

Reviewing Shakespeare for the Record

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Between 1975 and 1980 I reviewed the Shakespeare productions at the Oregon Shakespearean Festival for this journal. In doing so, I had several advantages denied reviewers who must provide timely accounts for newspapers or magazines, for I was able to see the productions more than once, talk to key personnel, test my reactions against those of other playgoers, and then, when my muse chose to sing, write my essay (which appeared six months to a year after the shows had closed). The advantages that accrue from the absence of a deadline, however, only spawn a new set of problems. Thus, the reviewer who is addressing not a potential playgoer but a reader who will not have seen a production must wrestle with the question: what should a review "for the record" do, say, or record? The comments that follow provide no definitive answers to this question but rather single out some of the problems involved as well as several yardsticks I worked out for my own use.

To bring into focus the larger principles that should inform such a review, *Shakespeare Quarterly* provides its contributors with some useful guidelines. For example, if one takes into account questions of genre or audience, a review that will not appear until months after the performance "must serve a purpose somewhat different from that of a newspaper or magazine review that appears shortly after a production opens and guides a potential playgoer as he decides whether or not to attend it." Rather, a review for the record should achieve some "distance" by "placing the production under consideration into a larger context that will illuminate its contributions to stage-history." The reviewer therefore should know as much as possible about the play or plays in question (e.g., major critical interpretations, textual peculiarities, performance history, dominant image patterns) and should provide as much background information or context as possible to indicate what is distinctive about this production. Central to these guidelines is the injunction that the review should offer both an accurate record of a show and an objective assessment. Who could quarrel with an "in depth" review, addressed equally to the general reader and the specialist, that places a production in the stage history of that play so to provide both a detailed historical record and an astute evaluation?

Alas, such reviews are rare--in *Shakespeare Quarterly* or anywhere else. Many reviewers are neither stage historians or veteran playgoers or even widely read, seasoned critics, so what seems striking and "new" to one enthusiastic reviewer (e.g., Isabella not accepting the hand of the duke at the end of *Measure for Measure*) may appear familiar, even trite, to many readers. Equally damaging is an addiction to a one-dimensional judgmental approach (the reviewer as Angelo), with most of the space devoted to statements such as "Actor A was good but Actor B was not," with no analysis of why some things succeeded and others failed, no substantive account of exactly what was good or distinctive in an individual performance or a production as a whole. To the reader who did not witness the show, scorecard evaluation (hits, runs, and errors) without the attendant details and analysis provides little help or insight. Such accounts fail to confront some key questions. What would a spectator who *has* seen a show want to hear a year later? What would a stage historian, critic, or director who has *not* seen a production want to know? Perhaps most basic, why, many months later, should this show be reviewed at all? Will the Mt. Everest response ("because it was there") suffice?

To set up general guidelines is therefore relatively easy, but, as I discovered year after year, a series of basic problems and pitfalls continue to bedevil the reviewer for the record. Consider first a problem inherent in all writing but particularly in writing reviews: the need for a balance between the general and the specific so to combine inclusive-ness (coverage, abundance of detail) with selectivity and control (not all details are significant or useful). At one extreme lies a verbal account equivalent to a film of the show (an iamb-by-iamb description). Thus, an avid performance historian suggested to me that my discarded notes (the material I chose not to include in my reviews) be kept available some-where for scholars working with a given play (an analogue to cinema outtakes). At the other extreme lies the judgmental police court review (x is innocent, y is guilty) that provides no sense of the performance at all but reveals a great deal about the reviewer's likes and dislikes. To be readable, a review must have some limits, but what are to be the criteria for inclusion or exclusion (again, a problem inherent in all kinds of criticism but especially thorny when dealing with a rich, "busy," three-hour-long production that most readers will not have seen)?

