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Peter Holland

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

Measuring performance

Mention statistics and measurement in an analysis of Shakespearean performance and most people will wonder what the connection is. My concern in this chapter is not simply to set out some of the apparently marginal aspects of the experience of Shakespeare plays in production but to try to use them to demonstrate some different determinants on audience experience and thereby indicate the theoretical position from which my analysis of individual productions is written.

Theatre performance, a system of such immense complexity that most theory has collapsed in the face of it, is a burgeoning field of academic study, for Shakespeare and beyond, yet it is rarely perceived as an area of precise measurement. However, within the practice of theatre, for theatre practitioners and playgoers alike, precise measurement figures far more substantially and visibly. By considering those calculations, some of the systems of theatre practice can be uncovered.

In the programme for the production of *Julius Caesar* by Peter Hall at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1995, the reader was informed that 'The performance is approximately 2¼ hours in length.' Such gestures towards precision have both external and internal implications. The length of a performance has significant consequences for an audience. Perhaps in Stratford the announcement of the brevity and rapidity of this *Julius Caesar* served primarily only to reassure audiences that they would be out of the theatre long before the pubs closed. But in London, the length of a performance has distinctly different resonances. Anyone attending a long performance at the Barbican – Adrian Noble's *Hamlet* with Kenneth Branagh, for instance, in 1992 – is used to seeing various members of the audience leave towards 11 p.m., not because they dislike the production but in order not to miss the last train home.

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[More information](#)

The example may seem trivial but the experience of performance and the playgoer's ability to comprehend the implications of production are affected so that the measurement of a performance's length has significance for the receptivity and pleasure of an audience. Assumptions about the audience's ability to assimilate meaning may be contradicted by such external factors. In an important passage in *The Tragic Muse*, Henry James has Gabriel Nash express something of the effects of the temporal constrictions of performance in his analysis of 'the essentially brutal nature of the modern audience':

[The dramatist] has to make the basest concessions. One of his principal canons is that he must enable his spectators to catch the suburban trains, which stop at 11.30. What would you think of any other artist – the painter or the novelist – whose governing forces should be . . . the suburban trains? ¹

The effect of length on audience perception is something of which theatre companies are acutely aware. British theatre companies know well that there are economic implications in performance length: a long performance may mean that the stage crew needs to be paid overtime, with a consequentially severe effect on a company's finances, the profitability of a production or even on the company's willingness to mount the production at all. The measurement of length can, then, be a powerful index both of response and of economic function.

In other cultural circumstances the effect of performance length on ticket-sales may be acute. In Moscow in 1994, I was made aware of the radically different position theatre now occupied in the post-Soviet state. Audience attendances were down, partly, I was told, because the real theatre was now to be found on television, in the daily experience of the political theatre of social upheaval. But long performances were especially at risk. The first question people asked at the box-office was no longer 'What is the performance about?' but 'What time does it finish?', a concern driven by the fact that, in a largely non-car-owning society, audiences were reliant on public transport, and that, in the aftermath of the new rule by gangsterism, travelling home late at night was dangerous. Personal safety in London is also seen as a major contributory factor in the reluctance of women to attend theatres on their own, making the gender composition of audiences a direct

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Measuring performance*

3

consequence of performance length. For a play like *The Taming of the Shrew* such changes in audience make-up may be crucial to the interaction of production and spectators.

But the programme for Hall's *Caesar* also informed audiences that the play 'will be played without interval', and signs in the foyer each night reinforced the information. In this it followed Terry Hands' 1987 production, also for the RSC. The information matters, not only for the theatre's bar-sales, an important source of company income, but also for the audience's comfort: such a long single span would never be allowed on Broadway where the difficulties of middle-aged men with prostate problems sitting so long are taken seriously. As Tom Stoppard found shortly before the Broadway opening of *Travesties*, his play had to be cut to accommodate the demands of "Broadway Bladder" (a term . . . which refers to the alleged need of a Broadway audience to urinate every 75 minutes).²

Intervals are a feature of performance that await proper investigation. They constitute one of theatre's sharpest means of defining interpretation, controlling articulation. For some plays the choice is ready-made: I have never seen a production of *The Winter's Tale* that has not placed the interval immediately before the speech of Time as Chorus, as natural a break as one could wish for. But in *Troilus and Cressida*, for instance, the modern convention of placing the interval as the lovers head off to bed both defines the shaping of the play, framing its two movements with Pandarus's two moments of direct audience-address, and mutes the dramatic sharpness of Calchas's entry to demand the exchange of Cressida viciously hard on the heels of the lovers' one night of love. Other productions take intervals in mid-scene: Trevor Nunn's 1991 *Measure for Measure*, for instance, stopped halfway through 3.1, transposing some lines from later in the scene to provide a conveniently emphatic close; John Caird's *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1992 halted after 3.6.19, at the end of Octavius's description of Antony, Cleopatra and their children in the marketplace, an event that was seen as well as described. Sometimes intervals are taken disproportionately late: productions of *King Lear* often go through to the blinding of Gloucester before the interval.

