Introduction: the purpose of playing

In calling the school he founded in 1619, built and endowed with the money he had partly earned from acting, the College of God's Gift, Edward Alleyn recognized that talent on the stage is not entirely a matter of conscious human disposition, as is also the case in any of the arts. One cannot become a good actor simply by wanting to be one. We still speak of a gift for music, without which the most advanced and meticulous technical skill will not produce an outstanding player or composer. That human gifts for one accomplishment or another came from God was widely recognized in Shakespeare's time; even Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing* modestly defers to his creator the credit for his superior deductive powers. Alleyn's establishment was not to be a school for the arts or a dramatic academy – and the lack, largely speaking, of such institutions in England before the later seventeenth century will form one theme of this book – but an academic school for middle-class boys, in the tradition of such charitable foundations from the early Tudor period onwards, to produce, eventually, the future lawyers, clergymen, and civil servants the nation required. God's gift to Alleyn was not to be rewarded by fostering similar gifts in others, save as a part of his professional life as an active player in one of the leading theatre companies, and his consequent influence on his junior colleagues and apprentices, which was largely over by 1600. The player's role as an instructor will provide a second major theme of the study that follows.

In becoming the benefactor of a school perhaps Edward Alleyn, like many modern donors to educational institutions, was recognizing his own lack of an advantageous start in life, in terms of social rank and opportunities, at least. Elizabethan England was, of course, quite different from modern Western societies in the ways in which its educational systems worked and in how they served social and cultural structures. Modern measures that correlate the formal educational experience within populations to economic attainment and to social and political development will not fit the conditions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. University

education in Shakespeare's day, for example, was restricted to a very small percentage of the population, entirely male, determined largely by rank and social expectations. University education was the very rare exception among contemporary actors – the actor-playwright Thomas Heywood spent some years at Cambridge, without graduating, and a number of other playwrights either were university graduates or had experience as students – but all players would have experienced at least a few years of schooling, of one kind or another. It is frequently assumed that the boy William Shakespeare attended Stratford Grammar School (although no contemporary document confirms his attendance), where he would have learnt to read and compose in Latin; although we cannot be certain about his schooling it is likely that he first acquired his evident familiarity with classical authors in his teenage years, rather than later. Ben Jonson certainly attended Westminster School, where he was taught by William Camden, and he may have been admitted to Cambridge, although he did not attend for long, while Cave Underhill, a leading comic actor after the Restoration, was a pupil at the famous Merchant Taylors' School in London before the civil wars. At the very least even the youngest actors had to be literate, in order to read the scripts they had to learn. Good memory – a gift of God commented on by several contemporary educational theorists – was, and is, a secondary requirement of any successful actor.

Gifts in the arts frequently run in families. The Bachs and the Mozarts are the eminent musical examples, in whom nature and nurture combined to produce eminence over several generations. The stimulus provided by early exposure to sophisticated music-making by one's parents or other close relations gives a notable edge to any latent talent. A child's interest in imitating adult behaviour not infrequently leads on to an artistic career in the same area as that of the parents. In modern theatrical families – the Redgraves, or the Cusacks, for example – women and men are equally distinguished; in the early English theatre, framed by inherited cultural conventions, there was no outlet for female talent in performance, although in contemporary continental Europe families of performers formed a notable part of theatrical organization, and women became leading players and managers. While the genetic circumstances were the same, then – individual gifts and aptitudes were as likely to be inherited from a mother as from a father – in Shakespeare's theatre, at least in the matter of performing on the stage, it is the paternal line only which can be observed. Richard Burbage, Shakespeare's leading colleague for twenty years or so, was the son of James Burbage, an actor, manager, and prominent figure in the theatre from the 1560s onwards. Many sons of actors became actors themselves, but

daughters also frequently married other actors, and widows of actors remarried to yet other actors, so that lines of descent and family relationships within the profession were often complex and intricate. Other leading figures of the theatre, however, had no family background or particular early training to do with the stage. Richard Tarlton, the famous Elizabethan clown, was not born into the theatre and did not, so far as we know, pass on his talents to any descendants. The genius of William Shakespeare, player as well as playwright, simply arose and was eclipsed in one generation, although, like Alleyn, Shakespeare in later life might not have encouraged younger people to take his own career as a pattern. His colleague John Heminges, for example, although he trained many young men for the theatre, sent his own son to Oxford.

