

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Tamburlaine the Great* presented by Theatre for a New Audience at the Polonsky  
Shakespeare Center, Brooklyn, November 2014 to January, 2015.**

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Edited and Directed by Michael Boyd. Designed by Tom Piper. Lighting by Matthew Richards. Choreographed by Sam Pinkleton. Music by Arthur Solari. Sound by Jane Shaw. Starring John Douglas Thompson. With John Douglas Thompson (*Tamburlaine*), Paul Lazar (*Mycetes/Sultan/Almeda/Amasia*), Saxon Palmer (*Cosroe, Sigismund/Frederick*), Steven Skybell (*Meander/Basso/Gov of Damascus/Baldwin/Perdicas/Physcian*), Andrew Hovelson (*Theridamas*), Tom O’Keefe (*Ortygius/Morocco/Frederick*), James Udom (*Ceneus/Barbary/Calyphas*), Oberon K.A. Adjepong (*Menaphon/Argier/Captain*), Merritt Janson (*Zenocrate/Callapine*), Keith Randolph Smith (*Techelle*), Carlo Alban (*Usumcasane*), Matthew Amendt (*Agydas/Arabia/Natolia*), Vasile Flutur (*Suceavus/Spy/Barbary/Celebinus*), Chukwudi Iwuji (*Bajazeth/Trebizon*), Caroline Hewitt (*Anippe/Virgin*), Patrice Johnson Chevannes (*Zabina/Syria*), Nilanjana Bose (*Edea/Virgin/Olypia*), Zachary Infante (*Magnetes, Amyras*), Ian Saint-Germain (*Young Callapine/Captain’s Son*).

Director Michael Boyd’s *Tamburlaine the Great* was a bloody massacre, at once horrifying and dangerously alluring. It was a particularly unique experience to attend a performance of this conflation of Marlowe’s two-part *Tamburlaine* (1590) during a time when the president of the United States can justify military deployments to Iraq and Syria not as ‘war’ but as ‘counter-terrorism operations’. And what better place to see such a performance than in New York, a city very much forged by its strength and perseverance in the face of terrorist attacks. In his revival of *Tamburlaine*, however, Boyd wisely drove the focus away from any commentary on religious extremism. Despite proclaiming himself the ‘terror of the world’ (Part I, 1.2.38),<sup>1</sup> *Tamburlaine*’s

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<sup>1</sup> Act, scene and line references are to *‘Doctor Faustus’ and Other Plays*, ed. by David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

rhetorical prowess and decidedly atheistic views were tempered by actor John Douglas Thompson's confident and electrifying performance. This powerful and surprisingly limber three-hour play managed to implicate the audience in the protagonist's actions, reminding us that progress is often made not over peaceful treaties but on the bloody remains of those who have fought with (and against) us on the battlefield.

Theatre for a New Audience has aimed to 'develop and vitalize the performance and study of Shakespeare and classic drama' since 1979.<sup>2</sup> The company has undoubtedly relied on an audience familiar with Shakespeare in particular and the early modern period in general. Nonetheless, their modernized Elizabethan courtyard stage at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center seems designed to attract an audience interested in experimental and daring performances. *Tamburlaine's* minimal staging took advantage of this set-up: the only permanent fixture were large, plastic curtains hung over the back entrance, poised on the entryway to a post-modern crime scene. Other props and set pieces were brought in by the actors during each scene. The stage felt at once bare and porous, ready to become a palace or a battleground as needed, but never to be cleared of the blood that was shed relentlessly throughout the play.

Boyd's staging choices helped build a striking image for the end of Part I, which in this performance served as the climax for the story preceding the intermission. Bajazeth, a Turkish Emperor and prisoner of war in *Tamburlaine's* castle, decides to end his life by bashing his head against the cage in which *Tamburlaine* has been keeping him. The scene, along with other similarly graphic deaths in the play, was emptied of its shock value by featuring a young boy—in some scenes appearing as Callapine, in others, such as this one, representing a literal harbinger of death—who poured a bucket of blood over Bajazeth's head. The result was the opposite of comical: no one, least of all the child, could be spared the violence of this moment. The audience was confronted with a slow-moving pool of blood as it mixed with the blood left on stage from previous deaths. In a matter of minutes, the bodies of Bajazeth, his wife Zabina, and the King of Arabia crowded the stage, forcing *Tamburlaine* and his men to literally step over dead bodies as they arrived fresh from another victory. Part I closed with *Tamburlaine* entering the stage to crown his bride, Zenocrate, as Empress of Persia—a moment that happened quite literally on top of his enemies' bodies, as he lifted her to stand on Bajazeth's cage. As Zenocrate's long, white gown soaked up some of the blood on stage, the audience seemed visibly uncomfortable: *Tamburlaine* remained an impossibly charismatic figure, but we could no longer ignore the bloody trail he left behind.