One discovery I made when wrestling with such problems is that reviewers should be conscious of their implicit and explicit standards of what constitutes an ideal production of a Shakespeare play and should be constantly re-examining those yardsticks. For some purists, ideal Shakespeare is "uncut" Shakespeare. For many academic playgoers, the ideal production is one that corresponds to the reviewer's own interpretation of that play (what I think of as the salvific approach--accept my reading or be damned!). For others, an "ideal production" is inconceivable (an oxymoron); rather, a major function of the critic is to find fault (chinks in the armor) and thereby to prove Shakespeare's (and the reviewer's) superiority to the actors and director. Obviously, a reviewer cannot (and should not) exclude his or her tastes and predilections from this process (I certainly cannot), for the unstated ideal will always to a degree be personal, idiosyncratic. Nonetheless, many reviews strike me as limited because they reveal more about the tastes of the reviewer than about the production (what I think of as the "sensibility game"), a situation especially frustrating for the stage historian trying to use such reviews as evidence. On the other hand, a tedious account of undigested and unrevealing details (my iamb-by-iamb approach) will turn away all but the most dogged readers.

So over the years I developed for myself several rules-of-thumb. For example, I see no point in fixing in cold print a negative critique of a young actor, especially in a less than central role (a year later, who cares if a Malcolm could not handle his lines in his scene with Macduff and Ross?). Major roles, however, do demand attention, as does the contribution of the director who, in my view, must take responsibility for all significant decisions. Examining my own tastes, I find that as a reviewer writing for the record I am particularly attracted to the following issues: cuts, transpositions, or changes in the script and what they reveal; major interpretative decisions by actors or directors (including a dominant "concept" if any); revealing trade-offs whereby to gain effect A a director or actor has to sacrifice effect B or passage C; special decor, settings, gimmicks, and other novelties (and whether they yield new meanings or seem intrusive); and distinctive properties, stage business, or other related choices, especially when they convey some meaning or experience not readily available to the reader of the printed page. In all of these categories, I am particularly interested in any "discoveries" made by actors or directors that should be shared with those who did not see the production.

Let me provide some examples to clarify my terms and categories. First, a "discovery" can be something as small as the rendition of a single line. A widely seen example is provided by Derek Jacobi's Hamlet in the nunnery scene of the BBC-TV production when, after berating and manhandling Ophelia, he said not "it hath made me *mad*" but rather, with a look of surprise, "it *hath*

made me mad" (3.1.146)¹. This change in emphasis not only turned around the speech but also changed the value of the entire scene in a way I found exciting and provocative, regardless of whether I end up endorsing this view of Hamlet at this moment. Such provocative choices by actors and directors should be part of the record (and, conversely, shows that provide no such moments may not warrant extended attention).

Consider another much discussed moment, the bear's confrontation with Antigonus in *The Winter's Tale* that builds to the best known stage direction in Shakespeare's plays. Historians (usually invoking *Mucedorus*) opine that the King's Men had either a trained bear or a bear costume for such a scene; critics continue to disagree about the tone and effect of this confrontation; directors worried about eliciting unwanted laughter may provide here a shadowy presence (Oregon 1975) or a menacing figure seen only for a moment looming behind Antigonus (RSC 1981-2). The full range of possibilities in this confrontation, however, was hidden from me until I saw the 1984 Oregon production in which director Hugh Evans opted for a "real" (and highly mobile) bear and the adept Ashland staff gave actor Steven Martin a costume that enabled him to provide a convincing rendition of a savage predator. This bear emerged from a central trap door near the end of Antigonus' long speech (the Folio provides no entrance for the bear) and immediately became a threatening presence.

The major revelation for me about the assets of such a mobile bear then lay in the range of choices available to both actors, choices I had never before considered. In particular, the reader of this scene can easily forget that at this moment not one but two possible victims await the bear, for Antigonus has just deposited the infant Perdita somewhere onstage (so she can be found moments later by the old shepherd). Thus, in this production the bear came out of the trap and started towards the basket containing the child (downstage center). After Antigonus called attention to himself, the bear moved indecisively upstage towards this alternate prey but then started back again towards the baby. At the line "This is the chase" actor Dick Arnold playing Antigonus stamped his foot (with a strong emphasis upon the "this"), again emphasizing his presence as prey, and then exited on his "I am gone forever" pursued by the bear. This rendition, thanks to the mobile bear, not only made good theatrical sense of a line that can be puzzling to a reader ("*this* is the chase") but also added significantly to our sense of what Leontes is destroying (as clarified in the previous trial scene) and what is needed to offset those errors. Here, in this rendition, Perdita is preserved for spring and the renewal of Sicilia by an act of sacrifice, a clear choice in which Antigonus knowingly gives up his life for a higher good. Lacking any evidence about the production by the King's Men, we have no way of measuring these theatrical choices against the original rendition, but this version of this problematic moment made more sense to me than any other interpretation I have seen or read. Such choices warrant preservation "for the record" as much as other more familiar kinds of discoveries about sources, the text, imagery, allusions, and informing contexts.

