

PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE: A BACKGROUND PAPER

by
John Hudson

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the period of half a century from 1580-1630 a shift took place in the nature of the English theatre. It had four dimensions;

- the allegorical mystery plays began to be replaced by new secular plays that presented a slice of life on stage;
- formal acting styles gave way to more realistic ones;
- the outdoor thrust stage was replaced by the indoor proscenium arch theatre;
- and the staging shifted from meta-theatrical to naturalistic productions.

These changes were part of the entire evolution of the entertainment industry as a whole, which in turn reflected shifts in society and the economy, and changes in what audiences wanted, and what stage machinery could provide. But within that broader trend I am going to focus on these precise shifts;

<u>Older Model</u>	<u>New Model</u>
Allegorical	Character-based
{Formal acting	Realistic acting
{Boy actors	Women actors
Thrust stage	Proscenium arch
Meta-theatrical	Naturalistic
'hear a play'	'see a play'

2. FORMAL ACTING STYLE

The older acting techniques were derived from the classics, and required the presentation of formalized gestures from oratory, as if the play were a moving tableau. For instance referring to Tamburlaine, Granville-Barker says it is a role "to be exhibited rather than acted". Heywood described acting as a "kind of mechanical labor" implying it had a routinized quality. Similarly, in 1592 Robert Greene criticized actors as "puppits...that speake from our mouths". The 1601 *Return from Parnassus II* referred to the players as "leaden spouts/That nought do vent but what they do receive". The players' sets of gestures came from the classical books on acting and oratory. Heywood suggests an acting manual by Labericus "a book of the gesture and action to be used by the tragedians and comedians". We can take three examples of the gestures they used;

- Drawing on classical sources (including Quintillian), *The Cyprian Conqueror, or The Faithless Relict* (1630's) advises the players that "the other parts of action is the gesture, which must be various, as required; as in a Sorrowfull part, the head must hang down; in a Proud (part) the head must be lofty; in an Amorous (part) closed eyes, hanging down looks and crossed arms".
- Gayton's *Pleasant Notes Upon Don Quixote* (1654) describes how in a dumbshow "the Don swells, looks big, menaces with hand and shaken

javelin..claps his own hands....the other Part shrug, sneeze,blurt, neglect, make mouths, and flout in Spanish postures” . These are standardized gestures--- swelling and looking big, while the other actor demonstrates scorn by shrugging and making mouths. Waldo McNeir (1941) argues that the techniques used in dumbshows were similar to those in the plays and that Elizabethan acting was “to a large degree formalized”.

- In *Apology for Actors* (1612) referring to acting at universities, Heywood recommends the actor “to keep a decorum in his countenance, neither to frown when he should smile, nor to make unseemly and disguised faces in the delivery of his words” and “not to use any impudent or forced motion” but in a “smooth and formal motion” to “fit his phrases to his actions” .

In a play that was performed at both universities, Hamlet uses almost identical terms to Heywood, when he tells the players to “Suit the Action to the Word, the Word to the Action”. He is telling them to ‘indicate’ or ‘illustrate’ the action---not as an individual emotional and expressive action ---but by drawing on a commonly understood repertoire of gestures. This is the same repertoire of conventions that would have been used by the boy players who were acting women, and who had learned those conventions together with classical rhetoric and oratory eg. Quintillian’s teachings-- about what gestures to use, and how men and married women must walk sedately, while slaves and maidservants should be lively in their movements.

Apart from one possible earlier example (in 1610), it is only after the 1630’s---when young boy players were no longer acting women—that we begin to get accounts of naturalistic expressive acting. After the Restoration, Thomas Betterton pioneered natural acting in the 1660’s for Davenant’s company. He was noted for making fewer gestures and not intoning his words. By this time audiences were coming not to hear a play but to see a play. Thus the evolution of theatre scenery and stage machinery were able to create an illusory spectacle that seemed more realistic and which was an appropriate setting for realistic acting.

