

Blackfriars Then and Now: Appearance, Actors, Audience

Tiffany Stern

When Ralph Alan Cohen decided to build a reconstruction of Shakespeare's Blackfriars playhouse, he gave his extraordinarily talented theatre company, first called the Shenandoah Shakespeare Express, then the American Shakespeare Center (ASC), a theatre from which it could learn. The combination of powerful troupe and haunting space resulted in productions that were not only vividly engaging – they revealed fresh ways of understanding early modern plays.

The Blackfriars in Staunton, Virginia, a wooden playhouse lit by candle chandeliers, with seating for the audience in pit, galleries and on the stage itself, recreates crucial aspects of the *appearance* of an early modern theatre. So going to Blackfriars helps one understand the geography negotiated by early modern texts. The ASC, preparing performances for that space, often use early modern rehearsal techniques. In their 'Renaissance Season' actors learn plays the way Shakespeare's actors did, from 'parts' consisting of speeches with cues. Thus the troupe also experiments with crucial aspects of the *method* of putting on early modern plays. The result of seeing aspects of 'original' performance in an 'original' space gives spectators the all-engrossing, high octane *experience* of attending an early modern production.

This essay will consider the appearance of Staunton's Blackfriars; the method its actors use in their Renaissance Season; and the way the audience, as a consequence of both, experiences performances. Throughout, it will quote Shakespearean and other early modern texts in order to show how Shakespeare's Blackfriars and Staunton's reflect one another. It will not, then, consider one single production, but will address some of the striking features of all of them. Staunton's Blackfriars does something very extraordinary that covers every play it puts on. It creates totally new and important performances for 'now' by applying, learning from, and returning to aspects of 'then'.

Blackfriars: Appearance

What do we know about the look of London's Blackfriars playhouse: the indoor theatre for which Shakespeare's later plays were written and in which most of them were performed? As the playhouse was built in the upstairs part of a dining hall in a disbanded monastery, it has left no 'footprint' on the ground of London, nor are there documents that specifically give its dimensions. Yet aspects of its look and arrangement were striking enough to be repeatedly referred to at the time.

Firstly 'Shakespeare's Blackfriars' (technically, The Second Blackfriars Playhouse – the First having been for a boy company) was wooden on the inside. Built in the top quadrant of a fourteenth century 'upper frater', however, it had minimal access to outside light: hence it relied on candles. James Wright, writing in the Restoration, recalls how 'The Black-friers, ... had Pits for the Gentry, and [its performers] Acted by Candle-light'; while the indoor theatre depicted on the titlepage of Francis Kirkman's *The Wits* (1672), which might even be Blackfriars, features candle-filled chandeliers overhanging the stage.¹ Staunton's Blackfriars, a wooden theatre lit by chandeliers, closely resembles the Kirkman picture, and replicates what we know about Shakespeare's Blackfriars in appearance.

When the ASC in Staunton perform in this wooden, chandelier-filled theatre, aspects of early modern drama instantly make sense. Firstly, the reason why playwrights so often employ 'chronographia' ('when we do plainly describe any time for delectations sake, as the Morning, the evening, midnight, the dawning of the day, the Sunne rising, the Sunne setting ...') becomes obvious.² Any period of day needs to be conveyed verbally, not visually through changes of light; so describing the time is a practical necessity that nevertheless also contributes compellingly to the lyricism of the drama: 'But look, the morn, in russet mantle clad, / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill' (*Hamlet*, 1.1.167-8); 'The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night, / Chequering the eastern clouds with streaks of light ...' (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.1-2).

What is intriguing, however, is that in the Blackfriars, then and now, all time and lighting cues have the reverse effect from those at the Globe. Take

¹ James Wright, *Historia Histrionica* (1699), 6; Francis Kirkman, *The Wits* (1672), titlepage.

² Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577), 142.

