

Rare Bard

Timon of Athens, Cymbeline, and King John in Stratford

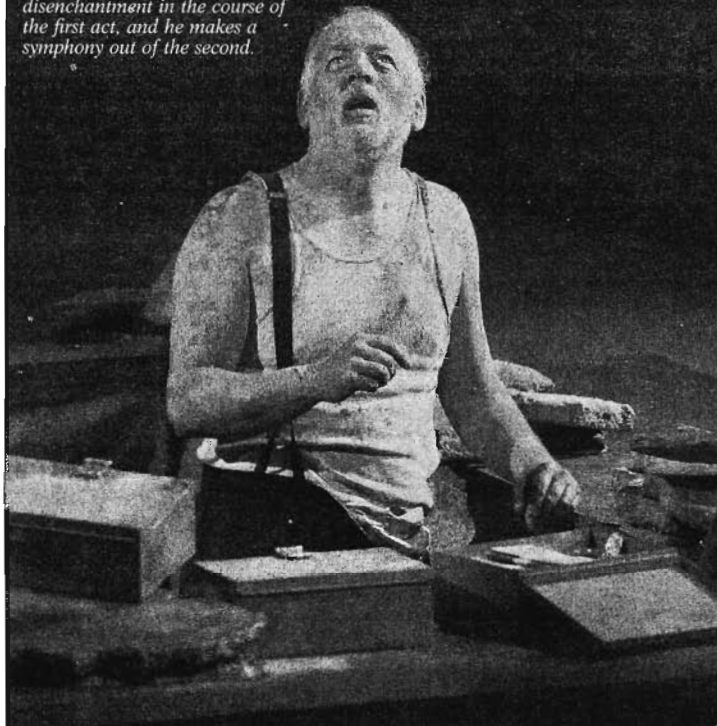
BY STEVE VINEBERG

Balancing crowd pleasers like *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Guys and Dolls* and *Anything Goes* and *Noises Off*, the Stratford Festival of Canada has dedicated a significant portion of this season to rarely produced Shakespeare. For the next month or so, you can see *Cymbeline*, *King John*, and a brilliant 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 three-quarters around the stage. And by now, the company has *Henry VIII (All Is True)* up and running in its largest venue, the Festival Theatre.

Timon of Athens is the strangest of Shakespeare'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 broken up by visits from his faithful steward, from an exiled captain mounting a strike against Athens, from senators who deserted him in his hour of need but now desire his help in defending his city, from sycophants 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's demonstrated a compassion notably absent in the senators who ousted him. (It's his defense of a comrade doomed to execution that gets him exiled in the first place.)

Stephen Ouimette's production has a contemporary setting, and its evocation of the details of a luxurious, wasteful society is precise and witty. When Timon (Peter Donaldson) dispatches his staff to beg loans from his social set, one is returning breathless from a tennis game, another is treating himself to his daily manicure, and a third is sunning himself by his pool. In the best Stratford tradition, Ouimette, his designers (Lorenzo Savoini, Dana Osborne, and Bonnie Beecher), and a letter-perfect ensemble sketch in the texture of these lifestyles as the play weaves in and out of Timon's mansion and other wealthy Athenian homes. The highlight of the first act is a banquet that evolves into a disco bachelor party. Then in act two, all these images of gracious living vanish as the action moves to the scene of Timon's exile. Shakespeare sets it

TIMON OF ATHENS: Peter Donaldson charts Timon's descent from blinkered bliss to disenchantment in the course of the first act, and he makes a symphony out of the second.



in the woods; here we seem to be in a desert, with smoke rising ominously in the arid air. Ouimette draws on the heavy, feverish atmosphere — and cinematic technique — to suggest that Timon's life as a recluse has lost the shape of time; the transitions between human encounters 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 Arbuckle) and his soldiers chopper in to besiege the Athenian senate, the image of the bleeding city too is surreal.

