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Excerpt

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# I | *Shakespeare and the visual*

Just before Shakespeare's birthday in 1978 the audience in his famous hometown looked at an unusual sight: a setting for *The Taming of the Shrew* that would have seemed proper in sixteenth-century Italy, taken almost directly from Serlio's example of the correct and decorous design for comedy. Spectators at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre had grown used to a nearly bare stage but here was a full illusionist picture, with a false proscenium framing a series of receding columns and arches, a colorful Renaissance view of Padua in perspective, built out of wing pieces and drop flats, with a painted landscape on a backcloth and a classical statue of lovers

I *The Taming of the Shrew* 1978 Stratford. D: Michael Bogdanov. Des: Chris Dyer.  
L: Chris Ellis. P: Thomas F. Holte. The opening set, a witty parody of Serlio.



I

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upstage center (illus. 1). This did not look like the usual work of Chris Dyer, nor the likely setting for a production by Michael Bogdanov, *enfant terrible* of British theatre; this looked, in fact, unlike anything seen at Stratford in the past quarter century.

But not for long. Before the play started, a drunk appeared in the audience in hot argument with a female attendant over the location of his seat. Shouting “I’m not having any bloody woman telling me what to do,” he made his weaving way on to the stage, where he proceeded to attack the beautiful, proper set. He knocked over the columns, tipped over the baskets of fruit, tore down the front curtains, pulled apart the statue, as stagehands ran back and forth trying to stop him, simultaneously taking away the pieces he had demolished. This, it is fair to say, was a true deconstructive act. A flat fell on the drunk but he remained unscathed, its cutout window allowing him grace; another flat repeated the moment; yet still an occasional audience member failed to get the visual joke and went on the stage to help the crew

2 *The Taming of the Shrew* 1978 Stratford. P: Thomas F. Holte. The set after demolition: a metal scaffolding in front of the bare walls of the theatre. Here Kate and Petruchio (Paola Dionisotti and Jonathan Pryce) rested on the journey to his house, described by Grumio in 4.1, which was staged by their running up and down the steps and catwalks.



suppress the disruption. Even after wide press coverage some spectators, well into the run, recognizing neither Jonathan Pryce in the drunk nor the relevance of his sexist remarks, fled from the house. With the Renaissance set gone, those who remained now looked on the bare back and side walls of the stage, with an elaborate metal scaffolding in front (illus. 2) – a combination of San Quentin and Paddington Station, said one critic.<sup>1</sup> The drunk was soon identified as Christopher Sly; and, wrapped in the illusion of the Induction, later became Petruchio himself, making his first entrance on a motorcycle. The argumentative house attendant, Paola Dionisotti, reappeared as Kate. We were in Padua, yes, but clearly in 1978.

This production used scenography not only to establish environment and atmosphere but also to create a complicated theatrical signifier of its thematic approach. *The Taming of the Shrew* is not a play about fifteenth-century Italy, Bogdanov and Dyer implied, but about the more subtle sexism of the modern world; the hardness and brisk unsentimentality of the performance were established by the harsh materials and bare, imprisoned look of the set. Most productions use stage and costume design to comment on the play, as a guide to the interpretive treatment; this one, by showing us at the start a set that was subsequently rejected, added a view of what it might have been but deliberately was not. By the end, when Kate delivered her final speech without ironic inflections to the male characters assembled around a green baize gaming table, the lines had acquired a meaning opposite to their apparent one, and the men on stage (and some in the audience) cringed at her words. Thus the demolition of the *trompe l'oeil* scene at the start was also a demolition of the facile view of the play, that tendency of many productions to treat it as a delightful *commedia* romp, glossing over its jagged edges, ignoring its challenges for late twentieth-century society, avoiding the contradictions within the text itself. Most interesting of all, the strategy required the audience to deconstruct the visual text in their minds, for in order to understand the meaning of the production it was necessary to understand the oppositional meaning of the two sets. The scenography, therefore, was a visualization of Brecht's "Not ... but" process: not then but now, not illusion but truth, not painted perspective but hard iron railings, not Serlio but Dyer. And, a traditionalist might add, not Shakespeare but Bogdanov.

What is the appropriate setting for Shakespeare's plays? Throughout the twentieth century that question has continually preoccupied artists concerned with their production, as well as audiences and critics who witness the results. That the question must be asked at all is significant, revealing

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that the modern theatre does not know unconditionally how to dress actors in classic plays or what physical environment to provide for them to move in. In other words, for the past hundred years or so we have no longer shared cultural convictions that would establish theatrical style. Instead the century has offered a variety of answers, some primarily subjective, others based on external events or fashions, that serve for a moment or a few years and then become extinct. To say this is to say scarcely more than a commonplace about the eclecticism and self-consciousness of twentieth-century art. Yet the visual history of performance, which has been mostly excluded from Shakespeare studies, rewards extended investigation because of its intriguing relationship to the status and uses of Shakespeare, both in the theatre and in the culture at large.

