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Introduction

ROBERT SMALLWOOD

'Do I have to play it in a flak jacket?' was, Jane Lapotaire tells us at the beginning of the essay she contributes to this volume, the first thing she asked when her director offered her the part of Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII*. The question goes to the heart of the whole issue of presenting Shakespeare's plays in the modern theatre: how should one approach the task, as director of *Henry VIII*, for example, of engaging an audience, sitting in a theatre in the last decade of the twentieth century, with events from the third decade of the sixteenth century as dramatized in a play written in the second decade of the seventeenth? A remarkable cross-section of the answers to that question on offer in current theatre practice is represented by the performances (and the productions of which they formed part) that the following essays describe. The range of Shakespearian work created by the Royal Shakespeare Company, from large-scale main-stage productions involving elaborate sets and costumes and big casts, to small-budget studio work of a far simpler kind, has justified the claim, in earlier volumes in this series, that it covered, in general terms, all the basic approaches and possibilities of modern Shakespeare production. With the opening of the new Globe Theatre in Southwark in the year in which this volume goes to press another possibility is now being explored: in a space intended to replicate, as precisely as knowledge permits, the original theatre building of 1599, and in costumes, so the programme note informed us, woven in the Elizabethan manner and using Elizabethan dyes, in natural light (or for evening performances in an imitation thereof), with even modern underwear banned, an all-male cast played *Henry V* in the summer of 1997 to audiences encouraged to eat and drink during the performance and to boo the French every time they came on stage in a way that was thought to replicate the patriotic behaviour of their sixteenth-century predecessors. Replication, or the attempt at replication, is a human activity with a long pedigree, and this was not its first appearance in the world of

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Shakespeare production, though it may be one of its more determined. How, or if, the arrival of the Globe will affect the development of Shakespeare production by other companies and in other theatres remains to be seen. I mention it here only because there is now a more extreme opposite of the flak-jacket approach to Shakespeare production than anything represented in this volume or its predecessors.

What, apart from this desire to try to copy all the details of original performance, are the main choices of setting that face a director planning a production of a Shakespeare play? There is, obviously, modern dress (which may or may not involve flak jackets): the players wear the sorts of costumes that would make it possible for them to join the audience without appearing conspicuous. Though the evidence of the Peacham drawing of *Titus Andronicus* suggests some vague gestures towards the Roman, it is generally agreed that opulent examples of contemporary costume are likely to have been what the original audiences of Shakespeare's plays saw their actors wearing: no tenth-century Danish look for Burbage's Hamlet, or eleventh-century Scottish costume for his Macbeth. In a sense, therefore – though a distinctly paradoxical one – the modern director who costumes his actors in clothes that could have been worn by his audience might be said to be presenting the play 'traditionally'. Sir Barry Jackson's modern-dress Shakespeare productions at Birmingham Repertory Theatre before the Second World War ('Hamlet in plus-fours', as the most famous of them was dubbed) were the pioneers of a method that has become a significant part of the armoury of the modern Shakespeare director, exemplified most obviously among current directors in this country in the work of Michael Bogdanov, for whom modern-dress presentation of Shakespeare is more or less a creed. The one whole-hearted example of it in this volume is David Thacker's *The Merchant of Venice*.

Also represented by only one example among the productions in this volume is what used to be thought of as the standard and straightforward way of presenting Shakespeare – in Elizabethan costume. Steven Pimlott's production of *As You Like It* had a Rosalind who could genuinely wonder what she was to do with her doublet and hose when Orlando appeared and, as David Tennant tells us in his essay, Touchstone even wore a version of a motley coat. In no sense, however, did the stage setting attempt to match the temporally fairly specific costumes and in the final moments there was a departure from historicity as determined as could be.

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The method which so dominated Shakespeare production in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the re-creation, through design and costumes, of the period in which the play's story, fictional or historical, is set, is still with us as the end of this century approaches. Instead of a flak jacket Jane Lapotaire got costumes and head-dresses based on contemporary portraits of Katherine of Aragon, and Paul Jesson remarks in his essay on the need for actors in that production of *Henry VIII* to bring to their wearing of the authentic mid-Tudor costumes equally authentic mid-Tudor deportment. Much less precise in its care for authenticity of historical detail, but still overwhelmingly 'Roman' in the effect they created and thus placing the play firmly in the period of its subject-matter, were the designs for Sir Peter Hall's production of *Julius Caesar*.