Most actors never achieved the financial success in the theatre which gave them the choice of retirement, while others evidently loved the stage too much to leave it: Shakespeare's colleague John Lowin, a prominent and well-rewarded performer, continued acting until late in life, his career stopped by political change rather than his own free choice. The pleasure of continuing to do what one was expert at doing, and which gave pleasure to others, must have sustained many actors less eminent than Lowin. A passion for the creative act of performance lies at the centre of the actor's art. Talent, will, and technical refinement – the last the part of acting that can be trained and improved – were all required of Shakespearean players. The particular configurations and proportions of those elements must have varied, as they still vary. If talent was in God's hands, the will and the acquisition of experience might have found a number of channels to fulfilment.

In the course of a written legal suit in the mid 1660s the minor actor William Hall claimed that he had 'served an apprenticeship in the art of stage playing'; a similar phrase, the art of a stage player, is used by the actor William Trigge in 1631 to explain what he was to learn from his master John Heminges, veteran member of the King's company, and the phrase was used proudly by a group of players in 1597 who had, they claimed, 'of long time used and professed the art of stage playing'.[1] Apprenticeship was a legally recognized system of training in any skilled occupation, and its regulation had been established in the early Elizabethan period by the Statute of Artificers of 1563. In London it was overseen generally by the city authorities, and particularly by the individual companies of trades and occupations which controlled much of the commerce of the city, from the small-scale to the large. Yet the word 'apprenticeship' could also mean, as it still may, simply a period of training, applied more loosely than the

statutory requirements of formal apprenticeship stipulated by law. Of the two men named above we know that Trigge was certainly legally apprenticed, although as a grocer rather than a player, since Heminges was a freeman of the Grocers' Company, one of the ancient and rich 'great companies' of the City of London. Hall, of whom we know less, may simply have meant in his statement that he had spent some time as a minor player on modest wages with an acting troupe willing to give him a try-out season or two. Legally binding apprenticeships, on the other hand, were usually served for terms of seven years upwards, in adolescence and early manhood, with the ten years between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four representing the central band of experience for the majority of apprenticeships.

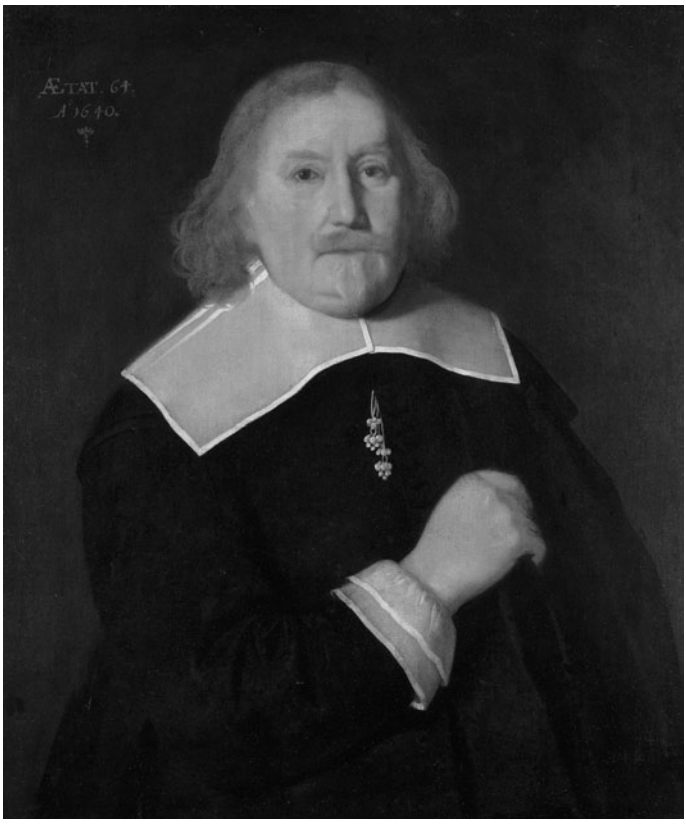
In the English theatre before the civil wars and the Restoration, then, when boy actors played female roles on the stage, apprenticeship was a convenient system for attaching suitably talented boys to a company. John Heminges, Trigge's master, was a member of the King's men, the leading acting company for nearly forty years, and William Trigge served his apprenticeship by playing a variety of female characters in that company's plays during the 1620s. We do not know that Hall followed a similar route, and it is clear enough that not all players had begun as boys or teenagers, as it is also clear that not all boys who apprenticed continued to perform as adult actors. One might, therefore, have trained for the stage without continuing a lifelong career in the theatre, and one might have entered the profession without having begun as a boy player, and perhaps without having 'apprenticed' in any sense of that word. If a boy apprentice had demonstrated talent early, and continued to develop it, as an adult he probably had a better chance of finding a permanent place in an acting troupe than did someone entirely unconnected with the company, although he still would have had to buy his position as a sharer, committing himself to the investment of production capital which the leading players of a troupe jointly managed, sharing the dividends from what we now call the box office. We do not know if those in charge of the management of acting troupes did any active scouting, in the fashion of modern professional sports teams, but rising stars occasionally moved from one troupe to another, and some kind of negotiation is likely to have prefaced such transfers.