Othello, a play that in its time, as the title page of the 1622 quarto attests, was 'acted at the Globe, and at the Black-Friers'.³ In the Globe, where plays were performed in daylight, 'dark' will always have been 'daylight', so scenes requiring candles will have added light to an already bright stage. *Othello*, carrying a candle to kill Desdemona because it is 'dark', will have been luminous in the Globe in that intense black-white play. In the Blackfriars, conversely, the stage really does require candles, giving indoor and night-time scenes the additional intensity of 'realism'. In Staunton's 2010 production of *Othello*, René Thornton Jr's candle-holding Othello entered through the discovery space, the curtains highlighting the theatricality of his intentions, whilst also intensifying the intimacy of the room.

Plays put on in Staunton's Blackfriars often contrast intimate 'indoor' scenes that comfortably mirror the theatre's indoor space against 'outdoor' scenes, where lighting ensures an added layer of fictionality. In its 2012 touring troupe production of *The Winter's Tale*, the exuberant and non-naturalistic 'outside' world of Bohemia culminated in a version of the 'dance of shepherds and shepherdesses' in which the entire cast sang and danced the *Dirty Dancing* finale of 'Time of My Life'. The liveliness vividly contrasted with the dour 'indoor' scenes of Sicilia that had typified the play's earlier, 'tragic' half. So the structure of the play, and the structure of the performance joined the structure of the theatre to force the distinction in character between the play's two locations.

The Blackfriars' chandeliers now, as in Shakespeare's time, light actors and audience alike. This means that no person, performer or watcher, is privileged over another by lighting. 'Universal lighting' (reflected in the ASC's slogan, 'We Do It with the Lights On') encourages, perhaps insists upon, actor-audience interaction. Here are two examples. Pompey in *Measure for Measure* arrives to take up his new work in prison, only to find he recognizes many people there as clients from his bawdyhouse: 'First' he says, 'here's young Master Rash ... then have we young Drop-heir that killed lusty Pudding, and Master Forthlight the tilter, and brave Master Shoe-tie the great traveler, and wild Half-can that stabbed Pots, and I think forty more' (*Measure for Measure*, 4.3.4-14). As a list, this is repetitive; as an invitation to audience-participation it comes into its own.

³ William Shakespeare, *Othello* (1622), titlepage.

When James Keegan (Staunton, *Measure for Measure*, 2008) performed Pompey, each name he mentioned was directed towards a different audience member, who might, depending on person, be startled, knowing, giggling, affronted. That humor also changed the pace and direction of the play, hurtling the audience into the production actively. The same actor that season played King Lear (Staunton, *King Lear*, 2008), a play that might seem less forgiving of audience participation: yet he found a moment there that was enhanced by audience interaction. Keegan's Lear, in the trial scene, motioned two audience members actually to change places at the line 'change places', and then turned his next question to the rest of the spectators 'handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?' (*King Lear*, 4.6.147). This brought the entire audience shockingly within Lear's purview, and inside his crazed logic. But both examples reveal plays that seem at moments to demand this kind of metatheatre, with all the threats it makes to the distinction between fact and fiction. In exploring such moments, the ASC raises further questions, not just about 'playful' passages in certain dramas, but also about the status of particular textual moments. Some of those passages in plays traditionally described as 'soliloquies' or 'asides', terms not used until after Shakespeare stopped writing – might they be better understood as actor-audience speeches, all potentially interactive?

A further aspect of the appearance of Shakespeare's Blackfriars was, of course, its seating. It had, like the Globe, a pit (though in the Blackfriars this contained benches) and a series of galleries. But it also had additional seating on the stage itself. Lenton writes about the man who demands to sit 'upon the Fryers stage,' even though he has to pay over the odds, 'an angel for a paltry stoole'; and Jonson provides a scene in his play *The Staple of News* in which keen spectators explain why these uncomfortable seats were so popular:

Mirth	Pray you helpe us to some stooles here.
Prologue	Where? o' the Stage, Ladies?
Mirth	Yes, o' the Stage; wee are persons of quality, I assure you, and women of fashion; and come to see, and to be seene. ⁴

⁴ Francis Lenton, *The Young Gallants Whirligigg* (1629), 13; Ben Jonson, *The Staple of Newes* from *Workes* (1640), 4.

