

Shakespeare's Verse

Shakespeare in performance – A history

During the sixteenth century, there was a huge development in the theatre in England. Medieval drama took the form of religious 'mystery' plays and morality tales that articulated and supported religious teaching. These were performed at times of significance in the religious calendar. Travelling troupes of actors ('strolling players') would tour the country, setting up in squares and on village greens to perform entertainments with music and dancing. The explosion of written English resulting from Henry VIII's break with the Catholic Church (Act of Supremacy, 1534) and the abandonment of Latin as the language of religious ritual and observance resulted in a new literature of drama and poetry as the English language grew by approx 10,000 words (Shakespeare himself coined 1,600 new English words).



James Tupper ('Joseph Cotton'), Simon Nehan ('Joe Holland'), Christian McKay ('Orson Welles') in 'Me and Orson Welles'. Dir Richard Linklater. Copyright CinemaNX Films One Ltd 2008. Photo: Liam Daniel

In Shakespeare's time, performances at the many theatres that proliferated in London took place during the day to make use of daylight. People who could afford to pay sat in seats under cover of a thatched roof, but the 'groundlings' stood on the ground in the open space in front of the stage, open to the sky and the elements. It is important to remind ourselves of the technical tools available to a dramatist writing in the late sixteenth century. There was no lighting, no sound reproduction or mechanisation of scenery. Exits and entrances were limited by the 'thrust' stage and could only be made from the back of the stage, and sets as we understand them were unknown, the decoration of the back wall of the stage being the only visual element other than costume. These technical limitations meant that the scene, the drama, had to be created using language.

In one of Shakespeare's most famous prologues (Henry V), the Chorus describes the difficulty of presenting a great dramatic spectacle in such poor circumstances. The play is about a great moment in English history, the victory over the French at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, and the myth of the great leader King Henry V.

*O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,*

*A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars and at his heels,*

*Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraisèd spirits that have dared*

On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth

*So great an object: can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram*

*Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon! Since a crookèd figure may*

Attest in little place a million;

And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,

*On your imaginary forces work.
Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,*

*Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;*

*Into a thousand parts divide on man,
And make imaginary puissance.*

*Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;*

For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,

*Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,
Turning the accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,
Admit me Chorus to this history;
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,*

Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.

The Chorus begins by wishing that the epic scale of the play could be reflected in the scale of production:

*A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!*

– rather than the bare stage and ordinary actors. How can these ‘flat unraised spirits’ – mere actors – achieve the feat of bringing to life the drama of such an extraordinary event?

*Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden ‘O’ the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?*

The Chorus goes on to ask that we –

*let us, ciphers to this great account,
On your imaginary forces work.*

The rest of the speech is an evocation of the sights and sounds of a dramatic pageant –

*Suppose within the girdle of these walls
Are now confined two mighty monarchies...
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them...
‘tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings...*

This powerful speech outlines the contract between the actors and the audience, a contract in which the audience will bring the power of their imaginations to bear in support of the drama. It reminds a modern audience that in a world without all the technical equipment we have at our disposal, the drama requires our participation in a different way and that the experience is one that enriches our imaginative response as we allow the sound of language and the images it creates to work on us. The visual experience is one predominantly created internally. This is particularly important when we examine Shakespeare in modern performance on stage and particularly in film, where the attention of the audience can be focused on a detail of gesture, expression or object in a way that was not possible at all in his time.

English drama since the sixteenth century

In the centuries since this speech was written, performance of Shakespeare's plays changed beyond recognition, as theatre developed and grew in sophistication and technical proficiency. During the eighteenth century Shakespeare's reputation continued to grow and at the end of the century the Romantic movement discovered in the tragedies an echo of their own sensibility, one in which the heroic and tragic individual was pitted against both inner and external forces, often expressed through elemental qualities found in nature. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the heyday of that great tradition in English theatre, the actor-manager (leading classical actors who led large companies of actors), increased interest in the plays and it is significant that it was primarily actors who were responsible for this re-discovery of Shakespeare as a dramatist, to be acted rather than a poet to be read. Actor-managers were also businessmen and were not slow to see the potential for commercial success in these towering and demanding roles, epic narratives and lavish settings. Increasingly, the talent and star-quality of an actor was measured by his ability to scale the emotional and technical challenges presented by Shakespeare's demanding tragic roles – Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and perhaps the greatest, King Lear. David Garrick (1717–1779), John Kemble (1757–1823), Edmund Kean (1789–1833) and William Macready (1793–1873), were all hugely successful actor-managers and major contributors to the establishment of Shakespeare as a significant cultural icon. The dominance of the actor-manager in the theatrical world that continued well into the twentieth Century, Henry Irving (1838–1905), Donald Wolfitt (1902–1968), and Laurence Olivier (1907–1989), being the most important) maintained and increased his pre-eminence. Henry Irving was a famous Hamlet (1874) and a sympathetic Shylock (1879) among many others, at the Lyceum Theatre in London which he ran from 1878–1899. The Donald Wolfitt Shakespeare Company toured the country with productions of many of Shakespeare's plays and played in London during the Battle of Britain. Although there were often criticisms of the production standards and the quality of supporting acting, Wolfitt was considered one of the finest Lears of his generation. Laurence Olivier who directed three films of Shakespeare – Henry V, Hamlet and Richard III, played Romeo and Hamlet at the Old Vic and the Royal Shakespeare Company before becoming the first Artistic Director the National Theatre.

