

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Twelfth Night, Hamlet, The Winters' Tale, Richard II, Timon of Athens*, presented
by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, February-November 2016.**

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Twelfth Night. Director: Christopher Liam Moore. With Sara Bruner (Viola/Sebastian), Gina Daniels (Olivia), Ted Deasy (Malvolio), and Rodney Gardiner (Feste).

Hamlet. Director: Lisa Peterson. With Danforth Comins (Hamlet), Christiana Clark (Horatio), and Derrick Lee Weeden (Polonius).

The Winter's Tale. Director: Desdemona Chiang. With Eric Steinberg (Leontes), Amy Kim Waschke (Hermione), and Miriam Laube (Paulina).

Richard II. Director: Bill Rauch. With Christopher Liam Moore (King Richard II), and Jeffrey King (Henry Bullingbrook).

Timon of Athens. Director: Amanda Dehnert. With Anthony Heald (Timon), Vilma Silva (Apemantus), and Jonathan Haugen (Alcibiades).

After the 2015 season, which staged only three Shakespeare productions, the Festival returned to a full complement of Shakespeare in 2016, using all three of its performances spaces. Sadly, another member of the acting company died of cancer this season: Judith-Marie Bergan was in her fifteenth year at OSF, playing the role of Miss Havisham in an adaptation of *Great Expectations*, having previously acted in some seven Shakespeare plays.

Twelfth Night

This was the first production to open, and had the longest run of any of the five Shakespeare plays. It was staged in the Bowmer Theatre and proved to be an exuberant and enjoyable production, but not one which was always faithful to the play which Shakespeare wrote, not least in its changing of the order of scenes.

The production was set in 1930s Hollywood, and it opened with the imposing edifice on the stage of the doors to Illyria Productions, and with the screening of two newsreels (from Folio Studios): the first told us that the movie star, Olivia, had pulled out of *What You Will* after her brother had died; the second that a pair of wealthy twins had been shipwrecked. We were then plunged into what is usually the second scene of the play, as the Sea Captain and Viola (with long hair and in a dress) entered the auditorium by way of one of the doors used by the audience.

By the time they were on stage and this scene was underway, the Illyria facade was being drawn back, the scene was changing to a movie lot, racks of costumes were being wheeled onto the stage, and the full extent of the set was opened up. Viola took a blazer from one of the racks and exited – when she next appeared in 1.4 she was dressed as a boy and had short hair, a transformation which might well have needed a clearer handling for those less than familiar with the play. When the same actor re-appeared as Sebastian in 2.1, there was no change of costume from that which she had worn as Viola/Cesario and little alteration of voice or manner.

Those familiar with Shakespeare often go to see his plays with particular scenes or issues in mind. For example, I tend to go to *King Lear* looking for how the blinding of Gloucester will be staged, and, when watching *Twelfth Night*, I am waiting for the staging of the Letter scene (2.5: often called the boxtree scene), the handling of the late introduction of Fabian and the way in which the production presents the twins.

To deal with the third of these issues first: the director of this production made the decision to have a single actor play both Viola and Sebastian, a bold move which was not entirely successful. In 2014 OSF presented a production of *Comedy of Errors* in which two actors played both sets of twins (echoing the 2004 OSF production of that play and earlier productions by other companies), but that is a much more straightforward trick to pull off. For one thing, the doubled roles are all male, for another there is just one brief moment at the end of the play when both sets of twins are required to be on stage at the same time: in both the 2004 and the 2014 productions of *Comedy of Errors*, two other actors came onstage for those final moments.

I have read no account of any other production of *Twelfth Night* which has attempted to have a single actor play both twins, and, in this version, there was no second actor onstage in the final scene to help resolve the plot. The result was an audience left in some confusion.

The Hollywood setting allowed the possibility of some on-screen cinematic trickery in the final revelation of Sebastian and Viola as separate individuals, but, when that cinema screen had been removed (5.1.278), we were left with a single actor on the stage, and the whispers from the audience members around me made it clear that nobody was quite sure which character she was representing.

My suspicion is that the director had in mind a visual tableau for the final moments of the production in which Viola/Sebastian was situated between Orsino and Olivia, torn between two lovers. Sadly, the production did not make that final tableau comprehensible, and it did not take the audience with it on the journey which led up to it.

After the opening scene, we saw the scene which is usually presented as 1.1, and the full set was revealed. There were long drapes at the back of the stage, with a staircase upstage coming down from stage right to centre stage. A grand piano was positioned forward of that staircase centre stage right, and there were steps down from the stage into the audience. Later, a circular trap was revealed at centre stage which was to be used on a number of occasions, notably to take of Malvolio from the stage in the box tree scene.

In 1.1, Orsino was dressed in a swimming costume, complete with inflatable rubber ring, and he stood at audience level, miming the action of swimming in a pool (the pool being suggested by blue lights). He was given a Germanic accent, which he retained throughout the performance and which did nothing to make him seem a romantic hero. In later scenes he wore riding boots and carried a crop, sometimes sitting on a chair labelled 'Director'.

