



BROWSE



How to Tar and Feather a Thief

Rachel E. Pollock

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

How to Tar and Feather a Thief

Rachel E. Pollock (bio)

Neat scraps of skin hang clothespinned to a line. Thick daubs of something shiny and black besmirch each one, downy white feathers stuck smeared to the surface. The soft breeze capering in through three

large casement windows stirs these fetishes like grim handkerchiefs.

The laundry of vigilante justice.

The taut rope, forefinger girthed, stretches the length of the steel-walled room on a sturdy wooden frame, pulley-rigged to hoist it up out of the way while its grotesqueries harden and cure. I haul the line and up it goes, belay it to a wall-mounted cleat. I smile at recollections of past lines belayed—the Girl Scout camp flag, the high school color guard, sailing on the *Liberty Clipper*.

I'm no serial killer sicko; this North Carolina studio is not my abattoir. I make costumes, theatrical costumes, and these tiny waving flags of tarred and feathered flesh compose the first notes of a cloth requiem: over the course of the next month, my shop will make a tar-suit. The theater that employs me, a professional regional theater in residence at a prominent Southern university, will soon present the final show of its 2010–11 season, *Big River*, a musical based on Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The show builds towards its dramatic climax as Huck exposes a con man's ruse and an angry mob of the bilked attacks. *Tar-and-feather 'im! Tar-and-feather 'im!* the crowd chants, shaking their fists as they pursue this man, known only as "the Duke." Sometime later, Huck discovers the poor fellow, disfigured and suffocating, the crowd having made good on their threat.

Cotton and silk jersey, matte spandex, a thin nylon mesh called Power-net—these are the fabrics that can mimic a victim's flesh on stage. I have dyed **[End Page 133]** each swatch to a particular skin tone, the creamy praline color of a man. An actor. Let's call him the Actor. The Actor will play the role of the Duke.

We, meaning the production team and I, have researched this phenomenon, tarring and feathering, and scrutinized daguerreotypes and photographs of survivors of the atrocity, historic paintings depicting the act in progress. We have debated the color, consistency, opacity, and

sheen of the stage tar desired, and considered the aesthetics of chicken versus turkey feathers.

I have taped each fabric sample to a long strip of waxed paper, smeared a ganache of black silicone caulk onto each. My assistant then followed along behind, bag of feathers in nitrile-gloved hand, gingerly smushing one into each gooey blob.

We have strung them up, our small, precise victims. Now we wait.

Six Facts I Cannot Think About beyond the Task at Hand

1. Pine tar is a blackish-brown colloid at room temperature and gives off a compelling, sickly sweet odor, a scent reminiscent of caramel and gin.
2. A common waterproofing substance in the nineteenth-century maritime industry, vats of hot pine tar constantly boiled over shipyard fires awaiting numerous uses.
3. North Carolina, the state in which I reside, was the major producer and exporter of tar and turpentine in the nineteenth century, so much so that “tarboilers” was a pejorative term for its residents.
4. Tar boils at 60°C (140°F).
5. Burn injuries result when the skin temperature exceeds 44°C (112°F).
6. The exact circumference of the Actor’s hips is 38½ inches.

Once we determine which fabric has the perfect combination of dyeability, stretch, and caulk retention, an artisan called a draper will draft a leotard pattern to fit the Actor’s measurements. Cut from the chosen cloth (Powernet will earn this honor), the pieces of the leotard will be stitched into a garment, which, if I’ve done my dye job correctly, will blend invisibly with the Actor’s actual skin.

He has a name, the Actor. It’s Scott.

This is both good and bad, I think, the fact that he goes by Scott. We are **[End Page 134]** already intimately acquainted, and for me that name carries uncomfortable baggage.

When I say “intimately...

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