Rare Bard

Timon of Athens, Cymbeline, and King John in Stratford

By Steve Vineberg

B"llowing crowds pleased like Macbeth and the Midsummer Night's Dream, Guys and Dolls and Anything Goes and Noses Off, the Stratford Festival of Canada has dedicated a significant portion of this season to newly pro-
duced Shakespeare. For the next month or so, you can see Cymbeline, King John, and a brilli-
ant mounting of Timon of Athens — all in the compact Tom Patterson space, a borrowed lake-
side badminton court (it changes back in the winter) where the audience sits on bleachers threethirds of the way around the stage. And by now, the company has Henry VIII (All Is True) up and running in its latest venue, the Festival Theatre.

Timon of Athens is the strangest of Shake-
peare's tragedies — unremittingly bitter (it
lacks the reconciliation and salvation that lighten even Lear), with a structural problem that seems insurmountable. In the first half, Timon's bottomless generosity, as host and benefactor, sinks his finances while the fair-weather friends he calls out to for help stand back and watch him drown. In the second half, Timon lives in a cave. His base existence is buoyed up by visits from his faithful steward, from an exiled captain montaging a strike against Athens, from senators who desired him in his heart of gold but now desire his help in defending his city, from sympathizers who've heard a rumor that he's hoarding gold. It's a series of episodes with no real climax, since Timon's death is a foregone conclusion that alters nothing. We do hold out some hope for Athens when the rebel captain Alcibiades wins the civil war, since he demonstrates a compassion nearly as great in the sena-
tors who assist him. It's his defense of a com-
rade doomed to execution that gets him exiled in the first place.

Stephen Ouimette's production has a con-
temporary setting, and its evocation of the details of a luxurious, wasteful society is precise and witty. When Timon (Peter Donaldson) dis-
patches his staff (to beg loans from his social set, one is returning fences from a tennis game, another is running himself a quicker divorce, and a third is shaving himself with his poodle. In the best Stratford tradition, Ouimette, his designers (Louise Bégin, John Dafoe, and Tonja Beacher), and a latter-perfect ensemble sketch in the texture of these lifestyles as the play weaves in and out of Timon's marionette and other wealthy Athenian homes. The highlight of the first act is a banquet that evolves into a disco back-alley party. Then in act two, all these images of gratuitous living vanish as the action moves to the scene of Timon's exit. Shakespeare sets it in the woods; here we seem to be in a desert, with smoke rising ominously in the air. Ouimette draws on the heavy, feverous atmos-
phere — and cinematic technique — to suggest that Timon's life as a recluse has lost the shape of time; the transitions between human encoun-
teres have a suspended, hallucinatory feel. That's
how Ouimette conquers the challenge of the episodic second half. The stylistic shift is remarkable, powerful — and definitive. In the finale, when Alcibiades (Sean Arbour) and his soldiers chop to besiege the Athenian senate, the image of the bleeding city too is surreal. Donaldson charts Timon's descent from blindered bliss to disenchantment in the course of the first act; in the second, where the charac-
ter's relentless misanthropy might reduce a lesser actor to a simple note, Donaldson makes a symphony out of it. The sour rage and rock-

hewn despair in his second-act performance have a Beckettian low key. And it's Beckett you'll think of when Aemusants, the cynic who
raised against Timon's excesses and blindness while he lived in society, bicycles out to see him in isolation and rail against him once more. Tom McCamus plays Aemusants at a goofy scholar with a sardonic slant over his shoulder. These two actors are superb together, just as they were as Jamie and Edmund in Stratford's Long Day's Journey into Night in the mid '90s. (If you can get hold of a copy of David Wellington's movie of that production, which was never released in this country, you'll see what I mean.)

Cymbeline, one of Shakespeare's handful of romances (all written late in his career), has an even more cobbled story line than The Women's Tale. What's also different from The Winter's Tale is that both its poetry and its characters feel insubstantial, though scene — notably the wicked stepmother and her cloying, bellicose son — are enjoyable fairy-tale caricatures. David Latham's production of the play is often elegantly staged, but it doesn't accomplish what some Cymbelines are said to have done: open up the play while leading the audience on an epic jour-
ney through its crazy narrative. It's certainly the plot that keeps you here. Yet this version is surpris-
ingly bland, like the performance of its lead-
ing lady, Clare Bullen, who was notably undista-
tinguished as Cordelia opposite Christopher Plummer's Lear at Lincoln Center last winter (in a production that originated at Stratford), plays the unfortunate Princess Imogen, whose father, the British monarch Cymbeline, banishes her husband when she marries against his will, whose stepmother plots to poison her, whose stepbrother plots her with an unwanted courtship, and whose exiled husband wants her killed when an Italian noble, for sport, .likes that he succeeded in gaining her bed. She also goes about in drag for half the play and wakes up next to the headdress of her unwanted suitor, Prince Cloten (a ludicrous performance by Ron Kennilworth, who's so good as the tennis-
playing son in Timon), as wedding of a character.

The rest are given by James Blendick as Cymbeline and by Bernard Hopkins (who is equally fine as Fiano, the despised, snotty, unloving servant, Pisanio, and Mariza Henley indubitably in some grand scenery chewing as the evil queen, nesting a pet ferret in her bare bosom. King John is a triumph when he caugh-

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The best thing about Stratford's King John is the way the company has translated Shakespeare's fascinating early histories. It's early in subject matter, too. John was the son of Henry I, Charles of Aquitaine (who's still argued in Shakespeare's play, exerting a heavy influ-
ence on her son) and the brother of Richard the Lionheart. The splendid cast, with its mix of scenes and characters from later, more famous works — for instance, the episode where both John and his adversary, the French king (Peter Donaldson, in a steady performance), eschew a city to open its gates is a warm-up for the Harlequin sequence in Henry V. But it's a jolly, engaging, dramatically varied play that deserves to be seen. Ilus is the title character. Stephen Ouimette gives an extremely intelligent reading of the role, and he's up to all its emotional demands. But John is a bit of a duffel. Shak-

ep's play show up later in on in Hotspur (the bouncy, friendly, the righteous agent) and Kent (the earthy wise-
dom, the bowerleaf-leech). John is a

KING JOHN: Stephen Ouimette and Peter Donaldson join forces.