In that swimming-pool scene, the piano-player was named by Orsino as Fabian, and I wondered whether the production had found a way to account for the absence of this character from the first third of the play: would he be the pianist in those early scenes, and then take up the lines of Fabian in the later part of the action? In part the answer was 'Yes', but that was because he remained the pianist throughout and had no lines in the play: the lines attributed to Fabian were either cut out given to another character.

The scenes which took place in Olivia's household were distinguished by legend 'Hollywoodland' which was projected on to the drapes at the rear of the stage. These were among the most effective scenes in the production, and featured some of the most competent and most audible actors in the cast, as well as some of the best comic business. For example, it was soon clear that the piano was not only a musical instrument, but also one of several hiding places for Toby's secret stash of booze.

In 2.2 the playing area was extended as Malvolio sought to return a ring to Cesario. He entered in one side of the auditorium and crossed all the way to the other along row J, before coming back on to the stage - out of breath!

After that, we had one of the most extensive alterations to the text as 2.3 and 2.4 were intercut, with 2.3 presented on stage left and 2.4 on stage right.¹ Perhaps the intention here was to imitate the sort of cutting between scenes which we associate with films. However, the cutting in this case had the disadvantage of disrupting the gradual development of a relationship between Orsino and Viola, and, in truth, there was no such relationship in this production.

2.5, the boxtree scene, came just before the intermission. The comic characters wheeled on a triptych of mirrors which served as their hiding place, and also as a glass in which Malvolio could admire himself. The joke was that Sir Andrew proved totally incompetent at staying hidden, at one point finding himself in front the mirrors and preening himself there.

When Malvolio was reading the letter, Sir Andrew's query (at line 89) – 'Her c's, her u's and her t's: why that?'² – was amended to spell out a four-letter word, and the question was followed by Maria whispering the answer (and the offending word) in Sir Andrew's ear, by way of explanation – at which point he fainted. The nature of the word which Sir Andrew had spelled out seemed to be lost on the audience at the performance which I attended.

Malvolio continued to read his letter, stepping over the supine Sir Andrew, and eventually having to step over all three comic characters as they lay in his path.

¹ The order was: 2.3.1-52;2.4.1-41;2.3.72-125;2.4.42-79;2.3.126-end;2.4.79-end.

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

The second half of the play began with music from Feste, but he had adopted the role of a blind harmonica player, playing the blues, and so the question in the opening line of the scene about his living 'by thy tabor' was amended to 'by thy harp'.

Sir Andrew's decision to leave in 3.2 was prepared for in this production by having him overhear the conversation between Viola and Olivia in the previous scene, as he came down the staircase, bouquet in hand, ready to woo Olivia himself.

3.2 included some good visual gags. The luggage of Sir Andrew included a cat in a basket and, when he made to leave up the stairs, he stopped, seeming to realise that he had left something behind. However, it was his cocktail glass rather than the basket which he retrieved, and, on his exit, it was left to Maria to throw the basket into the vomitorium, much to the anguish of the audience.

The sword fight in 3.4 was staged with a great deal of invention. In part, it drew upon the conceit of the movies, by having the combatants fight in slow motion, and, even more engagingly, Maria and Sir Toby became involved in the action as they started to demonstrate to Sir Andrew and Viola how they should hold their swords, only to find that they themselves were fencing.

We were reminded of the Hollywood setting once more in 3.3, in which the conversation between Sebastian and Antonio took place in a car, (which had a video projection of a retreating landscape for a rear window) and the revelation in the final scene drew heavily upon the movies. A screen was lowered and a black-and-white film was shown, which allowed both Sebastian and Viola to be seen on stage simultaneously, music was played reminiscent of the film scores of the 1930s, and the cast became on onstage audience, sitting on the floor downstage.

This production did not end, as other productions have done, with characters pairing off, leaving a solitary Antonio behind. In this version, Malvolio, constantly smiling, uttered his threat of revenge from a doorway in the auditorium, and may well not have been seen by some members of the audience.

There was worse to come. The production which, from 1.3 onwards, had included a great deal of music and dance, culminated in a full-scale Busby Berkeley tap number. This grew out of song from Feste which started with lyrics from Sonnet 73 and segued into 'The Rain it Raineth Every Day'. I wondered whether this lavish spectacle was there in part to paper over the cracks of not having dealt adequately with the presentation of the twins.

Almost every member of the cast was involved in this closing number, the only exception being the actor playing Malvolio. When the dance was over and applause was ringing out all over the theatre, he stepped on to the stage, a smile still on his face and pointed to a small overhead projection which announced that this production had been censored by order of Malvolio.

This was singularly ineffectual, and very easy to miss: why not have Malvolio stop the number in mid-flow and either end the show there, or have him cajoled into joining in? Overall, although some of the central performances were strong, I wondered at times if all those involved in this production understood the meaning of what was being said: or perhaps the director felt that the audience would not be able to follow the words too closely anyway? For example, in 1.5, the reference to Olivia wearing a veil was included, even though she had no veil.

Sometimes pace triumphed over audibility, and that problem was not helped by some odd choices in staging. For example, in 4.2 the 'mad' Malvolio was confined in a recording studio - unsurprisingly, he was hard to hear!

