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*Revolting Women, Roaring Girls and Bloody Men: The RSC in Stratford, 2014*

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**Revolting Women, Roaring Girls and Bloody Men:  
The RSC in Stratford, 2014**

Caroline Louise Heaton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of

Sheffield Hallam University

for the degree of Master of English by Research

September 2016



## **Abstract**

### **Revolting Women, Roaring Girls and Bloody Men:**

#### **The RSC in Stratford, 2014**

**Caroline Louise Heaton, September 2016**

**Master of English by Research, Sheffield Hallam University**

The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) states that its purpose is to produce “an inspirational artistic programme each year, setting Shakespeare in context, alongside the work of his contemporaries and today’s writers” (2016, online). This purpose has remained largely unchanged since the company’s inception in 1961, as has its commitment to maintaining its Stratford-upon-Avon home as the primary base for the delivery of its artistic programme. Within the context of Gregory Doran’s assumption of the Artistic Directorship of the company in 2013, this thesis provides an academic appraisal of the Stratford-upon-Avon productions contained within Doran’s first summer programme as Artistic Director, in 2014. The purpose of this analysis is to explore the ways in which Doran sought to meet the RSC’s continuing stated purpose, as a leading publicly-funded arts institution in the twenty-first century. The Stratford-upon-Avon season from March to October 2014 incorporated all three of the RSC’s play categories, across three performance spaces: Shakespeare in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (*Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*), Shakespeare’s contemporaries in the Swan Theatre (badged as the *Roaring Girls* season), and new writing in The Other Place at the Courtyard Theatre (in a short season entitled *Midsummer Mischief*). The season thus provided a suitable focus for this critical analysis.

THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY (2016). About us. [online]. Available at <https://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/>. Last accessed 25 July.

## **Candidate's Statement**

The primary purpose of this thesis is to carry out an academic appraisal of the Royal Shakespeare Company's theatrical productions in Stratford-upon-Avon in the summer of 2014, with a view to assessing the company's approach to fulfilling its stated aim of producing dynamic, distinctive, and inspiring theatre which incorporates Shakespeare, his contemporaries, and new writers. The work takes account of the impact of the new Artistic Directorship of Gregory Doran at the Company, from 2013.

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own individual work and effort, and that this work has been produced for the sole purpose of submission in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University's Master of English by Research, and has not been submitted for any other qualification or award.

No assistance has been received in the production of the content of this thesis and the work has not been submitted anywhere else for any award.

Where other sources of information have been used, they have all been acknowledged, and all citable sources are listed within the Bibliography.

Caroline Louise Heaton

September 2016

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## Introduction

### “Screw your courage to the sticking place”<sup>1</sup>

Established in Stratford-upon-Avon by Peter Hall in 1961, at a time when “state patronage of the arts was in the ascendant” (Chambers, 2004, p.xi), the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) was radical in its intention to become “Britain’s first large-scale, permanent repertoire company” (Chambers, 2004, p.ix). It “turned a star-laden, six-month Shakespeare festival into a monumental, year-round operation built around a permanent company” (Billington 1993, p.133). The RSC’s stated purpose was, and remains, to “stage the work of Shakespeare, his contemporaries and the most exciting new writers and performers of today, making every play an event”, and creating “dynamic and distinctive theatre” (RSC *About Us*, 2015, online). The new (2016) purpose also refers to the intention to produce an “inspirational artistic programme” (RSC *About Us*, 2016, online).

In *Studying Shakespeare in Performance* (2011), John Russell Brown suggests that writing about plays in performance has gradually become “an accepted and often industrious academic pursuit” (p.5). This thesis therefore analyses the on-stage work of the RSC in Stratford, in an attempt to appraise the performance output in the summer of 2014 and evaluate the degree to which it fulfilled its mission to be dynamic, distinctive, and inspirational. The period of March to October 2014 saw the first summer season under the Artistic Directorship of Gregory Doran. It incorporated all three elements of the RSC’s play categories: Shakespeare (*Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*) in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre; Shakespeare’s contemporaries (badged as the *Roaring Girls* season) in the

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<sup>1</sup> *Macbeth*, 1.7 (66-7)

Swan Theatre; and new writing (in a short season entitled '*Midsummer Mischief*') in The Other Place at the Courtyard Theatre, thus providing a suitable focus for this critical analysis.<sup>1</sup>

The productions directed by Doran (*Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, and *The Witch of Edmonton*) aimed to provide a strong visual representation of the Early Modern period, with their major emphasis being on the plight of the male protagonists at the heart of each piece. Conversely, the *Midsummer Mischief* productions, along with *Arden of Faversham* and *The White Devil*, were in modern dress and their key focus was on the conversations between their female protagonists and women in the twenty-first century. *The Roaring Girl* featured a modern-day female 'hero' caught in the Victorian era, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* was set in a stylish twentieth-century society in which women were attempting to contribute to the evolution of gendered roles. Each production had a number of distinctive elements, as part of a comprehensive season with a variety of directorial styles. It therefore offered a good indication of the potential range of the RSC's repertoire.

Act I of this thesis provides a background to the 2014 season, by considering the RSC's Artistic Directorships from 1961 to 2013. It also briefly explores the types of audiences which the company attracts, and how it fares in comparison to its leading London competitors. Act II provides reviews of the 'bloody men' productions in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and Act III analyses the 'roaring girls' who dominated the offerings in the Swan Theatre. Act IV explores the 'revolting women' who voiced their opinions in The Other Place, and Act V, provides reflections on the degree to which these productions were successful in meeting their intentions to offer dynamism, distinction, and inspiration.

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<sup>1</sup> Summer 2014 season announcement available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwVwimPjJRw>

# ACT I

## “What’s in a name?”<sup>1</sup>:

### The RSC in Stratford, 1961 - 2016

#### 1.1 “*What is past is prologue*”: Peter Hall to Adrian Noble (1961 – 2003)

When Sir Peter Hall established the company in 1961, a key feature of its identity was its commitment to the principle of the ensemble, which it says is made by “working together with trust and mutual respect over sustained periods of time”, enabling actors and directors to “experiment and develop our craft” and “gain a deeper understanding of each other and of the plays”, with the intended result that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (RSC 2015, *About Us*, online). Trevor Nunn described this commitment as demonstrating an identification with “the whole enterprise instead of just with a new production; the sense that we were committed to improve, to become more expert” (O’Mahoney 2005, online). With his emphasis on establishing a cohesive group of practitioners with varying degrees of experience (Chambers p.52), Peter Hall’s 1963 landmark production of the *Wars of the Roses* aimed to exemplify the RSC’s intention to embrace both veterans and relative newcomers, which it still aims to do in the twenty-first century.

In Stratford, 1960s RSC productions were staged solely in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, meaning that “performing Shakespeare’s contemporaries was something of an unaffordable luxury”, since they “did not bring the financial success that Shakespeare plays did” (Heijes 2012, p.70). The Royal Shakespeare Theatre was then a Grade II listed, 1932 art deco style proscenium arch theatre, designed by Elisabeth Scott, seating

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<sup>1</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1 (90)



approximately 1,400. Its formal style was perhaps fitting for the RSC's founder, Peter Hall, who described himself as a 'classicist' with a reverence for Shakespeare's text, who has sometimes been accused of making "robust attacks on contemporary verse-speaking" (Billington 2007, p.133). However, he also recognised that "you had to be alive to the present if you wanted to be any good at the past" (O'Mahoney, 2005, online). Like the National Theatre (founded two years later), Hall's RSC quickly became a "socially engaged, vibrant national institution" (Chambers, 2004, p.x) and Trevor Nunn described the early years in Stratford as "perpetually exciting and pioneering", (O'Mahoney, 2005, online).

When Nunn assumed the Artistic Directorship himself in 1968, he also oversaw some notable productions, such as Peter Brook's stark 1970 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and John Barton's 1973 *Richard II*, both of which might be said to reflect what Kenneth Tynan described as the RSC's 'house style', consisting of "wood and metal instead of paint and canvas; and... cogent deliberate verse-speaking that discards melodic cadenzas in favour of meaning and motivation" (Tynan 1964, in Billington 2007, p.137). Nunn "succeeded not only in sustaining the company's achievements but also in extending them, in bringing greater depth and consistency to the company's work and greater variety to the non-Shakespeare repertoire" (Chambers 2004, p.57). By 1977, the RSC was staging new plays at the Donmar Warehouse, as well as Stratford transfers at the Aldwych, Shakespeare's histories at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and plays by Shakespeare's Contemporaries at the new (1974) studio space in Stratford - The Other Place. This studio theatre, originally a 'tin hut' on Waterside, was the brainchild of the RSC's first female director, Buzz Goodbody, and seated approximately 140. Partly due to its limited space, directors tended to use minimalist sets, as in Nunn's critically-acclaimed 1976 production of *Macbeth*, with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench. Michael Billington has suggested that, at this point, "no other company in the world could match that output for quantity and quality" (Billington 1993).

However, by the early 1980s, with Terry Hands as joint Artistic Director alongside Nunn (from 1978), “the public service ethos of the subsidised theatre was worn away under the advancing embrace of marketplace entertainment” (Chambers, 2004, p.xi) and the Conservative government began to draw away from state patronage of the arts. The RSC’s lucrative production of *Nicholas Nickleby* helped to avert a financial crisis (Chambers, 2004, p.75) and offered a response to populist accusations of the RSC’s association with privilege, due to its focus on England’s leading classical playwright. However, throughout the 1980s, the RSC also remained committed to its aim of presenting large-scale productions of classical drama (alongside some contemporary works) and attempted to refute criticism of its alleged elitism by placing a greater degree of emphasis on outreach work and accessibility. This continues to the present day, and the RSC regularly highlights its educational work with inner-city schools, its touring productions to provincial and overseas theatres, its productions aimed at younger audiences, and the availability of reduced price tickets for young people, as well as accessible and ‘relaxed’ performances for disabled people.

In 1982, Nunn and Hands took the decision to forsake their regular London base (The Aldwych), in favour of The Barbican. They also began to promote strong designs which tested the company’s budget (despite financial support from the City of London Corporation) and posed challenges for transferring productions from Stratford into a space which Peter Hall likened to “an inhuman environment, like a second-rate airport” (Hall 1993, p.206). With public funding now dwindling, the RSC began to establish sponsorship agreements with large financial institutions, which were resented by some, who felt that this undermined individual creativity and contributed to an “industrialisation of art in which volume of output became an end product in its own right” (Chambers 2004, p.85).

Leaving the RSC in 1986, Nunn’s final major contribution to the company was to oversee the opening of the RSC’s new Swan Theatre in Stratford; the



former conference hall next door to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (on the site of the original Shakespeare Memorial Theatre), which was converted into an Elizabethan-style intimate thrust-stage theatre, seating about 460. Its creation was made possible by funding provided by American millionaire Frederick Koch. The Swan was (and still is) intended primarily to house productions by Shakespeare's contemporaries and, anecdotally, seems to be the favourite of the three theatres amongst many Stratford regulars, although the cost of running this additional theatre did contribute to the temporary closure of *The Other Place* in 1989.

Hands remained as sole Artistic Director until Adrian Noble took over in 1991, with the intention of ensuring that the RSC should be "the best classical theatre company in the English-speaking world" but with an additional commitment to new plays, "because they excite and amaze people" (Noble 1991, in Chambers 2004, p.97). Noble moved away from the RSC tradition of employing associate directors towards a freelance system, and severed connections with the Barbican Centre in 2002, in favour of a seeking new commercial deals in West End theatres. He also initiated his radical plan to "demolish the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in favour of a ... Shakespeare village" (Chambers 2004, p.110), which would be more in harmony with his intention to run the company in a similar way to a crowd-pleasing West End commercial theatre. This corresponded with his conviction that "artistically, we need to start talking to different audiences" (*Observer* 2001, online). However, Michael Billington described how this was "rather like a man who decides to leave his job, his wife and his house all on the same day" (*The Guardian* 2003, online) and, with serious financial problems and the threat of strike action due to large-scale redundancies, Noble left the "debt-ridden and demoralised" RSC (BBC News 2012, online) in 2003, and Michael Boyd took on the challenge as Artistic Director, remaining in post until 2013.

