

CHAPTER THREE

‘ORIGINAL PRACTICES’ AT THE GLOBE: A THEATRE HISTORIAN’S VIEW

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In recent years the term ‘original practices’ (hereafter designated as OP)¹ has been invoked not only in London’s Bankside Globe but also in several theatrical venues in North America – most notably by the American Shakespeare Company in Staunton, Virginia, and the Atlanta Tavern Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. The on-stage practices linked to the term, however, can vary widely, for few common denominators are to be found among the practitioners. In Atlanta, according to artistic director Jeff Watkins, OP translates into fast-paced productions with ‘a unit set of an Elizabethan design; Renaissance or Medieval costumes; live music on acoustic instruments; organic sound; a culturally diverse ensemble of sixteen to twenty-two actors, dancers and/or musicians’; and in general terms ‘a conviction that communion of actor and audience through poetry is the essence of theater’. In Staunton, artistic director Ralph Alan Cohen’s ‘production principles’ for productions at his reconstructed Blackfriars Theatre are (1) ‘universal lighting’ (there is no variation of illumination in this venue so that, as at the Globe, the players and playgoers are always in the same light); (2) doubling of some roles (given a cast of thirteen or fewer); (3) no sets; (4) period costumes; (5) reduced length of some scripts; and (6) acoustic music. At this venue, moreover, not only is a seated audience on three sides, but up to a dozen playgoers may be seated on the stage (as at the original Blackfriars) and thereby be targeted by the actors (e.g., for comic business).

In a significant majority of the roughly thirty productions I have seen at the Bankside Globe between 1997 and 2005, directors have not sought to conform to OP (as has also been true of many productions at the Staunton Blackfriars). Admittedly, some OP features are a permanent part of the London venue – in particular, ‘universal lighting’ but also the configuration of stage, standees and seated playgoers on three (and sometimes four) sides. Moreover, some historical practices have been definite strengths at the Globe, especially period dress (thanks to the efforts of Jenny Tiramani) and period music. Several productions have involved

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all-male casts, starting with *Henry V* (1997) and including *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1999); *Twelfth Night* (2002); and *Richard II* and *Edward II* (2003).

My focus in this essay, however, is on what I term the original theatrical vocabulary – the language of the theatre shared by the playwrights, players and playgoers at the first and second Globe – elements of which do not correspond to standard stage practice today. Ay, there's the rub. Even at a historical reconstruction of the Globe or Blackfriars, exactly what does (or can) OP mean when applied to a production mounted with directors, actors, designers, publicists and playgoers from the 1990s or early 2000s?

To raise such a question is to move into the murky area in which theatre history and commercial theatre overlap. For a variety of reasons, the findings of theatre historians have had little impact on today's productions, even at a 'historical' site such as the Bankside Globe. Most significant is the presence of a director (a figure not a part of Shakespeare's company) who provides a controlling point of view that can trump OP concerns. A major reason for the resistance of directors, actors and other theatre professionals to historical scholarship is what I term *theatrical essentialism*. Proponents assume that, regardless of other changes in language, culture and social practice, a basic core of truths about theatrical practice persists and can therefore be best understood by those in the theatre community regardless of the findings (and strictures) of scholars and other laymen.

A representative example is the argument, advanced by Sir Peter Hall and others, that no theatrical professional, then or now, would construct a Globe stage with the two posts supporting the canopy or 'heavens' as positioned in the Bankside reconstruction because such a configuration interferes with sightlines and impedes the flow of the action.² To an essentialist, building upon long-established reflexes, such an objection seems self-evident. The theatre historian, however, can respond with a question: was the ability to see all the events on stage from a good vantage point prized as highly then as it is now? Those playgoers seated in some of the most expensive seats at the original Globe (in the area above and behind the stage) could not see tableaux or other special effects presented in the discovery space. In addition, Tiffany Stern has provided evidence that playgoers, whether in the yard or in the galleries, felt free to move when they could not see something on stage.³ Other forms of essentialism or transhistorical meanings regularly applied to Shakespeare's plays (e.g., about 'human nature') have long been under attack in the scholarly community, but the theatrical strain remains deeply embedded in workaday activities and thinking, as have assumptions about 'character' and psychological or narrative realism.

Along with essentialism, the other major theatrical reflex that conflicts with 'historical' findings at the Globe and comparable sites can be summed up as: 'If you have it, use it.' As already noted, a director at the Bankside Globe or Staunton

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Blackfriars does not have access to variable lighting, so that all the scenes must be played in the same illumination (as befits an OP approach). Nonetheless, a theatre historian can cite other staging practices in recent productions that have appealed to theatrical professionals but cannot be documented from the period in question.

