

The extremity of both ends

The Tragedy of Timon of Athens. August 3rd 2015 (opening night).



A Greek tragedy concerning the misuse of money, verily its time has come. Already having been re-energised by the financial collapse that is still shaking the globe, *The Tragedy of Timon of Athens* will doubtless be oft performed from now on. However, this has been far from the case in the history of Shakespeare productions. *Timon* is always very much an afterthought but most commonly it has been completely overlooked. This is particularly remarkable given that it was written in a period where Shakespeare was at the height of his powers. The plays which surround the writing of *Timon* are: *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. Four “biggies” in anyone’s book, and five in some experts’ views.

Yet, I had never seen it before and, prior to last night, it was the Shakespeare play I was least familiar with. I read it once, some forty years ago, when none of it could have meant much to me, I was far too young. I only remembered the first and second half contrast, and the third ‘friend’s’ rejection of Timon’s appeal for help which always stuck in my mind.

Why had it reached this position of being overlooked? Probably because it was always referred to by this trio of off-putting words: ‘unfinished’, ‘unperformed’, ‘collaborated’.

Supposedly the play was unfinished. Well, it did not come across that way, last night. It was short, certainly, but complete in story line and rounded themes. As for unperformed in Shakespeare’s

lifetime, this is mere speculation. True; we have no record of it being performed, but that is far from proof. It may lead you to suspect that it was not, but it would be wise not to forget how hungry for novelty the London theatre audiences were in those days, and to consider how unlikely it is that a play from two 'box office names, Shakespeare and Middleton, would have been left unplayed.

I mention Middleton because there seems no doubt that this play was a collaboration. To downgrade it in your eyes because of that is a foolish and dangerous step to take. More and more evidence is coming out to indicate that a substantial proportion of what we have long thought of as "Shakespeare" is actually "Shakespeare plus a significant other". Damn *Timon* for this and you may find yourself damning far more illustrious titles by extension.



So, I watched it last night with as little knowledge as I have ever seen a Shakespeare play. I tried to approach it without bias or concern over what lines might or might not be "from the Bard's own pen" and I awoke with thoughts of the play running around my mind.

I thought Andrew Murton was astonishing as Timon and I had to remind myself I had seen him as Falstaff incarnate on Saturday. He did not seem the same human being (the actor, I mean). I didn't even realise at first that it was him, even though I knew it was to be him in advance. It was with a start that I reminded myself. In fact it beggared belief, as did the thought of him rehearsing this last week during the day and then going out to play Falstaff each evening.

Once again I stand in awe of what CSF actors do; it is truly humbling to think upon it. The whole cast here came from very strong performances in other plays. The King of Navarre from *Love's Labour's Lost* (Jonathan Arundel) here appeared as the loyal steward, Flavius. Titus (James Law) was here, on the same stage in much the same attire as Alcibiades. The dark, resolute and dangerous Tybalt (Alexander Myall) and the sparkling, effervescent Mercutio (Jannik Archer) from the first half of the season's *Romeo and Juliet* reappeared in new guises, multiple ones at that as a cast of nine had to take on over thirty different roles. (I lost count of all the different servants, 'over thirty' may be underestimating things). And there were others too, of course, the whole cast, indeed. Myall, not content with tripling in *Romeo and Juliet*, played at least four parts last night.

As did many others, I think everybody had to be in at least one more role, over and above what is written in programme, there simply isn't time to name all the servants after all and those bandit-thieves that are such a useful plot device in a number of Shakespeare plays make an appearance here, too. Timon is so central, one of the longest in Shakespeare, that he cannot double and so all the other multiple-character playing actors revolve around this central figure.

There were so many great lines and very funny moments too. I found myself laughing a lot in the first half. Speaking of the first half, I should mention that there was a sparkling opening to the play. “An’ the poet an’ the painter far behind his rightful time”, sang Bob Dylan, over half a century ago in “Chimes of Freedom”. Well, the poet and painter from this play would never have had a rightful time. These satirical creations, downright loathsome in all aspects, nevertheless got the evening off to a vibrant start. The festival’s tradition of actor interaction with the audience was an inventive and captivating start to proceedings, I do not want to spoil it by describing it here – you should go and experience it for yourself.

That was one of a number of “set scenes” that dominated proceedings. The long interchange between Apemantus and Timon in part two was spellbinding, and revealed their relationship from the inside-out as it were. The banquet scenes were beautifully stylized to give maximum contrast and effect.

Other points of note were that the music was unexpected, anachronistic, and yet an absolute delight; it was completely apt and an inspired complement to the evening’s performance. Also, the ‘edible root’ visual connection from Apemantus in part one to Timon in his transformed state was a very deft way of displaying the psychic journey the latter had travelled.



Given that I was called a misanthrope, much to my satisfaction, in a book a couple of years ago, I was bound to relish lots of the lines in this play. So, I felt like cheering when Tessa Hatts as Apemantus answered Timon’s question: “*What wouldst thou do with the world, Apemantus, if it lay in thy power?*” with, “*Give it the beasts, to be rid of the men.*”

Perhaps, though, my reaction there is not the desired one. However, there was another of Apemantus’s line that surely rings very true to all who hear it, as it sums up Timon so well: “*The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends*”. It reminded me of Hugh McDairmid’s lines in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*:

*I'll ha'e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur
Extremes meet - it's the only way I ken
To dodge the curst conceit o' bein' richt
That damns the vast majority o' men.*

Poor old Timon certainly 'dodged the conceit' of being right as he veered from one Jonsonian character-defined-by-excessive-trait to its opposite.

Some scenes were hard to take, Flavius's rejection was horrible, close to unbearable. Thankfully, he refuses to be rejected and later he was back, smiling at the rejected senators. Again, I felt like cheering. Flavius's character cannot help but bring Kent from *King Lear* to mind and there were numerous other echoes of that contemporaneous masterpiece. Apemantus scolding Timon recalled the Fool doing the same to Lear, and Andrew Murton literally portrayed a 'bare, unaccommodated man' as one by one all his garments were discarded as he left Athens and went to live alone outside the city walls, having tossed his boxer shorts into the bushes.

Timon's mixture of comic and tragic forms a forward path to the late romances, and brothels and whores link it directly to the first of those, the even stranger, *Pericles*. There was much to ponder at the end of the performance which was brought to the close by a silent and ambiguous Apemantus, centre-stage, mute and sitting with an enigmatic expression.

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