## 1.2 “I am not bound to please thee with my answers”<sup>1</sup>:

### Michael Boyd (2003 – 2013)

With a £2.8m deficit to address, Michael Boyd (working with Vikki Heywood, the Executive Director) announced that “We can’t afford to do everything I want to do, so I’ve focussed resources on the main house” (Boyd, in Billington, *The Guardian* 2003, online). Suggesting that if you “balance the books ... they’ll leave you alone” (Boyd, in Billington, *The Guardian* 2003, online), he initially attempted to attract large audiences by staging popular Shakespeare plays such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth* in The Royal Shakespeare Theatre. However, with what Billington describes as a “blend of pragmatism and vision” (*The Guardian*, 2003, online), Boyd also reintroduced some new works at The Other Place (in the brick structure which replaced the former tin hut), attempted (unsuccessfully) to identify a new permanent London residence for the RSC, and oversaw the ‘*Complete Works*’ festival in 2006, which was a “national knees up” (Billington, *The Guardian*, 2003 online) marking the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth and featured performances (including full productions and staged readings) of all of Shakespeare’s works in Stratford, by the RSC and visiting national and international theatre companies.

With the attitude that “we either reinvent ourselves, or we go up in flames” (Boyd 2008, *The Spectator*, online), Boyd was able to restore the financial fortunes of the RSC and oversee what was, arguably, its biggest attempt to ‘reinvent’ itself: the £112.8m re-building of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and its transformation from a proscenium arch to a thrust, courtyard stage. This necessitated the closure of all of the company’s Stratford theatres (the RST, the Swan, and The Other Place) for redevelopment between 2007 and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Merchant of Venice*, 4.1 (66)

2010, and the building of a new temporary space adjacent to The Other Place, named The Courtyard. It was a bold step, which attracted some concern from those worried that the RSC might not be able to win back audiences it had lost during the closure, and those who felt that having two thrust stages in Stratford might limit the possibilities for directors' individual artistic approaches.

Having been influenced by Russia's approach to theatre direction, Boyd placed great importance on detailed attention to the text, reverence for the stage as a highly respected art form, and a belief in the authority of the Director (Boyd 2012, *The Guardian*, online). He outlined his dislike of "bland, sentimental, acceptable, handsome" stage productions and stated that his aim to "create a space where there will be no excuses not to aspire to great art" (Boyd 2002, *The Guardian*, online). Boyd sees Shakespeare as a "dramatist of schism rather than a unifying oak tree of Englishness" (Boyd 2003, *The Guardian*, online) and appeared to have a greater personal affinity with Shakespeare's histories and tragedies than with the comedies. He was also of the opinion that Shakespeare expressed concern, through his writing, for the tide of anti-Catholic opinion prevalent during the Elizabethan and early Jacobean era, stating "of course, he started out as a Catholic... but he was clever about it..." (Boyd 2008, *The Guardian*, online).

In 2000, Boyd directed the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* at the Swan, as part of a full Shakespeare history cycle overseen by Adrian Noble. Boyd marked his own Artistic Directorship with his critically acclaimed cycle of the same plays in 2006-08 which, together with the redevelopment of the Stratford theatres, was probably the achievement for which he will be most remembered. The history cycle was initially staged as part of the 2006 *Complete Works* in Stratford, and culminated in the *Glorious Moment* in 2008, when all eight plays could be seen in succession, over 3 days.

Boyd also commissioned an RSC edition of Shakespeare's Complete Works (edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen). However, this attracted

some criticism for being based solely on the First Folio, and excluding content from the Quarto editions from the text. He also launched the *Stand up for Shakespeare* manifesto, to campaign for working in a practical and physical way on Shakespeare with children and, in 2011, Boyd supervised a five-production New York residency at the Park Avenue Armory, in partnership with the New York City Department of Education. In 2012, he oversaw Vikki Heywood's organisation of the RSC's contributions to the 2012 *World Shakespeare Festival*, which involved working with a range of UK and international arts organisations.

Throughout this period, Boyd remained steadfast in his resistance to the notion of transferring RSC productions to film, believing that "it will be a long time before cinema can capture anything more than a pale reflection of the art form" (Boyd 2009, *The Guardian*, online) and although, anecdotally, Boyd had a reputation for being a warm individual who welcomed views on a wide range of topics from his staff, he was reticent about placing himself in the limelight, preferring to emphasise the company's commitment to ensemble, and placing little importance on attracting 'stars' to the Stratford stages.

For his final (2013) season at the RSC, Boyd chose to end with "a celebration of women in the theatre", by featuring several plays which include dominant women, and employing three female directors (Lucy Bailey, Maria Aberg and Nancy Meckler). This theme was then taken up by the incoming Artistic Director, Gregory Doran, who re-employed Maria Aberg amongst his own team of three female directors as part of the *Roaring Girls* season in the Swan Theatre in 2014.



### 1.3 “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action”<sup>1</sup>:

#### Gregory Doran (2013 - present)

When Gregory Doran was announced as the RSC’s new Artistic Director in September 2012, he was described by Michael Billington as “a true Shakespearean” who is “one of the good guys” (Billington, *The Guardian* 2012, online), having “lifelong Bardolatry, high intelligence and [a] persuasive temperament” (Billington, *The Guardian* 2000, online). Generally thought to be a ‘safe pair of hands’, Doran has a long history at the RSC, as an actor (1987-88), an Assistant Director (1989), Director (1992-96), Associate Director (1996-2006), and Chief Associate Director (2006-2012). He had been “tipped as Adrian Noble’s eventual successor” as long ago as 2000 (Billington, *The Guardian* 2000, online) but, although he was unsuccessful in his 2002 attempt to secure the Artistic Directorship, ten years later he remained the most likely candidate for the role.

His first production as a Director in Stratford was an adaptation of *The Odyssey* by Derek Walcott in *The Other Place* in 1992, and his production of *All Is True* (Henry VIII) at the Swan Theatre (1996) provided a platform for his admiration of the work of John Fletcher. This led to productions of Fletcher’s *The Island Princess* (2002) and *The Tamer Tamed* (2003), which was staged as an ‘antidote’ to his *Taming of the Shrew* and featured the same cast. His 1997 *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Swan), 1998 *The Winter’s Tale* (RST) and 1999 *Macbeth* (Swan) all featured his life-partner (later husband) Antony Sher in the lead role. These productions marked the beginning of their director-actor artistic partnership at the RSC, which was re-established as soon as Doran became Artistic Director, with *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* (2014), *Death of a Salesman* (2015) and the 2016 *King Lear*, a play which

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<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet*, 3.2 (12-13)

Doran had previously described as “one that I don't feel grown up enough to do yet” (Doran 2013, *Interview Magazine*, online).

Doran has considerable interest in the work of Shakespeare's contemporaries, stating that “you feel you're part of a band... of people who do feel passionate about this repertoire, and not just for its relationship with Shakespeare, but for its intrinsic value as well” (Doran, 2010, in Heijes, 2012, p.75). In 2003, Doran's season of five 'Jacobethan' (late Elizabethan / early Jacobean) plays at the Swan Theatre received an Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement of the Year, following its transfer to London's Gielgud theatre. This marked the first of three seasons (including Laurence Boswell's 2004 *Spanish Golden Age* and Doran's 2005 *Gunpowder*) containing “groups of non-Shakespearean Renaissance plays ... with a coherent theme and ... critical and commercial success” (Kate Wilkinson, *Shakespeare*, 2015 online). Doran has also directed many RSC Shakespeare productions, including *The Merchant of Venice* (1997), *Timon of Athens* (1999), *King John* (2001), *Othello* (2004), *Antony and Cleopatra* (2006), *Coriolanus* (2007), and *Twelfth Night* (2010).

Peter Hall rejects the idea of “walking into a rehearsal room, saying 'here is the concept' and [forcing] everything into it” (Hall in O'Mahoney 2005, *The Guardian*, online). Unlike his predecessor Michael Boyd, Doran doesn't usually have a mission to draw out perceived indications of the writer's political and religious views. Speaking of “directors who use the plays to present their own agenda or their own obsessions”, Doran suggested that he prefers “to work on the play together” so that “what emerges is the result of those people at that particular time engaging with that play” (Doran 2014, *Official London theatre*, online), although he is well-known for cutting his rehearsal text well in advance, since “Shakespeare runs at about 900 lines an hour if you speak it trippingly on the tongue” (Doran, 2014, pers. comm.). Doran usually spends at least the first week of rehearsals with all actors seated in a circle, reading the play aloud (never reading their own part) and

putting the lines into their own words, ensuring everyone is familiar with possible interpretations of the text. Despite describing directing as “tyranny disguised as democracy” (Doran 2013, *The Guardian*, online), like his predecessor, Doran is generally considered to be an inclusive director, who wants everyone to feel part of the creative process, but whereas Boyd appeared to exercise a quiet and steely determination in shaping his productions, Doran seems use his outgoing and outwardly charming persona to exert influence. He has sometimes been described as an over-cautious director, commenting that “You don't need to do Shakespeare on Ice to get noticed” (Doran 2008, *The Guardian*, online) but arguably his least (critically) successful production was his extravagant 2006 musical version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which was largely condemned by critics as “a bit of a hotchpotch ... on the verge of sliding into mediocrity” (Orme 2006, *British Theatre Guide*, online), though it proved quite popular with audiences.

Michael Dobson has noted Doran's willingness to consult and work closely with academics (Dobson 2014, pers. comm.) but he caused controversy in his 2014 assertion that the presumed lost Shakespeare play *Love's Labour's Won* is, in fact, an alternative name for *Much Ado About Nothing*. His naming of a 2011 adaptation of *The Double Falsehood* as (a ‘re-imagining of’) Shakespeare and Fletcher's supposed lost play *Cardenio* also resulted in criticism from many Shakespeareans, although Michael Billington considered the resulting production to be “an extraordinary and theatrically powerful piece... that should both please audiences and keep academic scholars in work for years” (Billington, *The Guardian* 2011, online).

Doran frequently quotes Tyrone Guthrie's assertion that good directing is eighty percent good casting, and he appreciates the value of the excitement that can be generated when ‘top actors’ are employed at the RSC. Following Michael Boyd's own disinterest in attracting famous names, Doran suggests that “there was a sense that for some actors the RSC wasn't their home anymore” (2013, online), and is willing to marry his own interests with

the ambitions of actors who have the power to attract audiences. In 2016, Simon Russell Beale will return to the RSC for the first time in 20 years, to appear in Doran's production of *The Tempest* and, in September 2013, Doran's first production as Artistic Director (*Richard II*) included David Tennant, Michael Pennington and Jane Lapotaire in its cast. This was part of a season which also incorporated Jeremy Herrin's production of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* (which resulted in the RSC's fastest ever selling London transfer at the Aldwych, and which then transferred to Broadway) and the traditional family-friendly Christmas show, Ella Hickson's *Wendy and Peter Pan* (directed by Jonathan Munby).

Although he chose not to imitate Michael Boyd in presenting Shakespeare's full history cycle, Doran planned a staging of the second tetralogy, producing *Richard II* in 2013, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* in 2014 and *Henry V* in 2015. The plays were brought together as *King and Country* at the Barbican Centre from November 2015 to January 2016 (prior to a JP Morgan sponsored tour to China, Hong Kong and New York). This launched the RSC's commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death (with a 2015 Stratford performance of *Henry V* also having marked the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt). In accordance with his interest in anniversaries, in 2014 Doran appointed Christopher Luscombe to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War with productions of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (the latter re-badged as *Love's Labour's Won*) which were set either side of the First World War and placed in repertory with a new play set in the same era, entitled *The Christmas Truce*. Marking the centenary of Arthur Miller's birth, Doran directed Miller's *Death of a Salesman* in April 2015 and, in September 2015, he announced plans to observe the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Marlowe with a production of *Dr Faustus*, and the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cervantes's death with an adaptation of *Don Quixote*, in 2016. There would also be a 2016 production of *Two Noble Kinsmen*, since this had been the first play performed in the new Swan Theatre 30 years earlier. Back in 2011, Doran



had commemorated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible with his staging of David Edgar's *Written on the Heart*, and he had chosen to mark the RSC's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary with his 2001 production of Peter Barnes's *Jubilee* in the Swan Theatre, which celebrated David Garrick's first Shakespeare festival in Stratford, in 1769.

