

# Classroom Connections

Before the performance...



## Create a Vice Character

When Shakespeare was a young writer learning his craft, he based many of his characters and the structure of his plays on earlier forms of drama, including Medieval Mystery plays. The character of Aaron, in particular, can trace his history back to the Vice characters of early medieval plays. Vice characters were one-dimensional representations of evil. While Aaron orchestrates the death of many other characters in the play without remorse, Shakespeare also fleshed out Aaron by making him dynamic, charismatic and caring about his small child. Ask students to brainstorm ideas for a play that would include a modernized version of a Vice character. Ask students to develop a character sketch of their own Vice character—including their age, background and costume. What would be the motivation for wrongdoing? Ask students to move around the room and create a voice and physicality for this character, then present their choices to the class.



## Costume Design

One of the first steps in producing a play is designing the “look” of each character. Shakespeare includes characters from three very different worlds in this play. Ask students to re-read *Romans, Goths and Moors* and think about the differences between the worlds of each of these characters. How would students design the costumes for the Goths and Romans to show the difference in their societies? What about Aaron, who is an outsider in both worlds? Ask students to create costume sketches for Aaron, Tamora and Titus. They can use watercolor, colored pencil or collage to show color, line and form. Students can also include scraps of fabric as samples if available. Ask students to justify their choices with evidence from the text, and create a narrative explaining what they hope the audience will understand from their choices.



## Is Revenge Ever Justified?

*Titus Andronicus* forces audiences to ask the question: is revenge ever justified? Ask students to make a list of acts of revenge in the play. Then ask them to journal their response to the above question. Is there ever a time when revenge is justified or necessary? Ask the class to discuss their answers in relation to the characters’ actions in the play. Did the characters have any other way of redressing the wrongs done to them? If an act of revenge is justified, where do we draw the line? What is the difference between revenge and justice?



## Soldiers Coming Home

*Titus Andronicus* begins with the Romans marching home from a long, exhausting war. Ask students to discuss how the soldiers and generals in *Titus* adjust to returning home to a peaceful society. Do they make a smooth transition? Are there elements of a warring culture that contribute to some of the misfortunes in the rest of the plot of the play? Ask students to interview a veteran or conduct an internet search about the transition from war to peace time and any challenges faced returning to civilian life.



20th Century Fox

Harry Lennix as Aaron and Angus Macfadyen as Lucius in Julie Taymor’s 1999 film, *Titus*.



## Staging Violence

Every production of *Titus Andronicus* must deal with violence in its own way. Some productions make the violence stylized, or unrealistic, while others portray it as realistically as possible. Ask students to divide up into groups and choose one of the following scenes:

- Aaron severing Titus’ hand (Act 3, Scene 1)
- The deaths of Chiron and Demetrius (Act 4, Scene 2)
- Titus dressed as a cook and Tamora eating her sons’ flesh in a pie (Act 5, Scene 3)
- The deaths of Lavinia, Tamora, Titus and Saturninus (Act 5, Scene 3)

Ask each group to act as directors for that scene and prepare for rehearsal. Ask them to create a list of potential staging difficulties with possible solutions. Then ask them to decide what approach their production will take to stage the violence. Have students write up their ideas of how the scene will be staged and present the concept to the class. Discuss what is effective about each group’s staging choices and why.

# Classroom Connections

...After the performance



## Recipe for Revenge—Titus' Cookbook

One of the challenges of performing *Titus Andronicus* is the creation of realistic props—including the flesh pie at the end. Ask students what they thought of the pie in the Shakespeare Theatre Company production. Was it theatrically effective? How do students think the pie was made? Ask students to brainstorm ideas as the propsmaster of the show. How could a realistic pie be created? What would they want it to look like? Ask students to remember that the actors onstage must actually consume the pie. What if one of their actors was a vegetarian? Ask students to brainstorm their solutions and then present them to the class as if presenting them to the director of the play.



## Write Your Own Revenge Tragedy

*Titus Andronicus* is a prime example of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy. Ask students to re-read *Vengeance Is Mine* to review the elements of a revenge tragedy. Then ask them to write their own—if they completed “Create a Vice Character” before the play, they can use that character in their revenge tragedy, or revise their ideas after seeing the play. After students have completed their plays, ask the class to do staged readings of each others' work. What are the elements of a modern revenge tragedy? Does this form still have relevance today?



## Good Humors

In Shakespeare's day many believed that the body was ruled by four elemental fluids that dominated a person's temperament: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These liquids, or humors, were used as a means of classifying people and their behavior. A healthy, “normal” person would have a perfect balance of all four humors, but an overabundance of any one of them could cause changes in one's personality. As a class, research the qualities of each humor and how they affect human behavior. Ask each student to select a character from *Titus Andronicus* and determine which humor dominates his/her personality, citing evidence from the text that supports the diagnosis.



## Review the Production

Many writers and theatre enthusiasts make their careers by reviewing theatrical productions. Often, a good or bad review can make or break a production's ticket revenue. Ask students to imagine that they are writing a review of *Titus Andronicus* at the Shakespeare Theatre Company for the *Washington Post*. Or, ask students to read the *Post* review and write an op-ed letter responding to the review, either agreeing or disagreeing with the reviewers comments. Send students' letters to the Shakespeare Theatre Company Education Department!



## Do Military Men Make Good Leaders?

As soon as Titus returns from the war, he is offered the crown and asked to be emperor of Rome. He refuses and defers to Saturninus. Why do you think Titus refuses the crown? Do you think that he would have been a better leader than Saturninus? Make a list of current presidents and leaders of the United States, and list whether they have served in the military or not. Ask students to discuss if they think military service is important to good leadership. Would students vote for a candidate with military experience over one without? What are the different skills necessary to manage troops in wartime and lead a country? Ask students what they think the outcome of the play would have been, had Titus accepted the crown.



Photo by Angus McBeany/Harvard Theatre Collection.

Anthony Quayle as Aaron in Peter Brook's production, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1955.