

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Timon of Athens*, Presented by the Folger Theatre, Washington, D.C., May 9-June 11, 2017.**

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Directed by Robert Richmond. Scenic Design by Tony Cisek. Costume Design by Mariah Hale. Lighting Design by Andrew F. Griffin. Sound Design by Matt Otto. Projection Design by Francesca Talenti. Dramaturgy by Michele Osherow. With Louis Butelli (Ventidius), Aliyah Caldwell (Phrynia), Maboud Ebrahimzadeh (Alcibiades), John Floyd (Cupid, Senator), Amanda Forstrom (Timandra), Sean Fri (Jeweler, Sempronius), Eric Hissom (Apemantus), Andhy Mendez (Painter, Lucullus), Ian Merrill Peakes (Timon), Antoinette Robinson (Flavius), Michael Dix Thomas (Poet, Lucius), and Kathryn Tkel (Merchant, Senator).

Like the only other two productions of *Timon of Athens* I've attended, Robert Richmond's production for the Folger Theatre substantially adapted the text and setting of the tragedy. While less explicitly confrontational than *Cardboard Citizens* (who, in 2006, approached *Timon* from the perspective of the homeless) and Nicholas Hytner (who, at the National Theatre in 2012, offered a searing indictment of both corporate greed and the Occupy movement), Richmond still used the play to pay attention to general contemporary cultural phenomena, if not exactly precise current events.

Ian Merrill Peakes's nuanced performance of Timon was central to Richmond's interpretation, which focused more on the psychological imbalance of the individual than the social system. In his first appearance (and often throughout), Peakes's fingers and face twitched and ticced severely, sharply conveying his nerves and even neurosis, further illustrated in his frequent use of a handkerchief and hand sanitizer after handling any object. He refused (at first) to touch anyone, recoiling from Apemantus's twice-offered hand, so when he finally embraced the philosopher in the forest, hugging him

close on ‘I understand thee’ (4.3.314)¹, the gesture resonated all the more potently as a transformative moment.

Similarly, Peakes always noticeably skipped a certain step on the stairs, hopping over it while ascending, until, at the end of the first half, he stamped violently on it in anger as he realized his supposed friends’ fickleness. In the second half, he returned to skipping the step, but finally, after a visible struggle, trying to put his foot down while speaking with the Senators, instead he sat, suddenly calm, as if in resignation. While this might have indicated a kind of dissipation of the dysfunction, it was hardly a healthy gesture, since his suicide was imminent.

Then again, this production ended not after Timon’s death, but at his line ‘Timon hath done his reign’ (5.2.108), cutting the final scenes of the play—one of many changes made to the text. Since Timon had repeated ‘I have a tree’ (5.2.90) several times before the speech in which he foreshadows his own hanging, his intention appeared clear, but the absence of the resolution of the conflict between Alcibiades and Athens emphasized the conclusion of a personal journey, not the community’s.

There were other, mostly excellent textual adjustments, including the omission of some material (the subplot about Timon’s servant and the Old Athenian’s daughter, for example, and the reappearance of the Poet and the Painter in the forest) and, more importantly, the efficient and evocative combination of several roles. For example, Flavius was the only servant sent to ask for money. Richmond borrowed, whether consciously or not, from Hytner’s 2012 production by staging Flavius—or, for Hytner, Flavia—as subject to the sexual advances and degrading demands of Lucullus and Sempronius, a disturbing vision of these interactions. Also, the Amazons (blue bikinied, belly-dancing ‘Cabaret Artists’) at the feast returned as the whores Phrynia and Timandra, and even more effective, the thieves in the forest were Ventidius, Sempronius, and a Senator, who had all also earlier preyed on Timon.

But by far the best change was the rearrangement of the beginning, moving Timon’s first lines, about Ventidius – ‘Imprison’d is he’ (1.1.96) – before the entrance and conversation of the Poet, Painter, Merchant, and Jeweler. This introduction immediately established Timon’s character and set the stage for the successful streamlining of a script that I like rather better than many, but must still acknowledge is patchy in places.

¹ Act, scene and line references refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd edition, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 2008).

Also impressive were the elements of spectacle framing the production. Tony Cisek's stylish stage design included walls formed by prison-like bars and a long, thin screen, like the stock crawl on Wall Street. Onto that screen, Francesca Talenti projected a variety of images: the names, photos, and professions of all Timon's guests (e.g., Hortensius, Poet; Varro, Merchant); the diamond-shaped, circle-centered currency of Athens as it went from one bank account to another; a video of Timon's breakdown and assault, smearing feces (another alteration from the water and stones of the script, but lending new meaning to the line 'Each man to his stool' [3.7.61] – though, if I remember correctly, Cardboard Citizens did the same in 2006) on himself and his guests, at first filmed on a mobile phone by one of those guests, then by himself, as he seized the phone and waved into the camera, grinning grimly before cursing the city.

Mariah Hale's costumes wavered from the (surely deliberately) somewhat ridiculous triangular robes of the Senators, to the elegance of Timon's three-piece suit (the components of which he gradually discarded as his internal state deteriorated), to the quirky hipster chic of the professorial Apemantus: tweed waistcoat, scarf, beret, and elbow-patched jacket. Andrew Griffin's lighting was far from subtle, but the intensity succeeded in such moments as the symbolic tableau of Timon's guests at the feast posed to devour him with forks and knives, all bathed in envious green, and the super-saturation of lascivious purple over Timon's pouring of gold onto the writhing bodies of the whores in the forests. Just as obtrusive, but appropriately so, Matt Otto's synthetic sound and score shifted back and forth between loud, night-clubby music and ominous, electronic rumbling and droning.

I must confess, I would not have minded if Richmond had more directly engaged some of the specific and relevant political issues of the day. The opportunities to explore the connections between wealth and corruption were not ignored, but neither were they fully capitalized on. (And I didn't even hear the line that Michael Billington recently predicted² to precede great amusement: 'What means that trump?' [1.2.107] – was it cut, either because of anachronism or for fear of causing offense and losing sponsorship, as did the neighboring New York City's Public Theatre production of *Julius Caesar*, which opened the day after *Timon* closed? Or maybe I just missed it.) Still, the priority on telling the story of the disturbed person rather than the broken society was consistently compelling, especially given the poignancy of Peakes's splendidly detailed rendition of that disturbed person.

² *The Guardian*, June 12, 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/shortcuts/2017/jun/12/julius-caesar-trump-shakespeare-pulled-sponsorship>>