One of the most immediately noticeable changes during the transfer of the Artistic Directorship from Boyd to Doran was the alteration in stance relating to the filming of stage productions. In December 2009 a filmed version of Doran's 2008 *Hamlet* was broadcast by the BBC, and his filmed versions of *The Winter's Tale* and *Macbeth* had been produced by Channel 4 / Illuminations in 1999 and 2003 respectively. Doran had featured in a BBC documentary on his research for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and taken part in Michael Wood's BBC series, *In Search of Shakespeare*. Illuminations also filmed his World Shakespeare Festival production of *Julius Caesar*, which was broadcast on BBC4 in June 2012, as part of the *Cultural Olympiad*. Unlike his predecessor, Doran was enthusiastic about collaborating with Illuminations on cinema screenings of live productions, in a similar style to the National Theatre's *NT Live*. Whilst recognising that "the image, not the word, is the medium of film", Doran values attempts to "capture Shakespeare's newness on screen", conveying a sense of occasion, and making use of new technologies to broaden the ways in which audiences might immerse themselves in live theatre (2016, pers. comm.).

The live screenings began with *Richard II*, which was broadcast to over 100,000 cinema audience members in November 2013 (RSC 2015 annual report, online), under the label *Live from Stratford-upon-Avon*. Doran's productions of *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* were broadcast in May and June 2014, with Simon Godwin's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* shown in August, and subsequent screenings planned for all Shakespeare productions in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. The RSC also became the first company to stream free Shakespeare productions directly into UK schools, beginning

with 31,000 children in 400 schools watching *Richard II* in their classrooms and viewing a live Q&A with David Tennant and Gregory Doran.

Doran knows that the company's £16.4 million public subsidy is based largely on its commitment to youth education and regional partnerships, and is supportive of the work of the RSC's Education Department, and the touring *First Encounters* productions which are aimed at younger audiences. He also made a major commitment to working with regional and amateur theatre companies by endorsing Erica Whyman's ambitious plans for *A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Play for the Nation*<sup>1</sup> in 2016 (as part of the commemoration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death). This involved a BBC-documented tour to thirteen partner theatres, with amateur companies cast as the Mechanicals, and local school children as Titania's extra fairies. The critical reception of this large-scale and costly initiative has been mixed, and it remains to be seen whether it has succeeded in attracting new audiences to other productions.

In 2013, Doran agreed a three-year deal with its former London partner, the Barbican Centre, to stage *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, *Henry V*, and *Death of a Salesman*. The RSC has struggled for many years to find an alternative suitable regular London venue for its productions and, anticipating the excitement surrounding the Barbican deal, Doran cautiously described the arrangement as "dating" rather than "announcing wedding plans" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). However, it seems possible that the Barbican may continue to feature in Doran's stated intention to stage the whole of Shakespeare's First Folio (36 plays) over a period of 6 years (to 2019) "without repetition, hesitation or deviation" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). Cavendish describes this as part of

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<sup>1</sup> Trailer available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdZ-671kEik>  
Synopsis at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knSvuVZBk\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knSvuVZBk_g)

Doran's "less is more" strategy, which he sees as being "very different from the 2006 [*Complete Works*] jamboree" (Cavendish 2013, *The Telegraph*, online), but Peter Smith points out that his motivation seems to be "completeness rather than any kind of detailed exploration of the more canonical plays or even the resurrection of those that figure less prominently in the canon" (Smith, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 2016, online). Having personally directed almost two-thirds of Shakespeare's plays in Stratford, Doran hopes to complete the final third during his Artistic Directorship.

In interviews and at public functions, Doran is charismatic and sociable, and has a relaxed style of interaction which is markedly different from his predecessor Michael Boyd, who was often described as serious, quiet and unassuming. As a figure who is generally well respected amongst academics as well as theatre practitioners, Doran is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow of the Shakespeare Institute (affiliated to the University of Birmingham) and holds a number of honorary doctorates from UK universities. He also raised his profile further in 2016 by delivering the *Richard Dimbleby Lecture* in March, and forefronting the *RSC Live!* gala at the RST in April,<sup>1</sup> both of which were screened by the BBC. However, despite being seen as part of the establishment, Doran says "What I really want to do above all is generate some excitement" (2013, *The Spectator*, online). Michael Billington hopes that this will happen, suggesting that "it's a matter of restoring glamour and lustre to every production" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). This thesis aims to explore whether, based on the evidence of the Summer 2014 season in Stratford, Doran is beginning to do that whilst, at the same time, continuing with tradition and ensuring the continued pre-eminence of the RSC as one of the world's leading theatre companies.

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<sup>1</sup> Trailer available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HWYbn01qaE>

## 1.4 “All the world’s a stage”<sup>1</sup>: Stratford in Context

The RSC is overseen by a Board of Governors, and in 2015, the company received just under 25% of its income from Arts Council grants (RSC, 2015, online). A little under 54% of the annual income is from box office sales and, in 2014, the Company declared a £4.3m profit, having staged 22 productions. However, with its primary base in Stratford-upon-Avon, which Michael Boyd describes as “like a seaside town in the middle of England except that it’s next to a river”, which “marries ice-cream populism with high art” (Boyd 2005, *Evening Standard*, online), the RSC is perhaps not always best placed to compete with the abundance of early modern drama productions in London. As Kate Wilkinson points out, “the RSC can no longer be considered the only theatre company with a primary function of staging plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries” (*Shakespeare*, 2015 online). As well as periodic Shakespeare productions such as those offered by the *Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company* at the Gielgud Theatre in 2015/16, the new Globe theatre, established in 1997, operates without an annual government subsidy, and declares that it provides a “unique international resource dedicated to the exploration of Shakespeare’s work... through the connected means of performance and education” (About Us, *Shakespeare’s Globe* 2016, online).

The Globe caters to a very diverse audience, by aiming to provide an experience which is as close to Elizabethan theatre-going as we can (and perhaps want to) achieve in the twenty-first century. In 2015 it reported a record £23 million income, with a surplus of about £302k, and more than 490,000 theatregoers; a smaller revenue with fewer tickets sales than the RSC, but still proving very popular with audiences of all ages and

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<sup>1</sup> *As You Like It*, 2.7 (142)



backgrounds. As Michael Dobson points out, The Globe manages to achieve “the same buzz regardless of which play you’re seeing” (Dobson, 2014, pers. comm.) and the recent addition of the intimate (indoor) Sam Wanamaker Playhouse broadens the possibilities for staging works by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

The National Theatre also regularly stages Shakespeare’s works, and many of these are screened across the world as *NLive* broadcasts. In 2014-15, the National Theatre received 15% of its income from Arts Council grants (10% less than the RSC), and 63% came from the box office (9% more than the RSC). Its 2015 profit was £1.3 million and, like the RSC and The Globe, it has an extensive education programme. A key focus for Gregory Doran, then, may be to determine the purpose and extent of the RSC’s London presence, as one of several providers of staged early modern drama.

In planning a season of plays which are “in conversation with each other” (Doran 2013, *The Spectator*, online) for the Summer of 2014, Doran hoped that the ‘boys’ in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the ‘girls’ in the Swan Theatre would attract a broad range of audiences. Anecdotally, it seems that the RST tends to have more first time visitors than the Swan, which appears to have a slightly older and more loyal following, but the RSC tries to combine its face-to-face contact with its digital presence, though its live cinema relays of Stratford productions, trailers, and initiatives such as an online screening of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which featured a mixture of real and virtual actors, and was performed in real time, over three days.

## ACT II

### Bloody Men in The Royal Shakespeare Theatre

#### 2.1 “False face must hide what the false heart doth know”<sup>1</sup>

##### *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* by William Shakespeare

Greg Doran, Royal Shakespeare Theatre (11 / 12 June 2014 and 23 / 25 August 2014)

The two parts of *Henry IV* were published in Quarto, in 1598 and 1600 respectively, and are popular with directors, audiences and actors alike, being described by Michael Billington as “Shakespeare’s greatest plays”, due to their ability to present a “panoramic vista” which “encompasses every aspect of England” (Billington 2014. *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). They provide a rich combination of intense action, physical and verbal comedy, emotional pathos and cruelty, together with political intrigue and a psychological exploration of the nature of kingship. They are performed fairly regularly on the Stratford stages, with the most recent RSC productions having been shown in 2000 and 2007, both as part of a full history cycle.

As the incoming Artistic Director in 2014, Greg Doran followed in the tradition of his predecessors<sup>2</sup> by choosing to direct the *Henry IV* plays himself, having already given us *Richard II* in autumn 2013. In a 2014 interview with Paul Allen, Doran expressed an interest in seeking to understand the real Henry IV and, in exploring Shakespeare’s source material, Doran chose to make an addition to *Henry IV Part 1*, 2.4, using the anonymous 1587 play, *The Famous Victories of Henry V*. This includes a

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<sup>1</sup> *Macbeth*, 1.7 (91)

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hall 1964, Terry Hands 1975, Trevor Nunn 1982, Adrian Noble 1991, Michael Boyd 2006

scene in which Hal's angry intervention to defend Bardolph from arrest leads him to strike the Lord Chief Justice. By including this action in his production, Doran aimed to provide a visible link to the references made by the Justice in *Henry IV Part 2* (1.2 and 5.2) to the new king having struck him, and add more depth to a thinly-written role (Doran 2014, *RSC Summer School* pers. comm). In revisiting *Famous Victories*, the RSC decided to perform it for the first time (for young audiences) in 2015.

Doran's three-hour *Henry IV Part 1* picked up more or less where *Richard II* had left off. Although a few years had passed since Bolingbroke seized the crown, the monarch was still visibly distressed by his guilt at having murdered his cousin and was desperate to make his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, showing signs of physical weakness as a result of his torment (Britton 2014. *RSC Friends*, pers. comm.). In a church setting, Jasper Britton's Henry lay prostrate on the floor; face down with arms outstretched as though on the cross. Wearing a long tunic and cloak, he was positioned before a row of chanting monks (later revealed to be Henry's nobles and younger sons) carrying candles. He then rose to assume his (and Richard's) crown under the giant hanging gold crucifix (as though requesting confirmation of his right to rule), as the ghostly figure of Sam Marks, dressed as Richard II (in a tunic similar to that worn by David Tennant's Richard), hovered on the balcony.<sup>1</sup> Peter Smith saw this as an example of *Doranism* – a tendency to be “so concerned about theatrical clarity that he too often crosses the border into literal mindedness” (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online), thus underestimating the imaginative ability of the audience to make the connection between Henry's unease and Richard's demise for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Production images available at <https://www.rsc.org.uk/henry-iv-part-i/> and <https://www.rsc.org.uk/henry-iv-part-ii/>  
Pre-production trailer available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTx-enC2bOg>  
On-stage trailer available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NiaRQop7C4>

Doran is not always supportive of modern-dress productions of Shakespeare's works, as he feels they can raise questions and challenges such as "Why have they got swords? Why didn't Juliet just text Romeo?" (Doran 2013, *Interview Magazine*, online). The tone for this staging, then, was sombre and late medieval for the nobles (in the court and battle scenes) and more relaxed and Elizabethan for the commoners and Hal (in the tavern). In the first scene, Steven Brimson Lewis's period set<sup>1</sup> had echoes of his design for *Richard II*, incorporating a dark shiny acrylic floor, and using glass slides to project a holographic image onto a metallic curtain made of vertical strips of rusted beads, which set a harsh, grey tone. It also incorporated lighting by Tim Mitchell which suggested a gloomy, shadowy place of medieval formality, this time with the addition of seven large hanging lanterns. This severe atmosphere would be recreated in 3.1, with the addition of Richard's high-backed, gothic-style gilded wooden throne.

The solemn tone created by the weight of Henry's responsibility contrasted sharply with the carefree state in which his son Hal awoke in 1.2. Arising from the Eastcheap bed he had been sharing with two women (and from which Sir Antony Sher's Falstaff also later unexpectedly emerged, to comic effect), Alex Hassell gave us a handsome, agile, fun-loving prince who was fully embracing the hedonistic freedoms and pleasures of his current "loose behaviour" (*Henry IV Part 1*, 1.2, 203). Rather than being the archetypal Christian soul led astray by the Lord of Misrule, Hal was clearly a strong and confident character, with an inner steel and unwavering control over his own actions, engaging enthusiastically in ridiculing his companion, showing signs of exasperation as well as amusement at Falstaff's bluff, and attempting to waft away the old man's bad breath. In a video interview for the RSC,

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<sup>1</sup> Brimson Lewis explains his design at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOksapKPzpg&index=6&list=PLSIxo\\_5aCKQiA5ddbOwcRtmSxQ2a0fRV5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOksapKPzpg&index=6&list=PLSIxo_5aCKQiA5ddbOwcRtmSxQ2a0fRV5)



Hassell described the Hal of the first few scenes as being vain, dissolute and wayward (Hassell 2014, *RSC*, online) but he also showed intelligence in his quick-witted verbal exchanges with Falstaff and an appealing nature which went some way to explaining Poins' (Sam Marks) fondness for him.