Hamlet

Hamlet was the first of two Shakespearean productions presented in the open air, in the Allen Elizabethan Theatre. There was a great deal to admire in this impressive production. The acting was of an exceptionally high standard, and not only in the central roles. There was strength in depth in this cast: relatively minor roles were taken in some cases by actors who have starred in recent productions.

For the most part, this was a production which foregrounded the expertise of the actors in speaking the language of Shakespeare: for example 'persever' in 1.2 was stressed on the second syllable and 'discretion' in 2.1 was given four syllables. It was also a production which was staged simply but effectively – making the best use of this theatrical space that I have seen in a decade.

The stage set was largely bare and unadorned, with metal ladders and stairs connecting the upper and levels. Furniture was brought on by the cast when needed (e.g. a chaise longue for 3.4); the trap door centre stage was opened on two occasions (1.5 and 5.1); and a curtain was drawn for the arras (3.4). In other words, the staging approximated in many respects to the first productions of the play.

Furthermore, almost all the cast wore Elizabethan/Jacobean costume: silver grey for all but Hamlet (who wore black), Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (who wore comical patterns of checks and stripes) and the players (who had coloured, Turkish costumes).

In all these respects, this promised to be a production which would appeal to the purists in the audience, those who reject modern dress and 'gimmicks'. There was, however, one crucial exception to this conservatism.

The Playbill for this production, like that for *Twelfth Night*, featured a photograph of a central character from the play (Hamlet in this case, Olivia in the other) accompanied by a musician who was credited as having a role in the play. The *Hamlet* photograph showed him with a red electric guitar, while another guitarist, in modern dress, stood above him on the upper level.

So we entered the auditorium with that image in our minds, and found that the stage was not totally unadorned: there was a drum kit, a microphone and three electric guitars on the top level, and a small raised platform stage left on the lower level, on which sat two other guitars and a microphone on a stand. It seemed we might be anticipating a rock concert.

An actor (Scott Kelly) entered on the upper level and started to play a guitar and sing (a song called 'Till Death Do Come'). The music continued as Hamlet (Danforth Comins), in period costume (or is it contemporary leathers?), entered from the audience, took a guitar and mimed playing it. He exited, and the stage was filled with rushing actors in ghostly grey with crowns on their heads. Then the music stopped and the opening lines of the play were spoken.

My feeling about the 1930s Hollywood setting for *Twelfth Night* was that it was insufficiently integrated into a concept for the whole play. I had a similar sense here with the rock guitarist, except that this musical concept touched only on Hamlet and, much later in the play, on the mad Ophelia (and, in the very final moments, on Claudius): the rest of the cast could simply concentrate on delivering a fine version of the play. Hamlet became an emo character, signally different from those around him. Although Scott Kelly, from the band Neurosis, was a skilled musician, I felt that the Danforth Comins was too old to be an emo, and too evidently could not play the guitar.

Moreover, to begin the play in this way suggested that Hamlet was insane from the very outset.³

I remain unsure whether the guitar playing was really effective. Sometimes its music underscored the action, notably during Hamlet's first soliloquy, but my concern was that the actor and the words were in danger of being upstaged – not least because the guitarist was in full view, and could be seen turning the pages of his music. As the production got into its run, the OSF Facebook page on 15 July 2016 had the tag-line 'Something is rockin' in the state of Denmark',⁴ and what was clear was that the inclusion of the guitarist appealed to younger members of the audience, and, in that respect, it was a successful move.

The musician became a kind of mute confidant for Hamlet, who directed some of his lines to him, but they were never really a double-act. The closest they came was during Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of 3.2 (somewhat truncated to end with 'Now to my mother!'), when Hamlet once again took up a guitar and mimed while the musician stood and played amid a blaze of pyrotechnics. This provided a stunning close to the first half, but an effect just as powerful might perhaps have been achieved without Hamlet miming and with the guitarist playing offstage.

There were lots of ghosts, perhaps more even than in the production of *Cymbeline* on this same stage in 2013 – several versions of the ghost of Hamlet's father running across the set in the early acts, and then, in the final scene, gradual appearances on the upper level by the ghosts of other characters who have died in the course of play – Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

It was also a production with considerable humour, even in the opening scene. When Horatio, who had been sceptical about the likelihood of an appearance from the Ghost, finally saw him, the response from Bernado – 'How, now Horatio?' – provoked a laugh. Horatio was played by a woman (Christiana Clark), but, although her first line was changed to 'A piece of her', the character was not feminised, and, indeed, in 3.2, Hamlet went to some pains to emphasise how much of a man Horatio was. She spoke Latin to the Ghost in the opening scene, and her role was extended towards the end of the play when she took over some of the lines attributed to the Gentleman in 4.5.

³ The relationship between emo culture and *Hamlet* is discussed frequently online. See, for example, Erin Weinberg's comments at <<https://thebardolator.com/2011/05/04/emo-shakespeare/>> [accessed 28 October 2016].

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/osfashland/videos/10154332886670763/> [accessed 15 July 2016].