Consider how the yard, that area populated by the standees (or groundlings) between the platform stage and the rear doors, has been used at the Globe as a playing area. Most common among the plentiful examples are entrances and exits, as in the 1997 *Winter's Tale* where Autolycus made his first entrance (4.3) thrusting his way through the standees; the 2000 *Tempest* where Ariel made her final exit to freedom through the yard; or the 1999 *Antony and Cleopatra* where a drunken Lepidus was borne away through the groundlings (2.7). More elaborate effects include Act 1 of the 1997 *The Maid's Tragedy*, where the masque was presented on the stage but the king watched it from a throne set up in the yard, and the 2003 *Richard III*, where in 3.7 Richard and Buckingham on the stage sought the support of the Mayor placed on a stand facing the stage amidst the groundlings (I being one of them). In a programme note for his 2001 *King Lear* Barry Kyle stated: 'Since this season at the Globe is not about original practices, we have taken a freer approach to what follows', an approach that, among other things, sought 'to explore the vigour of the yard'. He therefore placed a pole in the midst of the standees, which Edmund climbed to deliver his 1.2 soliloquy and which Edgar scaled for his 2.3 speech in which he announces his decision to become Poor Tom.

Particularly elaborate were director Lucy Bailey's choices in her 1998 *As You Like It*, which started with a pre-show that used a singer in the yard and a dumb show on the stage to tell the audience about Sir Rowland de Boys and his sons, and then used this area for several key scenes including the wrestling in 1.2, Rosalind observing Phebe and Silvius in 3.5 and the celebration of the killing of the deer in 4.2. A programme note announced: 'The steps at the front of the stage are not a known original feature of the Globe but part of an experiment in the use of the space.' These bleacher-like wooden steps facilitated actors' ascents and descents and therefore made entrances and exits through the yard smoother. Especially effective was the *exēunt* of Duke Senior and his lords through one door at the back of the yard to end the first Arden scene (2.1) and, after a rapid change of costume, an immediate re-entry of the same actors as Duke Frederick and his lords through another yard door.

As a playgoer I enjoyed many of Bailey's effects – although seated in the lower gallery I was unable to see Orlando's winning ploy in the wrestling (a moment I find significant). Similarly, Richard's wooing of the Mayor and citizens (in a production also directed by Barry Kyle) was a rousing success, as we citizens were encouraged to approve, applaud and eventually to join in with cries of 'God save King Richard.' This approach provided a strong sense of participation in an 'event' (an effect often sought in renditions of the orations in the Forum scene of *Julius Caesar*) but still

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struck me as problematic in that ‘we’ knew the truth about Richard’s nature and plans (and moments earlier had seen what happened to Hastings) as opposed to an on-stage crowd that could be deceived or intimidated. Similarly, Kyle’s placing Edgar in the yard undercut a potentially meaningful sequence (2.2–2.4) wherein Kent in the stocks is juxtaposed onstage with Edgar in flight, a juxtaposition that encourages a playgoer to see an analogy between them.⁴ The narrative, however, places the two figures in two distinctly different places (Kent in the courtyard of a castle, Edgar emerging from ‘the happy hollow of a tree’ (2.3.2)), so that directors wedded to ‘geographical realism’ regularly resist this moment, often by using variable lighting to black out Kent during Edgar’s speech that constitutes 2.3 in most modern editions. Kyle had no such control over the illumination at the Globe, but, thanks to his use of the yard, he could place Edgar at some distance from Kent. What for me is the most distinctive OP moment in this script was therefore sidestepped at the Globe in 2001.

Here is the dilemma. To use the yard is often to set up some theatrically exciting effects (as in Bailey’s *As You Like It* and Kyle’s *Richard III*). On the other hand, as a theatre historian I am aware that no evidence exists that the yard was used for entrances, exits, processions or special effects at the first or second Globe.⁵ Silence is not evidence, but, given what we know about acting companies, stages and audiences then, the absence of such a practice does make sense (e.g., the high value they placed on costumes would preclude close physical contact with the groundlings).⁶ However, in the real world of today’s professional theatre the ‘if you have it, use it’ approach will prevail regardless of comments from disgruntled academics.

