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Dangereuse: Shakespeare's Most Badass Misanthrope: 'Timon of Athens' at Folger Theatre

By **Sophia Howes** - May 21, 2017

Just when Canada starts to sound like a good idea, comes *Timon of Athens* at the Folger Theatre, confirming once again that first-rate Shakespeare is a cure for almost anything. The show's brilliance is undisputed, and lead Ian Merrill Peakes gives a star performance as the benighted Timon. Timon may be Shakespeare's most badass misanthrope.

Misanthropes are often unusually intelligent (let's pass over that) but can also be highly entertaining. Charles Bukowski, in *Barfly*, wrote the following dialogue: "Do you hate people?" "I don't hate them. I just feel better when they're not around." Samuel Johnson remarked wisely: "I hate mankind, for I think myself one of the best of them, and I know how bad I am."





Banished Alcibiades (Maboud Ebrahimzadeh, left) confronts his old companion Timon (Ian Merrill Peakes). Photo by Teresa Wood.

William Hazlitt, in *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, commented: “[*Timon*] is as much a satire as a play: and contains some of the finest pieces of invective possible to be conceived, both in the snarling, captious answers of the cynic Apemantus, and in the impassioned and more terrible imprecations of Timon.” The play contains two dedicated misanthropes: Apemantus enjoys his hatred for all mankind, while Timon is tortured by his own, which stems not from innate tendency but tragic experience.

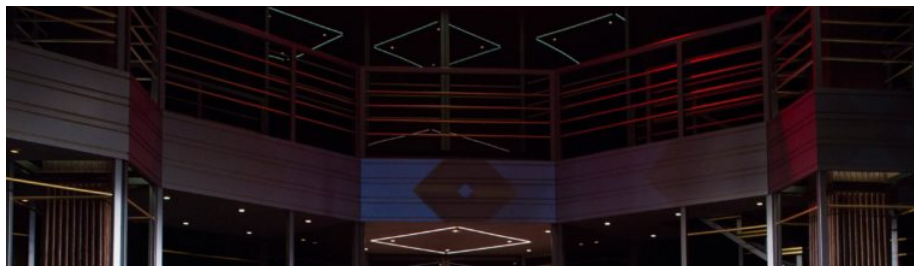
As Timon, Peakes is a ferocious bundle of energy. He attacks the role with tenacity and style, creating a complex character who is undone by the hypocrisy of others and his own limitations. He has extraordinary inner tension, which shows itself in tics and almost ritualistic behavior. Because of these underlying weaknesses, his descent into madness later on is beautifully anticipated. He



seems, somehow, fragile. And eventually he cracks.

In Act I, we are in the land of venture capitalists, investors, and self-deluded artists on the prowl for patrons. The set is dazzling (Set Designer is Tony Cisek) and technologically sophisticated. Golden shapes (coins?) dance across the top panels of the walls, and sometimes a character's name will flash above he or she as they enter. A ringing sound (cash register?) is heard whenever Timon bestows funds on one of his guests. The transition to Timon's refuge in the forest is extremely effective.

Unlike the original text, the Folger production opens with Timon getting his friend Ventidius (the always enjoyable Louis Butelli) released from prison by paying his debts. Next, we see the Poet (Michael Dix Thomas), the Painter (Andhy Mendez), the Merchant (Kathryn Tkel) and the Jeweler (Sean Fri). Their costumes (by Mariah Hale) are particularly imaginative and comical. The artists praise each other's work with unctuous insincerity. The Jeweler has an especially fabulous gem he wants to sell to Timon. They all discuss with relish Timon's legendary popularity. Here, we can sense echoes of today's world, where money isn't everything, it's the only thing.





Timon (Ian Merrill Peakes, center standing) serves a surprise dish to his dinner guests (l to r: Andy Mendez, Sean Fri, John Floyd, Kathryn Tkel, and Louis Butelli). Photo by Teresa Wood.

There is one honest heart among this clique of avaricious toadies, and that is Timon's servant, Flavius (Flavia?). As played by Antoinette Robinson, she evokes the stereotypical administrative assistant with a crush on her boss. But in another sense, she serves as Timon's conscience. She warns him repeatedly about his debts, attempting to save him from himself. Robinson has a disarming air of warmth and integrity. Her devotion to Timon is a saving note of kindness in a bleak universe.