## VISUAL CRITICISM

Visual fashions and gestural codes change swiftly, and are connected to place as well as time. This probably has always been true, though the extraordinary speed of communication in the modern world has greatly accelerated the cycle of cultural dissemination, decay, and renewal. Popular movies, television shows, and magazine advertisements only a few years old often look false or artificial because they were created to reflect or elicit a contemporary vogue, which, by definition, soon shifted. Similar cultural variations occur among nations, races, or geographical groups; a commercial product, offered for sale worldwide, normally needs an entirely different visual encoding in Bangladesh than in Japan. A theatrical event, as the English term *production* implies, is also a cultural artifact and is subject to the same external forces in the visual realm. Theatrical productions normally have visual freshness because they have been manufactured for a highly specific geographical and sociopolitical audience, and they rarely survive long enough to look old-fashioned. When they are long-lived, they may well need visual refreshing; eventually they will lose their significant connections to the culture or the moment they invoke. This is a simple, though incomplete, explanation of why classic plays seem to need theatrical reinterpretation every ten or twenty years, and why the definitive Hamlet of one generation will appear as an outmoded actor to the next. Peter Brook reports that at Stratford he and Peter Hall determined that the maximum life of a production was five years:

It is not only the hair-styles, costumes and make-ups that look dated. All the different elements of staging – the shorthands of behaviour that stand for certain

emotions; gestures, gesticulations and tones of voice – are all fluctuating on an invisible stock exchange all the time ... A living theatre that thinks it can stand aloof from anything as trivial as fashion will wilt. (Brook 1968: 16)

There is a clear relationship between what a production looks like and what its spectators accept as its statement and value. This seems obvious: the visual signs the performance generates are not only the guide to its social and cultural meaning but often constitute the meaning itself. Yet remarkably little attention has been paid to the connections between scenography and general performance style, or to the relationship between scenography and audience reception. Or rather, a great deal of attention is paid to these relationships by theatre artists in preparing a production, but critics after the fact have rarely studied how design might be used as a tool of commentary or investigated how to read it. Even less attention has been given to the historical meaning of visual reception; that is, to how the original audience read and understood the visual signifiers. Historians of the playhouse and of scene design tend to recount physical, technological, and aesthetic developments without giving much regard to the performance of specific playtexts for specific audiences. (There are exceptions of course; the groundbreaking work of Denis Bablet is particularly important.)

No doubt part of this reluctance derives from what is sometimes called the literary bias of theatre history, that tendency, natural enough to most writers, of relying on other written records – from the printed drama to newspaper reviews – when imagining the ephemeral moments of past performance. But there is perhaps a deeper anxiety in some minds about the visual, based on a fear that it can overcome the rational aspects of language and character with an appeal too direct and powerful to deny. The Greeks called the theatre a “seeing place,” but from Aristotle on there has been a critical suspicion about the visual qualities of performance, despite the existence of a respectable amount of pictorial documentation. The “spectacle” or visual aspect of production, Aristotle held, can have “strong emotional effect but is the least artistic element, the least connected with the poetic art.” His own literary bias is clear: “in fact the force of tragedy can be felt even without benefit of public performance and actors, while for the production of the visual effect the property man’s art is even more decisive than that of the poet’s.”<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle’s degrading of the visual had enormous effect on subsequent dramatic theory, especially in periods when questions about the theatre blurred into tenets of moral behavior. Certainly in England suspicion about

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the pictorial side of performance has run deep ever since the reign of James I; Ben Jonson established the prototypical antagonism between dramatist and designer in his bitter “Expostulation with Inigo Jones” over control of the production of court masques:

And I have mett with those  
That doe cry up the Machine, and the Showes!  
The majesty of Juno in the Cloudes  
And peering forth of Iris in the Shrowdes!

A generation ago W. M. Merchant noted that the closing of the theatres “introduced an ambiguous visual approach to Shakespeare which has persisted to our own day” (20). On the one hand Restoration taste required elegant and expensive stage designs; on the other there was “a continuous line of hostile criticism” about scenery, that foreign importation, as in the prologue to Shadwell’s *Squire of Alsatia* (1688):

There came Machines, brought from a Neighbor Nation;  
Oh, how we suffer’d under Decoration!

