

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



King Lear, The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and Cymbeline,
presented by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, February-November 2013.

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King Lear. Director: Bill Rauch. With Jack Willis/Michael Winters (King Lear), Daisuke Tsuji (Fool), Sofia Jean Gomez (Cordelia), and Armando Durán (Kent).

The Taming of the Shrew. Director: David Ivers. With Ted Deasy (Petruchio), Neil Geisslinger (Kate), John Tufts (Tranio), and Wayne T. Carr (Lucentio).

Cymbeline. Director: Bill Rauch. With Daniel José Molina (Posthumus), Dawn-Lyen Gardner (Imogen), and Kenajuan Bentley (Iachimo).

A Midsummer Night's Dream. Director: Christopher Liam Moore. With Gina Daniels (Puck), and Brent Hinkley (Bottom).

This was the 78th season of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and four of its eleven productions were Shakespeare plays: two were staged indoors (*King Lear* and *The Taming of the Shrew*) and two outdoors on the Elizabethan Stage/Allen Pavilion. This was the first season in which plays were performed indoors across the full season, and so both *The Taming of the Shrew* and *King Lear* had large numbers of performances. Nevertheless, according to the *Mail Tribune*, the non-Shakespeare plays drew larger audiences than Shakespeare this season: the plays staged outdoors fared especially poorly, and this is explained in part by the fact that four outdoor performances had to be cancelled because of

smoke in the valley, resulting in a loss of ticket income of around \$200,000.¹

King Lear

King Lear was staged in the Thomas Theatre (previously the New Theatre), the smallest of the OSF theatres, and ran from February to November. In this intimate venue, the audience was on all four sides with entrances and exits on three of the diagonals and a staircase on the fourth, leading right out of the auditorium. Members of the cast sat among and interacted with the audience at several points in the early part of the action, and, overall, this was a production which avoided pathos, in which every possible laugh was played for (including some which you never would have thought of), and in which no possible cruelty was shunned.

There were several positive and laudable features of this production. The performances of the cast were, for the most part, extremely impressive, and certainly more so than the directorial concept. Two actors shared the role of Lear in alternating performances, and the website did sterling work in alerting audiences to which actor they were going to see. Sadly, Jack Willis was injured early in the season, and I did not have the opportunity to see his performance. However, Michael Winters (as Lear), Vilma Silva (Goneril), Robin Goodrin-Nordli (Regan), Armando Duran (Kent) and Daisuke Tsuji (the Fool) were exceptional, and credit also goes to Rex Young (Cornwall), Peter Frechette (Albany) and Sofia Jean Gomez (Cordelia). I was not entirely convinced by Raffi Barsoumian (Edmund) or Benjamin Pelteson (Edgar) and was not convinced at all by Richard Elmore as Gloucester: he seemed neither surprised nor concerned that his son was trying to kill him or that civilization as he knew it was falling apart.

There were some notable moments when close attention to the text really paid off. For example, in one nice detail, when Edmund spoke the phrase 'Come hither captain' (5.3.26)² he paused before the final word, and actually promoted the soldier on the spot. In another, there was a touching moment in 4.1 when Edgar, having accepted the purse from

¹ Bill Varble, 'Variety Pays Off for OSF', *Mail Tribune*, 10 November, 2013.

<<http://www.mailtribune.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20131110/NEWS/311100340/-1/TEMPO>>

² All act, scene and line references refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

Gloucester, slipped it back into his father's pocket. The storm scene (3.2) was staged very effectively and with great economy, using flashlights, a wind machine and timpani. It was clear in this scene that the director trusted in the power of the words and in the ability of his actor to move the audience: sadly, that level of trust was not evident throughout the production.

