



## Tamburlaine the Great

### Who Had It, Who Lost It, and Who Won

By Christopher Marlowe  
[American Shakespeare Center](#), Blackfriars Theatre, Staunton, Va.  
Friday, October 7, 2011, D-7&8 (middle stalls)  
Directed by Jim Warren

As an amateur Shakespearean, I read Marlowe—any Marlowe but especially *Tamburlaine*—and I wondered how he could be so highly regarded. I understand that this play in particular was the *Titanic* of its time and that Marlowe probably inspired Shakespeare, especially with *Henry VI, Parts One and Two*. But by *Henry VI, Part Three*, young Will had surpassed young Kit in drawing characters and creating metaphors, and soon Shakespeare was heading to his own sphere of imagery, characterization, and nuanced language and portrayals. Within a couple of years of his death, Marlowe's plays, and this play in particular, were outdated.

In the hands of professional Shakespeareans—or professional Marloweans, for that matter, as was the case in this lusciously-costumed production—*Tamburlaine the Great* not only shows us the foundation upon which the great Shakespeare launched his own campaign, it also proves to be particularly timely for 2011. Yes, this play is bombastic in its speeches and characters, from the titular Scythian shepherd who conquers the Eastern World to the lieutenants who dote on him, from the succession of kings he subdues to their women. Yes, these characters are as dimensionally drawn as those of a graphic novel. Yes, the verse is rigidly formal. It is mighty verse. Nobody talks that way, not now and probably not then.

Yet, that mighty verse also reveals subtle insights into power politics, and the characters, if not multidimensional individually, taken as an overall palette portray shades of human nature that dictate the known world's fate. One of *Tamburlaine's* followers, Theridamas (Patrick Midgley), determines early in their conquests that "A god is not so glorious as a king: I think the pleasure they enjoy in heaven, cannot compare with kingly joys in earth." Yet, "though I praise it, I can live without it." Midgley's Theridamas served as the moral core of this production, though the Persian general shows a traitorous bent in his defection to *Tamburlaine's* side at the beginning of the play. Nevertheless, in Midgley's portrayal, accomplishment alone seems to be Theridamas' only goal, and he alone displayed discomfort later on at *Tamburlaine's* obstinacy and cruelty.

In Theridamas' defection, however, is the foundation for what I see in *Tamburlaine the Great* as a great study in leadership, absolutely applicable to our current nation's political and military landscape. It is a study in that ever ubiquitous but elusive "it" (what Kent calls "authority" in *King Lear*), who has "it" and who doesn't. More importantly, the play delves into how "it" cannot be easily replaced by other, tangible qualities. Theridamas switches his allegiance from Mycetes after meeting *Tamburlaine* and seeing in him not just strength and intelligence but bearing. "His looks do menace heaven and dare the gods; his fiery eyes are fix'd upon the earth, as if he now devis'd some stratagem, or meant to pierce Avernus' darkness vaults to pull the triple-headed dog from hell." Theridamas also sees the quality of *Tamburlaine's* leadership in the quality of his followers, Usumcasane (Chris Johnston) and Techelles (Miriam Donald): "What strong enchantments tice my yielding soul to these resolved, noble Scythians!"

The kings *Tamburlaine* defeats each depict leaders with a single but fatal flaw. Mycetes (Benjamin Curns) considers his rule as his privilege but abrogates his responsibilities at every turn. His brother Cosroe (John Harrell) usurps Mycetes and arrogantly deems the crown his right by virtue of his superior intelligence. Emperor Bajazeth (René Thornton Jr.)

## WILL POWER ON STAGE

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René Thornton Jr. as Bajazeth. Photo by Michael Bailey, ASC.

and his empress, Zabina (Allison Glenzer), display the arrogance of long-held power: They base their fates on the assumption that their obvious might is all that matters. Finally, Soldan of Egypt (Harrell again) rules in a state of willful ignorance, preparing for a reality that simple is not so.