The theatrical articulation accomplished by this choice of the placing of the interval can be acute but it can also be determined by factors other than directorial interpretation of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

performance structure. The RSC's previous production of *Julius Caesar* in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, directed by Stephen Pimlott in 1991, held back the interval until after 4.1, the scene in which the triumvirs mark names for execution. Only when the action of the play left Rome did Pimlott allow a break, so that the interval was as much geographic as structural. But the massive set of columns and a doorway, designed by Tobias Hoheisel, needed to be struck by the stage crew for the remainder of the performance; on some nights the interval lasted forty minutes, longer than the second half of the performance which usually ran for only thirty-five minutes. Such intervals, common enough in the opera house, are unknown in British theatres and audiences were confused and unsettled both by the interval length and by the performance's manifest imbalance of its parts.

For *Julius Caesar*, Hall – and Hands before him – identified the sweep of the play as one that denies or at least resists a performance's articulation by the interposition of an interval, choosing instead to follow Elizabethan practice and allow the play its single arch. Our academic understanding of Shakespearean dramatic structures, helped by Emrys Jones's innovative *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1971), now recognises the predisposition of Shakespearean tragedy towards a central plateau, a long sequence of unbreakable action across the centre of the play. Theatre directors, attempting to accommodate performances to companies' and audiences' expectations of intervals, had long understood the problem. But *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* are the only plays permitted to articulate their construction without the artificial structuring device on audience perception that an interval constitutes.

The length of Hall's *Caesar* was a direct consequence of Hall's attitude to pace. Actors were driven by the director towards an unusually rapid delivery. The impetus was partly derived from Hall's entirely reasonable perception of the play's rapidity, the delivery matching and illuminating the pace of the dramatic action. But it was also a consequence of Hall's belief in the necessity of Elizabethan verse being spoken at speed. Hall has become especially concerned with a metronomic approach to Shakespearean verse, counting out five stresses for each verse-line in rehearsal and demanding a pause at the end of the line, whatever the syntax may be doing. Hugh Quarshie, who played Mark Antony in Hall's *Caesar*, has dubbed the approach 'iambic funda-

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Peter Holland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Measuring performance*

5

mentalism' and complained that it was deeply inhibiting for actors, less the discovery of meaning in the rhythm of the verse than a constriction on that discovery, a denial of the provocative tensions between verse rhythm and syntactical meaning in Shakespearean language.³ Its inhibition on the actors' freedom was also an inhibition on audience comprehension. I was painfully aware, on the first occasion on which I saw the production in 1995, that actors seemed to be speaking with one eye on the clock, determined to bring the performance in on time.

Chekhov complained to his wife Olga Knipper about Stanislavsky's production of *The Cherry Orchard*: some relatives had reported that in the last act Stanislavsky 'drags things out most painfully. This is really dreadful! An act which ought to last for a maximum of twelve minutes – you're dragging it out for forty. The only thing I can say is that Stanislavsky has ruined my play.'⁴ Chekhov saw that speed is meaning, that the act played as fast as he intended denied the fatalist tragedy that Stanislavsky's approach was designed to reveal. But in the equally extreme case of Hall's *Caesar*, speed denied meaning, preventing the audience following the drama's and the production's argument. It was striking that, when I saw the production again in January 1996, it took ten minutes longer, the actors now taking control and finding some of the detailing in the language that they had previously had to refuse themselves.

The timing of the performance offered by the programme was deliberately phrased as 'approximately 2¼ hours in length'. Such measurements are necessarily imprecise but the differences can be highly significant. In a production heavily laden with stage mechanics the running time can change significantly: David Troughton, who played Richard III in Stephen Pimlott's production in Stratford in 1995, proudly announced to a Shakespeare Centre seminar in January 1996 that the previous night's performance had shaved seven minutes off the running time, partly because the machinery had all worked smoothly but also because the actors felt confident to let the performance move more quickly. In any case, the programme's measurement of performance length derives from an estimate made in the later stages of rehearsals, at the point when the copy for the programme needs to reach the printers. Subsequent to that, the production may decide to cut speeches or whole scenes, to eliminate slow-moving

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

effects or to speed up over-portentous delivery. The programme for Pimlott's *Richard III* announced a length of 'approximately 4 hours' but an inserted slip corrected that to 'approximately 3½ hours'.