Claudius (Michael Elich) was played as a less confident monarch in this production than in others I have seen. In 1.2 he looked to Hamlet before pausing to address Laertes instead, and he seemed unsure where his stepson's university was – his wife had to prompt him: later he hesitated when being introduced to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. He also got the best laugh of the night at the opening performance, an event plagued by showers, when, in 3.3, he delivered these lines through a downpour:

What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? (43-6)

It was a mark of his professionalism that he forebore to wink at the audience.

If Claudius was less secure than usual, Polonius (Derrick Lee Weeden) was more sympathetic. In his scene with his son, it seemed that Polonius really loved Laertes – giving him more money, and being reluctant to let him leave. He had his comic side too: not simply quoting from Hamlet's letter in 2.2, but singing from it. His explanation of madness in that same scene, and his introduction of the players were both excellent, the latter a fine piece of physical humour.

Danforth Comins as Hamlet was also a physical actor, as well as an actor firmly in control of language. In his first soliloquy, he acted out his mother, walking as Niobe, and, as early as 1.5, his conversation with the Ghost of his father, tipped him into a frenzy of madness. Up to this point, when the 'real' Ghost appeared, he was lit by a strobe, but that was switched off when the Ghost spoke in this scene, so that our attention was focussed completely on Hamlet.

However, I was not convinced that this insanity was consistently carried through the play: since he is likely to be lucid/sane when addressing the audience in soliloquy, the test is how he behaved in his public scenes. From time to time, Hamlet wrote on the scenery, but there seemed to be few other indications of public insanity, unless it was his use of the microphone.

He picked it up from its stand in 2.2 when being interrogated by Polonius, using it when he said 'Words, words, words' and when he said 'You are a fishmonger'. He pretended to stab himself with it later in that same scene, and, in 3.1, his offstage voice could be heard through the microphone repeatedly saying 'That is the question' before he entered

and thrust the mic at a surprised member of the audience on the front row. He prompted her to say 'To be or not be', and then completed the soliloquy himself, partly through the mic, partly not.

Hamlet was rational and enthusiastic in his dealings with the exotic players, who, in their colourful costumes, brightened up the spirit of the whole production. They were marked as being different by being uplit from footlights, and they had musicians of their own. Hamlet shared the Pyrrhus speech with Player King in 2.2 in a way which really made sense, and which worked them both into energy and passion.

He continued that energy into his soliloquy at the end of the scene, using the wooden sword left behind by the players to punctuate his speech. On the opening night, there was applause after this soliloquy.

In 3.4, when Hamlet evoked the physical contrast between his father and the present king, he gestured not at pictures, but rather at the actors playing these roles, as they stood on the on vomitoria. And, in 4.2, as the courtiers ran around to seek him out, Hamlet hid in plain sight on the upper level by side of the musician, beating a drum.

In his final soliloquy, in 4.4, he was very restrained, and this was the only soliloquy delivered from the upper level rather than from the centre of the lower stage, spoken after he had been looking down on the army of Fortinbras.

I was unsure about the performance of Jenny Greenberry as Ophelia until 4.5, the first scene after she had gone mad. At this point, she grabbed the microphone and not only sang, but sang tunefully and well. This was such a sharp contrast to every other Ophelia I have seen, that it made me wonder, firstly, whether it is a theatrical convention that mad people sing badly, and, secondly, whether holding the microphone had become, in this production, an indication of insanity?

In 4.7, as Gertrude brought news of Ophelia's death, she appeared on the upper level bathed in white light, the first of the ghosts to do so.

I was even less sure about the representation of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In their absurd costumes of checks and stripes, they looked ridiculous, like Tweedledum and Tweedledummer. I am not sure now how these roles can be played. Perhaps the best way is to follow the example of the Olivier film and cut them altogether?

The final act of the production had several surprises. Its first fifty lines were cut, so that it began with the Gravedigger's song (with musician Scott Kelly as the gravedigger, and

a second gravedigger uncredited). The actor who had played the Ghost (Richard Howard) doubled as the priest, with some knowing looks towards Hamlet. The reference to 'Ossa' disappeared as had the 'pat' from 'Now might I do it pat' from 3.3. The 'hall' became a 'lobby', and Hamlet was 'hot' in the sword fight, rather than 'fat'.

However, the strangest feature of this final act was that the fighting involved not only swords, but also one of the guitars from Hamlet's collection on the lower level, and Claudius seemed to be felled by this guitar as it broke over his head: in the words of John Hiatt, 'Smashing a perfectly good guitar'. Was this guitar an axe? Whatever it meant, it gave audiences something to talk about, and, presumably, that was good for the box office.

The Winter's Tale

This second outdoor production was a feast for the eyes, if not always for the ears. The director articulated her rationale very clearly in the Playbill: this was to be a production moving between binaries - old/young, dark/light, winter/spring, high class/low class, heaven/earth, parent/child and even East/West, for this was the first OSF production of a Shakespeare play 'staged through an Asian-American lens'.

The two worlds which it presented were a Sicilia drawn from the Chinese Han dynasty and a Bohemia from New World America. There were several members of the cast who also had roles in another Asian-American play this season, *Vietgone*, which followed the story of a group of men and women from South Vietnam exiled in the USA after the fall of Saigon.