What made a good actor, and what kinds of qualities might players charged with recruiting new colleagues have been looking for? As in the modern theatre, actors would have had a variety of individual physical and vocal characteristics, with the common requirements of strong and clear oral delivery and a suitable stage presence: an ability to command an audience's attention in a manner suited to character and the situation within a given

scene. What makes a 'well graced actor' – Shakespeare's phrase – is rather mysterious, but actors and directors know it when they see it and hear it, as do audiences. Attempts to define the qualities that distinguish the good player from the merely competent tend to sound vague. Contemporary gestures in this direction include the following passage by Thomas Heywood, like Shakespeare an actor, a sharer in an acting troupe, and a playwright:

> Actors should be men picked out personable, according to the parts they present; they should be rather scholars, that though they cannot speak well, know how to speak, or else to have that volubility that they can speak well, though they understand not what, and so both imperfections may by instructions be helped and amended; but where a good tongue and a good conceit both fail, there can never be good actor. (*An Apology for Actors* [London, 1612], E3^{r} [modernized])

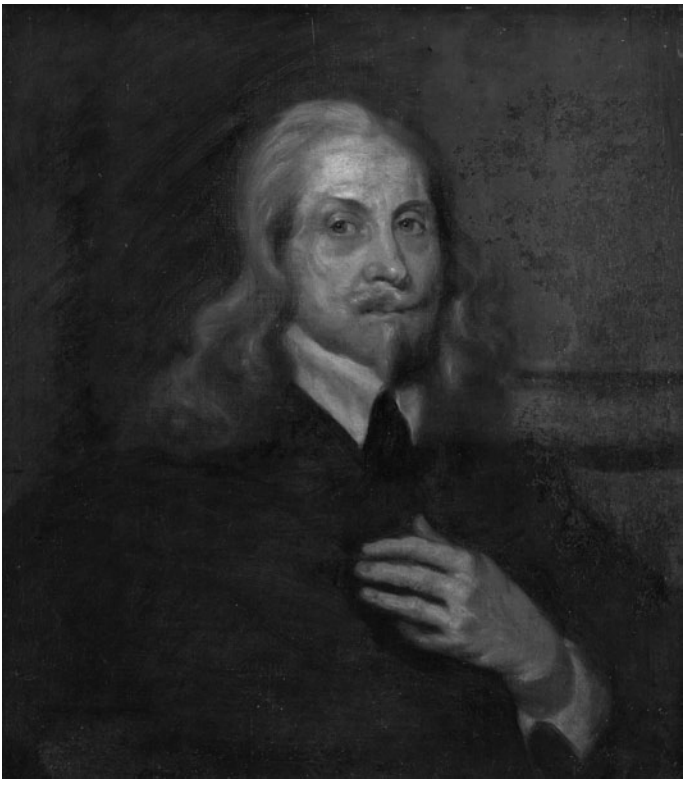
The voice and the judgement can be improved by training, in Heywood's opinion, but there should be enough to work with, and both a good tongue and a good conceit (or intelligence, as we would say) would be an excellent combination. As to the 'personable' qualities of the performer, Heywood hints at the individuality of appearance and behaviour that makes any good player interesting. Although it may sound as if he is suggesting careful auditioning to suit the parts in a given play, his own practice – that of a member of a repertory company with a permanent core of performers – cannot have bent too far in that direction; new plays would have been cast from the company strength, and Heywood's own voice, face, and physique, however he may have appeared (no representation of him survives), would have been lent to a variety of differing parts over the course of his career. The truly useful actor would bring range and variability, as aspects of his talent, to the troupe he served. Burbage, who is likely to have played the very different roles of King Lear and Volpone at roughly the same age, no doubt had a range of skill at least the equal of that of Alleyn, of whom Thomas Heywood wrote that he was 'Proteus for shapes, and Roscius for a tongue, / So could he speak, so vary'.[2] The surviving head-and-shoulders portrait supposed to be of Burbage does not tell us a great deal about his person, and one cannot read much from the face; perhaps a neutral expression is an asset for Protean changeability in performance. Later, better, and more reliable half-length portraits of the leading actors John Lowin, at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Figure 1), and of Richard Perkins, at the Dulwich Picture Gallery (Figure 2), give a far clearer sense of innate character, and of physique: Lowin large, bluff, even coarse, where Perkins is slim and long-faced, sensitive and melancholic.[3] Neither of the portraits seems to show its