3. META-THEATRICAL THRUST STAGE

Research reported by Bridget Escolme in her book *Talking to the Audience* (2005) finds that when performed on a darkened stage, with actors addressing each other and no direct address to the audience, the audience members will judge the characters—as if they were real people behind the ‘fourth wall’. However when a play is performed in full light on a thrust stage, the audience does not judge the characters and becomes more aware of their own role in the production of meaning. This was the fashion in which all Shakespearean plays were performed until 1596 when *Midsummer Night’s Dream* was the first to be performed (as a private entertainment), in the indoor Blackfriars Theatre while it was still under construction. This is the first Shakespearean play to specifically discuss the conventions of realism, when the Mechanicals worry about whether their lion will be too realistic.



On the thrust stage (like this one at The Swan) however, where Shakespeare’s plays were first produced, metatheatrical effects were the dominant aesthetic. Andrew Gurr in his essay *Metatheatre and the Fear of Playing* (in R.H.Wells (ed) 2000) lists some of the “openly unrealistic” aspects of the staging by which plays make their illusions “self-evidently illusionary”. These include the actors’ clothing, and the self-references that actors make to themselves as actors. Boika Sokolova (1992) sees the episodic construction, use of direct address, instantaneous scene changes and even doubling, as aspects of the Elizabethan stage that increased the metatheatric effect. Evidently the thrust stage promoted this. Brecht describes the Elizabethan stage as “full of alienation effects”. There was no scenery. Women’s roles were played by boys. The actors wore the clothes of Lords or Kings, but were not real members of the nobility. One could see through from one side of the thrust stage to the other, as at the Globe today. Some other examples;

- Characters comment that they are actors, or that their actions will be acted, eg Prospero, Cleopatra, death of Julius Caesar
- Deliberate anachronisms shatter any illusion that this is reality
- Chorus, narrator or prologues are used to give a commentary in the tragedies/histories
- Actors are specifically mentioned in most if not all the plays
- Fictional characters are mixed in with real ones
- Include plays-in-plays and masques/pageants within the plays, and onstage audiences (in around 20 Shakespearean plays)
- Use of blatant, ostentatious, literary composition, symmetry and allusion which alerts audiences that this is a literary product ---such as when Romeo and Juliet meet they speak to each other in sonnets.

- Only one of the plays (MWW) is set in contemporary England, all the rest are in locations that are geographically and/or historically remote eg. Bohemia, Egypt
- Unrealistic circumstances, sets of twins, girls dressed as boys, people turning into statues and vice versa
- Appearance of explicit allegorical figures like Rumour and Revenge, Hymen, Juno, Iris, Time.

All of these characteristics should promote a critical distance between the audience and the play. They should be communicating to us that the play is something to inquire into-- not a slice of life-- but something else, a problem to be solved, not something to be taken for granted. As for what that meaning was that lay beneath the surface---it was communicated through allegory which only those of ‘stronger stomachs’ could digest, as Harington puts it. So when we look at the earliest representation on stage of a Shakespearean play, we should be noting its metatheatrical and allegorical qualities.



4. ALLEGORY

Nashe satirised the tendency of Elizabethan culture to apply allegories—sometimes inappropriately—when he complained in 1594 “Let one but name bread, they will interpret it to be the town of Bredan in the low countreyes; if of beer he talkes, then

straight he mocks the Countie Beroune in France". It is well established that allegory was an integral part of Elizabethan life. It was found in the poetry, the literature, the tapestry, the politics, the music, the paintings, the processions, the gardens, pageants, court entertainments, masques, the needlework, and even the icing on plum-cakes at Court. Granted how pervasive allegorical thinking was, it would be extraordinary if plays somehow could be kept immune from allegorical interpretation. The evidence suggests indeed that this is precisely how they were—sometimes at least—interpreted by the “sharpe and learned” (Jonson).