The design for this scene revealed a grounded, earthy and slightly grubby representation of an Elizabethan-styled tavern, featuring: a sloping rectangular timber roof; a wooden balcony to the left and right of the stage; matching wooden screens which slid across the back of the stage; and sand-blasted wooden slats which had been nailed to the side walls by hand (Brimson-Lewis 2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). These enveloped the stage and suggested a fractured, flawed realm in need of repair. An old wooden stool served as a table for Falstaff's flagon of sack and an open tread wooden staircase provided access to the balconies and the tavern's imagined upper rooms. In adapting his design to accommodate *Richard II*, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, none of Brimson Lewis's sets appeared to create significant challenges to sightlines and, in scene 2, Hal, Falstaff and Poins were clearly visible whilst positioned on the raised bed, which had been drawn out on a low simple wooden platform from the back of the stage.

Michael Dobson describes the Eastcheap scenes as part of Hal's education, as he shifts between social groups, "learning his kingdom as a series of foreign languages" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). In an interview for the RSC's summer school, Hassell admitted that, in terms of his rehearsal interpretations of Hal, he had "moved all over the place with it" (Hassell 2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). When, in his soliloquy at the end of 1.2, he stood in spotlight to explain to a well-lit audience his plan to emerge from his reputation as a self-indulgent youth, we were perhaps given slightly unequal impressions in different performances of the extent to which he was emotionally entwined with his associates in Eastcheap. On first viewing, he gave a definite impression that his firm decision about his forthcoming 'conversion' meant that his involvement in

tavern life was merely a means to an end. On second viewing, Hal seemed more committed to his friendships, and his break from his companions seemed more troubling. This variation seems to reflect Hassell's view (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.) that Hal is a complex character, who does not have a conscious plan of exactly how to behave but who moves between seriousness and humour, between responsibility and recklessness. This view was supported by Doran, who believes that Shakespeare's characters are not fixed, but vary according to circumstances, and that their growth should not necessarily be thought of in psychological terms, so much as in dramaturgical ones (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.).

Brimson-Lewis's Elizabethan tavern costumes included Hal's faded red leather doublet, which denoted his royal status. Poins wore a similar brown suede doublet, whilst Falstaff was styled in a grubby off-white shirt, over a generously proportioned fat suit, with a dirty neckerchief and striped trousers. He wore long boots, with a leather belt below his huge stomach, and a leather strap across his chest, which was used to support his sword. An old worn beige leather coat with deep cuffs matched his broad brimmed hat, which Libby Purves said gave him "the air of a large ambulating mushroom sprouting curly grey fungus of beard and hair" (2014, *TheatreCat*, online.). With his white beard, pronounced belly, ruddy cheeks and wild hair, Falstaff moved slowly and awkwardly, troubled by gout and arthritis in a way which echoed King Henry's own physical weariness and decline.

In a piece of what Doran described as "left-field casting", which had been recommended by Sir Ian McKellen (2014. *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.), Sher was perhaps not an obvious choice for the role of Falstaff. Often portrayed as a sympathetic, larger than life fun-loving buffoon, Falstaff is known for his ability to eat, drink and misbehave and, as Doran points out, he "challenges the notion that life is a rehearsal for the real thing" and says "life is here!" (2014 *RSC*, online). With the biggest share of the lines and a tendency to share his worldly wisdom directly with the audience, Falstaff is

often the character with whom we have most affinity. However, Sher's performance gave some of its focus to Falstaff's predatory nature and tendency to be self-centred, ruthless, exploitative, cold and indifferent to suffering. In his book *The Year of the Fat Knight* (2015), Sher referred to the challenge of attempting to understand how such a selfish, disreputable creature could be so popular with audiences, though Julie Raby points out that he was able to "pick up on an audience member's laugh or gasp, and work with it through the rest of the speech" (*Shakespeare*, 2015 online). Sher's received-pronunciation delivery of Falstaff's lines was slow and deliberate, and he tended to wallow luxuriously in his words, as he slurred over them, in a way which suggested he was permanently a little the worse for sack and more than a little world-weary. Laura Kressley suggested that Sher's "rhythmic delivery lacks variation and harks back to the old fashioned declamatory RSC stage speech" (*Shakespeare Standard*, 2016 online) and Sher's sour reading of Falstaff perhaps did not inspire universal fondness for the old man, but his interpretation did make some sense of the fact that Hal appeared both attracted and repelled by him. In this production, their friendship was based on mutual amusement, convenience and self-interest, and it would clearly struggle to withstand any serious challenge.

In 2.4, as Falstaff entertained the tavern dwellers and audience with his increasingly preposterous tale of his own imagined bravery, he endured Hal's smug teasing and insults with his usual good humour and, as usual, we "ended up rooting for him, in spite of our better judgement" (Smith 2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online). The old reprobate found it impossible to be angry at his young friend and, in observing Hal's "I do. I will" (2.4.484) it was clear that he was confused by the coolness of the prince's response, and gave a look of appeal to his companions, as if to seek their agreement that

Hal was merely jesting.<sup>1</sup> The turning point in their relationship was perhaps their encounter in 4.2 when, following Falstaff's reluctant acceptance of a charge of foot (who were seen shuffling off to their deaths at the back of the stage), Hal appeared shocked and slightly disgusted at his friend's heartless unconcern for his "food for powder" (4.2.65) and his lack of commitment to his responsibilities. Falstaff's disdainful tone would be repeated in 5.1 when delivering his sermon to the audience about the uselessness of honour, and in 5.2, when he remained unconcerned that an exasperated Hal discovered, mid-battle, that the old man was keeping a bottle in his holster rather than a pistol (5.2.159). In Doran's production, despite Hal's frustration, Falstaff had convinced himself that their relationship would always remain strong.

Another key member of the Eastcheap society was Joshua Richards' Bardolph, who was tall and well built, with the usual large red blistered nose. Wearing an old brown leather outfit, Richards gave an understated and sympathetic portrayal of an old loner with an easy going nature who did not wish to get too involved in the proceedings and retained a blank expression for much of the time. In *Henry IV Part 1* (3.3), he shared an entertaining encounter with the hung-over Falstaff who wandered around the tavern emptying the dregs of sack from the used tankards, whilst Elliot Barnes-Worrell's over-worked Francis (the potboy) ran around in his white apron and cap, carrying drinks trays. Francis's primary purpose seemed to be to provide amusement for Hal and Poins who, on two occasions, would entertain themselves by summoning Francis in opposite directions at the same time, as he repeatedly called out "Anon sir". Bardolph, meanwhile, retained his expressionless demeanour as Falstaff teased him about his appearance, amusing the audience with the bland, economical rebuff "you are so fretful Sir John, you cannot live long" (3.3.11).

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<sup>1</sup> On-stage extract from 2.4 available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdI2iVJAyIE>



As the mistress of the Eastcheap tavern, Paola Dionisotti's Mistress Quickly had few lines, but was notable in 2.4, when she played mother hen to her customers and paid particular attention to Falstaff's comfort. Much laughter was generated by the knowing cough which was the response to her pretensions to respectability whenever she referred to her imaginary husband. She was slim and sprightly, with her wayward grey hair held in a scarf and her limited wealth carefully guarded in a leather pouch which she wore at the waist of her shabby brown dress with pink bodice and red underskirt. These characters, then, formed the group with whom Hal associated on a daily basis. Whilst his interactions were relaxed, warm, jovial, and entertaining, they were also largely shallow, and the prince's authoritative demeanour gave little evidence of genuine loyalty or affection.

Hal's relationship with his father Henry was similarly cold, though far more formal. At the RSC 2014 Summer School, Hassell suggested Hal has been hiding from his father's disapproval and distress (pers. comm.) and, in their encounter in 3.2, his formal apology showed little sign of genuine remorse. However, he was shocked by Henry's circling him angrily and grasping him by the ear to bring him to his knees (just as Northumberland did with his own son Hotspur in 1.3), and began a process of growing awareness and acknowledgment of his *own* anxiety about the magnitude of his forthcoming responsibilities. His commitment as he stood below the cross and swore "in the name of heaven" (3.2.154) to defeat Hotspur appeared genuine, and did seem to go some way towards comforting his sceptical father.

In *Part 1*, Jasper Britton gave a strong and vigorous performance as the anxious and enraged monarch, who was determined to do his utmost (despite his failing health) to hold together a kingdom deeply troubled by rebellion. Peter Smith comments that he was "wonderfully brittle, resolved and spiritually confident one moment, and despairing over his country's internal strife and his wayward son the next" (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online). Evidenced by the strength with which he shouted "No more!" in 1.1

(5, 7 and 18), his irate rebuke of Hotspur in 1.3 for the young man's refusal to hand over his prisoners and, later in 3.2, his angry criticism and despair of his son Hal for his idleness, we were left in no doubt about the strength of the fury which was wearing him down and making him "wan with care" (1.1).

For Henry's authoritative appearance at court in 1.3, Brimson-Lewis had designed him a long red royal cloak. Similar colours were worn by his supporters Westmoreland and Blunt, but simple muted grey and neutral-toned costumes were given to the rebellious Percy family, who wore long-line medieval belted tunics, with modern leather boots and trousers. Trevor White's Hotspur wore a black leather jerkin and a black jacket of a similar style to Hal's. His northern-sounding Hotspur was unusual in suggesting an autistic quality which, for White, explains: his lack of perspective; his ability to expound at length on a topic with no apparent awareness of the effect on others; his tendency to act against his own interests; and his continual sense of exploration and "almost insane bravery" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). Unlike Hal, Hotspur's humour was considered to be purely incidental, since "Hotspur has never told a joke in his life and wouldn't know if he had" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). This Hotspur was naïve, impetuous and single-minded, with regular tantrums and rages. Peter Smith described his "weird restlessness" as lending him "a comic childishness" (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online) and, as he railed against his accuser, Henry resorted to grasping him by the neck and looking to Sean Chapman's Northumberland to restrain his son's insolence, who grasped him by the ear to subdue him, thus enabling him to listen to Antony Byrne's Worcester, who had been waiting patiently for the rant to end.

White stated that Hotspur sees Worcester as a kind of surrogate father, with whom he has a warm and close relationship and for whom he has greater respect than his biological father, who shows a coolness towards him and fails to send troops to aid his rebellion (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). The strength of their relationship was emphasised when the uncle

hugged his nephew in 1.3 and then, later in 4.3, when a look from Worcester caused Hotspur to pause and consider Blunt's offer from the king, leading him to agree to suspend the battle in order to consider the offer of clemency.

White's performance was consistently high-energy, excitable and fearless and he gave us a convincing portrayal of an impatient hothead, such as when he jumped around like an excited toddler in 5.1, at the prospect of single combat with Prince Hal. Michael Billington said Hotspur was "brimming with uncontrollable ferocity" (Billington 2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.) and Michael Dobson described the character as being "so impatient that he can barely put up with the fact that he has to get to the end of his own sentence", needing to use martial valour to "prove everything he can't quite say in time" (Dobson 2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). White's portrayal was not universally welcomed by critics and audiences, but it provided a refreshing interpretation of a character with whom our patience can sometimes wear a little thin.

As his wife (Lady Percy) Jennifer Kirby was styled in a slim-fitting medieval pale grey long silk dress with fluid draping, and her performance suggested a strong female, who was willing to grapple with her husband verbally and physically but who genuinely cared deeply about his welfare and was very tolerant of his outbursts, though clearly bruised by his mental assaults. Though Hotspur began their scene in 2.3 regarding his wife as an unwelcome distraction, when she asked "do you not love me?", he reached out to her as though he wished to demonstrate affection but did not quite grasp how to communicate a response. We were left with a sympathetic portrayal of a couple with a strong emotional bond but very different outlooks on life – one caring, cautious and fearful, and the other ambitious, fearless and determined.