Use of the yard and disagreement about the positioning of the posts provide two examples of the collision between historical evidence and OP as understood at the Globe. Another example is provided by the presentation of specific locales or ‘places’ on this non-representational stage that lacks today’s sets and the potential implications of such choices. The many courtroom scenes in this period include the indictment of Hermione in *The Winter’s Tale* where she is directed to enter ‘as to her trial’ (3.2.10).⁷ Evidence from a range of plays indicates that the accused figure would have been positioned at a ‘bar’ and thereby isolated from others on stage in a fashion that may prefigure or parallel her reappearance ‘like a statue’ (5.3.19) in the final moments. That property, however, was not included in the 2005 Globe production. Similarly, the presence of potted plants in the garden scene of *Richard II* (2003) or, more significantly, the on-stage fountain and arbours in *Much Ado About Nothing* (2004) made a difference to the co-ordinates of those central moments, as did a large table that stayed on stage for a sequence of scenes in *Twelfth Night* (2002).

Note the anomaly here. In OP terms, evidence does survive about the presence of a bar in courtroom scenes,⁸ but that property was not introduced for the relevant

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moments in *The Merchant of Venice* (1998) or *The Winter's Tale* at the new Globe. In contrast, even in announced OP productions directors regularly provide large properties (tables, greenery, fountains) deemed appropriate for a given locale or atmosphere. The concern with appropriate-to-the-period features such as costume, music and casting (in the case of all-male companies) does not necessarily extend to areas where today's reflexes may not mesh well with the historical evidence. For example, thanks to the presence of the elaborate fountain in the 2004 *Much Ado*, the observers or eavesdroppers in 2.3, 3.1 and 3.3 did not make use of the stage posts – as opposed to the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, 3.1 (2004) who was positioned there to eavesdrop on Isabella and Claudio – and the interval in this *Much Ado* came later than usual (after 3.3, the first Dogberry scene) so that the fountain could be removed, another non-OP feature.

What then is or should be the role of the theatre historian in discussions of the use of the yard, large properties or analogous choices? Such practices may not be Historically Correct (HC as opposed to PC), but directors would not make such choices – at the Globe, in Stratford-upon-Avon, at Ashland, Oregon – were there not gains to be achieved. Rather, the issue for me remains: what, if anything, is diminished, blurred or lost in such choices? What is the price tag? Wherein lie the trade-offs? I am sympathetic to the problems faced by theatre artists in their attempt to draw in and hold on to paying customers who lack scholarly glosses and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, as teacher, playgoer and theatre historian my basic question remains: in moving from script to stage at the Globe or elsewhere, what role can or should be played by our knowledge of the original stage conventions or staging conditions? To what extent are such features as much a part of the 'language' of the scripts as the words and metre? The theatre historian may provide some windows into the past, but, to revert to the question regularly raised by my undergraduates, so what? Consider some test cases where potentially meaningful effects in the original scripts may be blurred or lost owing to interpretive reflexes linked to theatrical essentialism or an 'if you have it, use it' approach. My examples fall under the broad umbrella of 'imagery' as understood as images for the playgoer's as well as the reader's eye. What happens to performances or performance criticism when X that was a significant, even italicised factor for the original playgoers disappears today?

First, consider references to keys in widely varying contexts in *Measure for Measure*. In Isabella's first scene 'Francisca, a nun' tells her 'Turn you the key' so as to let Lucio enter (1.4.0, 8). This key need not have been visible (the phrase could be a way of saying 'open the door'), but, along with the two women's costume, a key that does or does not allow a man to enter is a useful signal for setting up 'a convent' on the Globe stage. The presence of keys is clearest in 4.1 when Isabella displays two keys given her by Angelo to facilitate their assignation. His garden, she reveals, has a vineyard with 'a planched gate, / That makes his opening with this bigger key. / This

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other doth command a little door, / Which from the vineyard to the garden leads' (4.1.30–3). As opposed to the convent key in 1.4, these two keys are associated with lust and stealth. Finally, the Duke, pretending to rebuke the Provost for beheading Claudio, states: 'For which I do discharge you of your office; / Give up your keys' (5.1.461–2), a comment that suggests that the Provost, like other stage jailers, was identified throughout the play (not merely in the final moments) by a visible set of keys.⁹

To note the presence of keys in three different contexts is not to offer a major reinterpretation of this complex play. Nonetheless, a network of visible (and hence readily linked) images may have been available to the original playgoers, a network easily missed (and nearly invisible) today. Should the one 'nunnery' scene (1.4) somehow be linked to the series of 'prison' scenes in terms of liberty versus restraint or some other set of associations? Why call attention to Angelo's keys in 4.1 if not to heighten some kind of linkage? Since 'place' often is generated by costume signals, relevant too is the question: how is Isabella costumed after 1.4? Does she continue to wear a wimple or some equivalent so as to carry with her a sense of the convent or has she shed any such visible link? Are such questions tangential in an already highly problematic play or do they call attention to signposts that have dropped out of sight?