In the American Colonies (which would become the United States) Shakespeare was being performed from the mid-eighteenth century. The first recorded performance dates from 1752 and was a production of Richard III. From the late eighteenth century, Shakespeare's works were central to the developing nation's literary culture and throughout the nineteenth century, productions of his plays were popular with all classes. English companies visited frequently from the early nineteenth century, bringing the traditions of English performance but there was also an indigenous culture of populist interpretations, (often involving extensive adaptation and alteration of the texts) which brought the plays to a wider audience. There were always arguments about the sanctity of the text and about playing styles – in 1845 a violent riot ensued when working class fans of the American actor Edwin Forrest (admired for his acting style and inclusive approach to the text) forced the English actor William Macready to abandon a

performance attended by wealthy theatre-goers in New York. Both the traditional and populist approaches continued into the twentieth century. On Broadway, in lavish productions Orson Welles (1915–1985) was a young actor who first achieved success at the age of nineteen as Tybalt in 'Romeo and Juliet' on Broadway in 1934. When he was invited to direct a production of 'Macbeth' for the Negro People's Theatre as part of the Federal Theatre Project in 1936, he set the play in a Caribbean world of voodoo and jungle landscapes. This radical departure from convention was followed by his sensational reinterpretation of Julius Caesar for his own company, the Mercury Theatre Company, in 1937. The production, which was heavily cut and played for 90 minutes without an interval, was set in a contemporary fascist state, drawing its design from the visual aesthetic of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The production was a phenomenal success and ran for 157 performances in New York before going on tour. At the same time, Hollywood was discovering Shakespeare and the first screen adaptations of his plays were produced – the famous Austrian theatre director Max Reinhardt directed an all-star cast in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' in 1935.

During this time, performance styles changed as cultural sensibilities developed. Many of Shakespeare's plays were performed heavily cut or in some cases with alternative 'happy' endings and it's important to remember that the practice of changing, cutting or re-emphasising the content is not a new one when examining ways in which filmmakers have approached Shakespeare. Shakespeare was so venerated by the nineteenth century that in 1879 the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre was opened in his birthplace Stratford-upon-Avon and in 1919 the New Shakespeare Company was formed. In 1925 the company received its Royal Charter and became the Royal Shakespeare Company, which has continued to exist and has been for many years one of the most important and famous theatre companies in the world.

The Globe Theatre on London's South Bank, which opened in 1997, is a carefully researched reconstruction of the original Globe Theatre which was near the site and which premiered many of Shakespeare's plays. It burned down in 1613 when a cannon fired during a production of 'Henry VIII' and set fire to the thatch on the roof. It is an indicator of the status Shakespeare has in the United States that the man responsible for bringing the new Shakespeare's Globe into being was the American actor Sam Wannamaker who dedicated his life to the project. Much of the funding for the Globe came from the United States, through both public and private donations. Under the Artistic Directorship of Mark Rylance (an actor whose career was launched at the RSC) The Globe became the world's pre-eminent theatre of 'authentic' Shakespearean production, working to replicate as far as possible the practices of the late sixteenth century. Critics of the Globe argue that this is an artistically redundant exercise, interesting only from the point of view of academic comparison. However the theatre has proved enormously popular with audiences, particularly the tourists who come to enjoy an authentic 'groundling' experience.

Performing styles have changed but the essential power and lasting significance of Shakespeare lies in his ability to inspire and contain as wide a spectrum of creative interpretation as there are thoughts and ideas in his plays. In the twentieth century, Freud's work and the development of psychoanalysis led to new interpretations based on a more questioning approach in which psychological motive was given a significant place in the staging. The growing importance of the director in theatre led to a move towards the 'concept' production which sought to illuminate a particular area of the text to make social or political points, often taking the plays out of their immediate historical setting and placing them in different periods. Shifts in ideas about the function of theatre as entertainment and spectacle and the development of a utilitarian Arts subsidy resulted in productions which sought to strip away extraneous production details required by conventional 'settings', leaving the emotional, political and philosophical content exposed more clearly. The history plays were seen as ways in which we could examine our own relationship to dictatorship, war, politics and society, the tragedies as minute examinations of the human psyche and the comedies were also reappraised and examined for their darker qualities. The development of film in the twentieth century enabled the exploration of how this most language driven dramatist could be translated into the ultimate visual medium and if so, at what cost to the integrity of the texts. It seems that whether being performed at the Globe in as close an approximation to the Elizabethan experience as can be re-created, or filmed by Baz Luhrmann as a modern story of love, violence and inter-generational struggle, Shakespeare's texts retain their integrity among the greatest examinations of human life ever created. The breadth of his poetic imagination is astonishing and he moves us, transforms our perceptions and shares with us his profound humanity and empathy with human experience in all its variety.