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<sup>2</sup> 'About Us', *Theatre for a New Audience* < <http://www.tfana.org/about/overview> > [accessed 10 January, 2015].

Boyd smartly balanced such intense, graphic violence with moments of underplayed tension. Those of us in the audience who were familiar with Marlowe's play were primed for one of its most controversial scenes, in which Tamburlaine burns the Koran, daringly calling to the skies: 'Now, Mahomet, if thou have any power, / Come down thyself and work a miracle' (Part II, 5.1.185-6). But Boyd was not interested in sensationalism, and relied on Marlowe's text to supply the context for the scene. Tamburlaine's soldier handed him a pair of black-leather bound books, which were then tossed through a smoking trapdoor. A few minutes later, charred bits of paper rained from the ceiling. Once more playing against the audience's own expectations, Boyd left us to ponder the consequences of the scene without relying on its visual shock value.

The conveniently broad and ambiguous setting, described in the playbill as 'an imaginatively contracted and expanded time-space encompassing the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Central Asia', helped excuse the play's sometimes vague costume choices. While Tamburlaine's men wore combat boots, cargo pants, and long leather coats, the kings and queens distinguished themselves by their Middle Eastern tunics in shades of cream and brown. Two choices stood out among the broadly-themed period costumes: the Virgins of Damascus were introduced wearing hijabs and, in one case, a full burka; after their execution, all four actors remained on stage behind the blood-stained plastic curtains, witnessing Tamburlaine's takeover and effectively indicting the audience as guilty bystanders. Set and costume designer Tom Piper seemed to suggest that their religious devotion had earned them nothing but a role as sacrificial lambs. In a similarly anachronistic choice, the Governor of Babylon made an appearance in Part II wearing a black suit and red tie. His distinctly Western characterization helped reflect Babylon's more modern political stance as well as the potential passing of time: Act 5, after all, brought on the inevitable denouement of Tamburlaine's rule, as other conquerors waited in the wings to take his place.

Tom Piper's set design and Matthew Richards's lighting also helped place the play within an uncanny historical space. The Polonsky Center's wide and bare stage reached into the audience with its eye-level height, long run-way entrance, and stairways that allowed the actors to quickly rise up to the mezzanine and balcony areas. Tamburlaine *quite literally* conquered the audience: the space between our seats was often invaded by soldiers, their swords at the ready, inches away from our faces. Evoking early modern performances, Richards did not bother with scene cuts or lighting transitions. Small wheels ensured that heavy items like banquet tables and Bajazeth's cage could be rolled away quickly, while young actor Ian Saint-Germain was tasked with bringing and passing around crowns as both figurative and literal props displayed on a silver tray.

The lack of transitions helped the three-hour play run smoothly: the action was only interrupted by brief pauses where actors rose from the ground, shedding their dead characters to embody new, soon-to-be dead ones. This bold choice also helped highlight the one death meant to affect Tamburlaine: that of his wife Zenocrate (Part II, 2.4). Her demise was the only one in the play to earn a cut to black. As the audience sat in darkness, we were forced to contemplate whether there was any difference between mourning Zenocrate and blazing past every other death in play (of which there are many). When the lights returned, the soft tungsten lighting had been replaced by stark-white spotlights. The transition was painful; as our eyes adjusted, we also adjusted our expectations of what was to come. Time is relentless: it marches on with no interest in mourning or sadness.

This sharp transition served one additional purpose: it allowed actress Meritt Janson and the audience a minute to switch from playing a crucial, iconic (female) character to embodying the more secondary (male) Callapine. Boyd's choice did not appear arbitrary: the two characters are not only among the few to be spared Tamburlaine's wrath, but also among the few (if not the only) characters whom we may hope could bring the Emperor's bloodshed to a stop. Unfortunately, some of Janson's acting choices weakened this parallel. As Zenocrate, she seemed at best tentative and at worst confused. After her city had been decimated and her father taken prisoner, Zenocrate wondered 'Whom should I wish the fatal victory, / When my poor pleasures are divided thus' (Part I, 5.1.384-5). Her speech poses a strong critique of the power of rhetoric to make people wilfully ignore their better judgments. It also suggests, more clearly than elsewhere in the play, that Zenocrate is as ambitious and power-hungry as her beloved Tamburlaine. Much like him, she is only brought to question such ambitions when the people she loves are put in the line of fire. Janson's delivery, however, focused on her character's confusion without any hints at this subtext. Her ambivalence read almost as shock: as if she had become numb to all the carnage around her. Unfortunately, such ambivalence was clear from her first to her last line; we never saw much energy from Janson's performance, making it difficult for the audiences to make out her motivations.