I had hoped that setting the play in this small theatre would have led to fluidity, with little need for stage furniture. Certainly, there was little changing of scenery, except during the two intermissions, and good use was made of a central trapdoor which allowed for the removal of a display case holding the map in the opening scene, of a reclining chair in Albany's castle in Act 1, of Poor Tom's hovel in Act 3 and of the body of Oswald in Act 4. However, there was a great deal of bringing on and off of stage furniture. A basketball frame was wheeled on for Edmund to use in 1.2, then struck, and a reclining chair and a large TV brought on for 1.3 and 1.4. There were two lengthy intermissions, each of which seemed to have been used primarily to move objects (and bodies) on and off the set. The first came at the end of Act 1, when gates were brought on diagonally across the playing area. The second was taken at the end of 3.7, and the bodies of Cornwall and the servant were removed during that break - to great applause. Much of this second intermission was taken up with striking a grand piano (which had been brought on specifically for this scene so that Cornwall could play 'Three Blind Mice' before blinding Gloucester) and installing signs of wreckage - a broken piano, upturned chairs and an upturned throne on the stairs. These interventions were distracting and sometimes even frustrating: a sports programme was playing on the TV in 1.4, but half of the audience was unable to see the screen, and the half which could have seen it might have been puzzled by the fact that it was showing Australian rules football. The gates introduced in the first intermission affected the sightlines for some of the audience, and the re-setting in the second intermission simply took up too much time.

Further problems related to costume and characterization. This was a production in modern dress, but it was by no means clear where it was set. The cast had US accents, but there were hints that the setting was England: once the fighting was done at the end of the play, Lear and Cordelia emerged in 5.3, clad in jumpsuits with 'HM Prison' on their backs, and in 2.1 Cornwall wore a red Manchester United tracksuit top, albeit one with a rather outdated logo. These choices sat oddly with the TV scene to which I have referred above, not only because of the non-English sport showing on the screen, but also because Kent

reappeared in this scene behind the TV as a repair man, and, in his opening soliloquy, he affected a Chicano accent for his alter ego.

There were some challenging characterisation decisions. The first actor onstage was in contemporary combat fatigues, and he paused to take in the throne. We quickly learned that this was Edmund, who, rather than having been ‘out’ nine years (1.1.32), had been ‘gone’. Edmund is normally represented as seething with envy at the way he has been treated, yet here he seemed to have enjoyed a successful military career and a thorough training, and he remained in military garb throughout almost the entire production. This eccentric way of treating Edmund was aggravated in 1.2 when we met Edgar, a foppish and intoxicated figure in a velvet suit, swigging from a bottle of champagne. During the first intermission, I heard a member of the audience seeking clarification from his neighbour: “So Edgar is the drunk brother, and Edmund is the soldier, right?” Well, maybe in this production...

At the beginning of the play, Cordelia was a feisty rebel, with dyed streaks in her hair and a tattoo on her back. She laughed loudly when Lear asked Goneril to speak first, she patted Burgundy on the back to dismiss him after he rejected her, and climbed all over France when he accepted her. She returned dressed as a soldier and with no streaks in her hair in 4.3, a scene which was heavily cut.

The Fool emerged from the audience in 1.4. He was dressed in an ill-fitting suit, with one red sock and one white, with a playbill on his head as a coxcomb. He embellished this costume with paper and scotch tape as the play went on, to the extent of having shoes with turned-up toes by Act 3. He was accidentally stabbed to death by the knife of Poor Tom in 3.6 while he and the others were trying to calm Lear. Edgar laid the body of the Fool on a cart after Gloucester and Kent left the stage, but he was then left in the awkward situation of having to deliver a soliloquy while avoiding any reference to the corpse directly in front of him.

Albany was represented as clearly taking Lear’s side against his wife in 1.4: when Lear called on the gods – ‘Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear!’ (275) – Albany made a religious (but non-Christian) gesture with his right hand at ninety degrees to his forehead, ignoring Goneril’s mute appeals. This was a gesture Albany was to use again in the final scene of the play. In contrast to this piety, Cornwall and Regan were both characterised as being drunk in the later stages of the production, especially in the blinding of Gloucester.

