

5-28-2018

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Recommended Citation

Elizabeth Zeman Kolkovich (2018) "Modernity and Technology: Staging Timon of Athens in 2017," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 13 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol13/iss1/24>

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Modernity and Technology: Staging *Timon of Athens* in 2017

Directed by Robert Richmond
Folger Theatre; Washington, DC
Performance Date: June 9-10, 2017

Directed by Stephen Ouimette
Stratford Festival; Stratford, Ontario, Canada
Performance Date: July 18, 2017

Reviewed by ELIZABETH ZEMAN KOLKOVICH

Shakespeare and Middleton's long-neglected *Timon of Athens* seems to be having its day. Following the global financial crisis nearly a decade ago, several American and British companies have identified the play as a parable for twenty-first-century financial and political corruption. I saw two North American versions in the summer of 2017, both performed in modern dress with sleek aesthetics to critical acclaim. Directed by Robert Richmond, the Folger Theatre's *Timon* in Washington, D.C., presented a bleaker, heavily edited version of the play, whereas the *Timon* directed by Stephen Ouimette at the Stratford Festival in Ontario presented a more playful interpretation that followed the text more closely. Both productions drew attention to gender inequality as they illustrated how well the play speaks to contemporary obsessions with technology, wealth, and celebrity.

Highly stylized and streamlined to twelve actors, the Folger *Timon* was a dazzling whirlwind of a production. Its costumes and set positioned the action in a cold, dystopian world filled with posturing sycophants. Costume designer Mariah Hale dressed the actors in grays and blues: the female Merchant (Kathryn Tkel) in a trendy jumpsuit and oversized sunglasses, the male Poet (Michael Dix Thomas) in a turtleneck and a long ponytail, and the male Painter (Andhy Mendez) accessorized with a scarf, beret, and small round glasses. The audience chuckled when the Painter haughtily revealed a hideous portrait of Timon in cubist shapes that appeared to be computer-generated. Among Timon's trendily dressed guests, Apemantus (Eric Hissom) stood out by wearing a professorial blazer with worn elbow patches and corduroys in shades of brown, looking perhaps as if he had spent the day in the Folger reading room. Later, the Senators' matching cloaks, medallion pendants, and creepily synchronized walking made them look like characters from *The Hunger Games*. An industrial set (designed by Tony Cisek) featured a diamond-shaped stage surrounded by metal bars with a skinny LED screen overhead. Each character who entered Timon's house had his or her identity "scanned" until a name and title appeared on the screen, such as "Hortensius Poet" or "Varro Merchant." Timon (Ian Merrill Peakes) and Flavius

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(Antoinette Robinson) took turns operating the system by placing their palms on a handheld plastic board. Cell phones were everywhere, but they were clear plastic shells—shiny and empty, much like the world that produced them.

The differences between the production's script and the Folio text are far too numerous to outline in full, but one significant change happened in the opening scene. It began not with the Poet-Painter dialogue, but with Timon and Flavius discussing Ventidius's imprisonment, thereby foregrounding their intimate relationship and Flavius's concerns about Timon's spending. Flavius, a female assistant in this production, then delivered a soliloquy—what is marked in the text as an aside (1.2.194-208)—ending with “I bleed inwardly for my lord.”¹ With a pained expression, she put her palm to the handheld device and cued upbeat club music. The first scene underscored that the music, party, and trendy fashion all thinly veiled pain and despair.

The two banquets offered a similar message. Timon's guests carried barrel-like seats to the first banquet, placed them down in unison, and performed various synchronized actions: clapping, laughing, unrolling silverware from napkins. When Apemantus told the audience “what a number of men eats Timon and he sees ‘em not” (1.2.39-40), the guests mimed cutting and eating Timon with their utensils. The text's masque of Amazons became a high-energy cabaret show with flashing lights and glitzy costumes. Cupid (John Floyd), identified on the LED screen as a “cabaret artist,” stripped down to angel wings and silver briefs while he and the guests danced with belly dancers Phrynia (Aliyah Caldwell) and Timandra (Amanda Forstrom) in a sordid, debased mess of limbs. The dark lighting, eerie music, and slow-motion grinding created an image that was sinister and disturbing. During one Friday evening performance, small silver beads fell from the dancers' costumes and remained on stage until intermission. Actors kicked them aside as they made “ping” noises and served as a reminder of Timon's extravagance and the others' exploitation of it, none of it easily swept away. In the second banquet, Timon served feces, which he rubbed on his guests' faces and hair as they ran around stage gagging and crying.



Fig. 1: Dinner at Timon's house in the Folger *Timon of Athens*. Photo by Teresa Wood, courtesy of the Folger Theatre.

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Richmond excised large portions of the play text's second half. From the start, this Timon had been neurotic; reviewers used the labels "germaphobe" and "obsessive-compulsive" to describe his inability to touch others.² In early scenes, he methodically wiped his hands with his handkerchief and fixated on the third step (by skipping it or stepping harder on it) when he climbed the stairs. Because the production began with a loud heart beat followed by a ringing sound and because Timon regularly clutched his chest and wiped his brow, I expected him to have a heart attack. He did not, but he appeared mentally and physically unwell. He also seemed a product of his environment, which was cold and nearly void of human compassion. His retreat to the wilderness marked a complete mental breakdown. After intermission, the play became a series of somewhat disconnected scenes in which Timon repeated the lines "I am wealthy in my friends" and "I have a tree" as he wandered around stage anxiously, repeating the ritual of washing his hands in a basin. Timon's mental state and the odd and fragmented interactions with some of his guests in the wilderness made me wonder if some were hallucinations. Yet it was only in this "uncivilized" space that he could finally experience physical touch and friendship: he embraced Flavius and joked lovingly with Apemantus. In the last scene, Timon delivered a soliloquy that combined two speeches in Scene 5.2 and ended with "Timon has done his reign." The ringing noise sounded again, and there ended the play. We heard nothing about Timon's death with the conflicting epitaphs or Alcibiades and the future of Athens. Although the production worked well in many ways, this ending felt abrupt, and at both performances I saw, the audience paused several seconds before applauding as they tried to decipher whether the play had ended.