The iconoclasm of Puritan religious reform in the seventeenth century led to a dramatic iconoclasm, in which the scripture of plays required protection from visual luxury, that vice of the Italian church and Italian theatre. Peter Hall has felt the same limitations well into the present. “The English suspect the visual delights of the theatre,” he once wrote. “For centuries the drama has been studied as literature ... the play not only begins with the word, but it had better end with it as well; otherwise it is inferior, appealing more to the eye than the ear. The puritan distrust of emblems, of representation by symbol and artifice, is a recurrent national neurosis.”<sup>3</sup>

But the visual is an essential part of the theatre, even when not particularly delightful or luxurious; what an audience sees is at least as important as what it hears. Shakespeare’s rhetorical drama, so tied to a culture of speaking and listening, is nonetheless drama, and its mode of realization requires actors to move through an organized and lighted space. (“Organized” does not imply a decorated, but only a demarcated playing ground; and “lighted” does not imply an artificially illuminated, but only a visible one.) The narrative of a play in performance inescapably takes place in the realm of the seen. It is curious, to say the least, how often that simple fact has been neglected in Shakespeare studies, which have for the most part been rooted in linguistic analysis and have often demonstrated the distrust of emblem and artifice that Peter Hall speaks of. Some of the most important

Shakespearean scholars of the past have cared little for the theatre or have actively disliked it, and preferred to ignore the rather untidy visual messages it sends about the inconsistent value of the plays through history. From Charles Lamb to Cleanth Brooks and beyond, the dominant literary critics in English tended to treat Shakespeare's work as a special case, detached from its theatrical genesis and subsequent representation, of lasting interest chiefly because of its verbal power and philosophic applicability to the human condition.

Of course times have changed, both on the stage and in the study. Producers of Shakespeare are much more likely today to know something of current critical discourse, just as Shakespearean commentators are much more willing to admit the importance of the theatre to their intellectual enterprise. There is now, in fact, an unparalleled cooperation between the theatre and the academy and a growing body of publication that is interested in how production affects our understanding of the plays; a recent *festschrift* goes so far as to claim this discourse to be “the single most important tradition in contemporary Shakespeare studies.”<sup>4</sup> Though capable of a wide variety of interpretation, in general usage the term “performance criticism” refers to commentary about aspects of performance that sheds light on the meaning of the plays. In other words, “stage-centered criticism,” as it is also called, attempts to use the theatrical life of Shakespeare's plays to investigate their essential or authentic condition. Granville Barker's *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (written 1927–46, though his earliest formulations go back to 1912) is usually thought to be the progenitor of this line, and Barker's own position as a radical director of Shakespeare who retired from the theatre to become a reflective critic insured his patriarchal status: the great and true amphibian, he has long been admired by both theatre practitioners and academics. His approach has been elaborated and extended by a number of eminent Shakespeareans in the Anglo-American tradition, most notably by Muriel Bradbrook, Bernard Beckerman, John Russell Brown, and J.L. Styan, who have added enormously to our understanding.

But the very phrase “performance criticism,” which is not often seen outside of Shakespeare studies, should alert us to a potential difficulty, for it implies a cohesive enterprise (criticism) about a unitary cultural activity (performance) and neither of these notions will withstand much scrutiny. First of all, to separate the consideration of Shakespeare's plays from the general movements of theatre history, as many performance critics do, is problematic. It may be convenient and may accord with the organization of the academy, but it would certainly be more historically comprehensive to

stress Shakespeare's relationship to changing theatrical manners. There is little point in making the theatre central to an appreciation of Shakespeare if his work is then treated as if it existed in an etherium. Indeed the story of Shakespearean representation – whether in the theatre, in the transmission of the texts, or in the general iconic status of the writer's work in world culture – should forcibly remind us that the plays and their meanings have never managed to escape the marks of time.

Though the goal of performance criticism may be an unbiased perspective on the plays, in print it has often assumed an evangelical or moralistic tone about production. It is accepted practice for both journalists and scholars to condemn artistic realization of Shakespeare based upon their sense that an important aspect of the source has been violated; since such writers claim an unimpeachable and indelible authority, some of the most sophisticated critics of our time have been led into positions from which they feel obliged to defend Shakespeare against the uses the theatre has made of him. Not only do they privilege the written text above its performance, they also assume that standards or boundaries of interpretation must exist for its performance, usually determined by the critic's analysis of the playwright's objectives. Rooted in what can be called intentional hermeneutics, much of the tradition of writing about Shakespeare on the stage has been detached from any aesthetic investigation of what the stage does and why it does it. W. B. Worthen has noticed how some of this commentary reveals through its rhetoric a surprising distrust of the theatre, and “seems inexplicably isolated from the theoretical and methodological inquiries that might help to direct it.”<sup>5</sup> In general, it has valued performance for what it teaches about the meaning of Shakespeare's linguistic text, which is assumed to be phenomenologically unaffected, durable.

