

BERCUT, POLI, AND FORBIN CREATE  
SHAKESPEARE'S TITUS ANDRONICUS

# Staging Barbarism

BY MARILYN AUGUST

**H**atred, vengeance, murder, and betrayal may be the traditional components of classical theatre. Add rape, mutilation, and cannibalism and you have *Titus*

*Andronicus*, the most violent play William Shakespeare ever penned. Last fall French director Daniel Mesguich attacked *Titus* with a vengeance of his own, and came up with one of the most spectacular productions of the 1989 Paris theatre season.

Staging barbarism was no simple matter. "*Titus* represents a permanent challenge to the art of *mise en scène*," Mesguich says. "The key is focusing on the process by which abomination is produced."

Mesguich called on Louis Bercut, one of the French drama world's most talented scenographers, to create a setting for his "creation of horror." The 40-year-old architect — who came to the theatre via his passion for dance — has already left his mark on the Comédie Française with acclaimed productions of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *Britannicus* just to name a couple. For *Titus*, he redesigned the walls, floors, and ceilings of the tiny stage of the Théâtre de l'Athénée (8 meters deep, 9 meters wide, 7 meters high) in order to recreate Shakespeare's nest of infamy and a world informed by anxiety and fear. The result was nothing less than amazing — an original decor which underscored the omni-

presence of evil in a civilization on the edge of destruction.

With a budget of 500,000 francs (UK £47,000; US \$80,000), Bercut imagined the set as a giant spider web seen through a wide angle lens. Under his direction, Bernard Aujogue of the

Lyons-based Espace et Compagnie rebuilt the stage floor using a 20 degree angle slope, and inclined the ceiling another 25 degrees. The side and back walls were incurved too, reinforcing the feeling of confinement and suffocation.

"When the curtain goes up, there's a moment of vertigo, and that's precisely the effect I wanted," he explains. "There's a feeling of general depth, of being sucked in and totally surrounded. Because the stage is tilted upwards, some of the action takes place on the same level as the first balcony, which enhances the effect." Wooden rungs were built into the floor at different heights to prevent the cast from slipping.

Renewing a favourite Mesguich theme, Bercut made the entire set look like a library, with the side walls, ceiling, and floors decorated with rows and rows of books painted *trompe l'oeil*. But there were real books too, ones which the actors pulled out of the floors and walls only to be mangled or consumed by fire. A mushroom-based lycopodium flash powder was dusted on the pages which caught fire and burned when ignited with a small flame. Other special effects were