The production made several textual changes that were intended humorously and were related to the modernised setting. Lady Brach became Lady Bitch (1.4.112). ‘Where may we set our horses?’ (2.2.4) became ‘Where may we set our luggage?’ As Curan made his exit in 2.1, he pressed the remote control for a car, which gave an obliging beep, and in 2.2 the trumpets of the Duke of Cornwall and of Goneril became ‘horns’ – the horns of offstage cars, which were identical in sound. In 2.1 there was a good example of a means of updating the text that was frequently used in this production: Cornwall’s line to Edmund ‘you shall be ours’ (114) became ‘you shall be ours – huh?’

There was also heavy cutting. Scene 3.1 (Kent’s conversation with the Gentleman) was cut entirely and the Fool’s final lines on Merlin’s prophecy in 3.2 were also excised, as were much of the ramblings of Poor Tom in 3.6. In the cuts to 4.3, we lost the beautiful lines describing Cordelia’s first meeting with her father: ‘You have seen / Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears / Were like a better way’ (4.3.17-19) – but I have yet to see a stage production in forty years which included those lines!

The Taming of the Shrew

According to Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith, *The Taming of the Shrew* is impossible to update to a contemporary setting, since the play ‘is based on a *sine qua non* of Renaissance domestic life: that a wife owes obedience to her husband. The 1950s is probably the latest period to which one can transpose this play.’³ This production, performed in the Angus Bowmer Theatre, was indeed set in the 1950s, but not for its misogynist connotations. Rather, this was the 50s of *Happy Days*, in a performance staged in a fairground setting on a boardwalk, complete with a rock’n’roll band. These choices proved significant both in creating the sense of an unreal location (a holiday venue where nothing should be taken seriously and problems could be forgotten) and in promoting guitar playing, which was (and is), traditionally, a male province (more of this in a moment). There were some anachronisms (for example, a Segway scooter, references to Beyonce and Jay Z, and a PowerPoint presentation) but the pace of the production prevented any lingering on these

³ Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith, *30 Great Myths About Shakespeare* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 22.

details. The set and the costumes were colourful and vibrant to the point of being garish, especially those of the suitors: Hortensio's clothes were wonderfully extravagant (think Elvis's Vegas years), whereas Gremio's shorts revealed his thin white legs, thus proving that not everyone looks good on the beach.

In this production, Baptista was the owner of a concessions stand, situated stage left, from which issued a variety of products, including a bucket of fried chicken used in 4.1 (which had Baptista's logo rather than that of KFC). The stage above the concessions stand was the location for the band, whilst the area on stage right had a fortune teller's booth ('Fortune's Fool') with a video screen above it: this was used to show the approach of Petruchio on his Harley 'hog' in 3.2 and for a presentation by Tranio in 2.1 to demonstrate the wealth promised by his father. Some of the detailed work which went into this setting might well have been lost on most of the audience in a theatre this size: I did not see the Baptista logo the first time I saw the production, and I never saw Bianca reading *Fifty Shades of Grey* (another anachronism) although I have been assured that she was.

Some characters and lines were adjusted to fit more easily into the boardwalk setting: for example, the Pedant became a Tourist and 'at the university' became 'at the beach'. In another development, Biondello was a woman, and was therefore able to become a partner for Grumio at the end of the play. Bianca was played as a blonde airhead, attractive only in the most superficial sense; she drank too much in the final scene.

The play opened without the Christopher Sly Induction, but instead had Petruchio, in the first of his rock-a-billy drape jackets, singing with the band. I did not feel this was completely successful – not least because, since Petruchio does not come on stage for several scenes, it was easy to fail to recognize him in this first appearance.