1 Portrait of John Lowin, 1640. Anonymous British artist, oil on canvas

subject costumed for stage roles, although Lowin *may* be dressed and posed as if he were delivering a prologue: a black cloak was supposedly the traditional dress of the player addressing an audience before the performance proper, and Lowin's right hand holds his hat, removed in deference to the observers, as in a playhouse when the performer acknowledges the presence of the audience.

The art of stage playing as the basis for an extended and busy professional career was a relatively recent option when Alleyn had his great artistic and financial success. Although since the later Middle Ages smaller troupes of players had made their living from a combination of private patronage – providing entertainment for the households of great lords and monarchs, and performing commissions for special events – and public performances,



2 Portrait of Richard Perkins, late 1640s. School of Gerard Soest, oil on canvas

collecting what they could from audiences at occasional performances at improvised playing places in town halls, inns, or at fairs, the late sixteenth-century metropolitan theatre with its large permanent playhouses and varied daily repertory was the result of at least fifty years of continuing enterprise, in which the elder Burbage, James, was a leading figure.[4] The theatre of late Elizabethan London was considerably changed from that operating at the start of the Queen's reign: its playing companies were larger, and its productivity, in terms of shows available to audiences, was enormously increased. By 1600 the opportunities available to anyone naturally gifted in the art of acting were far wider than they had been a hundred years before. How many mute, inglorious Alleyns there may have been in earlier centuries is impossible to calculate, but by the later half of the sixteenth century not only did dramatic writing change radically, to the actors' great advantage, but the entire organization of public performance

was also thoroughly changed. Theatre was a central cultural phenomenon of late Elizabethan London, with an international reputation, and the consciousness of everyone involved in its production or consumption was raised to new levels. Even actors on the fringes of the profession, or away from the hub of London, working in provincial and touring troupes, must have thought rather differently about their art by the time the seventeenth century began.

Considered in comparison with such an increase in standing and self-regard, the total membership of the profession probably did not expand at the same rate. The population of actors in London in the first decades of the seventeenth century must have stood between a hundred and fifty and two hundred people, calculating that estimate on the basis of principal actors or sharers in licensed troupes, minor or junior actors (hired men), and boys. In addition to this number there were more actors spread across the country as a whole as members of touring or local groups, and although the size of such companies may have been smaller than those of their metropolitan colleagues, the total number of people involved could easily have matched the London figures, and probably exceeded them. In addition English actors formed troupes in continental Europe, some of them spending extended careers there. Perhaps around five hundred people continuously involved in acting in the English professional theatre before the civil wars is not an exaggerated estimate. Equally, it is apparent from sixteenth-century records from across the country that professional players were numerous a century earlier; we know less detail about their activities and their identities, but that there were a good many of them is clear from the material collected by the Records of Early English Drama project, and is also suggested by early Elizabethan anti-theatrical polemical complaints about the proliferation in the performing and viewing of plays. The profession of playing as it was practised by Richard Burbage and Edward Alleyn was based on the work of preceding generations of actors.

It seems reasonable to think of an established community of theatre people in London by the year 1600, most of whom knew or knew of many of the others, even outside their immediate colleagues in any given company. Letters to Edward Alleyn from his wife while he was on tour, for example, give news not only of the London household, but also of the ups and downs of professional colleagues.[5] Gossip is one leading off stage activity of actors and their circle. Although daily performance combined with frequent learning and rehearsal of new plays for an ever-changing repertory would have left most actors with little free time, I think that when chance afforded the opportunity they would have gone to see other actors at other playhouses,