I felt that some of the actors who featured in both plays were better-suited to the contemporary drama than to Shakespeare, and to a smaller, more intimate theatre, and I wondered how the audition process had operated - which of the two plays was cast first? This is not an especially fast-moving play, and therefore the audience needs to hear the words clearly spoken, and this was not always the case. Although the production used microphones, that did not add to the clarity of diction.

As in the case of *Hamlet*, the staging was simple. Furniture and properties were wheeled out from the inner stage to represent formal China and rural America, but there was so little use of the upper level that this production could have been presented almost as readily in one of the smaller indoor theatres. The Chinese costumes of the first half of the play were severe and formal, giving way to colourful rural America costumes as the

scene shifted, just before the intermission at the end of 3.3. In the moment for which we were all waiting, the bear was represented by a huge puppet, and got its own round of applause on its exit.

In general, the director seemed to prefer a declamatory style and so decided to build upon the use of the Chorus in 4.1 by having a Chorus replace Archidamus and Camillo in 1.1 and substituting that same Chorus for the actors in 5.2.

The music, song and dance was well-executed, and Stephen Michael Spencer was an exceptional Autolycus, combining physical dexterity with musical ability and a feel for the words.

Eric Steinberg (Leontes), Amy Kim Waschke (Hermione), Christofer Jean (Camillo), Miriam A. Laube (Paulina), Jonathan Haugen (Old Shepherd) and Paco Tolson (Young Shepherd) were also clearly comfortable in their roles, and were a pleasure to listen to, but that left several actors who were unable to match the level of their performances in *Vietgone*.

In essence, I felt that the scenes in Bohemia were much more lively, vibrant and assured than those in Sicilia: this is a difficulty which is inherent to the play, but not one for which this particular production found a solution. There was a beauty in the austerity of the Eastern/Sicilian parts of the play, but the energy was all in the West, in America: perhaps that was the intention - for that seemed to be the message of *Vietgone* too.

Some lines from the final scene were cut, taking out Paulina's reference to herself as a turtle and her pairing with Camillo, and also excising the lines that predicate a realistic explanation for Hermione's return. In consequence, it seemed an unsatisfactory conclusion, and one lacking in wonder or magic.

I had two minor cavils with the production: the actor playing Mamillius was very evidently a young girl and not a boy – casting against gender is fine, but this was a step too far; and, in the final lines of the play, 'leisure' in 'leisurely' was pronounced to rhyme with 'seizure', and not with 'measure' – Shakespeare would not have approved...

This is a play which spans two very different worlds and two very different periods of time: I did not feel that this production was successful in bridging these gaps.

Richard II

It is not often that an OSF production is completely sold out before it has opened, but that was the case with *Richard II*. This might have resulted from the fact that it was staged in the smallest of the three theatres, or that it had a relatively short run, or that it had not been seen at the festival since 2003, but, in any event, tickets were snapped up months before the first night, and audiences were not disappointed: this was an astonishing and sometimes audacious production.

A cast of fourteen played the thirty named roles in the text, most taking two or three parts, and this was a fine ensemble piece, with outstanding performances by Christopher Liam Moore as Richard and Jeffrey King as Bullingbrook. Some of the doubling was in itself inventive - the same actor played Mowbray and the Bishop of Carlisle, so that, in 4.1, he in effect delivered a eulogy about himself.

The production had pace and fluidity with scarce a pause between scenes: the director had no qualms about having his stagehands in full view of the audience. There were few cuts to the text, and only one scene was totally excised: 5.4, in which Exton takes it upon himself to murder Richard. And it very quickly became clear why this scene was gone, when the murder was committed not by Exton but by Aumerle.

There was a style and a symmetry to this production, which had a coffin on the stage as the audience entered, and matched that with a bodybag holding Richard's body at the end of the play. At first sight, the set appeared simple and austere, but that proved to be an illusion and the levels of its complexities were revealed in each passing scene.

The audience was seated on three sides of what appeared to be a single wooden block. The longest of these three sides had an aisle which led up to a throne on which was placed a crown. As the play opened, the fourth side of the auditorium showed raked seating, with a curtain behind: in the course of the play, the curtain was raised to expose more seats, and, on occasions, a second curtain was lowered so that no seats were in view. At the rear of this side were panels which could be opened or closed.

Before a word was spoken, solemn music played as the cast came onstage and took their places on the seats on the fourth side of the square to pay their respects at the funeral of Gloucester. This dumb-show came to a sudden and shocking ending as Richard opened the casket to place a rose on the body. We then went straight into the opening scene.

There were advantages to this staging decision, not least that it made a clear distinction between 1.1 and 1.3, two scenes with a similar degree of formality and almost identical

members of the cast onstage. In this production, the actors in the first scene were dressed in mourning, and the action was played as a familial dispute, whereas, in 1.3 their costumes were variations of red, white and grey, and this was unmistakably not an intimate family gathering.