Performance criticism of Shakespeare has been grounded in a different type of literary bias, the belief that the goal of theatrical activity is the authentic realization of playscripts. This is a misconception of long standing, attacked in recent years by a number of cultural historians, semioticians, and theatre artists.<sup>6</sup> Though a written drama is usually the foundation of a performance, the *sine qua non* of traditional theatre, it is far from being its sole or even primary rationale. A performance in a theatre, itself the result of extraordinary collaboration among a disparate group of artists coming together with successive series of audiences, has no single intention but rather a complex of vaguely related cultural objectives, ranging from declarations of high art or nationalist propaganda to the personal whim of an actor or the company's need to secure emergency



funding. To put it another way, theatres produce scripts but the theatre is about more than scripts. For their part spectators have rarely arrived with the single-minded purpose of hearing a play; they come in addition to see an actress, a marvel of scenery, or each other. They assist at the spectacle as necessary receptors of, and as reciprocal generators of, a complicated and imperfectly comprehended set of signs. Their attitudes to the theatre building and the ludic space, their dress and manners, their own status in the audience, what they eat and drink at intermissions, whether they laugh or cry: all these and many more social strategies greatly affect the experience of what is so reductively called “playgoing.” *King Lear*, the program says, but the adventure of performance says many things unrelated to the words which make up the text of the play.

If playgoing in general opens questions that go far beyond the consideration of playtexts, and beyond purely artistic concerns, concentrating attention on the visual aspects of performance returns us to aesthetic effect yet offers a way to investigate the non-literary manifestation of performance. Though normally based upon an idea or a vision engendered by the words of a play, stage, costume, and lighting design can easily disregard or transcend both the words and the notional setting, reminding us that though performance may seek as its goal the faithful transmittal of the dramatist’s writing, it need not do so. We are also reminded that ideas about what constitutes fidelity are shifting; they may encompass a fidelity to the spirit of the play as understood at a given moment as well as a literal fidelity to the details of its fable. Even the briefest look at the history of Shakespeare staging will suggest how divergent visual approaches can be.

Bertolt Brecht, himself one of the great poets and playwrights of the century, exploited the practice of appropriation (*Aneignung*) of the classics for his own purposes, turning Shakespeare and other earlier dramatists into conveyers of new meanings for the present. While Brecht’s practice seems extreme because it involved rewriting established texts, there is a sense in which every production of a play is an appropriation of its text, a seizing of its resources, whether the text has been translated into colloquial modern German or simply selected from available English editions. The regular practice by directors of cutting the plays, sometimes with ruthless tyranny, demonstrates how subject the text is to theatrical exploitation. How and why this occurs is of small literary consequence but of great cultural resonance, offering insights about the theatre as a social institution and about the place of classic plays in the world of the present. Because the

lighting, settings, and costumes of a production establish its physical world in an incontrovertible manner, scenography is normally the most direct representation an audience receives of the performed meaning of the play – which is a separate matter from its literary meaning.

In brief, this book is about how the theatre has appropriated Shakespeare in the realm of the seen. Its method is to chronicle international scenography for the production of Shakespeare's plays in the twentieth century; its principal intent is to investigate how scenography may be used as a guide to the changes that have occurred in our understanding of Shakespeare and his place in the theatre. Some of my strategies rely on recent developments in theatre semiology; other are aligned with materialist interpretations of culture. These two methodologies are related in my approach because they both offer possibilities of understanding the cultural meanings of signs. Both also tend to suggest that the theatre event is larger than the artistic intentions that create it; since a performance is directed at an audience, what matters is not only the meanings the artists inscribe in their work – whether those meanings are political, social, or purely aesthetic – but also what meanings spectators actually receive.

While the study will incidentally (and roughly) recapitulate the general development of design in our time, its focus will be more specific. A number of important directors and designers unconnected with Shakespeare will have no place here, just as some visual movements pertinent to Shakespeare will assume more prominence than they would in a larger consideration. This is a huge subject, in some ways an intractable one, for Shakespeare has been almost everywhere in the century. The temptation to limit my focus has been great: by discussing only the tragedies, for example, or by selecting a few important plays as representatives, or by restricting attention to English-language productions. Despite the problems of size, however, only by seeing the subject whole is it possible to indicate its full significance and something of the importance of Shakespeare to the modern theatre.

I have naturally been forced to ignore many interesting and valuable productions in order to tell the main story. Three types of movements have been given paramount attention: those that clearly established a new visual vocabulary for Shakespeare that was exploited by subsequent designers and directors (like the work of Edward Gordon Craig, or the Peter Brook–Sally Jacobs *A Midsummer Night's Dream*); those that, while not innovative in themselves, were particularly successful in using design elements already established (like the many examples of Expressionism outside of Germany, or the elegant simplicity of Motley in England); and those that reflected a