with a critical eye for both strengths and weaknesses: actors today remain both fiercely competitive and communally supportive. Actors who were also playwrights, Shakespeare and Heywood, notably, seem to have been well aware of the plays performed by companies other than those to which they belonged, and alluded to them in their own writing. Although theatre troupes of Shakespeare's time were nominally permanent in their membership – Shakespeare's own troupe notably so – there was in fact a fair amount of fluidity, particularly available to talented actors, and one's rival today might be one's partner tomorrow. Changes in the patronage of troupes, or crises over financing and management, gave rise to periodic rearrangements of personnel. Sickness, death, and retirement at one end of professional careers, and particular brilliance and appeal to audiences at the other, meant that individually and collectively actors had an eye to the state of the profession, and to where their own skills and those of their colleagues might appear to the best advantage.

The community of the professional theatre was supported by a variety of communities of theatre-goers, and other enthusiasts of the theatre. There are many indications of a vigorous amateur theatre during Shakespeare's lifetime, not only within the pedagogical and festive contexts of school and university drama but also in other communities, certainly including, for example, apprentices, sailors, lawyers, and aristocratic families. The apprentice Ralph in Beaumont's satirical theatre comedy *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, even before his adventitious starring role as grocer errant (possibly a theatrical in-joke aimed at the player-grocer John Heminges, and his string of apprentices) was to have played Hieronimo with a shoemaker for a wager, an acting contest based on one of Alleyn's most famous stage roles. Shakespeare's theatre comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* includes a man who claims knowledge of how to play 'Ercles' vein, a tyrant's vein', as well as the quieter tones of a lover. Falstaff, preparing to play the role of one of his actor colleagues, King Henry IV, promises to do it in 'King Cambyses' vein', the style of a generation before Shakespeare.[6] Amateurs in the French sense, lovers of the theatre theatrical, were particularly taken by the style of Marlowe and his imitators during the late 1580s and early 1590s, and by the showy histrionics it encouraged: Pistol, in Shakespeare's *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*, adopts a mangled extravagance in vocabulary, syntax, and gesture, full of half-remembered quotation, and originally, perhaps, some imitation of Edward Alleyn's stride and commanding posture.

Schoolboy players and gentleman amateurs were still welcome at court in Queen Elizabeth's reign, and all pre-Restoration royal visits to Oxford and Cambridge featured plays presented to the monarch by student performers.

All such groups would have disdained playing for money at a playhouse, but their standards, at the best, were quite high. The play so admired by Sir Philip Sidney, *Gorboduc*, was staged as an amateur show, for example. Boy players might well step over the amateur boundary when they were organized into troupes giving regular performances for paying audiences of plays written by professional playwrights: the singing boys of the choirs of St Paul's Cathedral and of the Chapel Royal were so professionalized, one might say, at various times between the 1570s and the first decade of the seventeenth century, and the practice of 'boy' or 'children's' playing was revived thereafter in various forms. Famously, in the Folio text of *Hamlet* (1623) the 'children' are spoken of as serious rivals to the adult actors. In what sense such companies were regarded as training grounds or 'nurseries' of acting talent, to use a contemporary term, is a matter examined at more length in what follows, but they generally do not seem to have had a close relationship with the adult troupes, who recruited their own boys, the specialists in female parts within a predominantly adult troupe, largely independently. A company of boys of roughly the same age performing in such a play as Marston's *Antonio and Mellida*, for example, as they did, cannot have had the same range of vocal production, of differentiated physique, as an audience would have experienced at similar plays performed by adult troupes.

Enthusiasm for the theatre during the years considered in this book no doubt produced many conversations and discussions about the art of acting, carried on in taverns, at street corners, and in domestic groups. Actors themselves, as I have suggested, are likely to have discussed their common work with colleagues and friends. In Shakespeare's day there was no equivalent of the modern newspaper reviewer, so that not only do we today lack anything resembling a contemporary critique of a performance but Tudor and Stuart theatre-goers did not experience any common public discourse about theatre, with the exception of what was carried on in plays themselves, and in the corresponding printed texts which sometimes followed their performance. Although there would have been a lively tradition of talk about plays and players, then, our impression today, based on surviving texts, is that contemporary dramatists were the chief critics and theorists of the arts of theatre, performance included. A range of playgoers certainly recorded their presence, at the very least, at performances of various kinds, and their testimony is usefully collected by Andrew Gurr in the book *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*. Detailed comment of a kind which illuminates performance is rare, however, so that it is particularly impressive to read the account of Henry Jackson, from Oxford in 1610, of