Figuring out how to make a Nirvana song sound more fitting within the visual and aesthetic frameworks of our version may seem trivial, but when you create a pressure on yourself to succeed, these pressures can become difficult to face. They kick at your flight or fight instinct; 'How do I make this the best it can be?' 'How do I make this believable?' 'Would it have been easier to not have this acting role?'

My spirit animal, is a Gorilla. Gorilla's effortlessly command groups of people through the strength of will, decisiveness, and the mediation of conflict. With this type of leadership, they understand responsibility. Gorillas totem people, always take full responsibility of those within their command. Moreover, these folks fully understand that a good leader is a leader who serves

the needs of the followers. They also lead by example and with integrity.<sup>2</sup> This definition describes me well; however, it does not give a contextual backdrop to these features. It paints the Gorilla in a positive light. There are times when these traits are a burden. The process of creating the world of *Titus* was a *fragmented hybridity*; in this context, I was not in control. The negative aspect of my leadership ability and desire for control means that it is difficult for me to take a recessive role in a process of creation where I am not the arbiter of aesthetic choices. There were times when this process was too fast, too fragmented and left me without the feeling that I had truly mastered or grasped *Titus* to my full satisfaction. The process began to feel like a pressure cooker. It was at odds with my instincts as a Gorilla. However, the two-week intensive of making and shaping the performance were clearly laid out, typical of the organisational traits of Rossi – interesting that his theatre making aesthetic is ‘off the wall’ when he is so obsessive about details and arrangements. His method of working allows the process a space to develop because it is laid out so clearly.

Anonymous: The notion of a *Titus* “Anonymous,” for me, was ironic. At no point in the creation of this character did I feel anonymity. Anonymity was the only thing that was not fragmented. I was fully exposed to the process, felt the weight of expectation, felt uncomfortable at times, felt lonely – suspended in a hybrid world between my students and my colleagues. Since I was a child, I had always wanted to play a Cowboy. *Titus* was a ‘Bad ass Yankee Warrior.’ The idea of the Cowboy, falls pretty much in line with my love of American culture. I borrowed a pair of Cowboy boots, a big belt buckle, bought a hat and I began to explore the *Titus* that Rossi, an American, re-envisioned for this version: a whiskey-swilling guy with little patience for small talk and a big appetite for order and tradition, leading tragically to the killing of his own daughter.

Beyond the creation of *Titus Anonymus: fragments of*, I confronted Cowboys, Time, Space, Love, Loss, Revenge, *Disney*, Broken Guitar Strings, Chords, Belief, Hope and Collaboration. In the days following the performance, I reflected on my choices, the quality of my performance, my skills as an actor and musician which had been exposed in front of my students, and ultimately, the need to do this again, or not. This project was rich in opportunity and collaboration, hollow in its speed, unrelenting in expectation but ultimately something that forced new perspectives in how to develop material both physically and emotionally, and selfishly gave me the chance to collaborate with new colleagues. I'm grateful. There were many more familiar beeps of *WhatsApp* during the ten days of the production process; and they continue on, with semi-cryptic references to *The Oresteia*...

***Rory O'Neill is a Lecturer in Drama & Acting for University of Northampton's Drama Programme.***

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> King Lear, BBC 2 May 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Primal Astrology Primal Zodiac sign of Platypus (online). Available from: <http://www.primalastrology.com/gorilla.html> (Accessed 01/09/2018)

fragments of...

## **PRODUCTION NOTES**

*TITUS ANONYMOUS* was first produced by the Drama Programme at University of Northampton (UK) on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2018 at Isham Dark Studios, Avenue Campus.