Three of the productions discussed in this volume followed a route that has been much used by Shakespeare directors over the last two or three decades but was a comparative rarity earlier, the setting of the play in a specific historical period that is neither that of its story, nor of its composition, nor of its production. Paul Jesson writes in his essay of a putative production of *Henry VIII* that proposed to set the play in the early twentieth century, with Henry as Edward VII, Katherine as Queen Alexandra, and Anne Bullen as Lillie Langtree. Whether its failure to materialize represents a sad loss or a happy escape for playgoers we shall never know, but determinedly reaching their intended destinations along the same road were Ian Judge's *Love's Labour's Lost*, set very exactly in the twilight of the Edwardian era, just before the First World War; Adrian Noble's version of *Romeo and Juliet*, presented in a late nineteenth-century world; and David Thacker's production of *Coriolanus*, making broad and ample, if not altogether consistent, reference to the French Revolution.

The creation of coherent worlds in specific historical periods against which audiences can assess and measure the events of the play might thus be said, with varying degrees of vagueness and exactness, to have been the method of seven of the eleven productions represented in this volume – one 'modern', one 'Elizabethan', two 'historical' (setting the play in the period of its events), and three 'period' (setting the play in a specific period somewhere between its own and the audience's). The other four – and thus the largest single category – took the route which has become increasingly frequent in recent Shakespeare production, the 'eclectic', that is the deliberate evasion of the specific, the studied creation of a sense of temporal vagueness about the period in which the

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1 'Modern-dress' Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*, RST 1993, directed by David Thacker, designed by Shelagh Keegan; Act 1, Scene i. (Antonio (Clifford Rose), Gratiano (Mark Lockyer), Lorenzo (Mark Lewis Jones), Bassanio (Owen Teale).)

play's events are taking place. There are different levels and categories of this technique: sometimes, as with Steven Pimlott's *Richard III*, the production may seem mostly to belong in a single period – in this case Elizabethan, certainly, rather than late fifteenth-century – which is then dislocated by the intrusion of figures from another era. On other occasions – Adrian Noble's *Macbeth* was an example, as was the same director's *The Winter's Tale* – deliberately non-specific, or 'timeless', costumes may be displaced for a scene, or a section of the play, by visual evidence that seems much more dateable. And, thirdly, there is the technique of straightforward eclecticism, using costumes or other visual images from many different periods and simultaneously and anachronistically juxtaposing them, a method adopted most obviously, among the productions represented here, by Gale Edwards's version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which costumes from more or less every century from Shakespeare's to our own were to be seen simultaneously on stage. The photographs attached to individual essays provide a number of

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examples of what I have been discussing; by a pleasing coincidence, however, it happens that the Folio order in which the essays are arranged means that the book opens with productions offering splendidly contrastive examples of four of the main categories – 'modern', 'period', 'Elizabethan' and 'eclectic' – and the illustrations to this Introduction (nos. 1–4) thus make their point most sharply by straying no further than *The Merchant of Venice*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *As You Like It*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Having offered those very broad, and inevitably over-simplified, categorizations of the productions upon which this collection is based, I turn now to each production in turn in the hope of providing a slightly fuller sense of the context within which the individual performances were created.

The Venice of David Thacker's 1993 production of *The Merchant of Venice* was the financial quarter of a modern city – its set might have been the Lloyds Building in London – with Antonio, in the opening scene, meeting his friends over a lunchtime drink at a smart restaurant (see Illustration 1) and Shylock's office fully equipped with the latest computer technology. Other parts of its multi-levelled playing area were peopled by bustling yuppies in sharp suits making enormous financial deals on mobile telephones or, when off duty, listening to appallingly loud rock music at parties where coloured lights dazzled and flashed. Through such a party, David Calder's Shylock, fresh from listening to Schubert on his gramophone, was pushed and jostled in his forlorn search for Jessica after her elopement with one of the denizens of this shallow, materialist, fast-track world. In the early stages, racial tensions were virtually invisible below the surface of this uniformly money-obsessed community (at a number of points the text was adjusted to replace the two syllables of 'the Jew' by the metrically equivalent 'Shylock'), and Shylock himself was indistinguishable from his fellow financial dealers; but as the loss of Jessica pushed him into isolation and the news of her elopement and extravagance drove him more fiercely in upon himself, he became increasingly racially self-conscious, adopting the outward evidences of his Jewishness with aggressive determination, and as all the reactions of his friend Tubal made clear, abusing his religion by enlisting it in support of his pursuit of vengeance. The trial scene thus became, in spite of the superficialities of modern dress, and particularly in the almost demented abusiveness of Mark Lockyer's Gratiano, a site of racial hatred at the most primitive level.

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In spite of an elegant mirrored screen and a costume for Penny Downie's Portia that looked like a designer ball-gown chosen from an issue of *Vogue* a couple of decades earlier than those being consulted in Venice, there was enough of the Lloyds Building set left in Belmont – our imaginations were required, for example, to allow the stilts upon which it stood to double as the trees in the garden – to make one realize that all that 'old money' that Portia's father had bequeathed her in his peculiarly restrictive will had probably been augmented by dealings in the self-same markets where Antonio and Shylock traded. It was a coherent world that David Thacker had created and one in which the play's ancient story of money and marriage, racial pride and racial hatred, was perfectly at home. It was also one in which Christopher Luscombe's nervous and suburban Lancelot Gobbo, eating his Kit-Kat in his Debenham's blazer, could make rare sense of a notoriously difficult part.