Elizabethan playwrights countered Government propaganda, as Annabel Patterson notes in her book *Censorship and Interpretation* (1986) by an oblique mode of communication; “There is evidence [in Elizabethan texts], if we look carefully, of a highly sophisticated system of oblique communication, of unwritten rules whereby writers could communicate with readers or audiences (among whom were the very same authorities who were responsible for state censorship) without producing a direct confrontation” (1986; 56). Similarly Pinciss remarks, that playwrights would use; “...strategies of indirection and allusion, of ambiguity and suggestion, of hinting through seemingly trivial facts to accomplish “signaling according to cautious codes.” By using such “signals,” a playwright might hope to stay out of trouble, for these were the ways that he could imply meaning, enabling him to express himself on subjects that, though forbidden, were of intense concern” (G.M.Pinciss, 1995).

Allegories were one such method of creating covert messages within the plays, saying something rather different from the surface meaning. Allegories were coded forms of communication that could establish additional channels of meta-communication. Some audience members at least did comprehend such allegories. When Sir John Holles attended Middleton’s *A Game at Chess* in August 1624, he deciphered the play which he called a ‘facetious comedy’ as an allegory of the relationship between England and Spain. Another example comes from 1639 when R. Willis recalled the allegory from the play *The Cradle of Security* he had seen in the 1570’s in which the figures of two old men, carrying sword and mace, represented the Last Judgement and the End of the World (Huston Diehl, 1982).

The plays also used visual signs and symbols to communicate points that might by-pass the censor. In Dekker’s *Old Fortunatus* Fortune enters followed by nymphs carrying a globe and a wheel. In Wilson’s *The Three Lords and Ladies of London*, Pride appears with a shield on which there is an *impressa* of a peacock. Similarly in pageants such as the one that King Christian arranged on the Seven Deadly Sins, characters formed explicit allegories and bore long signs explaining in 20 words or so what they represented—similar to the signs in Elizabethan painting and tapestry. However, during this period explicitly labeled allegories became replaced by *implicit* ones. Ben Jonson refers to this when he says, referring to the pageants presented to King James, that it was *no longer* “becoming” for the “dignitie of these shews” for an ignorant Painter to place signs on the puppets (actors) “*This is a Dog* or *This is a Hare*”. Instead the figures would be “so to be presented, as upon the view they might without cloud or obscuritie, declare

themselves to the sharpe and learned” (in Griffin, 1972) in other words expecting the audience to engage in an act of decipherment.

Audiences who attended the masques would already be skilled in such deciphering. Daniel, in *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses* (1604) noted that in the masques the Images “have oftentimes divers significations”. Jonson of course created hundreds of such allegorical and symbolic characters (Gilbert, 1948) but recognized in *Hymenaei* that for some in the audience these would be “steps beyond their little, or (let me not wrong ‘hem) no braine at all”.

The author of the Shakespearean plays also makes several hundred visual allusions, many to engravings in emblem books and books of alchemy. There is growing awareness of how this imagery in the Shakespearean plays is related to the emblem books (Peter M. Daly, 1993). This reflects an iconographic staging as described by John Doeblor *Shakespeare's speaking pictures : studies in iconic imagery* (1974). So for instance, the depictions of Cleopatra as Fortune reflect various emblematic depictions. The depiction on stage is the equivalent of the visual emblem, the words spoken are the equivalent of the motto or inscription, and the responsibility of the audience is to expound the hidden moral meaning of the device, just like a reader of the emblem books.

These examples suggest that writers were fully aware that audiences were engaged in acts of interpretation and emblematic or allegorical decipherment. Some of the allegories were hostile and religious in nature. In 1586 “masquerades and comedies” took place in which, in the opinion of the Venetian ambassador, “all sorts of evil” was spoken of the Catholic religion. Similarly in 1592, certain players were allowed to make contempt of the religion of the king of Spain. This is possibly a reference to Lyly’s *Midas*, in which the king, obsessed with gold and conquest, chooses Pan (Catholicism) in preference to Apollo.