In the course of this first scene, Richard ascended to his throne from which his witty remarks were applauded by his onstage audience, only for him to come back centre stage and stand before the coffin in petulance when he did not get his way. That coffin remained in place for 1.2 before it was taken away through a trapdoor, and the Duchess of Gloucester with it. In contrast to Richard's behaviour from the throne in this first scene, when Bullingbrook ascended the throne in 4.1, although he laughed at Richard's performance, his onstage audience, sitting opposite him, did not join in.

In 1.3, it was clear that the period which this production was set was going to be somewhat fluid, certainly in terms of costuming. For the most part, the cast wore modern dress, although Bullingbrook and Mowbray both had armour and spears for the joust in this scene, and there would be an offstage horse for York later in 5.2. Both Bullingbrook and Mowbray had banners in 1.3, and Mowbray tore down his as he was sent into exile. There was another anachronism which ran throughout the play, and that was visual rather than verbal. Richard's status as king was represented by him carrying an orb and sceptre: whilst the latter is validated by the text, no English monarch before Charles II carried an orb. Nevertheless, it proved a useful object in this production for the playful Richard to toy with. And the references to the sceptre were increased in this version when, in 1.3, the King threw down not his warder, but his sceptre.

Clothing and costume was an important motif in this production. Any director of this play needs to make a decision on how to represent the weakness at the heart of Richard's kingship, and the key here seemed to be his passion for expensive clothes. In 1.4, the trapdoor brought up a full-length mirror in which he admired himself as he tried on more new clothes, and, as the play went on, the contrast between Richard and Bullingbrook was manifest in what they wore. Bullingbrook and his supporters wore battle fatigues and then military uniforms, and, although he sat on the throne, Bullingbrook never wore ceremonial robes, nor did he don the crown until the final moments of the play.

In contrast, when Richard returned from Ireland in 3.2, his fine suits had gone but he was dressed not as a soldier but in an over-elaborate naval uniform. In 3.3, in his final display of majesty, he wore the most elaborate cape ever produced by a theatrical wardrobe, and, after his abdication, he was dressed in clothes which did not fit him (in

any sense). How do you punish a king obsessed with clothes? Give him suits which are too small...

The intricacies of the set started to become apparent in 1.3. As Bullingbrook prepared to go into exile, he lifted a flap in the central wooden block which exposed a small square full of soil. In 3.2, Richard lifted other flaps to reveal rocks, water and a sandy grave in which, whilst talking of the death of kings, he himself first laid down and then solemnly interred his uniform and his crown. This was the final scene before the intermission.

The second half of play opened with Bullingbrook and his followers looking through binoculars in their search for Richard. The curtain on the fourth wall was fully down, covering all the seats. After some seventy lines the curtain rise to reveal Richard in a shimmering cloak which stretched over all the seats. When he descended, the cloak came with him, and, at end of the scene, after Richard had unclasped it and left the stage, it lay there to become garbage, fallen leaves for the gardeners to sweep up and put into a bag in the scene which followed. As a visual metaphor, this was very striking, not least as it became clear that the cloak was elasticated, and took up much less space than first appeared.

This second half also included a spectacular stage effect and a radical departure from the text. The stage effect came in 4.1, when Richard called for a glass so he could examine his face, and another flap was lifted from the central block, this time exposing a mirror. Through an elaborate lighting effect, the mirror was seen to break onstage as Richard spoke his line (289).⁵ The radical departure from the text came after the comic scenes involving the Duke and Duchess of York and the plotting of their son, Aumerle. Richard's attackers were dressed all in black when they set upon him, and it was only when he pulled off his mask that the ultimate assassin was shown to be Aumerle. This was a brilliant coup de theatre, but not an entirely original idea: the production of the play by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2013, directed by Greg Doran, also made this change, as did the television version *The Hollow Crown* in 2012, directed by Rupert Goold. Perhaps this will become the standard way of staging the murder in all future productions of the play?

On the whole, this production paid careful attention to language and pronunciation. Terms like 'leisure', 'Hereford' and 'Coventry' were appropriately pronounced

⁵ Details of how this effect was contrived were posted online at one of the videos on this site: <<https://www.osfashland.org/en/productions/2016-plays/richard-ii.aspx>> [accessed 15 July 2016].

(although there was some inconsistency with ‘revenue’), and the original four-syllable pronunciation was given to ‘physician’, ‘incision’ and ‘proportion’. At the same time, the language was sometimes made to sound contemporary by use of a simple pause: thus, in the opening scene, Bullingbrook paused after ‘Now’ (38) and ‘Look’ (90) so that they sounded like contemporary interjections, and his reading of the verse therefore became another aspect of the pragmatism of the character. It was for Richard to be poetic; Bullingbrook was the consummate politician.

The one aspect of the language which troubled me was the use of accents: the Queen had a French accent, Willoughby had an Irish accent, and the Welsh captain was German. Perhaps the latter two might be a result of doubling, an attempt to separate out the roles for the benefit of the audience, but I did not feel that this was necessary when the changes in costume made the differences clear.