This production emphasized the broad farce of the play, using slapstick elements throughout, and the energetic and capable cast clearly relished these opportunities. For example, Tranio stirred Luciento from his trance in 1.1.178 by throwing water over him from a bucket conveniently placed by the stage, and, in 2.1, Kate slapped her sister with a wet fish. However, this slapping was surprisingly gentle, and the farcical playing of these violent moments tended to imply that none of the violence of the play should be taken seriously. The comedy was broad throughout: the actors occasionally stepped off the apron altogether to allow characters to overhear one another (for example, when Tranio and

Lucentio overheard Hortensio and Gremio in 1.1)

How do you solve the problem of the apparent misogyny of the play? One way is to make Kate and Petruchio seem to be equally enjoying the jousting of their courtship: in this production, that equality was played up in part by having each of them be heavily tattooed. Another way, also used by this production, is to make Kate's final speech a joke between her and Petruchio, and to have him come obediently to Kate at her command. This production then added a more original solution: after Kate's speech, the play was rounded off with a guitar duel between Kate and Petruchio, which Kate won - and it ended with a song. I may be being over-subtle, but I noticed that Petruchio's servants were transformed into his roadies in the second half of the play, and that they fooled the audience by playing dummy guitars: perhaps none of the males could really play guitar?

Cymbeline

This season, OSF took risks in including productions of *The Taming the Shrew* and *Cymbeline* – the former is a risk because it is a play we think we know and a play to which the modern world is resistant; the latter because it is a play with which we are less familiar, and therefore a play to which the audience has to be wooed. In both cases, the risk paid off, although the comic inventiveness of *Cymbeline* was sometimes marred by confusing costuming and overblown scenic effects.

The production used a mixture of costumes, ranging from the fantastical (the doctor and the Queen) to more conventional period dress. Some characters were also given pointy ears (the interpreter, some of the British soldiers and the soothsayer), whilst in the scene in prison (5.4), we encountered a most extraordinary jailer who seemed to be clad in a complete body-stocking, head and all, so that he would not have been out of place in *Star Wars* or in *Shrek*.

The three open-air productions this season shared what was essentially the same set, which showed off the tiring-house facade to good effect, while using the upper and lower levels, and the interiors for both these levels, as well as a central, downstage trapdoor. *Cymbeline* had magnificent lighting and video projections, and superb music: the lighting, in particular, became more striking as darkness fell and the tiring-house itself could be used as

a screen. I do not recall quite such extensive use of lighting effects in this theatre since the production of *Henry VIII* in 2009, and I wonder whether there was a sort of built-in insurance policy between both of these productions: if the audience did not love the show, there were still visual treats to enjoy. However, we do not come out whistling the lighting, and I wish that the director had had more faith in the abilities of his cast to tell the tale.

Cymbeline has a large cast (forty named roles in the Folio text) and therefore it is as diffuse in its focus as a history play, even though the Folio classifies it as a tragedy. This production featured twenty three actors, playing on the large stage of the open-air Allen Pavilion. It was only the sixth OSF production of *Cymbeline*, all but one of which have been performed on this stage. The 2013 production did not opt for a dreamlike quality (despite increasing the number of ghosts from those in Shakespeare's text). Instead, it became an object lesson in how to play for comic effect, and just how fluid generic boundaries can be when staging a Shakespeare play.

There were a number of notable performances in this production. Anthony Heald as Cornelius, Robin Goodrin Nordli as the Queen, Tony DeBruno as Pisanio, Jeffrey King as Belarius/Morgan and Al Espinosa as Cloten all did splendid work. For me, the best moments in this large-scale production came when there was attention to detail. When the audience is first told of Cloten, the character who describes him says 'He that hath miss'd the Princess is a thing' (1.1.16). In this production, he paused after 'thing' to insert a disgusted 'aaach': we thus knew what to expect from Cloten. This sort of touch is one of the things that Rauch does best as a director, and this care was also evident in several moments in Kenajuan Bentley's performance as Iachimo: in 1.4, Iachimo's reference to 'any lady in the world' (112-13) was accompanied by his pointing into the audience. And when we came to the following exchange:

POSTHUMUS: What lady would you choose to assail?