In 3.1, the rebels who threaten Henry's realm gathered at Owen Glendower's Celtic-styled castle, around a large white sheepskin rug on a set which also featured a wooden armchair, a small harp and three lit iron

braziers. Joshua Richards (who also played Bardolph) played the solemn, self-important, but tolerant, long-haired Glendower, and wore the map of England as a cloak around his shoulders. (In *Part 2*, this map would also be symbolically wrapped around the shoulders of a troubled Henry in 3.1; denied sleep due to his worries about the continuing threats to his kingdom.) Peter Smith felt that the appearance of Glendower was a prime example of *Doranism*, since he wore “a Prosperian gown, with magic staff and long droopy moustache” and appeared “every inch the Celtic twilight magus” (Smith, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 2016, online).

The tense build-up to the battle began in 4.1 with projected clouds and smoke drifting across the back wall, above bare tree branches and undergrowth, as Hotspur expressed his unfailing confidence in his inevitable success, despite the absence of his father’s troops. The battle scenes featured low lighting and flashing red lights, accompanied by the sound of cries, drums, music and clashing swords. A crazed Douglas (Sean Chapman) attempted to attack the king with a medieval flail, and Hotspur ran on stage shouting a battle cry, stopping suddenly at the sight of his intended prey, Hal. The armoured rebel fought in a frenzied style against his agile enemy and their encounter was energetically directed by Terry King and set against a red sky, symbolising the blood spent in battle. Peter Smith felt that their combat was “a fitting climax to such a naturalistic production” (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online) and, in his triumph, Hal showed the customary compassion for Hotspur, who was able to laugh briefly at his own defeat, as Hal held his hand and appeared genuinely moved by his loss.

This poignant moment was ended by Falstaff, who, after playing dead in order to avoid danger, caused much laughter by realising that his paunch was so pronounced that he was unable to roll over in order to stand up. After struggling to his feet and attempting to drag Hotspur’s body off by his leg, he was spotted by Hal, who did a double-take and realised that Falstaff’s death was merely feigned and that he was attempting to claim



credit for Hotspur's demise. *Part 1* ended with Henry looking to the heavens for divine assistance in his next potential encounter with the rebels.

*Part 2* began with Antony Byrne walking onto a well-lit stage as Rumour, dressed as a stagehand, in modern black jeans and a Rolling Stones tongue t-shirt. Having told the audience to "turn off yer phones!", he took a selfie before activating a projection of the word Rumour in the form of a Twitter hashtag, in a multitude of languages. This gave a lively, though perhaps odd, opening to the play, which would be echoed in the 2015 *Henry V*, as Oliver Ford-Davies' Chorus appeared in casual trousers and a cardigan. Laura Kressley (2016, *Shakespeare Standard*, online) suggests the decision was jarring, since the modern dress was not repeated in the rest of a production which was otherwise very similar in look and feel to *Part 1*. Based on the same wooden set, there was one major addition in the form of a timber screen against the back wall which had a diagonal jagged central crack (to represent the growing schism in Henry's realm), and which would open up to display scenic projections in the exterior scenes.

When Falstaff entered the stage in 1.2 (to the sound of animals being taken to Smithfield market) he was dressed as before but with the addition of a red sash across his chest and a feather in his hat, which presumably he felt he had earned following his recent show of 'valour' in battle. He was accompanied by his young Page, with whom he would associate himself when describing "we that are young" (177) and whom he would comically attempt to hide behind in 2.1, when approached by the officers whom Mistress Quickly had summoned to arrest him for his failure to pay his debts. The warm reactions of the audience to the three young boys in the role of the Page (dressed in a smart red and black livery) meant that we were sometimes removed from the world of the play, in a similar way to when Launce appeared with his dog Crab in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. At times, Falstaff showed a benevolent attitude towards his servant which was out of character and a little distracting in its disruption of the narrative.

The Page also featured in 2.4, where Hal and Poins hid behind the tavern curtain to observe Falstaff's exchanges with Quickly and Nia Gwynne's Doll Tearsheet. Beginning with the overworked Francis running across the stage with his reprisal of "Anon sir", the scene took place in a small, intimate tableau setting on the platform which featured a tapestry curtain and simple chandelier. Doll was comforted in the recovery from a hangover by Quickly, whilst vomiting in a basin which none of the servants were keen to empty (Falstaff's offering of a chamber pot was an equally unwelcome gift). She then hid her head in the floor cushions before reluctantly dragging herself to the table. Dressed in an old beige gown, red petticoat and boots, and with long tangled blond hair, she attempted to compose herself, before the sound of a gunshot announced the arrival of Anthony Byrne's drunken Pistol.

With wild, vertical hair, worn leathers and a grubby face, Byrne gave a boisterous, entertaining and unpredictable performance, which Peter Smith felt made him "as unwelcome in the production as he was in Eastcheap" (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online). Providing *Part 2*'s version of Hotspur's ungovernable behaviour in *Part 1*, Pistol staggered around in a threatening manner with a knife, had his head buried in the cushions by an angry Doll, leaped onto a chair, stole the table cloth to wear it around his neck, took his trousers down, and swung from the chandelier (in a manner reminiscent of Lisa Dillon's Moll in *The Roaring Girl* which was playing next door at the Swan theatre). At intervals there were moments of stillness as the others were able to calm him, but they soon lost patience and Bardolph threw him down the stairs, reporting "the rascal's drunk" (2.4.206) to an unscripted sarcastic response of "No!" from the others. The scene ended with an unexpected, and perhaps somewhat extreme, display of emotion, as Doll and Falstaff appeared overwrought and highly tearful at their parting.

As in *Part 1*, the transition between locations was achieved smoothly, with the effective use of light to indicate character and mood. In 3.2, as Oliver Ford-Davies's Justice Shallow and Jim Hooper's Silence sat on the moving

platform (now representing a rustic Gloucestershire), the bright light suggested early autumn sun and projections showed branches and bracken in the background. Surrounded by boxes, baskets, barrels, fruits of the apple harvest, and a tray of wooden flagons, Shallow repeatedly attempted to elicit a response from his companion of few words, as they sat on a bench and Shallow reminisced mournfully, and with a trembling knee, about his reputation as “lusty Shallow” (3.2.16) and his encounters with the “bona-robas” (3.2.23). Peter Smith admired Ford-Davies’ characterisation and felt that “the complexity of emotions aroused by Shallow’s painful nostalgia ... set them apart from the rest of the production” (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online). Dressed in black trousers, boots and waistcoat, with a red robe denoting his office, Shallow had long white hair and glasses on the end of his nose. Silence was bald except for a tuft of white hair which stood on end, with a bushy beard, brown velvet trousers and a green waistcoat. Shallow spoke slowly and in a melancholy tone, about his wild youth and boon companions (now all deceased) and Silence half listened, with a vacant expression. They were joined by the laconic Bardolph (and the Page), who did little to liven up the conversation and, as the birds tweeted and white clouds drifted over the sleepy countryside, Shallow pronounced the word “accommodated” (3.2.71) slowly and carefully, as though attempting to find something with which to occupy his mind.

Their peace and tranquility was interrupted by Falstaff who hinted strongly that he wished for a drink, and asked to see his recruits. They were entertainingly, if somewhat predictably, portrayed as a motley assortment: a very tall, stomach-scratching, cowardly Bullcalf in ill-fitting clothes and a skull cap (Youssef Kerkour, who also played Westmoreland); a slim and slouching Shadow with long greasy hair (Jonny Glynn, who also played Warwick and Morton), a very ragged, leering Mouldy (Simon Yadoo, who also played Lord Randolph), a better-dressed, courageous Feeble (Nicholas Gerard-Martin, who also played Hastings) with glasses, felt hat and a pony tail; and a very small and unsteady Wart (Leigh Quinn, who also played

Gloucester), who was bent over at the waist with long white hair, and wearing dirty gloves and rags. Despite the humour of the scene, we were given a sense of the potential danger facing the soldiers, as Shallow took notes on them with his quill and Falstaff considered their merits.

Though still a dominant presence in *Part 2*, this Falstaff was much less boisterous than when socialising with the young prince in *Part 1* and an emphasis was placed in this three-hour production on the reflective, melancholic tone of the scenes between Shallow, Silence, Falstaff and Bardolph. With the suggestion of a pastoral idyll to contrast with the stresses of court and battlefield, performances in the Gloucestershire scenes were subtle and wistful, and perhaps a little indulgent. In 5.3, Falstaff made himself comfortable (with Bardolph and the Page removing his boots), whilst a tipsy Shallow struggled to pronounce the word “cavalieros” (5.3.56) and Silence drifted in and out of the conversation, occasionally bursting into song, and sometimes staring into space, then falling asleep and waking suddenly. He was still, snoring, as Falstaff, Shallow, Bardolph and the Page all set off enthusiastically on their journey to greet the new King Henry V.

Back in London, Keith Osborne’s Archbishop of York led the rebels (Mowbray, Hastings and Randolph) in the latest plot and in 4.1 they gathered for what Doran described as “notoriously the hardest scene in the histories to get right” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). Lacking the physical drama of the rebellion in *Part 1*, the focus was on the relationships and exchanges between the plotters and the confident and disingenuous Prince John (Elliot Barnes-Worrell in a role which contrasted starkly with the subservient eager-to-please Francis). In a gloomy forest scene, crows were heard in the background as the Archbishop and Mowbray (Trevor White, returning to the role of rebel but now in a long brown wig and with a somewhat calmer disposition) expressed their anger to Westmoreland about their unsettled grievances. A hesitant Archbishop was won over by the sly Prince John’s promise to address their demands and, in an echo of



Hotspur's preference for violence over diplomacy, Mowbray was the last to drink to their truce, retaining doubts about the supposed royal assurances, which were well justified, since the deceived insurgents were duly arrested.

Unaware that the current threat to peace would be resolved without bloodshed, Henry's distress was beginning to mount and his health was showing signs of deterioration. In 3.1, as the tavern dwellers exited and Quickly dozed in her chair, the king entered through the back door of the tavern in a scene which Peter Smith (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online) cited as a prime example of *Doranism*, since Henry walked past the hostess (one of "my poorest subjects" ... "at this hour asleep" (3.1)) and sat with his legs hanging into the trap door for his soliloquy about the burden of keeping his subjects safe from rebellion. Wearing Glendower's map of England around his shoulders (thus carrying the weight of his kingdom), he held a paper boat in his hand (to match the sea imagery), and a bible (since he was addressing God) and he clutched his stomach as he referred to the pain of "rank diseases" (3.1). By 4.2, Henry was weary in spirit as well as in body, and Hal was initially cautious in his response to the King's anger at his heir's apparent over-hasty eagerness to assume power. As Henry coughed blood and raged in despair against his wayward son, Hal made a calm entreaty for the King to believe his assurances, and the two were reconciled, holding hands and in tears, before Hal and John led Henry off to end his days not in the Jerusalem of the Holy Land but in the Jerusalem *chamber*.

Following the announcement of Henry's death, Hal (now Henry V) was presented in spotlight on his throne, in a black cloak and his father's crown. Showing his predicted sudden change of demeanour, there was just a brief moment when the 'old Hal' looked as though he might vent his anger against the Lord Chief Justice, before he responded in a manner befitting his station and was reconciled with his former enemy. In a very brightly-lit final scene, the new king entered in a golden robe to the sound of trumpets and a welcoming crowd, as he crossed a stage scattered with straw, behind a

procession of armoured guards and princes. The splendour of his grand entrance contrasted with the grubbiness of Falstaff and his companions (including Pistol, who had hit the ground in anger at it having tripped him up) and Hal appeared aloof and cold as he turned to Falstaff to inform him “I know thee not, old man” (5.5.48). Although there had been little indication in *Part 2* of the convivial intimacy between Falstaff and Hal which had been so evident in *Part 1*, Falstaff appeared shocked and hesitant as he looked on after Hal, before quietly and unconvincingly attempting to reassure Shallow (and himself) that “I shall be sent for” (5.5.77). As all exited the stage, the production ended with the formerly pampered Page being left to fend for himself, while Falstaff and his company were led off to the Fleet.