I was also puzzled by 2.2, which began with a bathroom being raised through the trapdoor in which the Queen stood, examining the results of a pregnancy test. She stayed in the bathroom until the entry of York, and the other characters spoke to her from outside. There is no suggestion in the text of the play that there is any concern about the absence of a royal child, and this pregnancy test, the results of which were unclear but presumably negative, seemed an extraneous and unhelpful piece of business. Almost everyone who saw this production admired it, and looked forward to the staging of the two parts of *Henry IV* in 2017. Advance publicity indicates that there will not be a continuity of directors for these two plays: each will have a different director and, in neither case, is this the person who directed *Richard II*. Both will be staged in the Thomas Theatre and the principal roles in the two plays will be played by the same actor in each of the two parts.

Timon of Athens

This was the last of the eleven productions to open this season. It was staged in the Angus Bowmer Theatre, and was the first OSF production of this play since 1997. Indeed, this play is not staged with any frequency anywhere in the world, and a production in Austin, Texas earlier in 2016 was part of a project called *Fixing Shakespeare*, which in the past included a radical interpretation of *King John*.⁶

⁶ Shanon Weaver, ‘The Rude Mechs’ *Fixing Timon of Athens*’, *Austin Chronicle*, 12 February 2016 <<http://www.austinchronicle.com/arts/2016-02-12/fixing-timon-of-athens/>> [accessed 1 August 2016].

Although this OSF production was imaginative and inventive, it did not suggest that this was a play in need of fixing.

Before the performance started, the front curtain had been lowered, and on it were written a number of quotations from Karl Marx, especially on the power of money to transform. Those members of the audience who have studied the play might be familiar with interpretations which set the play in a Marxist context,⁷ but what was perhaps more surprising was that this production also read the play in the context of Beckett. If *Endgame* is comparable to *King Lear*, then *Timon of Athens* and *Waiting for Godot* prove to be another set of bookends.

Downstage of that front curtain, where the action of the first scene took place, were four microphones on stands. They were there primarily for musicians and singers, but put to more general use across the play.

The first performers on the stage were a quartet of musicians in full Goth garb, who, in the course of the play, proved accomplished in an eclectic range of music and instruments, including guitar, cello, bass, violin, and banjo as well as vocals, and also doubled as soldiers. It was frustrating that there were no credits for original music in the Playbill, nor indeed for the well-known compositions which they played. My grapevine told me that the director herself wrote the songs: she deserved to be named!

After an opening song, the band was joined on stage by the jeweller, the poet and the painter, dressed respectively in yellow, blue and red suits, with white-face make-up. Since the opening ninety five lines of this first scene were largely carried via a song, and since we had not only white-face but also footlights and follow spots, it seemed that we were to expect a stylised rather than a naturalistic performance, perhaps a kind of Brechtian pantomime.

The scene continued downstage of the curtain, with Ventidius freed from imprisonment in our sight (carrying a barred window frame which was thrown away) and Lucilius as one of the musicians, later to wear an overcoat which might have been worn by Jimi Hendrix.

Apementus entered mutely into this opening scene, displaying the first of a series of placards. This one read 'Timon gives to friends' and was followed subsequently in the

⁷ eg R. S. White, 'Marx and Shakespeare' *Shakespeare Survey*, 45, (1992), 89-100.

first half of the production by ‘... to strangers’, ‘.... to the arts’, ‘owes money’ and ‘asks for help’.

Apemantus and Flavius were both played by women (the latter given a Scots accent), and the production as whole, although using male and female actors, had no female characters: Alcibiades was to have no whores in the second half, and there were no females in the masque in 1.2.

Since the play is staged so rarely, there are few highlights for which a reviewer might be on the lookout, but the banquet/masque is one of these turning points. Does Timon join in the feeding and drinking, or does he stay aloof from it? In this case, the front curtain was drawn back to reveal the inner stage, where a table was set, remarkably reminiscent of the Last Supper. Timon was now wearing rubber boots in addition to the white suit of the opening scene, and quickly donned a plastic overall, giving aprons to his other guests. A cloth on the table was removed to reveal an animal carcass, from which Timon pulled a bleeding, bloody heart.

Apemantus was not only seated separately (to chants of ‘Kids’ table’) but used a microphone to talk over and comment on the festivities. These proved to be not just a display of luxury, but hedonism and debauchery: and a somewhat overlong display at that. One of the musicians assumed the role of Cupid, with another as his guitarist; the other two entered with full size female puppets attached to their bodies. The band played on (‘Putting on the Ritz’) as the puppets danced together in an increasingly lascivious way, only to be torn from their carriers by Timon’s guests, who simulated sex with the puppets.

All in all, this was quite a memorable scene with the actors ending up covered in blood from the carcass. Timon feasted and drank, but did not take part in the orgy: he stood apart, watching but not participating. Nevertheless, the ideological position of the eponymous hero was made clear by the fact that his servants (actors who had previously played the poet, painter and jeweller) wore uniforms with ‘Property of Timon’ on the back.

Alcibiades was also a spectator rather than a participant in much of this scene, but there was so much going that the contrast of his non-involvement was somewhat reduced. It might have been more effective to have had Alcibiades bring the debauchery to a close by stopping the music, in much the same way as I wished that Malvolio had brought the final musical number to an abrupt end in *Twelfth Night*.