IACHIMO. Yours, whom in constancy you think stands so safe. (125-6)

the pause after "Yours" was as shocking a moment as Beatrice's "Kill Claudio" in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Similarly, when Iachimo entered in 1.6, it looked as if he was going to enjoy a lascivious joke with the line, 'All of her that is out of door most rich!' (15), as he began to stroke his chest. However, the real joke came on the lines 'Boldness be my friend; / Arm me, audacity, from head to foot' (18-19), upon which he stooped to pick a flower

from the ground to give to Imogen. His 'Revenge it' (preferred to "Be reveng'd" at line 126), was delivered with maximum weight, and again followed by a pause. There was, however, a downside to many of these touches, because they had the effect of making Iachimo neither sinister nor threatening. In addition, Bentley was unable to sustain his Italian accent – and the fact that accents were used at all (Italian early on, Welsh later) was an indication of Rauch's tendency to treat the play as a comedy. This was compounded by the inclusion of the occasional Italian words not in Shakespeare's text, such as 'Andiamo' and 'Ciao'.

The pace of comic invention increased as the play went on: in 3.5, Cloten's bribery of Pisanio took the form of a single coin, even though he promised a 'purse' (123); in 3.6, Imogen had a fine comic moment when, after the two young men furiously rejected her offer of money, she responded, 'I see you're angry' (55); and in the final scene, the lines 'I slew him there' (5.5.287), 'I left out one thing which the Queen confess'd' (244) and even 'The Queen is dead' (27) were all played for laughs. But there was comic invention throughout the production: in 2.3, in a neat piece of business, a sleeping Imogen hugged Iachimo after he had stolen her bracelet, much to his delight; in 3.3 the two sons joined in with Morgan's lines as he extolled the virtues of their mountain life as opposed to court life: clearly, this was a sermon they had heard many times before (the choice reminded me of an interchange between Polonius, Ophelia and Laertes in the 2010 OSF production of *Hamlet*). There were comic touches even in the midst of death and confusion: Posthumus's complaint, 'You have put me into rhyme' (5.3.63), received a well-earned laugh and in the final scene, the Welsh group, located on the upper level of the stage, shouted 'hey' and waved when 'Fidele' was identified (5.5.118).

From the outset of the play, Cloten was depicted as the principal comic character, and, again, was never really credible as a threat. In 2.1, Cloten constantly admired himself in a mirror, and that became a device he used all through this production, not least when he disguised himself as Posthumus. However, in 2.3, after the song 'Hark Hark the lark' had been turned into a ridiculous performance by Cloten and his servants, the scene became problematic for me, because of the way it treated the actor playing Cymbeline. That role was performed by Howie Seago, a deaf actor; other members of the company used sign language when he was on stage, while Peter Frechette signed all of the King's speeches. In this scene, Cloten proved to be not only an incompetent singer, but also incompetent at signing, employing the sort of parody of signing often seen when English tourists try to

communicate with foreigners. I have to confess that I found this offensive: the audience laughed but the ‘joke’ seemed to be as much at the expense of the deaf Cymbeline as the idiot Cloten. Moreover, in previous OSF productions in which Howie Seago has acted, his lines have been signed by a member of the cast who had a substantive role in the play, but in this case Frechette had no role but that of interpreter.

This production made some notable changes to the ordering and nature of individual scenes. In recent years, and most notably in the 2010 season, OSF productions of Shakespeare plays have often opened with scenes other than those found in the original text. This production of *Cymbeline* dispensed with Shakespeare’s first scene, and began with Posthumus in a graveyard with the ghost of his parents. The two anonymous lords were thus excised from the opening of the play, and the dialogue began with the entrance of the Queen, Imogen and Posthumus, with Cornelius, the doctor, speaking the lines from what is usually 1.1 which explain what happened in times gone by. Indeed, Cornelius’s role was much extended in this production to become a choric/narrator figure akin to Gower in *Pericles*, with a fantastic costume, a beard and hair curled into horns. In addition to providing exposition at the beginning of the play, the lines at the end of 2.3 on the foolishness of Cloten were given to him, and he had a significant presence at the end of the play.