Staunton's Blackfriars likewise has a pit, galleries and stools on the stage. The popularity of the latter reveal how, still now, theatregoers count 'being seen' as high amongst their enjoyments – together, of course, with having a prime seat for metatheatrical interaction: it is the audience on the stage which is particularly likely to be asked to agree with, or disagree with (or flirt with) characters in the plays, and to hold, or sometimes become, props. The effect of this on-stage audience, however, is profound. The emotional content of all productions is ratcheted up by having spectators onstage, because the spontaneous emotions they display are 'catching'. When Keegan's Lear entered howling, the dead Cordelia in his hands, my tears were a testament to the extraordinary power of his performance, but they were allowed, intensified and enabled by the frame of tearful and moved people through whom I saw the performance. The stool-setters help explain aspects of early modern performance which we know too provoked a highly emotional response – 'often times *Stage players*, by their fained mourning, wring forth true teares out of the spectators eyes'.⁵ Indeed, Shakespeare, a shrewd man of business, may well have sanctioned stool-sitters, though they reduce the acting space, for emotional reasons: in showing off themselves, what they really show off is the force of the play.

Blackfriars: Rehearsal

As is now well known, actors in the early modern theatre received not full scripts of the play in which they were to perform, but personal texts consisting of their speeches only, preceded by a short cue, generally of around three words. These were known as 'parts' in the early modern period, though they later acquired further titles: they were called 'lengths' in the eighteenth century; 'sides' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and 'cue-scripts', also in the twentieth century.

As the structure and nature of parts defined how rehearsal and performance took place, Shakespeare regularly referred to them in his writing, from the moment when Boyet quips that the Queen of France's 'contempt will

⁵ Richard Younge, *The Cure of Misprision* (1646), 143.

kill the keepers heart, / And quite divorce his memory from his part' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.149-50), to Beatrice's taunting 'Speak, Count, 'tis your cue' (*Much Ado*, 2.1.305). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has a subplot that centers on parts, concerning actors so amateur that they do not understand the difference between cue to be listened for and line to be spoken. At the start of the Mechanicals' rehearsal of *Pyramus and Thisby*, Flute is depicted as having memorised his part in its entirety: he then recites speech, subsequent cue and next speech, causing the exasperated prompter, Quince, to complain: 'you speak all your part at once, cues and all' (3.1.99-100). Later, in the performance, the actors are proud that they have finally learned how to use their parts correctly. Bottom, playing Pyramus, glosses the words 'O wicked wall, through whom I see no bliss! / Curs'd be thy stones for thus deceiving me!' with the explanation, "'Deceiving me" is Thisby's cue.' (5.1.180-2; 184-5). The part was so elemental to performance that jokes on the subject were available to everyone in the audience, whether they were actors or not.

There is so much information about how plays were put on that it is extraordinary that the Globe and the Sam Wanamaker playhouse, major replica theatres, do not embrace it. At Staunton's Blackfriars, however, the ASC does. The company have a 'Ren Run' before all their plays, and additionally put on an 'Actors' Renaissance Season' on a yearly basis during which as many of the exigencies of early modern rehearsal are replicated as possible. Actors for the Actors' Renaissance Season learn their parts, often for rarely performed and unknown early modern plays, in isolation: they are generally 'off book' ('without book' in early modern parlance) before minimal group rehearsals of, sometimes, just a couple of days. There is no director, so the ideas the actors come up with, and the observations they make from examining and learning their parts, shape their presentation of and notion of 'character'.

The result is performances that are not governed by an overarching directorial concept, but are instead shaped to the text. As each actor has received and learned a separate part, so each has a sense of the unique and key role that 'his'/'her' character plays. Productions, as a result, do not revolve around a single 'star' character: every character is fully individualized. There are, for instance, few roles, no matter how minor, that are not central to the play when interpreted

by the magnificent John Harrell. Take the Satanic, animalistic comedy of his goat-legged Lucifer (Staunton, *Doctor Faustus*, 2010); or the poignancy of his plump Dogberry, a police badge nestled under a large beer-gut (Staunton, *Much Ado*, 2012). When actors are given characters who range from comic to tragic, the strength of their individual performances can highlight complexities in the genre of the play itself. Allison Glenzer, as the Jailor's Daughter (Staunton, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, 2013) started out as a giggly, exuberant girl; she became clownishly love-sick, hilarious, fearful, and finally a form of mad in which the clown and the tragic heroine intertwine; she 'doesn't just set the tone for this production', enthused Minton 'she sets the standard of walking a path weaving through comedy and tragedy'.⁶ Well in that play may the two kinsmen fight for love: Glenzer showed that the Jailor's Daughter suffered for it, her unabashed and crazed sexual cravings giving an earthy reality to what it really was that the 'noble kinsmen' were fighting for.