Doran believes in the director’s responsibility to ensure an appropriate cast, design, edit of the text and fluidity of action. However, he suggests that the acting company need to feel a sense of ownership and contribution, with the freedom to explore the full possibilities of the play, without the imposition of strong concepts or a pressure to “be different for the sake of being different” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). *Henry IV* was certainly a traditional production in many ways, with a visible attention to detail, a strong focus on the narrative journey and textual clarity, and definition of character, with clear cohesion between members of the acting company. With *Part 1* the more eventful and varied of the two plays, the more subdued tone of *Part 2* seemed to present greater challenges, with its strange mixture of melancholy and hope. However, both parts of *Henry IV* showed clarity and humour and were well-paced and carefully constructed. It was well received by both critics and audiences and, whilst it perhaps did not offer anything significantly new in terms of an interpretation of the play, the transition between scenes was smoothly handled, the designs were unified and there was a significant degree of light and shade in the tone and action of each play, with strong central and supporting performances from the entire ensemble.



## 2.2 “How bitter a thing it is, to look into happiness through another man’s eyes”<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Two Gentlemen of Verona* by William Shakespeare**

Simon Godwin, Royal Shakespeare Theatre (15 and 19 August 2014)

Joining the *Henry IV* plays in the RST quite late in the season, was Simon Godwin’s production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Although there are no surviving records of Elizabethan performances, it is generally considered to be amongst Shakespeare’s earliest plays (written in the late 1580s according to Katherine Duncan-Jones, *RSC Summer School*, 2014 pers. comm.), with a plot apparently taken in part from John Lyly’s 1578 *Euphues* (and possibly the 1589 *Midas*). As the first of Shakespeare’s plays in which love and youth triumph over the opposition of a parent, the play transitions from the simple and comfortable, yet unfulfilling, world of Verona to the sophisticated but troubled Milanese court, and then to the restorative forest, in a sequence of events which foreshadows the action of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It*.

It has the reputation of being less mature, and perhaps less accomplished, than Shakespeare’s later comedies. It may be for this reason that there have been so few productions staged in Stratford, with the last full main stage version in 1970. Since then, there has been just a handful of productions in the Swan Theatre, primarily in 1991 and 2004 (the latter having a 1930s jazz theme and being part of a UK tour alongside *Julius Caesar*). The lightness of touch used in the 2014 production perhaps made it quite a sensible choice for a show which coincided well with the school holidays and could be

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<sup>1</sup> *As You Like It*, 5.2 (31)

enjoyed by families and tourists. However, the short run (12 July to 4 September) was presumably also a reflection of the unpredictability of the potential popularity of a lesser-known Shakespeare play.

Simon Godwin's 2014 production marked his debut with the RSC. Many of his cast (including the four young protagonists) had similarly never worked at the RSC before. For Peter Smith this indicated that, as Artistic Director, Gregory Doran was "treating this play with little respect" (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online). Godwin stated in the production's programme that, having experience of working with new playwrights as Associate Director at the Royal Court, he intended to approach this early work by Shakespeare as though it were a new problem play, by an inexperienced writer.<sup>1</sup> His 2014 production began with quite a long cheerful pre-show which was set amongst the alfresco diners at Antonio's relaxed Veronese restaurant, revealing an opening tone to Paul Wills' 1940s/50s design which was bright and colourful, with couples dressed in casual summer clothes enjoying drinks at small circular white tables which had matching chairs with metal scrollwork backs. The stage floor and walkways were covered with terracotta glazed tiles and the tables were decorated with red and white checked tablecloths which matched the heart-shaped overhead lights and red balloons attached to the ice-cream cart at the rear of the stage. The red roses on the tables and red heart-shaped balloons suggested a Valentine's Day theme, and three onstage musicians accompanied the diners. Against the back wall was the glass door of the restaurant, below a tall window with a wrought-iron semi-circular balcony.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Godwin's synopsis and production decisions available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8Phs3oFnVE> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OiID6hO-QQ>

<sup>2</sup> Production images available at <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-two-gentlemen-of-verona/>  
Trailer available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYkO393io6c>

The restaurant's manager, Simon Yadoo's brown-suited Panthino, welcomed diners to their tables and wove amongst them, whilst also inviting members of the sun-drenched audience onto the stage to sample the gelato, as a young man offered them cellophane-wrapped red roses. The waitress (who we later learned was Lucetta, Julia's maid) flirted with gentlemen in the front row, whilst Valentine's servant, Speed, aimed red paper love darts at members of the audience, and the local priest sat quietly at his table before the church bell indicated it was time to head off for evening service.

During the pre-show, Mark Arends' Proteus sat at a table, dressed in conservative black trousers and braces with a white shirt, and drinking from a beer bottle whilst composing a Valentine's letter to the object of his affection, Pearl Chanda's Julia. Michael Marcus' Valentine was dressed more casually, sporting a light blue double-breasted jacket with blue floral-patterned shirt, beige casual trousers and brown shoes. He had with him a grey and white nylon sports holdall, in preparation for his forthcoming implausible sea voyage to fashionable Milan. Valentine was keen to be off and showed no great reluctance to leave Proteus, who was preoccupied by the energetic Julia, who was pretty and slim with olive-skin and long dark brown hair, and wore a knee-length pale blue and white floral print dress.

Following Proteus's departure, Julia discussed her potential suitors (in a scene reminiscent of Portia's conversation with Nerissa in *The Merchant of Venice*) with Leigh Quinn's mischievous Scottish Lucetta, who was petite, bubbly and spirited, with curly short blond hair and a 50s style waitress uniform. Having found and intercepted the letter from Proteus (the preferred suitor), Lucetta playfully teased Julia with it before leaving Julia to entertain the audience with her amusing explanation of regret at her rash tearing of the letter, as she attempted to gather together its fragments, stamped petulantly on the section which included her own name, and proposed that the extract containing Proteus's name should be placed at her breast. Proteus's subsequent attempt to tell the audience of his delight at receiving

an amorous reply to his letter was interrupted by his authoritarian father (Keith Osborne's Antonio) who had been encouraged by Panthino to send the distressed Proteus after his friend to Milan. Panthino's expression following Proteus's exit suggested there was little love lost between him and his nephew and that he would be very pleased to see him absent himself from Verona. Perhaps he knew something we didn't (yet) know.

For Act 2, the scene relocated to the Duke's court in Milan, which was simply indicated by the roaring sounds of city traffic, and darkness descending on the café. Spotlights shifted our attention to the semi-circular balcony above, where Martin Bassindale's Speed entertained us by scoffing at his master's protestation of love for the Duke's daughter, Sylvia. Speed was true to his name, being energetic and quick-witted, with a short slender appearance and the air of someone constantly rushing to his next task. Dressed in casual baggy grey trousers, dirty white tennis shoes and a red flat cap, he kept his sunglasses in the pocket of the denim jacket that he wore over a hooded jersey. Along with Proteus's servant Launce, he would provide much of the humour as, in typical Shakespearean style, he made comical observations and attempted to remain one step ahead of his master.

Having met the alluring Sylvia, the affable Valentine was forced to alter his priorities and rescind his mocking dismissal of his friend's comments on the value of love. Tall and slim, and first appearing in a sophisticated and stylish slim fitting knee-length dress with peplum frill around the hips, Sarah Macrae's Sylvia wore a white glove and a broad-brimmed white straw hat on top of her long blond hair, and seemed slightly aloof, and perhaps initially beyond the reach of the less sophisticated Valentine.<sup>1</sup> However, she indicated an interest in him, and was entertaining in her visible frustration of

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<sup>1</sup> On-stage extract from 2.1 available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVxbce118Zc>



Valentine's inability to understand her ruse (the composing of a letter to an imagined suitor) in declaring her affections. Her ability to command his actions suggested that their relationship could be one of equals.

With the focus now shifting back to the café below, Proteus and Julia were seen exiting the restaurant at dawn, not quite fully dressed, ostensibly having spent the night together. This 'morning after the night before' scene echoed Romeo and Juliet's parting, and their exchange of rings was also reminiscent of the plot of *All's Well That Ends Well*. Their leave-taking was cut short as Panthino thrust Proteus's bag towards him with great insistence. The sound of thunder provided a timely cue for the removal of the café tables and chairs as the musicians announced the entrance of Proteus's servant Launce, who was newly arrived in Milan.

Roger Morlidge was droll, if somewhat humdrum, as Proteus's slow, clownish servant, who was usually accompanied by his lugubrious and loveable canine companion Crab. Launce was overweight and unshaven, and dressed in a worn green tweed jacket and waistcoat, with baggy dark grey trousers, white shirt, a red kerchief around his neck and an old brown leather suitcase. The audience would be repeatedly entertained by his intermittent accusations of Crab's apparent lack of sympathy, social graces, and gratitude, such as for the many times "I have sat in the stocks for puddings he hath stolen" (4.4, 20). The long-haired, easy-going Crab (actually a four-year old female lurcher named Mossup, who was given her own portacabin dressing room) was inevitably a popular addition to the stage, with her undirected whimpers, barks and wanderings providing a welcome unpredictability to Launce's otherwise quite run-of-the-mill scenes, which chimed well with his main purpose, which was to lead us into a temporary distraction from the main plot. As an interesting addition to the production, at the performance on the evening of 19<sup>th</sup> August, a local Support Dogs charity brought other canines onstage after the curtain call, in what seemed to be quite a lucrative appeal for donations from the audience.



Upon Launce's exit, the band struck up to announce a swift change of scene to 2.4's evening party, ostensibly hosted in the Duke of Milan's personal nightclub. Bruno Poet's lighting design was used to set the tone, with bright blue iridescent lights and a mirror-ball shining around the audience, and pink disco lights circling the dance floor. The back wall was drawn aside and a balcony revealed Molly Gromadzki's exotic cabaret dancer, who sang of the fun to be had in 'Milano', whilst wearing a bright blue tight satin mini-dress with matching leggings, high heels and feathers at her neck and cuffs. Michael Bruce's up-tempo club music was used to emphasise the fast, sophisticated lifestyle of the cosmopolitan Milanese, within a setting which now included a sweeping semi-circular iron staircase at either side of the balcony and party-goers in sharp suits and short evening dresses. The dancing provided an excellent opportunity for Sylvia and Valentine's flirtatious body language, and afforded Johnny Glyn's Duke the opportunity to flaunt the wealth and power of his extravagant Milanese court.

The Duke was slim and of medium height with grey-brown medium length hair, and a trimmed grey beard. He was expensively dressed in a slick shiny light brown suit, with slip on shoes and sunglasses. Johnny Glyn gave him a relaxed air of authority and confidence, as he circulated amongst his guests and welcomed his preferred, but hapless, suitor to Sylvia's hand, Nicholas Gerard-Martin's Turio (*Thurio* in the original text). Of medium height with short wavy brown hair, Turio sported a black suit with sparkling rhinestones on his lapels. With bright red patent shoes, he gave the appearance of a showy but shallow suitor, who had little idea of how to go about wooing his host's intelligent and sophisticated daughter. His attempt to sidle up to her on the dance floor was rebuffed and his subsequent unheard conversation with Valentine led to Sylvia physically parting the acrimonious rivals.

With music playing faintly in the background, Sylvia (in a black and white cocktail dress) was introduced to Proteus, and knelt playfully to him to bid him welcome. She did not observe the expression which indicated his

instant infatuation. Thrilled at Proteus's arrival in Milan, Valentine unwisely entrusted his pal with the news of his intended elopement with Sylvia, before the provincial-looking Proteus knelt to face the audience and appeal to us to understand his plight and approve his decision to put aside his friendship and promise of undying love for Julia, in order to pursue his own self-interest with Sylvia. The speed and vigour with which he had transferred his affections drew a mixture of laughter and sounds of disapproval from the audience, with groans heard at his description of Julia as "a swarthy wretch" (2.6, 26) - a more politically-correct version of the original 'swarthy Ethiopie' - and laughter accompanying his placing of Julia's ring in his pocket at the suggestion that he should now forget that she was alive.

Act 2 Scene 7 began with a night-time picnic, which saw Julia drinking wine from a bottle and conversing with Lucetta on a rug, in a scene reminiscent of the closeness and informality of Juliet and her nurse. Showing herself to be driven by her strong emotional attachment to Proteus and a desire to live in the moment, the endearing Julia excitedly flung herself to the ground with her head on Lucetta's lap, as she spoke of "lascivious men" whilst Lucetta playfully grasped her breasts. Julia expressed her spirited idea of assuming a male disguise in order to pursue her lover and, with great optimism, she and Lucetta imagined her manly attire - tucking her summer dress between her legs, using the wine bottle to indicate a codpiece, and drawing a moustache on her face. However, the audience's laughter at her youthful enthusiasm became more cynical as the naivety of her misguided devotion led her to assert that "his words are bonds, his oaths are oracles / his love sincere" (2.7, 75-6), and there was audible sympathy for her ignorance of the fickle betrayal by her unappealing former suitor.