Other notable cuts included the early dialogue between the maid and the Queen in 1.5, replaced by a cauldron emerging from the rear of the lower level, into which, at the end of the scene, the Queen threw a rat, much to the amusement of the audience. Jupiter did not appear in 5.4 so that Posthumus dreamed only of ghosts and was given no tablet. The final scene of the production took some twenty minutes to unravel all of the play’s plot threads but, given that Posthumus had received no tablet, the Soothsayer was left to prophesy at less length after Cymbeline had declared his wish for peace. Another consequence of this omission was that there was nothing in this final scene which the audience did not already know.

Music featured more prominently in this production than the text would suggest. The well-known song ‘Fear No More the Heat of the Sun’ does not normally occur in the text until 4.2, but it was used as a leitmotif throughout this production: it was there at the opening of the play; sung again in 1.6 by the ghost of Imogen’s mother; and reprised in its usual place in 4.2 by another female ghost, who had a fine Welsh accent (it was a little hard to know

whose ghost she was: my assumption was that she was the ghost of Belarius's wife, who was to return at the end of the play). The play ended with one more verse from 'Fear No More', sung by the whole company, wishing that 'nothing ill come near' (4.2.279).

Despite its comic invention, this was in many respects a confusing production, not least in terms of its costuming. I am told that when, as a result of smoke in the valley, the full production had to be substituted by a simple indoor reading, the play made more sense.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Like *Cymbeline*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the other open-air Shakespeare production, opened with a scene which is not found in Shakespeare. In this case, the play began with the graduation of the Class of 1964 from a Roman Catholic US high school, so we saw very young lovers (in school uniform), and a Theseus and Hippolyta who were the School Principal (a priest) and a nun rather than a Duke and Duchess. This heightened the shock value when Hippolyta and Theseus finally kissed in 4.1, but took away any sense that Theseus might once have been a warrior. The 'mechanicals' were members of the school staff, although the fairies were in Elizabethan dress. There was a female Philostrate and a female Puck, and a great deal of video projection associated with the latter character, as she flew around the woods. One problem associated with the new setting was that I did not feel that the lovers were sufficiently aristocratic; it was not always easy to see a real difference between their status and that of the mechanicals, nor to hear that they were speaking verse rather than prose. However, they were charming, not least when their escape to the woods involved taking sleeping bags and a teddy bear.

The central comic figure was undoubtedly Bottom, who had the best of the comic business: when, in 3.1, there was confusion between 'odious savors sweet' and 'odors savors sweet' (82-84), he sniffed at Quince's armpit. In this same scene, his voice grew ever higher as he was being measured for his costume by Quince. This trajectory meant that the audience anticipation became increasingly high for the play of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' and it was not disappointed. Although the prologue to the play was cut, we saw a ridiculous Flute in drag as Thisbe (all the sillier, given that three of the mechanicals were women); a wonderful 'Pam Snout' playing Wall, attired in armour made of kitchen implements; and a magnificent death scene from Pyramus, who found no less than six different ways to end

his life, including a car accident and hanging.

As a whole, the production emphasised physical comedy. For example, the second half of the play opened with a chase scene and confusion among lovers (3.2), with Hermia wandering above lost in confusion, while Lysander and Demetrius chatted up Helena. Later in that same scene, Lysander and Demetrius moved upstage, leaving Helena and Hermia to fight, while they themselves exchanged blows in the sort of non-fight that we saw between Hugh Grant and Colin Firth in *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

Conclusion

The four Shakespeare plays on offer at OSF this season had in common the notion of escape to a green or alternative world: very evidently there in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Cymbeline*, somewhat less obviously in *King Lear* (the heath), and there by implication in the fairground setting of this particular production of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The 2013 season proved to be a successful season for OSF, but the big audience draws were all non-Shakespearean productions. As some of the longer-established members of the company move to retirement, it will be interesting to see if younger actors coming in are able to cope with the demands of Shakespeare's language and, in particular, the requirements of playing in a large auditorium open to the skies. Let us hope that the escape does not become a flight from Shakespeare.