Performance analysis is inhibited both by the imprecision and the inadequacy of its data. It is not only the exact measurement of a performance that may be lacking but also the range of variation within which a particular performance may be placed. Internal timings may also be highly significant. Jonathan Miller's 1987 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* for the RSC defined the major switch in Katherine's relationship to Petruccio through a long pause in the sun/moon scene (4.6). As Katherine (Fiona Shaw) observed the sun, looking at it through her wedding-ring, she silently meditated on her marriage and analysed the relationship before resolving to accept it and value it. The prompt-book for the production indicates that the stage-managers became intrigued by this pause, timing it each night as they waited for the next lighting cue, as the pause lengthened and lengthened in the course of the run. Like the famous pause in Peter Brook's 1950 *Measure for Measure* before Isabella would kneel to intercede for Angelo's life in the last scene, or the one before the first entry of King Lear in Robert Sturua's 1987 production in Tbilisi, each performance allowed the moment the maximum space the performers believed the audience could or would tolerate. The pause's length becomes an indication of the actor's silent investigation of the action and of the audience's understanding of the import of an event that the production found outside language.

The measurement of the maximum capacity of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford in 1996 is 1,508. I want to use this fact both in relation to the measurement of theatre space and to the measurement of audience size. The three theatres that the Royal Shakespeare Company runs in Stratford – the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the Swan and The Other Place – attract the most particular and peculiar audiences. It may possibly constitute the largest audience for Shakespeare in the world but it certainly constitutes the most heterogeneous. International Shakespeare scholars, the world's theatre experts, regular theatre-goers, local residents and tourists – both English-speaking and those without a word of English in their vocabularies – are to be found there. Brian

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Peter Holland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Measuring performance*

7

Cox, playing King Lear in Deborah Warner's production for the Royal National Theatre, recognised that such diversity extended to London:

Clearly, if you are doing a play by Shakespeare the audience must comprise people who are interested in the plays of Shakespeare . . . but how interested? At the NT there are schoolchildren dragged there unwillingly for the sake of their GCSEs, husbands who would rather be asleep in front of the television, socialites who go because it is the place to be seen, sponsors whose product is patronising the event, tourists there in error. Ian McKellen says that only nice people go to the theatre; they do, but sometimes on automatic pilot.⁵

The rhetoric of the disgruntled actor is not trustworthy as audience research, but there is little hard evidence for the social composition, the age range, nationality or cultural and commercial interests of audiences in Stratford or London. Like all theatre companies, the RSC knows the size of its nightly audiences. It can identify and measure both its percentage capacities and also its percentage of the maximum potential figure for box-office takings, performance by performance. The two measures are significant in their differences: a production may be nearly full but the box-office significantly lower as a percentage of its maximum, a consequence of, for instance, the number of customers paying full price for their seats compared with the number coming on a group booking at a discounted rate, or the number paying a high price for a seat in the stalls compared with the number paying much less for the balcony. A play that appeals more to those unable or unwilling to pay a high price per ticket may be nearly full but the distribution of the audience within the house will be a measure of the nature of the production's or the play's appeal. The two ranges of appeal – play or production – are eloquent distinctions of measurement. Some plays in the repertoire will attract near-capacity audiences irrespective of the quality of the production: Adrian Noble's disappointing 1995 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, trashed by the reviewers, still did 'good business', as the jargon has it, while Trevor Nunn's 1981 production of *All's Well That Ends Well*, starring Peggy Ashcroft, one of the finest Shakespeare productions of the century, often played in Stratford to tiny audiences.

The RSC has come to believe that a particular Shakespeare play will produce a particular size of audience, completely irrespective

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[More information](#)

of the production. As Trevor Nunn, the RSC's sole artistic director from 1968 to 1978, expressed it in 1973, 'We are dedicated to the works of Shakespeare. To put it in a slightly livelier way, Shakespeare is our house dramatist.'⁶ Yet the financial constrictions, consequent on that crucial measurement of 1,508, mean that the repertory for that theatre is far less than the full range even of the Shakespeare canon. We cannot now, given the current state of theatre economics, expect to see large-scale main-house productions of plays like *Timon of Athens*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* or even *All's Well That Ends Well*. Financial measurement precludes them. Shakespeareans might find that disappointing but some further statistics might be a helpful corrective: in the six years covered by the reviews in this book, the RSC produced forty-two productions of twenty-nine different Shakespeare plays, twenty-five of which were seen in at least one production in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (six in the Swan and four in The Other Place – some, of course, in more than one theatre).

None the less particular plays come round for production with surprising frequency. The RSC is on a cycle or perhaps a treadmill which is becoming increasingly arduous, a strain on the demand for invention and originality. While Nunn recognised over twenty years ago that the company must preserve Peter Hall's founding principle, 'that whenever the Company did a play by Shakespeare, they should do it because the play was relevant, because the play made some demand upon our current attention',⁷ he also recognised that 'To present the plays of Shakespeare relevantly, but also to present them (roughly) once every five or six years, is contradictory . . . The difficulty is to avoid novelty but remain fresh.'⁸ What was true in 1973 is all the more emphatically true now: the pressures of the contradiction have only intensified.