Other kinds of distinctive choices also strike me as worthy of preservation for the record. For example, one of my scholarly concerns that inevitably gets intertwined with my playgoing is an interest in the original staging conventions and procedures, so I am always alert to moments in a Shakespeare script where something is happening (or appears to be happening) that is not in tune with twentieth century assumptions about realism, "character," or narrative. Some of these scenes have achieved a notoriety of their own: Gloucester's attempted suicide at Dover Cliffs; the banquet left onstage during 2.6 of *As You Like It*; the presence of Kent in the stocks during Edgar's speech in 2.3. Such anomalous moments recur throughout the canon and often elicit revealing responses from actors and directors.

Consider one such problematic moment, Queen Katherine's final scene in *Henry VIII* (4.2) where the sleeping figure has a "vision" (so termed in the heading to the long Folio stage direction) involving dancing figures clad in white wearing golden vizards and bearing a garland. According to the Folio, the figures in the vision bow to Katherine, dance, and take turns holding the garland over her head, while she, still in her chair, "*makes (in her sleep) signs of rejoicing and holdeth up her hands to heaven.*" During this action, moreover (as confirmed in the ensuing dialogue), Griffith and Patience are onstage but see nothing.

For a variety of reasons, the elaborate signal in the Folio creates difficulties for modern actors and directors. In his 1983 Royal Shakespeare Company production, director Howard Davies brought in the dancing figures, and Katherine (Gemma Jones) rose from her chair, danced *with* them, and remained standing when the lights returned to normal. As a spectator, I got the impression of a dream rather than a vision, an effect enhanced by the dimmed lighting and perhaps keyed to Griffith's reference to "such good dreams" (93). In contrast, in his 1984 Oregon production director James Edmondson reduced the Folio's group of vizarded dancers to one white-clad figure that came to a dozing Queen who, with half-opened eyes, was vaguely aware of her women (also in white costumes) winding sheets. In this rendition, the spectator was left with the sense of an hallucination, not a transcendental vision (and lost too was any link to either the vizarded group of masquers led by the King in 1.4 or the very different coronation of a Queen in 4.1). Similarly, to emphasize the dream and to have the queen rise and actually join the dance, as in the RSC version, is also to diminish the visionary or transcendental nature of this moment, especially when one remembers that in the original production, where the King's Men had no variable lighting, the spectator would have been conscious of Griffith and Patience onstage impervious to the vision (what Katherine refers to as "a blessed troop"--87). As I have argued elsewhere², this combination of seeing and not-seeing figures recurs in Jacobean drama, so that the changes made by both directors signal the presence of a stage convention available at the Globe for presenting a transcendental moment but (apparently) without efficacy today. When reading a review of a production of *Henry VIII*, I, for one, therefore want to know how this moment was staged.

Also of particular interest to me is the issue of trade-offs. Given the many choices that must be made by actors and directors, what was gained and what was sacrificed? For example, in the battle scenes of a recent modern dress production of *I Henry IV* the actors skillfully used the woods and terrain around an outdoor theatre to envelop the audience with the sounds and movement of a war zone. The price paid for such exciting battlefield realism, however, was the loss of any sense of personal chivalry and a knightly code of honor, an ethos possible with swords and armor but incompatible with automatic weapons and grenades. Again, a recent production of *Measure for Measure* provided a strong rendition of the low-life element in Vienna, as represented by Lucio, Pompey, Mistress Overdone, many onstage prostitutes, mod costumes, and rock music. The trade-off in this case came in the occasional upstaging or diminution of the well known scenes. Thus, in this production a strong Lucio, accompanied by a punk companion, clearly overshadowed Isabella in her first scene, to the extent that her line "Someone with child by him" (1.4.45) elicited considerable laughter from the audience. Given the potency of the low-life elements, Lucio here seemed "with it," witty, in control, in tune with the dominant images of the play; Isabella appeared slow on the uptake, unworldly, a bit dense, someone to be laughed at from "our" (Lucio's) perspective.