Actors receiving parts have to make 'their' text make sense. ASC actors, long trained to think about verse, are often excited by the problems raised by 'difficult' passages and knotty syntax. Ralph Cohen relates how he proposed cutting lines in *As You Like It* that he thought too difficult to perform: 'He that a fool doth very wisely hit / Doth very foolishly, although he smart, / Not to seem senseless of the bob' (2.7.54-6). But John Harrell, who has a deep understanding of syntax and meter, showed Ralph that he could keep the logic of 'doth very foolishly ... not to seem senseless' by *emphasizing* 'although he smart'; he 'embrace[d] ... the interruption as a way of achieving that goal of *not* interrupting'.⁷

What is intriguing, given the amount of private preparation involved in putting plays together from parts, is that ASC productions have tight ensemble qualities. That is because actors who have minimal rehearsals have to trust one another in performance much more than actors who have rehearsed together

⁶ Eric Minton, 'This is Some Seriously Crazy Stuff, Man', review of *Two Noble Kinsmen* for Shakespeareances.com, 18 March 2013, in [http://www.shakespeareances.com/willpower/onstage/Two Noble Kinsmen-02-ASC13.html](http://www.shakespeareances.com/willpower/onstage/Two+Noble+Kinsmen-02-ASC13.html) accessed 6 November 2014.

⁷ Jeremy Lopez, 'John Harrell', *The Routledge Companion to Actors' Shakespeare* ed. John Russell Brown and Kevin Ewert (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 88.

over many weeks: otherwise the productions as a whole will not work. As Greg Phelps explains,

One of the things that we learn here is that if you make the other person look good, you in turn make yourself look good. If they look good, then the production looks good, and if the production looks good, then you look good, and then things just get on a higher level, than if you're just out for yourself. Teamwork!⁸

Naturally, productions put on in this way also have a profound affect on the way the audience experiences the play. When a play is put together from parts, it remains fluid in performance, able to evolve and alter because directors and rehearsals haven't 'fixed' it over weeks. Spectators of such a play become not just watchers but something like a collective director: their responses can shape what actors do. So acting from parts empowers the actors, but by so doing empowers the audience too.

Blackfriars: Audience

As has been shown, the construction of Staunton's Blackfriars building and the way plays are put on within it both give surprising power to the audience. And, turning back to Shakespeare, it becomes clear that, yes, audiences in his time watched plays actively, insistent on being part of what they watched. Whenever Shakespeare writes a scene for staged spectators, he always adds in their interaction with the performers. In *Taming of the Shrew*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Tempest*, judgmental spectators flip between evaluating the fictional characters ('the lady doth protest too much, methinks', *Hamlet*, 3.2.232), the actors ('well spoken, with good accent', *Hamlet*, 2.2.466-7; 'He hath rid his prologue like a rough colt', *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.119; 'His leg is too big for Hector's', *Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.711), and the play itself ('this is too long', *Hamlet*, 2.2.499; 'Tis a very excellent piece of work', *Taming of*

⁸ ? 'Better Know an Actor: Greg Phelps interview', March 22 (2012) in <http://ascinterns.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/welcome-to-second-installment-of-better.html> accessed 6th November 2014.

the Shrew, 1.1.258; 'This is the silliest stuff that ever I heard', *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.208). These show that Shakespeare was indeed used to a visible, audible audience that insisted on being part of the performances they watched. He needed, then, texts that could control them.

This essay has provided a few examples of how early modern drama's crowd-control is, firstly, present, and secondly, displayed and exploited at Staunton's Blackfriars. It has shown that Ralph Cohen, in creating the space, rehearsal method and interactivity of early modern performance, has enabled the ASC at the Blackfriars to get back to something at the heart of Shakespeare's artistry. The audience. Us.