The choices of repertory for the RSC are particular. The decisions made for a season derive from the question 'Which Shakespeare plays shall we do this season?', not from the question 'Shall we do a Shakespeare play?'. Any description of the reasons for the choice of a particular play is inevitably tentative but when, in 1993, the RSC mounted a production of *King Lear*, the conditioning factors might reasonably be set out as follows: Adrian Noble had begun an extremely successful collaboration with Robert Stephens two years earlier when Stephens, after a long absence from the English stage, played Falstaff in Noble's produc-

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Peter Holland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Measuring performance*

9

tion of both parts of *Henry IV*, winning awards for Stephens and garnering for him the highest praise as one of the great classical actors of his generation. Noble's first production of *King Lear* in 1982 had been his debut on the main stage and, in spite of the brilliance of Antony Sher as Fool, had not been a success. Recognising that he had found the actor he wanted to play Lear, Noble felt it was time to try the play again. The company's previous production of the play in 1990, directed by Nicholas Hytner and starring John Wood, highly praised by many, was now just far enough in the past to justify another (three years, the minimum gap in the current frequency of return).

The decision to produce *King Lear* in 1993 was then conditioned entirely by theatrical concerns: the nature of the company's repertory, the availability of the right combination of leading actor and director, as well as the marketability of a major tragedy in that season's repertory. There is no socio-political reason here as a primary cause for the production's inception, even if one could certainly disentangle socio-political implications in the production's interpretative decisions, and even if such interpretative decisions might be important to the commitment of director or actor. The Royal Shakespeare Company sees itself as a cultural institution, its decisions primarily aesthetic, its politics submerged. It would not, of course, be wrong to read the production politically but the reasons would not be primary, self-evidently present in the decision to create the performance. Even in those cases where an RSC Shakespeare production does seem to be driven by its interpretative purpose, the production's existence within the RSC's repertory for a given season is unlikely to be a result of the interpretation; its place in the frequency cycle is always likely to be far more important.

This sense of the under-interpreted nature of mainstream British Shakespeare is particularly visible when observed from the outside. Laxmi Chandrashekhar, a lecturer in English in Bangalore, India, commented to me that Indian audiences look forward to British touring productions because

there is always this illusion that a British director understands Shakespeare better than an outsider can . . . Sometimes of course one is slightly disappointed because there is no attempt at any particular interpretation or to make it relevant . . . When a local group does Shakespeare in the local language we always find a justification for doing Shakespeare.⁹

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Peter Holland

Excerpt

[More information](#)

This drive for justification in Indian productions is, as Chandrashekhara recognises, an anxiety about the legacy of colonialism, a need to justify the choice on other than British terms. Relevance to the Indian social and political situation is a primary means of denying the colonial imprimatur. For the RSC, obviously, no such anxieties pertain. Noble's *King Lear* has no need of a justification, least of all one of relevance: it is justified by the very existence of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Hall's criterion of immediacy, the sense that a play should be considered 'as if that morning it had dropped through the letterbox on to the front doormat',¹⁰ seems less efficacious by now. The institution has its own momentum and its own necessities that justify its work in general without ever needing to justify a particular Shakespeare production. In 1974 Trevor Nunn had defined his aims: 'I want an avowed and committed popular theatre. I want a socially concerned theatre. A politically aware theatre.'¹¹ Nunn's choice for the 1972 Stratford season of a cycle of Shakespeare's Roman plays was driven by his belief that the plays seemed to him 'to have the most meaning and the most point and the most relevance'.¹² But such a search for the right response to the demands of relevance has disappeared from the company's practice.

The cyclicity of the process, the inevitability of needing to return to a play and hence of needing to find a new way of doing it, has its consequences. Some of the company's work seems to have forgotten the limited knowledge of the bulk of its audience; it often speaks more directly to those whose theatre-going is within a frame of repeated Shakespeare productions, those for whom the narrative is familiar, the production does not need justification and whose perception of the production is always in relation to other productions and to a knowledge of the text itself. There is a closed circuit of theatrical communication here, something that is not, of course, in itself undesirable but which may function to exclude other parts of the audience.

Even so, marketing, that mysterious part of the theatre industry, can produce surprising effects. David Thacker's *Coriolanus* in 1994, starring Toby Stephens, did reasonably but not remarkably well in the Swan Theatre (capacity 458). Since the opening of the Swan in 1986, the RSC has always had the problem of finding the right London theatre to which to transfer the Swan productions. Apart from experiments in using the Mermaid Theatre and the