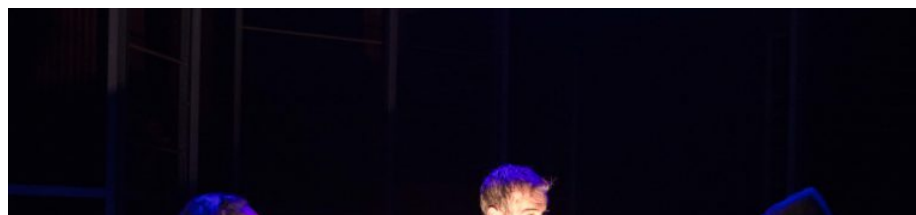
Timon, in a suit, like the classic businessman, throws a wild party for his friends. He is a civil master of ceremonies, welcoming and gracious to all, even Apemantus. As Apemantus, Eric Hissom is a worthy foil to Timon, hissing his lines and enjoying every moment of his diatribe. There is a floor show with elaborate acrobatics, topped by the entrance of Cupid (John Floyd) whose physical agility is something to see. The Senators (John Floyd, Michael Dix Thomas, and Kathryn Tkel) are all corrupt; the atmosphere ruthless, and the betrayals constant. (Sound familiar?)



The performances are uniformly excellent, the double casting impeccable, which is what we have come to expect from Robert Richmond. He has brought Timon into this century while retaining the underlying spirit of the text. There are sections of prose alternated with rhymed couplets, all delivered with close attention to the language as well as the acting. Judicious cuts have been made to the script, and the ending is not Shakespeare's but an exhilarating conclusion to the evening.

Alcibiades (Maboud Ebrahimzadeh) is also eager to rebel against Athens. The Senators have refused to pardon his friend, and as a storied military veteran, he proposes a general's solution; he will leave, organize an army, and attack the city. Ebrahimzadeh performs with distinction in a role which is somewhat underwritten.

As the false friends, Sean Fri (Sempronius), Andhy Mendez (Lucullus), and Michael Dix Thomas (Lucius) begin as sycophants and end as the materialistic villains we love to hate. The Bandits (John Floyd, Sean Fri, and Louis Butelli) are the only honest men, in the tradition of satire.





Phrynia (Aliyah Caldwell, left) and Timandra (Amanda Forstrom) humor their bait, Timon (Ian Merrill Peakes). Photo by Teresa Wood.

There is little for women to do in the play, so the casting of Antoinette Robinson as Flavius and Kathryn Tkel as a Merchant and a Senator is particularly welcome. The only other females are prostitutes Phrynia (Aliyah Caldwell) and Timandra (Amanda Forstrom). The two are delightfully versatile, and have fine moments as Patty Hearst-like camp followers towards the end of the play.

Director Richmond explores Timon's social anxiety in a uniquely provocative way. This originality can be found throughout the play, and reflects the ingenuity of the entire creative team. Besides Director Richmond, they are Tony Cisek (Scenic Design); Mariah Hale (Costume Design); Andre F. Griffin (Lighting Design), Matt Otto (Sound Design), and Francesca Talenti (Projection Design).

Misanthropy, it seems, never goes out of style. Some misanthropes grace today's television screens. There is Sherlock (Benedict Cumberbatch): "Get out, I need to go to my mind palace." Or Doc Martin (Martin Clunes) "Treat yourself



to a noun.”

For the greatest declaration of misanthropy (many philosophers appear to be misanthropes) we must turn to good old Jean-Paul Sartre; “Hell is other people,” which as a concept has a lot going for it-if you’re a misanthrope, that is.

Do not miss this outstanding production.

Running time: 2 hours, with one intermission.



Timon of Athens plays through June 11, 2017, at Folger Theatre – 201 East Capitol Street, SE, in Washington, DC. For tickets, call the box office at **(202) 544-7077**, or purchase them **online**.

Sophia Howes

Sophia Howes has been a reviewer for DCMTA since 2013 and a columnist since 2015. She has an extensive background in theater. Her play *Southern Girl* was performed at the Public Theater-NY, and two of her plays,



Rosetta's Eyes and *Solace in Gondal*, were produced at the Playwrights' Horizons Studio Theatre. She studied with Curt Dempster at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, where her play *Madonna* was given a staged reading at the Octoberfest. Her *one-acts Better Dresses* and *The Endless Sky*, among others, were produced as part of Director Robert Moss's Workshop-NY. She has directed *The Tempest*, at the Hazel Ruby McQuain Amphitheatre, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at the Monongalia Arts Center, both in Morgantown, WV. She studied Classics and English at Barnard and received her BFA with honors in Drama from Tisch School of the Arts, NYU, where she received the Seidman Award for playwriting. Her play *Adamov* was produced at the Harold Clurman Theater on Theater Row-NY. She holds an MFA from Tisch School of the Arts, NYU, where she received the Lucille Lortel Award for playwriting. She studied with, among others, Michael Feingold, Len Jenkin, Lynne Alvarez, and Tina Howe. Her father, Carleton Jones, long-time real estate editor and features writer for the Baltimore Sun, inspired her to become a writer.