Consider as a provocative example the final scene of *Coriolanus*, a moment especially vulnerable to

such alterations (as witnessed by the widely seen BBC-TV version as well as the 1981 Stratford Festival Canada production). Let me focus, however, upon the 1980 Oregon rendition directed by Jerry Turner. First, like many directors, Turner chose not to follow the Folio stage direction for Coriolanus' death ("*Draw both the Conspirators, and kils Martius, who falles, Auffidius stands on him*"). Moreover, the Folio calls for three groups of figures for this final confrontation: Aufidius and his conspirators (who actually commit the murder); the commoners who enter with Coriolanus; and the lords of the Volscian city. In the Oregon production, however, most of the lords' lines were cut (a few were given to the conspirators). Then Coriolanus was stabbed repeatedly (six or seven times) by conspirators *and* commoners, giving Denis Arndt as Coriolanus the opportunity to act as an almost superhuman figure who, although given a series of mortal wounds, kept getting up, kept moving on, and eventually (in high heroic fashion) leapt to his death--in effect, choosing his own moment to die rather than being brought down by lesser men, no matter how many. Meanwhile, the voices of restraint or the comments upon the murder provided by the lords were eliminated. Rather, the spectators at this production saw *everyone* onstage pitted against one heroic individual who stood and fell alone and thereby greatly enhanced his stature (an effect undercut by the Folio stage direction that sets up the image of Aufidius standing or treading upon the prostrate body).

Given Arndt's bravura performance, this death scene was a superb theatrical experience and helped to elicit standing ovations. But to gain this striking, moving, heroic ending, note what had to be sacrificed. 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" (3.3.121-36). 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 his death (and an ignominious death for the conquering war machine of Act 1). The ironies and deflation of the Folio ending (at least as I read it) have therefore been traded off for an heroic climax that appeals to a modern audience--at the risk of rewrighting the play or translating it into a new language or idiom. Such changes raise a recurring question: where does "Shakespeare" end and "interpretation" begin? What price "good theatre" or standing ovations?

My purpose here is not to quarrel with the director's interpretation (indeed, I confess to sharing in those standing ovations) but rather to call attention to a particularly revealing example of directorial choices that produced a striking theatrical effect--at a price. Most trade-offs are not this extreme (or this visible), but readers who did not witness the show but are interested in this script and hero deserve to have access both to the strong effect achieved and the means used to achieve it so as to make their own decisions about meaning and interpretation in this climactic scene.

In this discussion of reviewing for the record, I have sought to present not a series of platitudes about the virtues of the ideal reviewer but rather some problems that will never be fully resolved. By way of summary, compare the following questions: (1) what *was* done in a given production? (2) what was *not* done or *could* have been done (the road not taken)? (3) what *should* have been done? (4) is this production worth reviewing and, if so, why? Building a review for the record upon question 1 would seem the obvious route (the reviewer as recording secretary), but, as I have noted, a tricky and sometimes frustrating process of selection and sorting is still involved, with many value judgments per square inch. Question 2 demands much more of the reviewer (ideally, a command of the potential in the script equal to that of the director and actors) and can easily lead to

question 3 in which the academic, not always well informed about interpretation on the stage, lectures the theatrical professional about the latter's craft, often on the basis of a narrowly conceived perspective. Question 4 involves many judgments, including an assessment of the kinds of readers to whom the review is addressed (e.g., those who have never seen a production of this script versus those who have seen many, including some stronger than the one being reviewed). But if *As You Like It* is staged twenty times during 1985, how many of those productions actually warrant reviewing for the record?

I have no neat answers to my various questions. However, speaking as a reader-consumer rather than author-reviewer, I often find myself frustrated by what is presented in (and omitted from) such reviews and therefore, for my purposes, have not found them a substitute for playgoing or even a useful source of information. As a spectator on the sidelines (who has sworn off such reviewing), I can sympathize with those who now struggle with these problems and hope for a "record" that will better serve theatrical professionals, scholars, and general readers.

Notes

1. Citations are from *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969).
2. See Chapter 7 of my *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1984).