Plays in Performance

The Inauguration of the New Swan Theatre with *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Every Man in His Humour*, Stratford-Upon-Avon.

In 1926 the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon was burnt to a blackened shell. The auditorium had been notoriously unsuitable and the event was regarded as providential in theatrical circles. George Bernard Shaw, who two years previously had published a condemnation of the building, sent a telegram crowing congratulations to the Festival Chairman. "It will be a tremendous advantage to have a proper modern building. There are a number of other theatres I should like to see burned down. . . ."[1] The blackened shell remained to mark the site of that Victorian edifice when the present main house was built next to it in the early 30s. The fact that even then sufficient money to build the new design was not forthcoming in Britain and that the great part of the cost was met by American contributions foreshadowed the means by which The Swan Theatre has risen, a sixty years belated phoenix, from the cold ashes of that fire. Widely publicised as another supernatural intervention, an anonymous American has provided all the necessary funding for the Royal Shakespeare Company to create a new auditorium on top of the Victorian foundations. On 26 April, 1986, the Swan Theatre opened with *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, dedicated to presenting contemporary Jacobean works in an effort to place Shakespeare in an artistic and historical context. The repertoire is to be chosen from sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century dramas which are deemed relevant to the present concept of Shakespeare.

It is an ambitious project. To present obscure or unknown plays which may or may not have influenced Britain's "national poet" is some scholars' idea of paradise, to be sure; but despite the RSC's disclaimer, will it really be possible ". . . to find ways of making the plays speak to a contemporary audience" without producing either a museum piece or worse, that condescending epithet, something merely academic?[2] There are those who would argue that this rather didactic approach reinforces both the RSC's monopoly on professional Shakespeare productions in England, and the elitist construction of a shrine for a national poet who creates and is created by English "culture." Similarly, there are less theoretical arguments which question the artistic merit and financial viablility of presenting plays that few have ever produced, successfully or not.

The building has been designed by a Stratford architect, Michael Reardon, who coincidentally specializes in ecclesiastical restoration. His brief from Trevor Nunn was to construct an unchanging backdrop for Jacobean plays:

> Of necessity, the key to the whole question is that the interior design of the theatre amounts to a permanent staging . . . [The Swan] is the simplest possible structure on which we can present the pre-proscenium plays of our dramatic tradition. It is a theatre for texts and actors, for the work of analysis, structure, insight and performance. Clearly design will have a vital significance in what we do there, but it cannot be design involving changing the configuration of the stage, or even of 'set building' in the sense that we currently understand it.[3]

Thus the auditorium has been expressly designed not to accommodate designers' impedimentia but rather to showcase the poetic texts themselves, as Elizabethan playhouses are thought to have done.

However, the design of the new theatre is not a copy of any particular playhouse Shakespeare may have known. Although interested in modern theories on the actual structure of Elizabethan stages, Reardon has explained that the exigencies of the Victorian foundation and current safety regulations have left him no opportunities for accurate imitation.[4] Thus the Swan as it stands, with a wooden thrust stage surrounded on three sides by the stalls and two circular galleries, is evocative of the older playhouses without being an actual reconstruction. The influence of known Elizabethan theatres is demonstrated by the continuation of the top gallery into a complete circle incorporating the backstage wall. In performance, this is used by actors, musicians and stage staff. The result is a beautiful, light, and lively space: the structure is of brick and pale wood, and the acoustics are good. Architecturally it is the RSC's best auditorium.

The first two productions on The Swan's bare boards present an admirable dialectic on the projected character of the theatre. The play chosen to inaugurate the space was the Shakespeare/Fletcher collaboration, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, directed by Barry Kyle. In mid-May it was joined in the repertoire by John Caird's production of Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. Ironically enough, these two directors certainly do not have the reputation for visually unencumbered productions. In the past few seasons Caird and Kyle have been responsible for some of the RSC's worst excesses in the direction of Britain's pilloried "designer-theatre"—the remembrance of Caird's bizarre 1984 *Merchant of Venice* lives on in infamy. To have two such directors open a theatre whose stage doors are deliberately only eight feet high in order to abrogate any possibility of scenic extravagance smacks of a refresher course in production economy.