Back in Milan for Act 3, the Duke was in his drawing room, where a backless leather padded bench was placed at either side of the stage, and a drinks table containing glasses and a decanter was conveniently placed for his reception of his guest Proteus, who feigned loyalty to his host in betraying

Valentine and Sylvia's plans for elopement. Following the Duke's outraged physical attack on the unsuspecting Valentine, the heartbroken young man was left to pre-empt Romeo's speech on the comparison between banishment and death, as his 'friend' Proteus pursued his swift assimilation into the Duke's inner circle in 3.2, observing the Duke's comments on Turio's ineffective wooing of Sylvia from the comfort of the Duke's red leather desk chair. The Duke's facial expression upon reading Turio's sonnet to Sylvia alternated between benign approval and doubtful scepticism. His concern would be well-founded as, after the interval, Turio, flung red roses enthusiastically about the stage, aiming some at Sylvia's balcony and using others as a microphone, during his heartfelt but overly dramatic and comical rendition of "Who is Sylvia", which was accompanied by the guitars, tambourine, violin and maracas, played by Proteus and on-stage musicians<sup>1</sup>

In Act 4, we moved to the supposedly dark world of a very tidy forest, with a curtain of green foliage hiding the back wall and balcony and a large square camouflage net across the floor, which became the man-trap for Valentine and Speed, who found themselves suddenly suspended in mid-air by a group of outlaws (four male and two female) who were clad in Army surplus khaki combat trousers, vests, T shirts and gilets, woollen hats and stout leather boots. The notable physicality of the forest scenes helped to carry along the action, and the capture of Valentine and Speed was simple but entertaining, with the audience enjoying the comic tone of Valentine's raising of his eyebrows, as part of his casual, resigned acceptance of the role of their new leader, in preference to the alternative death sentence.

Back in Milan, Julia entered through the audience (now disguised as Sebastian) and witnessed Proteus's unwanted declaration of affection for

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from 4.2 available to view at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ApL51n2wPPs>

Sylvia, following Turio's own unsuccessful attempt. Wearing blue pyjamas and touching Valentine's ring which she wore on a chain around her neck, Sylvia's firm rejection of Proteus confirmed her unwavering loyalty to her betrothed. Sarah Macrae's Sylvia was dignified and headstrong, but quite moving in her self-possession. She showed strength of character and maturity, in her trusting determination to flout her father's will in pursuing her own choice of husband. Julia turned to a laughing audience, to share her shocked reaction to Proteus's desperate claim that his own fiancée was dead, and watched as Sylvia reluctantly agreed to give her new suitor her picture, in an effort to get rid of him, before planning her pursuit of Valentine with her reluctant companion, Sir Eglamore (Youssef Kerkour).

In a quite convincing brown suit and tie, with a short wig, Julia was shown being directed by Proteus to take a gift to Sylvia. There were murmurs of disapproval from the audience as they realised that (with echoes of Bassanio's potential betrayal of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*), the intended gift was the ring which Julia had given to her betrothed. Julia remained dry-eyed but forlorn, as she elicited laughter from the audience at the question "how many women would do such a message?" in a tone which seemed to ask how many more indignities she must suffer in her pursuit of love, and which, for Michael Billington, exemplified her "immensely touching study of heartbroken devotion" (*The Guardian*, 2014 online).

Encountering Sylvia as she embarked on her escape, Julia's exchange with the new object of Proteus's affection was a very memorable part of the production. Sylvia's anger and frustration at Proteus's pursuit of her clearly endeared her to 'Sebastian' and Sylvia was visibly moved by the tale of Julia's plight, with her sympathy seeming genuine at her comment "poor lady, desolate and left!" Though both were in serious mood and distracted by their individual woes, it was possible to see a connection and empathy between these two young women that could easily translate into friendship in more fortunate circumstances. Julia's subsequent comparison of their



physical attractions was delivered without malice, but with a sense of her confusion and distress at the transfer of Proteus's affections, and the audience was left wondering what on earth she had found so alluring about him in the first place.

In Act 5, within the outlaws' camp, the music gained momentum as Sylvia and her protector were captured, and the tension between the four lovers culminated in Proteus's threat to rape Sylvia. In this generally tame production, he was interrupted very quickly by Valentine, before it was made clear whether or not Proteus might be prepared to act upon this threat, with Valentine thrusting the trouble-maker's head into a conveniently located water drum in quite a satisfying manner. Julia's true identity was revealed and Proteus was given his stock opportunity to see the light and apologise for his sins. Despite the more serious tone here, there were also comic moments, such as when Turio rapidly gave up his claim to Sylvia at the threat of violence from Valentine, and one of the outlaws attempted to hide the watch he had just stolen, in an effort to appear virtuous.

Godwin created an ambivalence about the ending, in which Sylvia at first helped to steady the gun which Valentine aimed at Proteus, as though to assist him in exacting revenge, before directing the weapon away, enabling her to make the final judgement in the decision to forgive Proteus for his disloyalty. Peter Smith felt this action to be "wildly melodramatic" (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online) but it did perhaps show Valentine's acknowledgement that he wasn't the only one who had been wronged by Proteus' actions. However, it was followed by a somewhat unexpected lack of reaction from an otherwise quite assertive Sylvia, to Valentine's offer to resign his claim on her in favour of Proteus. This potentially challenging moment, where a friend apparently offers up his betrothed as a present to his friend therefore proceeded almost unnoticed. However, visually, Godwin did not quite present "one mutual happiness". In the final moment of the production, Julia and Proteus walked slowly towards each other, but the



lights went down before we could see the extent to which they might be reconciled. Some of us might hope that she would walk straight past him, and keep going.

Although Edmond Malone stated that he thought the comedy and poetry of this play to be “as perfectly Shakespearean... as any of his other pieces”, he recognised it is not perhaps “as finished or as beautiful” (1821, cited by Kathryn Duncan-Jones, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). Whilst Katherine Duncan-Jones suggests that the play has passages which are “as expressive and emotive as any later Shakespeare play” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.), there has long been criticism that the plot of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is shallow, and that the four young lovers are thinly written and not sufficiently engaging. Peter Smith felt that Godwin tried to overcompensate for this, with the result that “the irritating insistence on trying to thicken the play’s texture and some very thin performances made this a slight production” (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online). However, Charles Spencer seemed to appreciate Godwin’s lightness of touch, and felt it to be “superbly fleet-footed” with a “sunny comic exuberance... disconcertingly darkened by ominous shadows” (2014, *The Telegraph*, online). It was another truly ensemble piece, with strong performances from all the major characters and none standing out significantly from the rest. It was confidently presented and visually stylish and, viewed within the context of Shakespeare’s later comedies, provided an interesting foretaste of many of the motifs which would reoccur in better known and better-respected plays. Michael Billington regarded this production as proof that the play “exists in its own right as a study of love’s metamorphoses” (2014, *The Guardian*, online), and it seems to have been quite warmly welcomed by audiences and critics alike. All the indications were that it may not be another 45 years before it features again within the RSC’s repertoire.

## ACT III

### Roaring Girls in the Swan Theatre

In September 2013, when the RSC announced its 2014 season of plays, the newly appointed Deputy Artistic Director, Erica Whyman, acknowledged that part of its mission would be to attempt to address the “perceived dearth of parts for women in the modern theatre” (Furness 2013, *The Telegraph*, online) whilst attempting to draw parallels between four hundred-year-old plays and issues still faced by women today. The *Roaring Girls* season ran from April to November 2014 in the Swan Theatre and, in consisting primarily of four non-Shakespearean Elizabethan / Jacobean works, it fulfilled Greg Doran’s intention of returning the Swan Theatre to its original (1986) primary purpose, as a platform for Shakespeare’s contemporaries.

Having worked as Artistic Director and Chief Executive at Northern Stage for seven years, Whyman had not been employed by the RSC until her appointment. It was perhaps a bold step then, for her to begin her new role by expressing the view that

there has been a vigorous debate in recent years about why we have so few good roles, especially for women over 50 (or indeed 40), and it is an important debate and one which I hope will lead to better roles, more gender-blind casting and more gender-conscious writing and programming (Whyman 2014, *What’s on Stage*, online).

The *Roaring Girls* season provided an opportunity for Whyman to present four provocative works featuring female characters in pivotal roles. Although all four were written by men, they feature females at the centre of their plots, and were based on the stories of real women, with three of the 2014 productions also directed by women. The season began in April 2014 with the play which inspired its title, *The Roaring Girl* (Dekker and Middleton, 1611), and was shortly joined by *Arden of Faversham* (Anonymous, 1592),

and then later by *The White Devil* (Webster, 1612) and finally *The Witch of Edmonton* (Ford, Dekker and Rowley, 1621).

Only one of the productions (*The Witch of Edmonton*) was placed in an early modern setting; a period in which married women were legally subordinate to their husbands and female lives were often interpreted according to the two main Christian archetypes of: The Virgin Mary - the pure and virtuous vessel with no agency; and Eve - the woman who brings sin into the world by taking action (Helen Castor, 2014, *Roaring Girls Today*, pers. comm.). Catherine Belsey points out that 'troublesome women' were those who complicated the stereotypical models of femininity and who were viewed with anxiety and suspicion by a patriarchal society which feared a rebellion if women were granted freedoms usually reserved for men (2014, *Roaring Girls Today*, pers. comm.). As Shakespeare tells us in *The Taming of the Shrew*, "I am ashamed that women are so simple to offer war where they should kneel for peace, or seek for rule, supremacy and sway, when they are bound to serve, love and obey" (5.2, 173-6). The plays chosen for the 2014 *Roaring Girls* season feature women who do not fit neatly into a patriarchal society, and feel disinclined to "kneel for peace" or "serve" and "obey".

In responding to Whyman's premise that "well behaved women seldom make history" (Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, 1976), *The Telegraph's* Dominic Cavendish praised the decision to "bring in some of the brightest young directing talent around", by choosing Polly Findlay to direct *Arden of Faversham*, Maria Aberg to direct *The White Devil*, and Jo Davies for *The Roaring Girl* (Cavendish 2013, online). However, speaking at the RSC's Summer School in 2014, Michael Dobson and Michael Billington suggested that, whilst it was a sensible choice to place these plays in *The Swan*, there was a danger of the season being marginalised, and being interpreted as "You girls do your thing over here while we men get on with the histories" (Billington 2014, pers. comm.).

### 3.1 “Pleasure and action make the hours seem short”<sup>1</sup>

#### ***The Roaring Girl* by Thomas Dekker & Thomas**

#### **Middleton**

Jo Davies, Swan Theatre (9 June and 21 August 2014)

The *Roaring Girls* season began with Dekker and Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*, a complex city comedy which Michael Dobson points out appears to have been “written by two people who didn’t have chance to compare notes as often as they wanted to” (*RSC Summer School*, August 2014, pers. Comm.). The RSC’s last presentation of the play had been in 1983, directed by Barry Kyle, with Helen Mirren as the eponymous Roaring Girl. Written for Prince Henry’s Men at the Fortune theatre, it celebrates the real-life Mary Frith, a notorious, flamboyant pickpocket and fence of Jacobean London (c.1584 – 1659), who flouted the rules of ‘civilised’ female behaviour by appearing in trousers on the stage of the Fortune theatre with her viol, and who we understand was present at the first performance of the play. Described by 2014 director Jo Davies as displaying behaviour which was “liberating” and “disturbing to the patriarchy” (2014, RSC, online), Frith was well known as an entertaining, free-thinking cross-dresser who smoked a pipe, frequented taverns, was imprisoned at Bridewell for her swearing and drunkenness, and was later placed in Bedlam, where she was ‘treated’ for supposed insanity.

*The Roaring Girl* (a term derived from ‘roaring boy’, meaning a riotous, bawdy and disruptive individual) tells the imaginary tale of Moll’s encounters with characters from all levels of London society, from aristocrats and their wayward sons (the ‘gallants’), to shopkeepers, servants and pickpockets. It

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<sup>1</sup> *Othello*, 2.3 (340)



has a fast-paced convoluted plot, with “scenes which don’t go anywhere twice” (Davies 2014, RSC, online) and with a text which is “less lyrical [than Shakespeare], but... more visceral... [with] a real bite to it (Davies 2014, RSC, online).