Tamburlaine (James Keegan) sees rule as his destiny, something he was born to accomplish, and he sets out in manner, in training, and in personal fortitude to achieve it. He is ruthless in his conquests, but he proves true to his followers (something not entirely true of the other kings), and while they talk of the spoils of war, it is their achieving an end that seems to drive them most.

Such a reading of the role of Tamburlaine requires such an actor to play that role, and Keegan did project a bearing on the Blackfriars' stage that was not simply bombastic but authoritative. In Tamburlaine's early incarnation, he had a gentle face and an honest smile, even when he was issuing stern threats. He inspired admiration in the captured daughter of Soldan, Zenocrate (Blythe Coons), who ultimately becomes Tamburlaine's wife. In the second third of the play, however, Keegan's Tamburlaine became more of a ruffian, and by the last third he was nothing short of despotic, with pride and a stout sense of "honor" driving him to such cruelties as spearing the virgins of Damascus with horseman's lances to be hoisted against the city's walls.

In the siege of Damascus, Tamburlaine went through three phases represented by banners hanging from the theater's balcony and his own makeup and robes: white for leniency, red for last-chance warning, and black for "too late, no mercy." In that final phase, his face smeared in black and wearing black robes, Keegan's Tamburlaine spoke his resolve in an even voice, but his piercing eyes communicated his soul, and it was merciless. Perhaps Marlowe's intent of keeping the captured Bajazeth on stage in a cage behind Tamburlaine for the play's latter portions was to suggest that the conquering general's fate had turned toward that of the conquered emperor, where leadership gets caged in by arrogant pride.

Thornton was all wrath and power as the reigning Bajazeth and all despair and power as the caged Bajazeth. Never once did he let go of his arrogance. For him, he must be emperor; nothing less was worth living for. But Marlowe has him kill himself in the most gruesome way: "He brains himself against the cage" say the stage directions. Thornton's death scene was a hard one to top.

But it *was* topped minutes later. Standout performance in this production was Glenzer, in three different roles: the Persian lord Ortygius, one of the virgins (she didn't speak, but her expressions emoted real fear), and, especially, Zabina. In her verbal spat with Coons' Zenocrate during the armed battle between their husbands, Glenzer seemed to draw her inspiration as much from modern reality show divas as from classical archetypes. After their dueling prayers, Glenzer shot Coons a withering look that brought the house down. But as a captive watching her husband abused, Glenzer hushed the house, eliciting real pity. And then she died as Marlowe dictated: "She runs against the cage and brains herself."

The final scene—Tamburlaine had defeated Soldan, killed Zenocrate's original betrothed, the King of Arabia, but saved Soldan for his wife's sake, then has his three lieutenant kings crown her empress—played out around the brained bodies of Bajazeth and Zabina. Even in death, Thornton and Glenzer dominated the stage, and the play of *Tamburlaine the Great* had become the Tragedy of Bajazeth.

Eric Minton  
October 12, 2011

## Comments

Dear Eric,

Last night, we had the pleasure of seeing the great John Douglas Thompson once again command the stage in a tour de force performance as Tamburlaine. The play is produced by Theatre for a New Audience at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn. Each part is 90 minutes, and there is a 30-minute intermission during which time the audience is encouraged to have a light snack or meal at the cafe.

I just came across your review of *Tamburlaine* in Staunton, Va., from 2011 a few hours ago. You not only review the performance, you also put the play in context and analyze several scenes, characters, and quotes. Reading this review helped me clarify, process, and further appreciate the overwhelming spectacle that we saw last night!!

I started taking my sons to see Shakespeare plays when they were 9 and 12 years old. My younger son has become a huge fan, and together we've seen about 20 plays during the past five years. We saw John Douglas Thompson as Othello at the Duke Theatre on 42nd Street and were completely enthralled by his talent. We arranged to meet him after his next performance as Macbeth, also at the Duke Theatre. We've also seen him steal the show in his role of Kent/Caius in a production of *King Lear* starring Sam Waterson. JD T is as kind and generous to his fans as he is talented—and that is saying quite a lot!!

Alice Deutsch, DMD

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