From the look of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Kyle and his designer Bob Crowley have not been deterred by this structural obstacle. Outsized poles, string and scarves appear constantly. The Gaoler's Daughter (Imogen Stubbs) spends a great deal of her stage time shinning up and down fifteen foot poles or perched on a bench up-stage. There is no flytower in The Swan but the kinsmen's gaol is a suspended crib perilously swaying from pulleys and anchored to the stage by ropes. Emilia follows a string inexplicably tied to

another pole into the "garden" where she is seen by the incarcerated men, hovering over her.

The entire production seems overcrowded with props. This impression is exacerbated by the incompatible but heavily emphasized Japanese Noh fashion in which Theseus and his court are dressed. The stylized and remote action of the play's main plot is thus embodied in dumbshows of Samaurai combat. The chiaroscuro effect of white-face and black wigs enforces the overtones of symbolic activity and, to Kyle's credit, is consonant with the mythic elements of the play. However, they effect a distancing of the main plot while the typically English rustic details pertaining to the Gaoler's Daughter and the Schoolmaster's entertainment in III.v (with morris dancers and a huge, erupting phallic symbol) bring the subplot much more intensely to the fore. Hugh Quarshie and Gerard Murphy are physically powerful and are well matched as the warring kinsmen; however, this production has effectively rechristened the play "The Gaoler's Daughter."

Imogen Stubbs' haunting portrayal of the love-crazed Daughter displays her considerable technical and gymnastic accomplishments. She communicated the text simply and intelligently and with a rare sensitivity to its beauty. Her preservation of both meaning and poetry while scaling thin steel poles and swaying on top of them is spellbinding. While Stubbs' performance is memorable in itself, perhaps the Gaoler's Daughter subplot is spotlighted by the eccentric Oriental treatment Kyle uses to distance the characters in the main plot.

In Kyle's defence it could be argued that the disparity of treatment of the two plots is a function of the play as written. The play has been notoriously described as too awful to bear Shakespeare's mark but not awful enough to have been Fletcher's unaided work. Despite this, divided authorship cannot be blamed when scholarship generally divides the characterization of the Gaoler's Daughter fairly evenly between Shakespeare and Fletcher. Thus it seems that, faced with a difficult and mediocre play to open a theatre dedicated to such experiments, Kyle has succumbed to the temptations of gimickry and gingered up an evening of patchy interest.

In contrast, John Caird's delightful revival of *Every Man in His Humour* is a testimonial to the exciting potential of the new theatre. The pale polished wood of the galleries and stage floor are complemented by a rough block and tackle and rack far upstage from which are suspended the economical pine chairs which furnish the stage when needed. The upper gallery is used as a discovery space allowing the audience and actors alike to stare at Kitely's wife and sister (played by Vanessa Redgrave's daughter, Joely Richardson) while he fumes downstage in painfully absurd jealousy. Henry Goodman is excellent as Kitely; his timing and delivery construct a sympathetically comic personality. He is one of several seasoned RSC actors in the cast and their presence typifies the superb company standard of ensemble playing. The even orchestration in this performance refelcts the play's equal emphasis on the disparate elements comprising a community and recalls why Jonson's folio revision is a standard of the city comedy genre. The RSC production is a beautifully balanced chamber piece in which the corporate action is evenly divided by the whole company between the intricately plotted stories in Jonson's multiple vision of city life.

The London of *Every Man in* (Caird follows the folio version exclusively until the final scene) is a society based upon familial and social relationships which constantly threaten anarchically to transgress the bonds which hold the society together. Thus the servant Brainworm, energetically played by David Haig, propels the rapidly moving action from behind various disguises as representatives of London's legal authority. As soldier, lawyer's clerk and sergeant he impersonates the civic defenses against anarchy in a logical if undisciplined attempt to reconcile the father and son whom he serves. The disguise motif that runs throughout the play has been subtly but firmly dealt with by designer Sue Blane. Each of Brainworm's disguises becomes more cumbersome than the last, reemphasizing his increasingly inextricable relation to the burgeoning subterfuges. His repeated determination to pawn each suit and spend the money is mirrored by the impoverished, disreputable braggart, Bobadill (Pete Postlethwaite), whose shocking pink silk stockings are so obviously intended for the same fate eventually. Kitely's luxurious and appropriate green velvet proclaims his dominant humour as do the ghastly leggings on the pathetically pretentious Stephen (Paul Greenwood).

