

Timon of Athens

By William Shakespeare

Produced by The College of the Holy Cross

2002-2003 Season

Directed by Edward Isser

A Glorious Mess

Ben Jonson, in his famed introductory note to the First Folio, wrote, “I remember, the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare that in his writing (whatsoever he penned) he never blotted out line.” A close look at the text of *Timon of Athens*, however, challenges the notion that Shakespeare’s plays sprang from his consciousness fully composed requiring little or no revision. *Timon of Athens*, put simply, is a glorious mess. It contains numerous errors, problems, and performative challenges; character names change, certain scenes appear to be little more than outlines, the verse is often jarring and filled with overlong lines, and the text shifts abruptly from prose to verse without apparent reason. Moreover, there is no evidence that the play was ever performed during Shakespeare’s lifetime. A number of critics, reacting to the rough and unfinished quality of the text, have even conjectured that Shakespeare was working on it at the time of his death in 1616 and Thomas Middleton completed the unfinished work. Other critics, denying collaboration, assert the play was composed at some point in 1605-6 because of its textual and thematic correspondence to *King Lear*. The debate over composition and dating will probably never be fully resolved. The Folio text of 1623 was apparently based upon a set of so-called “foul papers,” a preliminary draft submitted to the playhouse by the author prior to production.

The problematic nature of the text and the harshness of the story have caused *Timon* to be generally ignored by scholars, teachers and directors. *Timon of Athens*, however, deserves and demands our attention. It is a biting, unadulterated examination of the human condition that forces us to reconsider our notions of friendship, loyalty and the precariousness of status and success. Timon, a fabulously wealthy man who throws his fortune away on lavish parties, expensive gifts, and acts of philanthropy, mistakes patronage for friendship. The adulation and comradeship that coalesce about him dissipate when the money is gone: upon losing his wealth, he is bereft of social status and fair-weather friends. Alone and destitute, heartbroken and alienated, he begins a journey toward self-discovery. Timon's passage to awareness, however, is neither purgative nor transcendent. He is physically and emotionally transformed into **Misanthropos**, a vengeful and hateful man who bankrolls the destruction of the city that turned on him.

Timon of Athens is a play about the debilitating, dehumanizing effect that money has upon all human relationships. Every association in this play boils down to hard, cold cash. Athens is run on the principle of commerce and there is no place for loyalty, chivalry, or honor. It is no coincidence that Karl Marx referred repeatedly to this text in *Das Kapital*.

The existential crisis that Timon undergoes has been weighed against that of Lear and his discovery of the lack of substance behind social appearances has been compared to Hamlet's quest for the truth. The character of Timon, however, fails to measure up to such comparisons. But interestingly, in terms of modernity, he may surpass the two more famous models. Both Lear and Hamlet fulfill the structural prerequisites of classical tragedy. Both are

great noble figures that achieve transcendence through their suffering. We watch their stories unfold with awe and wonder, but ultimately with a degree of distance and security. *Timon of Athens* strips away our safety net. Timon may come from a good family, perhaps even a noble one (the text never specifies his background), but he is clearly not the prince of Denmark or the king of England. His entire social status is derived from the size of his pocketbook and he emerges, perhaps, as our truest contemporary in the works of Shakespeare: a seemingly modern man devoid of spirituality, materialistic to the core, and desperate for recognition to justify the emptiness of his existence. We watch the fall of Timon in horror and fascination. We may not know a Lear or a Hamlet, but we all know a Timon.

The structure of *Timon of Athens* is unique among the works of Shakespeare. The first half of the play is relatively “normal” – large in scale and epic in scope. The second half, however, develops into something wholly original. The drama suddenly becomes small and intimate, akin to a modern psychological chamber play. One can see in the second part of the play the antecedents of both expressionism and surrealism as Timon enters a nightmare world from which he cannot escape.