In the case of the Shakespearean plays scholars began detecting the religious allegories in the plays during the 1930s. Quotations from the Bible are used in 3,000 places as shown by Professor Naseeb Shaheen, and use 14 different translations. In a few places the playwright has made their own translation from the Book of Genesis using the original Hebrew. In addition, there are many other church and other religious references. For example, in 1999 in his study of *Julius Caesar*, Professor Steve Sohmer argues that the playwright "set out to interrogate the truth of the Gospels" , and asks the questions "How can a man become a god? Are his gospels reliable? can his priests (and writers) be trusted)? . Similarly in 1988 Linda Hoff showed that *Hamlet* is entirely a religious allegory. Others have researched particular pieces of the allegory, for instance *King Lear*, *Antony* and *Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Henry VIII* and others all include detailed Apocalypse allegories, according to the study by Peter Milward.

5. CREATING A NEW WAY OF PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE

Penetrating beneath the surface; An allegorical, metatheatrical theatre, requiring audiences to look beneath the surface is rarely found today, although some like Kantor have come close. Modern theatre reviews usually describe how a play was performed and

how the actors executed it---that is they treat it as if it were a slice of life. They do not usually inquire into what the play text *means*, or what the author was trying to communicate. This is partly because the plays now tend to be performed with full scenery, in a realistic style, so that audiences are not encouraged to maintain sufficient critical distance necessary to think about the meaning. This problem is worsened in our post-modern world where audience members are increasingly “pancake people” (as playwright Richard Foreman calls them), who are unable to penetrate the layers of depth and meaning below that surface. The result is that most audiences’ take away from Shakespeare’s plays is that they are boring—and why 98% of people who go to the theatre do not go to see Shakespeare. This has misled a generation of directors to try and make them more exciting and compete against the movies by adding in zombies, sports cars, tap-dancing, strippers and loud pop music or alternatively creating ‘high concept’ productions transposed to improbable settings such as the North Pole. We will not be doing that.

Production Values: My hope is to create a style of production that once more creates an alienating effect and makes people see the play in a new way and inquire into what it *means*. We will do that by drawing on the conventions of the ‘Poor Theatre’ which makes little use of scenery, lighting or set design and focuses on the relation between the actor and the audience. We will also use the conventions of Brecht, Kantor, modern experimental theatre, as well as other conventions from video and advertising. We will borrow any technique that enables the audience to engage in multi-tasking, and utilize multiple strands of communications simultaneously in the construction of meaning. We will make the play *problematic* and provide the cues and communication strands that lead the audience to decipher it---just like the State Decipherers who sat in the theatres trying to decipher the plays in Jacobean London. The performance on stage, the hangings in the room, the messages outside, the billboards, the brochures, the advertising, all will be integrated and present the play as an object to be decoded---exploiting the popular conventions reflected in, say, the *Da Vinci Code*.

Acting: The style of acting changes the sorts of meanings that the audience derives from the play. In this experimental production the actors will not use the conventions of realism but will be more like the puppets of the Elizabethan stage. They will have more in common with Edward Gordon Craig’s idea (in 1908) of the actor who should not interpret the character emotionally but who simply presented the underlying figure on stage. The surface characters are not real people and do not exist outside the literary work—which is especially easy to see in MND because the surface characters are so fantastic, and clearly metaphors.

This production will also require a different use of voice. The focus is not on placing emphasis on an upbeat at the end of the line and reciting the poetry in a way that is beautiful. Sir John Harington talked about this in the introduction to *Orlando Furioso* (1591) describing some who will be seduced by the surface beauty of a piece of verse. But those of stronger stomachs, he says, will actually struggle with what it means, and will solve the allegorical figure that lies beneath. So in this production the guiding principle is that verse will be spoken to show what the play actually *means*.

Meaning: In this new approach actors will not primarily play the surface character, but rather will perform the underlying allegorical identity. I want to break open the surface skin of the play and look inside its body very, very deeply and publicly. In a post-modern culture where inter-textuality has been almost extinguished, resulting in a superficial narrative interpretation, the most radical thing one can do is bring back all the complexity that has been wiped out and in particular to foreground and highlight the deepest level of the allegory and the remarkable message that the Author conveys.

March 2007

John Hudson
The Shakespeare Institute