The disguisings and untrussings contribute to the anarchy intrinsic to Jonson's vision of London. Elizabethan society had strict rules governing appropriate apparel for the social classes and the visual metaphor of trading clothes in Caird's production brings home the instability of the upwardly mobile bourgeois. Clothes make and remake the men in *Every Man In*, and in Caird's production the elaborately assumed disguises stand out the more clearly against the Swan's unadorned wooden backdrop.

The action is lively and well-paced throughout, although the second half which comprises the confrontations and resolution passes more quickly. Kitely's jealous intrusion into the drawing room comedy of Wellbred and Knowell's foolish companions erupts into an uproarious fight wonderfully staged by Malcolm Ransom. This is paired later in Act IV with an interpolated dust-up between Cob and his wife—she proceeding to leave the stage littered with incapacitated men. Ransom's fights are beautifully choreographed and seem to be the natural outbursts of every man's seething humours.

In conclusion, if Kyle's production is not successful drama, Caird's show is a vindication of the current artistic policy for the Swan. It remains to be seen how the rest of the season—Aphra Behn's *The Rover* and Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West*—progresses. The Swan is intended to be self-supporting. Because of this, few if any additional actors or staff accompanied the establishment of the new institution, nor were there any additional dressing rooms or storage space in the plans. It is to receive no portion of the company's government subsidy. Thus its future is entirely dependent upon box office receipts, themselves dependent upon artistic policy. It is to be hoped that Nunn's brainchild, the unexpected heir of a scholastic fancy and a fiscal fantasy, is not left on a barren hillside.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to Sally Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982) for this summary of the events in 1926. On p. 93, Beauman states that the above text presented is the oral version which Archibald Flower, the chairman of the Stratford Festival, and his family preserved. She conjectures that the original text of the telegram is lost.

2. Simon Trussler, compiler, *Every Man in His Humour: A Programme/Text* (London: Methuen, 1986). An explanatory introduction to the theatre is printed on the inside cover of all the Swan programme/texts. The full paragraph from which I have quoted reads:

> The promontory stage, surrounded on three sides by galleries, is not unreminiscent of the reconstructions of Elizabethan theatre, but there has been no attempt to produce a museum-like replica. Neither will the plays be presented as pieces of scholarly research. As in all RSC work, the most important consideration will be to find ways of making the plays speak to a contemporary audience.

3. Trussler 7. Trussler has included this segment of a memorandum from Trevor Nunn when he proposed the new theatre's artistic policy.

4. Michael Reardon described the Swan project to "The Conference on Elizabethan and Jacobean Plays in Performance" at The Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon, on 5 October, 1985.

King John at Ashland

King John, one of the most coldly-liked plays in the Shakespeare canon, is produced rarely though there have been memorable mountings in our era at the Old Vic and the Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. At Ashland, *King John* was last produced fifteen years ago, and the version here reviewed did little to promote a speeding up of that schedule. What went wrong?

A huge genealogical chart hung above the stage throughout the play. An elaborate pre-play presentation of the characters explained who they were and their relations to each other. To open the play, the French Chatillon brought in a big map to diagram the geography of the conflict. These attempts at clarification distanced the characters and action firmly in another time and place, so that the audience was asked to see them under glass, as it were, foreign bodies, curious objects for historical study. Another indicator of this attitude was the four-page spread in the OSF Program entitled "The King's Majesty: What is it? Where did it come from? Who [sic] does it serve?" Again encouraging a museum-like, antiquarian approach to the plays, this article concluded with such questionable sentiments as these: "In the 16th century the combined elements of Aristotelianism, Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Stoicism, and Christianity were almost indistinguishably woven into a pattern which was universally agreed upon. . . . [Shakespeare's] kings could be enlightened and gracious or tyrannical and cruel, but they were men of the Renaissance and sanctioned by God." In other words, to see *King John* is to enter a closed ideological system of dubious relevance to today.

Once cast in the role of history buffs and told, moreover, that John was sanctioned by God, the spectators had little choice but to devote substantial amounts of their energies to keeping the characters sorted, attending primarily to political meanings, and trying to accept the machinations of John as teleologically fruitful. Largely lost were opportunities to consider other dimensions of the play such as its many-leveled skepticism toward the