Donaldson charts Timon's descent from blinkered bliss to disenchantment in the course of the first act; in the second, where the character's relentless misanthropy might reduce a lesser actor to a single note, Donaldson makes a symphony out of it. The sour rage and rock-

hewn despair in his second-act performance have a Beckettian lower range. And it's Beckett you'll think of when Apemantus, the cynic who railed 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 Apemantus as a gypsy scholar with a saddlebag slung 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 crabbed story line than *The Winter's Tale*. What's also different from *The Winter's Tale* is that both its poetry and its characters feel insubstantial, though some — notably the wicked stepmother and her cloddish, 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 journey through its crazy narrative. It's certainly the plot that keeps you here. Yet this version is surprisingly bland, like the performance of its leading lady. Claire Jullien, who was similarly undistinguished 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 pesters her with an unwanted courtship, and whose exiled husband wants her killed when an Italian noble, for sport, lies that he succeeded in gaining her bed. She also goes about in drag for half the play and wakes up next to the headless corpse of her unwanted suitor, Prince Cloten (a ludicrous performance

Timon of Athens

By William Shakespeare. Directed by Stephen Ouimette. Set by Lorenzo Savoini. Costumes by Dana Osborne. Lighting by Bonnie Beecher. With Peter Donaldson, Bernard Hopkins, Tom McCamus, and Sean Arbuckle. At the Tom Patterson Theatre at the Stratford Festival of Canada, Stratford, Ontario, in repertory through September 25.

Cymbeline

By William Shakespeare. Directed by David Latham. Set and costumes by Victoria Wallace. Lighting by Michael J. Whitfield. With Claire Jullien, James Blendick, Martha Henry, Dan Chameroy, Ron Kennell, Bernard Hopkins, Stephen Russell, Dion Johnstone, and Jamie Robinson. At the Tom Patterson Theatre, in repertory through September 26.

King John

By William Shakespeare. Directed by Antoni Cimolino. Set and costumes by Santo Loquasto. Lighting by Robert Thomson. With Stephen Ouimette, Jonathan Goad, Martha Henry, Keira Loughran, Peter Donaldson, Dion Johnstone, and Tom McCamus. At the Tom Patterson Theatre, in repertory through September 24.

by Ron Kennell, who's so good as the tennis-playing Lucilius in *Timon*). The best performances are given by James Blendick as Cymbeline and by Bernard Hopkins (who is equally fine as Flavius in *Timon*) as Imogen's faithful servant, Pisanio. And Martha Henry indulges in some grand scenery chewing as the evil queen, nestling a pet ferret in her fur boa.

King John was still in previews when I caught it, and I suspect the underbaked second act will be in firmer shape by this weekend's opening. (The problems in Antoni Cimolino's staging of the battle scenes, which are sodden with familiar anti-war symbolism, are less likely to be solved.) It's not a great show, but it's a striking one, with gorgeous Santo Loquasto costumes, a convincing aura of political hysteria, and one marvelously sinister stage image that stays with you at the end of act one: John retreating on a train with the trusting young nephew whose murder he's just arranged. (Loquasto also designed the multi-purpose scaffold set.)

The best thing about Stratford's *King John* is that it offers the chance to see one of Shakespeare's fascinating early histories. It's early in subject matter, too: John was the son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine (who's still around in Shakespeare's play, exerting a heavy influence on her son) and the brother of Richard the Lionheart. And you can spot the blueprints 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 sturdy performance), exhort a city to open its gates is a warm-up for the Harfleur sequence in *Henry V*. But it's a juicy, engaging, dramatically varied play that deserves to be seen.

Its flaw 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 dullard; Shakespeare did a far more accomplished and charismatic portrait of a failed monarch in *Richard II*. Here the thunder you expect to resonate in the vicinity of a history-play protagonist is continually being stolen by dead King Richard's bastard offspring Philip, a plainspoken, swash-buckling proto-Dumas adventurer who accepts his legacy and fights for his king while occupying the play's moral center. (Jonathan Goad plays the role with gusto.) Elements of Philip show up later on in *Hotspur* (the lusty humor, the righteous anger) and Kent (the earthy wisdom, the bone-deep loyalty). John has more complex feelings — he plots the assassination of a child, then regrets it; he both scorns and courts the Church (represented by Cardinal Pandolph, who's played by Bernard Hopkins); he grieves for the loss of his mother (Martha Henry). But it would be a more satisfying play if Shakespeare had shifted the Bastard front and center.



KING JOHN: Stephen Ouimette and Peter Donaldson join forces.