In that same 1993 season Ian Judge created an equally fully realized world for *Love's Labour's Lost* by setting it in an Oxbridge men's college on the eve of the outbreak of the First World War, the vow with which the play begins, to study for three years, having an almost uncanny aptness in these academic circumstances – or, just as relevantly, perhaps, having no aptness at all, for these elegant, aristocratic undergraduates, in this idyllic *Charley's Aunt* world, were infinitely more likely to be seen in a punt on the river, or on the cricket field, than venturing into the unfamiliar territory of a library. At the end, after all the merry japes of the Pageant of the Worthies, played outdoors in the quad against a skyline of dreaming spires and watched by the Princess and her retinue from white wickerwork chairs, and after the ladies had postponed their decisions on the marriage proposals, the imminence of warfare in trenches left one painfully aware (perhaps a little *too* painfully aware for the play that Shakespeare wrote) that a year and a day was an excessively hopeful estimate of the length of the wait.

The production took the opportunity to present a virtual mannequin parade of Edwardian ladies' fashions, the scene in which Navarre met the ladies on their arrival at the railway station (see Illustration 2), complete with authentic steam-train sound-effects, providing a particularly elaborate example of its visual self-consciousness. It is no accident that this is the only production among those represented here that lists a choreographer among its credits. It also found niches for most of the characters – Holofernes was Professor of Latin, Armado a long-term (very long-term) Visiting Fellow from an Iberian sister institution,

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2 'Period' Shakespeare: *Love's Labour's Lost*, RST 1993, directed by Ian Judge, designed by John Gunter, costumes by Deirdre Clancy; Act II, Scene i. (The King of Navarre (Owen Teale) greets the Princess of France (Jenny Quayle); on the left Dumaine (Robert Portal), Berowne (Jeremy Northam), and Longaville (Guy Henry); on the right Boyet (Paul Greenwood); in the background Rosaline (Abigail McKern), Katharine (Virginia Grainger), and Maria (Alexandra Gilbreath).)

Costard errand-boy and general hanger-on to the porters' lodge, and Moth, a role that the recent stage history of *Love's Labour's Lost* has often found so recalcitrant, became, as Christopher Luscombe's essay describes, the senior chorister in the college chapel.

Steven Pimlott's 1996 production of *As You Like It* was played in a determinedly non-realistic space – a shiny metal box of a set into which were flown, in variable numbers and configurations, long metal poles to represent the trees of Arden. Its costumes, on the other hand, were as realistic-Elizabethan as the play has seen at Stratford for a long time, Niamh Cusack's Rosalind appearing not only in doublet and hose for the arrival in Arden but carrying a hefty spear that looked perfectly adequate, to the non-expert eye, to deal with most boars. Its Arden was a harsh and uninviting place in the first half, with howling wind and swirling snow against which the exiled Duke's followers huddled in blankets while he preached to them (unconvincingly, it appeared) on the

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virtues of the life removed from public haunt. The climate, indeed, proved fatal to Adam, brought in a state of collapse to the ducal table and expiring in the arms of two of the Duke's followers in as solemn a way of marking the arrival of the interval of *As You Like It* as any production can have managed.

Sunlight and daffodils and an exhilaratingly energetic pace characterized the second half, observable not least in the lustful energy sparking between David Tennant's red-suited, cap-and-bells Touchstone, as traditional a version of an Elizabethan jester as one is likely to see, and Susannah Elliott-Knight's eagerly responsive Audrey. As David Tennant's essay mentions, the production ended in Stratford (he also describes the variation in London) with the arrival on a stage peopled by characters in flamboyantly Elizabethan costumes of a middle-aged, grey-haired woman in a black Marks and Spencers trouser suit, who entered by way of the front stalls and who must have seemed to many in the audience to be a member of the front-of-house staff accidentally strayed into the performance (see Illustration 3). It was, in fact, yet another attempt by a director of *As You Like It* to solve the problem of the appearance of Hymen, god of marriage, the idea seeming to be that if gods come from outside a play's everyday world, what better than to bring into this Elizabethan-costumed piece a figure from the twentieth century, and if a play in performance derives its power from the audience's willingness to believe, from where else should the figure of ultimate power come but from the auditorium. Not all intellectually interesting ideas work theatrically, however, and this was one of them. But if this aspect of the production is perhaps best forgotten, others are well worth remembering, among them David Tennant's demonstration that it is still possible to play an Elizabethan jester and get laughs on the lines.