### **CAST**

TITUS ANONYMOUS	Rory O'Neill
A-RON	Gerrard Martin
RHETORTER	Emily Kirkup
ASTERISK	Hayden Harvey
BEZABETH	Catherine Pratt
MARK-ME	Ryan Ferguson
YOUNG LUCY	Beth Raven
METOO	Megan Jeffery
LUCKY LUCIUS	David Howard
MUTIUS	Artemis Artemiou
TAMORA	Jessica Jones
D.T.	Joseph Bradley
K-9	Katie Lowe
CHOREO-CAMERAZZI	Alex Malgras
NURSE	Rachel Hatfield
CLOWN	Samuel Palmer

#### **THE CHORUS OF ROMAN CITIZENS:**

Marina Faltinschi, Ceejay Gumbs,  
Rachel Hatfield, Juana Lloyd-Sempres,  
Kieran Mcnamee, Toyin Ogidi, Samuel Palmer,  
Jessie Stead

#### **THE BASTARD ARMY:**

Arte Artemiou, Marina Faltinschi,  
Ceejay Gumbs, Rachel Hatfield, Emily Kirkup,  
Juana Lloyd-Sempres, Alex Malgras,  
Kieran Mcnamee, Catherine Pratt, Toyin Ogidi,  
Samuel Palmer, Jessie Stead

**PRODUCTION & DESIGN TEAM**

Director: johnmichael rossi  
Dramaturg: Sarah Mullan  
Choreography: Gerrard Martin &  
Rory O'Neill  
Scenographer: Rachael Champion  
Set Design Chief: Hayden Harvey  
Props Master: Katie Lowe  
Costume Design: Jessica Jones  
Lighting Design: Tim Halliday  
Sound Design: johnmichael rossi  
Live Orchestration: Rory O'Neill  
Production Manager: Carl Kirk  
Stage Manager: Bryani Moulds  
Assistant Stage Manager: Yasmin Argent  
Front-of-House Staff: Sharney boakye-yiadam

**SET & PROP CONSTRUCTION CREW:**

Arte Artemiou, Sarah Bains, Joseph Bradley,  
Ryan Ferguson, Ceejay Gumbs, Rachel Hatfield,  
David Howard, Megan Jeffery, Emily Kirkup,  
Juanaya Lloyd-Sempres, Marina Faltinschi,  
Alex Malgras, Kieran Mcnamee, Toyin Ogidi,  
Samuel Palmer, Catherine Pratt, Beth Raven,  
Jessie Stead

*TITUS ANONYMOUS* was developed and presented as a work-in-progress presentation on 23 March 2018 as part of 'Specialist Study,' a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year Drama module for the BA Drama programme. The following students took part in this process:

Uzair Babar  
Sara Bains  
Hollie Betts  
Zara Hussain  
Andrew Macintosh  
Mary Rita Odusanya  
Shannon Weir  
Emily Whitehouse

**DIRECTOR'S NOTE**

Welcome to TITUS ANONYMOUS where 'Rome is Rome is a fiction is Rome.' In December 2017, second-year Drama students were tasked with the opportunity to deconstruct *Titus Andronicus* in a collaborative process for their Specialist Study module. Students were challenged with the need to find contemporary relevance and resonance in this early Shakespeare text, which many scholars argue is the bard's most flawed text. I would argue that it is the work of a young practitioner experimenting with the form of the revenge tragedy and establishes ground for absurdist theatre which wouldn't take shape until centuries later. The term-long exploration and reconstruction of the text led to our need to grapple with the racist language exchanged between Shakespeare's Romans and Goths in light of the Black Lives Matter movement; and overt misogyny in both language and action; no longer norms but points of critical debate through the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. To add to the complexity of this process; student learning around professional practices of theatre-making was framed by an experimentation in DIY Theatre aesthetics, working with a limited budget but a wealth of space, a robust costume, props and set stock and the power of our collective imagination. As an ensemble of creative problem solvers the second years work-shopped and presented a draft of this work to an invited audience in March.

On 16 April, the ensemble and production team expanded to include Year 1, 2 and 3 Drama students representing Single Honours, Joint Honours and Foundation programmes; engaged in a two-week, 80+ hour intensive rehearsal period in collaboration with the Drama teaching team, and guest artists. The end result asks you to indulge in this hybrid world inspired by the Wild West, Ancient Rome, pop culture and today's political landscape, where each ensemble member has placed their 'spirit animal' at the core of their character.

We hope you enjoy this wholly new re-imagined Rome!

Corgie-ly yours,

johnmichael rossi  
Programme Leader for the Drama Programme at University of  
Northampton