

**T**HERE'S a reason you have never seen a production of Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. It's not his best play. It's not even his, or rather his alone, but probably a collaboration with Thomas Middleton. An awkward work that falls between tragedy and fable, it's not surprising that it is seldom seen: huge cast, lots of set and costume changes, clunky dialogue, a lead character that hits mostly one note, and not much that happens in the play.

So why is the National Theatre in London doing it at all? Well, in true National style, they have cleverly staged it in a manner that turns it into an apocalyptic vision of bankers' greed and youthful riots. As such, it's well worth seeing, even if you have no particular interest in the rarity value of what is considered a "problem" Shakespeare.

The story is simple: a rich man lavishes his wealth on his friends, only to find that when money runs out, they disappear. He curses them and the city and goes to live in a dump outside it. There he finds a mysterious pot of gold, experiences the generosity of a servant, a cynic and the rebel leader who is inciting the young mobs to violence.

Word of his gold spreads, and he gets beaten up by the yobs and threatened by the rich. In the end he dies, and the rebel takes over the city, after the city fathers have handed over some of their own for slaughter.

Simon Russell Beale is a splendid actor, but the role of Timon (to rhyme with Simon) doesn't give him much scope. The first half asks nothing but posturing of him, and the second, while it has some lengthy monologues in which he curses money and most other things, is equally unvaried in tone.

The rest of the cast of 20 consists of some fine actors, the most nuanced part being Timon's put-upon PA who warns him of his impending downfall then tries to rescue him, here played as Flavia, rather than the original Flavius, by Deborah Finlay. Hilton McRae is most entertaining as the churlish philosopher Apemantus, who is reviled by the wealthy and the later



A scene from *Timon of Athens*. The modern staging renders an apocalyptic vision of the financial crisis.

PICTURES: JOHAN PERSSON

*A modern interpretation places this in the heart of the banking crisis but doesn't obscure the play's inherent flaws, writes Nushin Elahi*

misanthropic Timon.

Nicholas Hytner, as director of both the play and the National Theatre itself, has used the piece as a vehicle to make an incisive comment on today, depicting the extravagant excesses of the rich and the brooding, explosive anger of the young who see their future squandered by those in power.

It's a superb staging by him and

designer Tim Haley, both in the modern costuming and the sets that place this squarely in the City of London. The backdrops and projections range from a Champagne reception at an art gallery, with an interlude of real ballet, to the high-rise banking tower blocks. The Occupy movement that has rocked the heart of London is referenced in the tents that hover on the edges of

this opulence. In the second half we are in an altogether seedier part of town, a wasteland of concrete where the flawed hero can disappear from life.

So far, so good, placing words of revolution in a gang of hoodies, making Timon's false friends bankers with glass offices. The parallels with today are obvious. For Athens read London. Greed and revolt are the same today as they were in ancient Greece. The problem is that there is no drama to it all, and however slickly done, however many smart frocks, the first half is simply a pageant of people touting Champagne glasses and smirking smiles, with Timon gushing about how he loves to be

generous. The second half gears up a pace with the arrival of the hoodies, and we get to wonder whether Timon will hide his gold before they pounce on him and there is some good banter with Apemantus, but it remains a pageant of good and evil.

I couldn't help wondering whether the thunderous applause was simply to signify how much they wished to see the rampant greed of today checked by a young leader with the fire and eloquence of Alcibiades in *Timon of Athens*.

This play was filmed live at the National Theatre in London and will be screened at Cinema Nouveaus nationwide today and on December 12 and 13.

## A lesson from Iran in quality film-making

DANA STEVENS

THE IRANIAN director Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation* serves as a quiet reminder of how good it's possible for movies to be. You don't always have to sacrifice complexity for suspense, or formal sophistication for visceral power. It's possible, if rare, to come across a movie that has it all.

*A Separation* is a domestic drama in the strict sense: it takes place mainly inside the apartment of a family, a middle-class couple named Simin (Leila Hatami) and Nader (Peyman Maadi) who have a 10-year-old daughter named Ter-meh (Sarina Farhadi).

Simin is beginning divorce proceedings against her husband: She's obtained an exit visa and wants to leave Iran with their daughter and settle in the West. But Nader refuses to consider leaving behind his father, who has Alzheimer's, has come to live with the family and requires round-the-clock care.

"He doesn't even know you're

his son!" protests Simin. "I know he is my father," Nader responds.

At their divorce hearing, Simin and Nader are sent home by a patronising off-screen judge. "My finding is that your problem is a small problem," we hear him tell a furious Simin, refusing to grant the divorce until the couple can come to a mutual agreement to separate.

But this family's problems are about to get a lot bigger. When Simin moves out to live with her parents, Nader hires Razieh (Sareh Bayat) to look after his father during the day. This devout young mother is soon overwhelmed by the task of attending to a man who can no longer speak, dress, or wash himself. One afternoon, for reasons that aren't clear at first, she leaves the old man alone while she runs an errand. The consequences of that act – and of Nader's outburst when he comes home to find his father unattended – will spiral into personal and legal disaster for both families, Nader's and Razieh's.



Simin (Leila Hatami) and Nader (Peyman Maadi) in *A Separation*

As plot summaries go, that's a sketchy one, but I'll leave it there, since one of *A Separation's* great strengths is the way it gradually reveals the complicated half-truths and strategic evasions in each party's version of the story. In a way, this is also a legal procedural, but one in which the truth becomes less and less clear-cut as the film goes on.

As the battle between the two families intensifies – with Simin taking the side of her estranged husband, and Razieh's hotheaded

husband Hodjat (Shahab Hosseini) forcibly intervening on behalf of his terrified wife – we get a sense of the complex web of social forces determining these characters' choices.

The better-off couple are secular and cosmopolitan, dismissive of the poorer family's traditional Islamic values.

But whatever their class or education level, the women – even the fiercely independent, plain-spoken Simin – are subject to the ever-present constraints of insti-

tutionalised sexism and social shame.

*A Separation* isn't worth watching only as a precise sociological analysis or a political critique of Iran – those qualities would be cold comfort indeed if they didn't exist in the context of a sad, funny, suspenseful story about love, grief, and the search for justice.

Despite some conflict between Farhadi and government censors while the film was being made, *A Separation* has now been released to acclaim in Iran and named the country's official entry for the foreign-language Oscar.

This is a dense, complex film that demands close attention from its audience (and richly rewards a second viewing).

With one of Iran's major living film-makers, Jafar Panahi, in prison for his support of the opposition movement, and another, Abbas Kiarostami, now working abroad, it's a joy to see films of this calibre are still being made in that curiously cinematic country. – Slate