Eleven productions figure in this book. Only one of them had a woman director. Whether the proportion is roughly in line with the ratio elsewhere in the profession or whether it is peculiar to Shakespeare productions or to Stratford, and why these things should be as they are anyway, is, unfortunately, no part of the purpose of this Introduction to enquire. What is worth observing, however, is that the Artistic Director of the RSC, planning to include a production of *The Taming of the Shrew* in the Company's 1995 repertoire, made sure that he had a woman to direct it. The play's presentation of the wooing and wedding of Petruccio and Kate, the methods of his 'taming' of her, and above all her

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3 'Elizabethan' Shakespeare (with interloper): *As You Like It*, RST 1996, directed by Steven Pimlott, designed by Ashley Martin-Davis; Act v, Scene iv. (Orlando (Liam Cunningham), Hymen (Doreen Andrew), Rosalind (Niamh Cusack), Duke Senior (Robert Demeger), with Celia (Rachel Joyce), Audrey (Susannah Elliott-Knight), Oliver (Sebastian Harcombe), and Touchstone (David Tennant) in the background.)

final speech on relationships within marriage, have made it a contentious piece, one of the new 'problem plays'. Michael Siberry's essay offers a revealing insight into some of Gale Edwards's methods of coping with it. Significant among these was the invention of a new character, a wife for Christopher Sly, who was seen at the beginning of the play, in an episode roughly based on the Induction, quarrelling with him and throwing him out in a drunken stupor. Since Sly and his wife were played by Michael Siberry and Josie Lawrence, Petruccio and Kate in the main play, the whole piece thus became Sly's dream, his fantasy of sexual dominance, reversed again at the end as the dream unravelled and (as the essay describes) Sly awoke to return, submissive, to his wife. To some members of the audience the final image was of possible hope for the future, with a chastened Sly who might behave better in future; to others it was a deeply depressing signal of Mrs Sly's submission to the

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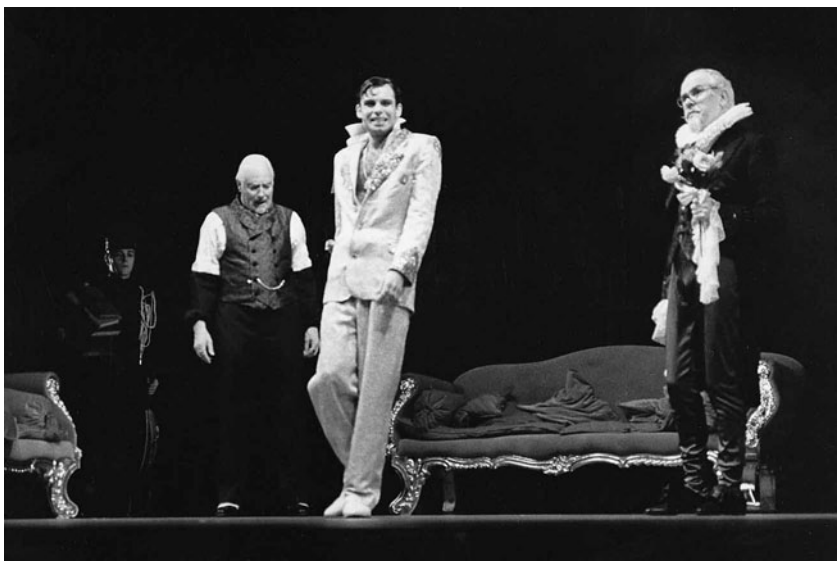

4 'Eclectic' Shakespeare: *The Taming of the Shrew*, RST 1995, directed by Gale Edwards, designed by Russell Craig, costumes by Marie-Jeanne Lecca; Act II, Scene i. (Baptista (Clifford Rose) in nineteenth-century costume, Tranio, disguised as Lucentio (Mark Lockyer) as modern pop star, and Gremio (James Hayes) in Elizabethan dress.)

inevitability of more brutality. Our responses to theatrical images are nothing if not subjective.

Because the events of the main play were all offered to the audience as part of a dream, director and designer had *carte blanche* for eclecticism and fantasy. The Lord and his followers only partly suggested huntsmen; there was also something oddly sinister about them, figures in black tailcoats who appeared intermittently through the piece silently observing, perhaps even controlling, the action. For the wedding Petruccio appeared in an outfit partly inspired by the plumage of some ornate breed of cockerel (a product, no doubt, of Sly's fantasies of roosterly dominance), and costumes throughout mixed the Elizabethan, the modern and all points in between in an uninhibited gallimaufry – as when Mark Lockyer's Tranio, pretending to be Lucentio, appeared in all the glitter of a modern pop-star among characters whose sartorial commitments were to distinctly earlier periods (see Illustration 4). A dilapidated little red motor car conveyed the newlyweds from Padua, a means of transport rather more uncertain than the dilapidated horse of

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