Janson's line readings were perhaps most disappointing when placed in contrast to Patrice Johnson Chevannes's remarkably affecting performance as Zabina. The Turkish Empress moved from pride, to shame, to defiance, to despair all in the space of three acts. From the moment she mocked Zenocrate for daring to defy Mahomet (Part I, 3.3), to her uplifting encouragement in begging her husband to use his survival as the ultimate act of defiance (Part I, 4.4), Chevannes brought a stage presence that was impossible to ignore. Chevannes seemed intent on compressing the play's 'time-space' even further by leaning heavily on its slavery overtones. Zenocrate (or perhaps Janson

herself) seemed particularly uncomfortable when the chain-bound Zabina was forced to serve at Tamburlaine's banquet while his men fed the encaged Bajazeth scraps from the table. But it was her final speech upon discovering her husband's suicide that truly made Zabina the heart and soul of Part I. Chevannes spared no intensity; tears streamed down her face as she paced wildly across the stage, her chains pulling dangerously at her feet as we watched her unravel. After such a powerhouse performance, it was difficult to refocus on Zenocrate's 'poor pleasures'. Part I may end with a coronation but, as Boyd made clear, the image left lingering with the audience was tainted with blood.

Staging and lighting aside, *Tamburlaine* could not stand without its powerful title character, and John Douglas Thompson did not disappoint. As a charismatic, yet threatening figure, Thompson's Tamburlaine took his time delivering lines, staring down the audience as much as he did his enemies. Where Janson was tentative, Thompson was assured. His voice was always levelled: we never heard any fear, doubt, or even anger in the Tamburlaine of Part I. When he finally raised his voice at Calyphas, his eldest son, and eventually lost control long enough to kill Calyphas in front of his army (Part II, 4.1), the audience was appropriately shocked: this was a man whose rhetorical power, and not his physical prowess, had taken hold of the stage. Tamburlaine's death is perhaps the greatest irony of the play—that he dies not from a vengeful plot or battle wound, but from a mystery illness ultimately robs the audience of any potential catharsis. His descent from the 'terror of the world' to mortal human may take away some of Tamburlaine's physical strength, but his speeches continue to enchant the audience. Thompson's regal performance even saved the arguably hokey final scene, in which Tamburlaine used a slide projector to present maps showing off his conquests. Appropriately, what was most menacing about Tamburlaine (and Thompson's performance) was not his outspoken defiance of faith and morality, but his ability to deliver speeches that proved neither he nor his witnesses in the audience could ever doubt his ambitions would be fulfilled.

It is difficult to say for sure whether casting director Deborah Brown was aiming for a colour-blind cast or intentionally marking racial differences in her choices. Some contrasts, intentional or not, were difficult to ignore: when Zabina and her maid Ebea (played by the Jamaican-born Patrice Johnson Chevannes and Indian actress Nilanjana Bose, respectively) confronted Zenocrate and Anippe (both Caucasian, fair-skinned actresses) in Part I, 3.3, it was undeniable that the two pairs of women came from remarkably different worlds. Their clothes, skin-colour, and speeches each contributed to distinguish their experience: these women would never be able to empathize with one another. Similarly, it was perhaps intentional that Mycetes, Tamburlaine's first

conquered king, and Theridamus, the king's soldier and later Tamburlaine's right hand, were both Caucasian. Zenocrate, in particular, could have been played by a number of actresses, including someone of Middle Eastern descent (an ethnicity curiously under-represented given the setting), so the decision to select a Caucasian actress seemed especially pointed. Elsewhere, however, the cast did not appear to lean heavily on any one ethnic representation. In an ensemble where nearly everyone but Thompson (for obvious reasons) played at least two characters, race and gender played second-fiddle to more practical concerns such as timing and staging transitions.

Despite Zabina's sharp-tongued curses and Tamburlaine's own open challenge for the gods to stop him, Boyd's revival was not interested in taking either political or religious sides. As the dead rose, one by one, to stare down the audience before taking on their next role, Marlowe's play felt more compelling than ever. Whether pacifist or warmonger, religious or atheist, audience or actor, we are all complicit: war rages on. At least in the theatre we were allowed a break while the crew mopped up the blood.