The lines to the ladies in 1.2 were cut, as was the interchange between Apemantus, the fool and the page in 2.2, and, as the fortunes of Timon went into decline, the band played 'Spinning Wheel'.

In a small but telling change in 3.1, the question about the health of Timon was met with the response 'His wealth is well'. The three strangers in this scene were combined into one single character, played by Apemantus, disguised as a reporter/photographer – dark glasses can work wonders!

The final scene before the intermission was 3.5, in which Alcibiades appears before the Senate. The three senators were placed across the auditorium: one on a platform above the stage, the other two by the doors used by the audience. They had cloaks imprinted with the words 'power', 'justice' and 'thief'. The officer for whom Alcibiades was pleading was present in chains on stage, and, when the senators had given their verdict and departed, two soldiers came on stage ready to execute the officer: instead, they were shot by Alcibiades to whoops of delight from some sections of the audience.

The second half began with the front curtain back in place, and the band playing 'Brother, can you spare a dime?', and, for a few moments, it looked as if the style of the first half might continue. That impression was swiftly punctured when, after the second banquet in 4.1, when Timon rails against his guests, the curtain was torn down and the entire stage revealed, unadorned.

Up to that moment I had wondered about the decision to stage this unfamiliar play in this theatre, while confining Richard II to a space half the size. Suddenly, that decision made complete sense – we were exposed to the vastness of this stage, and to a different style of representation, in which follow spots and footlights gave way to working lights on the stage which brought the audience out of the darkness, and, even to floodlights that shone straight at us.

In this stark new world, artifice was gone. Stage hands were in full view, using a wheelbarrow to bring in trash rather than leaves – plastic bags and general detritus, which was heaped on the stage – the same wheelbarrow which had held the wealth of Timon in the earlier part of the play.

The semi-naked Timon crawled about in this garbage, sometimes in the rain, and, when he found a root in one of the plastic bags, he had to spit it out, it was so vile. In 4.3, when Alcibiades encountered Timon, he was unaccompanied by whores: his retinue consisted instead of soldiers, and lines were cut and amended accordingly to focus upon

the general's imminent attack on Athens, and Timon's support of that attack. This was to be an Alcibiades who shared nothing of Timon's sense of extravagance.

In this second half of the play, three actors performed at the top of their game. Anthony Heald was magnificent as Timon and his scenes with Vilma Silva as Apemantus and Robin Goodrin Nordli as Flavius were heartbreaking, so different from one another, and yet both the product of brilliant casting decisions.

There was a tenderness in the scene between Timon and Apemantus as they shared water and a banana, and in the moments when their heads almost touched. The lines from 4.3.374 onwards were treated as a quasi-soliloquy by Timon, as Apemantus retreated upstage (a very long way on this bare stage), but, as she returned and before she left, the actor almost placed her hand on Timon's head - almost, but not quite.

The scene with the bandits was cut, and so the visit of Flavius came right after that of Apemantus. In contrast, she was ramrod straight, conscious of her lower social status, but also conscious that she had done everything she could to protect her employer. In the case of the characterisation of both Apemantus and Flavius, there was considerable benefit in having women take on these roles.

The play ended with the wheeling in of a platform which Alcibiades mounted to address the Senate and the audience through a microphone. He had become a ranting megalomaniac, murdering his enemies in full public view.

During the final speech of the play, Timon came back onstage, and acted out his death: he pulled a plastic bag from the pile of trash and, placing it over his head, suffocated himself. Shakespeare chose not to show Timon's death in the play, preferring to have it described, much as the death of Samson is described Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (a drama which has many echoes of this play). It might have been preferable to follow the text in these final moments.

In point of fact, the production as a whole remained very faithful to the text, retaining even obscure words such as 'unclew', 'doit', and 'apperil'. Furthermore, the male terms applied to Apemantus and Flavius were left unchanged.

The most contemporary of questions 'What means that trump?' was posed, but raised no laugh at the opening performance.

This was an illuminating production of what may well be a flawed play. As far as Timon himself is concerned, there is no character development, just a flick of a switch from generous benefactor to misanthrope: perhaps the title of the play should have been *Timons of Athens*?

Conclusion

This was, in many respects, a successful season for Shakespeare at OSF: the production of *Richard II* was outstanding. It was a considerable challenge to present five Shakespeare plays in a single season, not least when two of them have such big contrasts between their first and second halves. I did not feel that the productions of either *The Winter's Tale* or *Timon of Athens* were able to resolve these difficulties. Recently, I have been working on adaptations of these plays by Garrick and Shadwell who made their own attempts to overcome these problems: they were not entirely successful either.

I was pleased to see a sense of a real repertory company at work once more, with actors appearing in different plays across the season. On the other hand, it was disappointing that, when actors were required to take on more than one role within a single production, the directors felt it necessary that they should assume different accents. Finally, the use of microphones is now established practice at OSF, and so it is pleasing that a virtue is being made of necessity and that directors are finding witty and imaginative ways of employing microphones, as they did this year in both *Hamlet* and in *Timon of Athens*.