Consider next three separate and apparently discrete scenes in *Romeo and Juliet*: (1) the first appearance of Friar Laurence (2.3); (2) Juliet's visit to the friar's cell in which she is given the potion (4.1); and (3) Romeo's seeking out of the apothecary (5.1). The first is often designated in our editions as *in a garden* or *in a field* because the friar enters 'with a basket' (2.3.0) and talks about gathering weeds and flowers; the second is designated as the friar's cell as established by the dialogue; the third is placed in the streets of Mantua outside the apothecary's shop. But in those original productions on a bare stage with no set, all the first scene requires is an actor with a basket from which he pulls a single flower; the second and third require only vials of potion or poison that are given to Juliet and Romeo. Those vials could be picked up from a table (but then a table would have to be discovered or thrust on to the stage) or pulled out of a pocket or, to underscore imagistic continuity, pulled out of a basket carried by the friar or apothecary.

A reader or playgoer wedded to geographical realism will see no connections among the place where the friar gathers flowers and weeds, the cell where he provides the potion, and the shop where the apothecary provides poison. Moreover, both theatrical essentialism and 'if you have it, use it' reflexes cry out for some form of on-stage representation of garden, cell and street. However, in the original as [if] in staging (*as in a garden, as in a cell, as in front of a shop*) the links among the three moments need not be overly subtle (something to be teased out after many readings) but could be italicised. In the first of these scenes Friar Laurence notes

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that within the same flower (taken from his basket) 'Poison hath residence and medicine power' and links these two opposites or options to 'grace and rude will' within humankind (2.3.24–30). A playgoer who then sees two subsequent moments that strongly echo this speech is encouraged to make connections and think about issues central to the play. To impose upon this sequence a later anachronistic sense of place-locale may then blur some potentially meaningful links that could enhance that playgoer's sense of the choices made by the two title figures, choices linked visibly to two contrasting basket-bearing suppliers of vials. Here something of importance can be lost in translation.

Consider finally a sequence of scenes in *Coriolanus*. In 2.1 Coriolanus returns in triumph from the Volscian wars to be greeted in public; 2.2 moves the narrative to the Senate; 2.3 takes Coriolanus in his gown of humility into the streets to seek the voices of the plebeians; 3.1 moves back to the Senate for a major confrontation between Coriolanus and his enemies within Rome. As is the norm throughout the period, the Folio stage directions – with one notable exception – provide no information about 'place' and offer nothing equivalent to the locale headings to be found in many editions today. That exception is found in the first of the two Senate scenes: 'Enter two Officers, to lay Cushions, as it were, in the Capitol' (2.2.0). The locale for this scene is clearly 'the Capitol', but that 'place' is to be created by the dialogue, by the costumes of first the officers, then the senators, and by the laying down of cushions, an action that initially defines the theatrical space. Such 'as it were, in' thinking in turn makes possible a quick (and efficient) switch to 'the street' in 2.3 for the gown of humility scene and then a switch back to 'the Capitol' in 3.1. For the theatre historian this as [if] in technique typifies the narrative flexibility of Shakespeare's chameleon stage.

Such a Jacobean approach to 'in the Capitol' can in turn heighten images blurred or eclipsed today – in this instance the cushion. In the second Senate scene an angry Coriolanus tells the senators that if they give in to the commoners, 'Let them have cushions by you. You are plebeians / If they be senators' (3.1.100–1). For me, this line suggests that the cushions, although not cited again in a stage direction, were a visible presence here as well as in the earlier Senate scene. Later in the play Aufidius notes the title figure's inability to move 'from th' casque to th' cushion' (4.7.43), from war-generalship (as symbolised by the warrior's casque or helmet) to peace-politics (as symbolised by the cushion). These two passages and, more important, the larger process being described are much clearer if the playgoer has seen the Capitol or the Senate defined on stage not by furniture or a set but by the laying down of cushions.¹⁰ Two dialogue references are easily missed, but these properties may have had a strong theatrical presence in the first performances of this script, especially if the tumult occasioned by Coriolanus' conflict with the tribunes and plebeians in 3.1 involved disruption of the cushions.

