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0521852137 - Pronouncing Shakespeare: The Globe Experiment

David Crystal

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Pronouncing Shakespeare: The Globe Experiment

How did Shakespeare's plays sound when they were originally performed? How can we know, and could the original pronunciation ever be recreated? For three days in June 2004 Shakespeare's Globe presented their production of *Romeo and Juliet* in original, Shakespearian pronunciation. This book tells the story of how it happened . . .

In an unusual blend of autobiography, narrative, and academic content, reflecting the unique nature of the experience, David Crystal recounts the first attempt in over fifty years to mount a full-length Shakespeare play in original pronunciation. The story begins by introducing the Globe theatre and its approach to 'original practices', which had dealt with all aspects of Elizabethan stagecraft – except pronunciation. It traces the way the idea developed, from the initial proposal in 2003 through planning and rehearsals to the full-scale production in 2004. A large section is devoted to the nature of the Early Modern English sound system and the evidence for it. Other major sections include reports of how the actors coped with the task of learning the pronunciation, how it affected their performances, and how the audiences reacted.

DAVID CRYSTAL is one of the world's foremost authorities on language. He is author of the hugely successful *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (1987; second edition 1997), *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (1995; second edition 2003), and *English as a Global Language* (1997; second edition 2003). An internationally renowned writer, journal editor, lecturer, and broadcaster, he received an OBE in 1995 for his services to the study and teaching of the English language. His previous work on Shakespeare includes two books written with his actor son, Ben, *Shakespeare's Words* (2002) and *The Shakespeare Miscellany* (2005).

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To all at Shakespeare's Globe

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PREFACE

This has been a curious book to write – an unusual blend of biography, narrative, and academic content. It reflects the unusual nature of the experience. It cannot be often that academic linguists find themselves so intimately involved in the theatre world, or for theatre practitioners to be so heavily involved with historical linguistics. But the integration of the two domains is exciting, in whichever direction one travels.

The person who made this journey first, in living memory, was John Barton, who approached it from the opposite direction. If this book were being dedicated to any one person, it would have to be him, for his production of a Shakespeare play in Elizabethan pronunciation took place in 1952, when I was eleven and had yet to see my first Shakespeare play (Paul Robeson's *Othello*, seven years later – in which, incidentally, Sam Wanamaker played Iago).

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When I met Barton, while preparing this book, his first words to me were: ‘You are a lucky fellow.’ I knew it. In my non-linguistic life I have had a lifetime amateur or semi-professional relationship with the theatre. I have acted in several repertory companies, as has my wife, directed a few times, and toured my own shows. We have a son who became a professional actor. For years we have spent an annual holiday in Stratford. So it is easy to imagine that, for me, there could be no more entrancing world outside linguistic walls than this one; and to be involved in it, for a few months, was fortune indeed.

It was, in many ways, the project of a lifetime – a real voyage of exploration, for all concerned. All praise to the Globe, I say, for committing themselves to it. And my thanks to the prime movers there, for asking me to be part of it.

The book had to be written quickly, while the performances were fresh in my mind – and in the minds of those who participated. I am most grateful to everyone at the theatre for their help in making all the arrangements which enabled me to be in the right

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PREFACE

place at the right time, and to talk to everyone involved, both directly and virtually.

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Holyhead, July 2004

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PROLOGUE

Tim Carroll

Almost everything about this project was last minute. The decision to go ahead, all decisions about *how* to go ahead, even the appointment of a dialect coach – they all happened long after they should have done, if we were to do the thing properly. The reasons for this are boringly easy to imagine (money, scheduling problems, my own lack of organization); what is not so easy to explain is why it ended up working so well.

Over the last few years that I have worked at the Globe, I have spent a lot of time thinking about the nature of Shakespeare's language. I have always been very interested in what, if anything, Shakespeare's use of verse implies about the way the plays should be spoken. In particular, I have often noticed that an actor can create quite a pleasing effect by picking out those phrases (not so rare) which are still in use today

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and speaking them in as modern and ‘street’ a way as possible – ‘What do you mean?’ ‘How do I look?’. I have often felt that this short-term success came at a long-term cost: that it is a bit like performing a play in French, except that every time you come across a word like *association* that is the same as the English word, you pronounce it in English. This might help understanding fractionally, but it would destroy any chance of our believing we are listening to a language that anyone ever spoke. I have long felt that a strict attention to the metre might well create a language that, even if it took a little getting used to, would sound unified, and therefore more lifelike.

The three performances of *Romeo and Juliet* in original pronunciation gave me a glimpse of that longed-for event. Imperfect as it was, it was nonetheless possible to hear that real people were talking to each other. To be sure, some previously well-known words were less familiar, but in that they were in the same boat as the characters in their original-practice costumes: we might not recognize them, we might not understand or even like them, but we can see that they belong together, that they

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PROLOGUE

come from one world. Out here, in the yard, in the galleries, in the chimney of Tate Modern – all around us – is another world. And what an extraordinary place it is where these two worlds can meet.

Not everything about this project was last minute. One element that pre-dated this summer was my desire to hear a Shakespeare play sound as it might have done 400 years ago. That desire has been with me for a long time, and for its realization I am eternally grateful to Mark Rylance, who gave the project the green light; to Sid Charlton, Rowan Walker-Brown, Debs Callan, and everyone in the Theatre and Education Departments who worked to make it happen; to Tom Cornford for doing much of the heavy lifting; to Charmian Hoare for her wonderfully patient and skilful work with the actors; and of course to the author of this book. What the following account will not tell you, but you will easily work out for yourself, is that the main reason this project did not end up in disaster is David Crystal. Had he done as many of us would have done, and brought an air of arrogant omniscience to the rehearsal room, the whole thing could

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have been scuppered from the start. But instead, from the very beginning, he insisted on being clear about what he knew and what he didn't. In so doing he set an example of humble enquiry that liberated the rest of us. Suddenly we were reminded of what it is so easy to forget: that the heart of the enterprise is not display but discovery.