The world of the Stratford *Timon*—the festival's fourth and Ouimette's second—was less oppressive. Ouimette used the Arden edition and changed little, cutting the minor characters of the Fool and the Soldier who discovers Timon's epitaph. The sterile set included a blue floor with a subtle marble pattern, three white modern benches, two small white tables, and two modern wire chandeliers. Designer Dana Osbourne chose modern, trendy costumes, such as slim-fit corduroys with boots for the Painter (Mike Nadajewski) and a pinstripe suit for the Merchant (Qasim Khan). The production was firmly set in the present: Timon distributed money by check or Canadian dollars, and he threw BMW keys when he talked of giving away his horse. Smart phones, digital notebooks, and laptops were ubiquitous in the first half of the play.

Whereas the oldest-appearing character in the Folger production was Apemantus, this time the most senior figure was the title character, who had thinning hair and a white beard. When he shuffled around stage in dirty clothes and one suspender loose in the play's second half, he appeared to have drifted into dementia. Yet Joseph Ziegler played Timon's childishness for laughs. When he complained of "rotten humidity" on a muggy July day, banged a stick while yelling "Earth! Yield me roots!" or threw rocks at his visitors, audience members applauded and chuckled.

The two productions together highlighted gender and racial tensions. Of the Folger's twelve-actor cast, half were people of color, and the production played with actors' and characters' identities in thoughtful ways. Timandra's Eastern

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European accent alluded subtly to global sexual trafficking, Maboud Ebrahimzadeh's brown-skinned Alcibiades called to mind specific racial tensions in post-9/11 American society, and the female Flavius endured sexual harassment and humiliation when she asked Timon's false friends for money in Act 3. Lucius (Michael Dix Thomas) pulled her close creepily and said, "Good girl. Now wink at me and say thou sawest me not." Sempronius (Sean Fri) made her kneel and nearly kiss his shoe before he rejected her. But because the Merchant and head Senator were also played by a woman of color, the Folger production demonstrated that women and people of color could rise to power and become just as oppressive as white men.



Fig. 2: Members of the company performing the masque in *Timon of Athens*, Stratford Festival. Photography by Cylla von Tiedemann, courtesy of the Stratford Festival.

By contrast, Stratford's *Timon* was a world in which only men (and mostly white men) held power. Some male parts were given to female actors, but only minor ones: Caphis (Zara Jestadt) and Philotus (Jessica B. Hill), for example, were played by women as secretaries or assistants. The masque scene made Timon's party into a flashy, joyous affair. Cupid (Ijeoma Emesowum) was a scantily dressed woman with a booming voice who called forth three female dancers wearing grey chiffon floor-length gowns open at the center to reveal matching panties, along with over-the-knee laced boots. When Phrynia (Emesowum) and Timandra (Jacklyn Francis) later appeared, they were soldiers wearing combat gear, understandably confused and offended when Timon spoke to them like they were

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whores. Yet they still asked Timon for money and claimed they would do anything for gold. These representations of women were troubling, and the production presented them without apparent irony or critique.

Although the ending of the Folger *Timon* felt rushed, it was certainly a tragedy, both of an individual man and of a failed, dystopian society. The Stratford *Timon* was more difficult to define. In this version, Flavius (Michael Spencer-Davis) found Timon's epitaph, scribbled it in his notebook, and reported it to Alcibiades (Tim Campbell), a white man with a buzz cut in modern military gear who had just coldly overseen a battle scene in which invisible shooters gunned down civilians. Were we supposed to applaud Alcibiades or understand his assault on Athens as a tragic event? When he delivered the line with which this production ended, "Make war breed peace, make peace stint war" (5.5.81), I knew that the line calls for peace, but all I heard was his emphatic delivery of "war." Although both productions emphasized the coldness of pervasive technology and criticized the wealthy elite, the *Timon* performed on Capitol Hill in the politically divided land of Trump offered the bleakest examination of our contemporary moment. As reviewers praised both productions, they repeatedly assumed that *Timon of Athens* is a bad play surprisingly well done, but perhaps to twenty-first-century audiences, *Timon* isn't such a bad play after all.

Notes

1. Play quotations are cited from the Arden 3 edition: *Timon of Athens*, ed. Anthony B. Dawson and Gretchen E. Minton (Cengage, 2008).

2. Examples include Peter Marks, "Shakespeare's 'Timon of Athens' takes a rare Washington bow," *The Washington Post* 17 May 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/shakespeares-timon-of-athens-takes-a-rare-washington-bow/2017/05/17/f21dd808-3b1d-11e7-a058-ddbb23c75d82_story.html?utm_term=.5d775f3edcad; David Siegel, "Review: 'Timon of Athens' at Folger Theatre," *DC Metro Theater Arts* 15 May 2017, <https://dcmetrotheaterarts.com/2017/05/15/review-timon-athens-folger-theatre/>.

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