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To extrapolate further, consider the potential effect of casques and cushions in the play's complex final scene. The Folio calls for three groups for this final confrontation: Aufidius and his conspirators who actually commit the murder; the commoners who enter with Coriolanus ('Enter *Coriolanus* marching with Drum and Colours, the Commoners being with him' (5.6.69)); and the Volscian lords. As I understand Shakespeare's strategy here, this final scene sets before us in a Volscian city the same elements (lords, conspirators, commoners) that Coriolanus had faced in Rome between 2.1 and 3.3 (patricians, tribunes, plebeians), a confrontation that, despite the support of one group (the patricians), had led to his banishment, his 'I banish you', and his 'There is a world elsewhere' (3.3.120–35). To include the same elements in the final scene in the Volscian city, again, with one of the groups – the lords of the city – supportive, is to act out the obvious fact that there is no world elsewhere, that the hero's second confrontation with such a city leads to a second defeat, this time resulting in his death – and an ignominious death for the conquering war machine of Act 1. Admittedly, such a parallel is hard to realise today for a playgoer unfamiliar with this daunting script, but here is where attention to the original stage practice can be fruitful. Imagine a Coriolanus in armour and bearing a casque-helmet who twice confronts the Roman senators seated on their cushions (2.2, 3.1) only to be banished from Rome. What if this casque-bearing figure appears again in the play's final moments to confront the Volscian lords also seated on their cushions? As in the second Roman senate scene (3.1), those cushions could be disturbed when Aufidius and his fellow conspirators, cheered on by the same commoners (who moments earlier had cheered Coriolanus), kill him.

In calling attention to keys, vials and cushions my goal is not to defend my readings (which are meant to be suggestive rather than conclusive) but to flesh out what may have been heightened images for the original playgoers. The near mystical expectations linked to the construction of the new Globe in the 1990s (a version of 'if you build it he will come') may have faded – so that to the sceptic OP claims may seem only a marketing tool for 'museum theatre' – but my question remains: are we today with our superior know-how and technology missing images or linkages that would have been obvious, even italicised to the original playgoers? Can a sense of OP that extends beyond period costume and music expand rather than constrict our approach to the surviving playscripts? Whose plays are they, anyhow?

NOTES

- 1 For purposes of this essay I will use this abbreviation, though, in a wider context, it can easily be confused with a related term, 'original pronunciation'.
- 2 For a discussion of the controversy over the placement of the posts at the new Globe see Paul Nelsen, 'Positing Pillars at the Globe', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, 3 (Autumn 1997), 324–35.

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- 3 Tiffany Stern, "You That Walk i'th Galleries": Standing and Walking in the Galleries of the Globe Theatre', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51 (Summer 2000), 211–16.
- 4 For a discussion of both the Kent/Edgar juxtaposition and the comparable situation in *As You Like It* 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7, see my *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 101–4.
- 5 Earlier scholars had argued that the stage direction *passing over the stage* involved use of the yard, but they are now read as signals for movement from one stage door to another. See the 'pass, passing, passage' entry in Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 6 Today's playgoers are likely to be better behaved than their Elizabethan/Jacobean counterparts and perhaps more amenable to actors in their midst. Moreover, Richard Burbage and his fellows would probably not have risked damage to their costumes on which they placed a very high value. E.g., a 1614 agreement between Philip Henslowe and actor Robert Dawes spells out various fines for absenteeism, lateness and drunkenness; the fine for removing a costume from the playhouse was forty times greater than the fine for missing a rehearsal. See Neil Carson, *A Companion to Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 73–4.
- 7 Citations from Shakespeare's plays are from the revised Riverside edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
- 8 For a summary of the evidence about courtroom scenes see Alan C. Dessen, 'Recovering Elizabethan Theatrical Vocabulary: a Reconsideration of the Evidence', in *Textual and Theatrical Shakespeare: Questions of Evidence*, ed. Edward Pechter (University of Iowa Press, 1966), pp. 46–50 (44–65).
- 9 Various passages can be cited as context for such keys, whether discussions of liberty-restraint (e.g., 1.2.124–30), Angelo's 'devilish mercy' that Isabella describes to Claudio 'that will free your life, / But fetter you till death' (3.1.64–6), and even the 'strange picklock' (3.2.17) found by Elbow on Pompey. In prison Pompey is told that if he helps Abhorson, 'it shall redeem you from your gyves' (4.2.10–11), a line that suggests that Claudio and the other prisoners may be wearing fetters throughout.
- 10 For an illustration of King James in the House of Lords in 1614 that includes such cushions (or, more properly, *woolsacks*), see June Schlueter, 'Michael van Meer's *Album Amicorum*, with Illustrations of London, 1614–15', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69 (2006), 301–13, figure 7. Schlueter translates the inscription in the left margin as 'Thus the King in England holds counsel in the gathering of the upper Parliament' and notes that 'The Lord Chancellor's seat, a woolsack, is in front, between the king and the clerk of the Parliament, and there are rows of judges, lawyers, bishops, earls, and barons' (p. 311).

STAGE APPEARANCE