It features a series of deceptions, including the attempts of the wayward young gallants to entertain themselves by beguiling the wives of shopkeepers, and the plot by the genteel Sebastian Wengrave (played by Joe Bannister) to feign amorous intentions towards Moll in order to gain the reluctant consent of his profit-driven magistrate father (Sir Alexander, played by David Rintoul) to his marriage to the real object of his affections, Mary Fitzallard (played by Faye Castelow). Sebastian's hope (not without reason) is that Mary, as a bride with few financial prospects, will still be preferable to Moll, a “monster” who wears breeches. The Director, who had not worked at the RSC since assisting Greg Doran on his production of *The Winter's Tale* in 1999, was aware that, whilst the real Mary Frith was well known for appearing on the stage of *The Fortune*, a modern audience would be largely unaware of the real Moll's public persona and “celebrity status”. Moll's musical performances (with modern rock-concert style lighting) were therefore used to “expand the space around her” (Davies, 2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.) and emphasise her role as an entertainer.

This 1611 play was written at a time when pamphlets were in circulation which concerned the perceived dangers of allowing women to wear male apparel (on the assumption that “deviance in clothes equals deviance in behaviour” – Davies 2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.). However, Davies chose to set her production in Victorian London,<sup>1</sup> a pre-suffragette era which Davies felt represented “a time of great debate on social and

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<sup>1</sup> Production images available at <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-roaring-girl>  
Trailer available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUpoTeTE4XU>



sexual politics and the status of women” (*The Roaring Girl* prompt book, 2014, p.5), and in which women could still be arrested for wearing trousers in public. Whilst audiences seemed to respond warmly to the costumes, Michael Billington expressed the view that the production’s Victorian setting was a “serious misjudgement”, as it removed the “documentary realism” which he believed would have resulted from a Jacobean setting (Billington 2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.).

Lisa Dillon had been fascinated by the character of Moll and had requested the role in a meeting with Gregory Doran, although she had concerns about the potentially tokenistic nature of the Swan’s “season for women” and felt that this was “not a box I wanted to tick”. She wished to present a version of Moll who was “not the usual sexy panto boy dressed as a man to turn on men” but who did not appeal to anyone in a sexual way (Dillon 2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). This corresponded with Jo Davies’ willingness to maintain the play’s ambiguity about Moll’s sexuality and its apparent lack of judgement concerning her refusal to conform to social norms. However, Dillon hoped that modern audiences would “have a connection with [Moll], even if they don’t like her” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). Davies described Dillon’s resulting performance as being “multi-layered [and] multi-faceted” and praised her commitment to the role, claiming that, as well as spending an afternoon with a Drag King, “she had guitar lessons ... double bass lessons... we only just shied away from tap dancing” (Davies 2014, *RSC*, online).

Lisa Dillon’s Moll was given a selection of more modern, unconventional outfits, sporting modern grey slim leg trousers, a white shirt, fingerless gloves, a single earring and a punk belt chain, as well as a tartan vest which revealed the assorted Victoriana tattoos on her arms, as well as one of a roaring lion on her shoulder. This contrasted with the 1880s costumes of the other characters, which were influenced by the tweeds, tartans and punk styles of Vivienne Westwood (appropriately described by the V&A as

combining “unconformity with a sense of tradition”). Designer Naomi Dawson presented us with a range of “Victorian Westwood” costumes which reflected the upper, middle and lower classes of the 1880s, including morning suits for the fathers of the two young lovers, less formal coloured checked suits for their sons (the gallants), and repressive, long checked wool dresses with corsets and bustles for the female shopkeepers.

This interplay of past and present created “an imaginative Victoriana” (Whyman, *The Roaring Girl* prompt book, 2014, p.2), a steampunk version of a Victorian London which included a modern female band, inspired by Pussy Riot. Consisting of drum, base, trumpet and saxophone, the ‘Cutpurses’, like Moll, seemed to reflect more closely twenty-first century female fashions and behaviours. Peter Smith felt that they contributed to the production being pulled away from its period, rendering the fictional world “too plural to be comprehensible” (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, *online*) but their function also seemed to be to add weight to Moll’s first appearance within the action of the play when, immediately prior to 1.3, they emerged from underneath the stage, together with Moll and her electric guitar. The band frequently re-entered the stage to perform Gary Yershon’s music during scene changes, and were used to emphasise Davies’s view that Moll Cutpurse would be a charismatic, challenging and fearsome adversary for any potential male aggressor, as “a force of nature”, and one of those “women who put themselves out there” (Davies 2014, *RSC*, *online*).

With this in mind, Dillon was tasked with delivering the prologue, for which she lounged casually and provocatively in a chair centre stage. She engaged the audience head on, with a slightly mocking, confident, calm and nonchalant air, cigarette in hand, and set out the play’s intention to entertain and to present a self-assured and strident, if somewhat sanitised, fictional interpretation of this troublesome woman. Her delivery of the prologue announced her function as our guide through the play’s journey from the beginning, which facilitated our identification with her and increased the

likelihood of our siding with her in her criticisms of the male representatives of London society.

The prologue was delivered on a largely bare set, except for its permanent features, which consisted of a floor of black square cobbles (edged by a row of white translucent cats-eye styled lights), ornate black iron gates which stretched across the back of the stage, and a wrought iron spiral staircase which led to an iron bridge above the gates, at the height of the theatre's first gallery. Street lamps extended out on iron brackets from underneath the side galleries and subtle lighting changes were used to indicate the time of day and the changes in external / internal location. The wide range of settings were cleverly recreated without obstruction, including Sir Alexander's sitting room, where his male dinner guests partook of after dinner brandy whilst he made at first a light-hearted, but increasingly indignant attempt to shame his son Sebastian into shunning the company of his potential "gaskin bride", and the magistrate's library, where he tried to tempt Moll into stealing jewellery in order to confirm his perception of her as a dishonest thief. A central trapdoor was used to facilitate the swift entrance of Moll and her band, as well as the contents of the Openworks' shop, and Sir Alexander's library desk. Display cabinets housing the magistrate's curios (including butterflies, animal skulls and globes) and others containing the apothecary's tobacco, scales and jars of potions were slid into place at intervals, at the rear of the stage. The progress of Moll's shopping expedition in 2.1 was neatly handled, with the tobacconists housed at the rear of the stage, the seamstress in the middle, and the feather shop, (represented by hat stands which were brought manually on and off stage) at the front. A greater challenge was presented by attempts to highlight the poverty inherent in the dirty streets of the more dangerous areas of Victorian London, in which a sense of threat from the criminal underworld was suggested subtly through low lighting and, more vigorously, through the spirited dexterity with which Moll defended Sir Guy Fitzallard from the deceptions of the pickpockets and facilitated young Jack Dapper's escape from the constabulary, who had been sent by his

disapproving father to whisk him off to prison in order to teach him a lesson in frugality.

Throughout the performance, Dillon gave us a lithe, athletic, vital and quick-footed Moll, who climbed balconies, swung irreverently from Sir Alexander's chandelier, and demonstrated her skill with a variety of weaponry. As an assertive and determined adventurer with a political message, she interacted with, but was also clearly separate from, the multi-layered society of 1880s London. Confounding social expectations by refusing even to give clear indications of the nature of her sexuality (telling Sebastian "I love to lie on both sides of the bed myself", 2.2), and confusing society's attempts to label her, Moll glided seamlessly across social boundaries, and did indeed slip "from one company to another, like an eel between a Dutchman's fingers" (2.1). Erica Whyman describes Moll as being "effortlessly cool, splendidly outspoken, and dangerously skilled" (*The Roaring Girl* prompt book, 2014, p.2) and, in a comment made at the RSC's Summer School, Michael Dobson agreed that Lisa Dillon demonstrated a "fascinating mixture of vocal control and visual power" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). Moll managed to charmed, flirted, bantered, fought and quarrelled her way through a series of episodic encounters and made effective use of her "masculine womanhood" to enliven what Davies managed to present as an entertaining and accomplished, though at times still confusing, comedy, full of "opposite policies, courses indirect" (2.2).

Attempts were clearly made by Davies and the RSC's Literary Manager, Pippa Hill, to simplify the complex sub-plots and reduce the extensive list of characters by re-allocating lines and removing minor characters, such as Greenwit, Sir Adam Appleton, Tearcat, Sir Beauteous Ganymede, Sir Thomas Long, and Lord Noland. Sergeant Curtilax was renamed Cutlass, and some linguistic changes were made to suit a modern audience, some of whom may have been unaccustomed to the challenges of Dekker and Middleton's visceral language. The mysteries of Dekker's canting scene in



Act 5 (featuring the urban language of the London criminal classes) were somewhat masked by the decision to present it in the form of a rap contest between Moll and the conniving streetwise Trapdoor (Geoffrey Freshwater), which provided a catalyst for their rapprochement and the beginning of their hastily arranged duplicitous plan to bring about Sir Alexander's approval of Sebastian's marriage to Mary. The final plotting was acted out through a brief wordless series of encounters between Moll and her co-conspirators, accompanied by the sound of *The Cutpurses*.

Though Moll's clothing emphasised her distinction from the other characters and her wild reputation led some to fear or deride her, many characters were clearly tolerant of, and even attracted to, Moll's wit, her charismatic individuality, and her personal conviction that "marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse one in its place" (2.2). In Davies's production, Moll was not an entirely isolated individual and was often accompanied by her silent, but visibly present, maid Annie (Joan Lyiola); a character not present in Dekker and Middleton's text but who, here, demonstrated a willingness to serve and protect her mistress, and emulated many of her behaviours, enjoying the occasional cigarette and drink from a flask or bottle. She also revealed that she had retained her talent for pick-pocketing, presumably a reference to her imagined earlier occupation. Peter Kirwan points out that Annie's role was to "[share] silent jokes with [Moll] and [ensure] that Moll's confidence always had a mirror, someone who could verify and support her as she went about her disruptive business" (Kirwan 2015, *Shakespeare*, online).

Unlike Annie, the female shopkeepers conformed more closely to social expectations and, visually, they reflected the prudish veneer of Victorian lower middle-class society. However, whilst appearing to endorse traditional values, they too indicated a degree of independence and strength of will, and they made spirited attempts to maintain a delicate balance between their reluctance to submit to the authority of their husbands and the risk of



societal moral disapproval for their flirtatious encounters with the gallants. Davies described Lizzie Hopley's attractive, mischievous Prudence Gallipot as having "more language than she needs" (2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.), but Davies was keen to use Prudence to demonstrate that marriage needn't be the end of a woman's story. She revelled in the excitement of her innuendo-laden encounters with the caddish Laxton (whose name, suggesting that he 'lacked stones' was not emphasized), and had no hesitation in risking domestic upheaval by duping her benign, dull, but infuriatingly doting "apron husband", played very effectively by a stout, bald, round-faced Timothy Speyer. In contrast, as the strident Mistress Openwork, the plump, no-nonsense Harvey Viridi gave the audience no sign of being genuinely tempted to succumb to Goshawk's charms (played by Peter Bray), and kept an assertive check on her good-willed husband's own behaviour, accusing him of "foreign wenching" with scolds which "will be heard further in a still morning than Saint Clement's bell" (2.1). Despite their bickering, the Openworks showed genuine affection for each other and none of the female shopkeepers were in serious danger from their "shallow lechers", who "put not their courtship home enough" (2.1).

Amongst the gallants, Laxton was perhaps the most developed character. Presented as one of the young men who engaged in the 1880s fashion of 'slumming' in the coarse streets of London's East End, Keir Charles gave us an exuberant combination of the bowler hat-tipping 'cheeky chappie' and the scheming, manipulative and lascivious misogynist. His disrespect for Prudence Gallipot, Moll and women in general was addressed by Moll at her most vengeful, when, in 3.1, she assumed a conventional male disguise of black frock coat and top hat, and sported a maquillage moustache and stubble, in order to trick Laxton and berate him for the arrogance of his unwelcome advances, and assumption that every woman is his "fond, flexible whore". Using a cane to subdue him and send him to the floor, Moll informed him "I defy all men, their worst hates, and their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts, with which they entangle the poor spirits of fools".

In reference to the prologue's stated purpose of providing entertainment rather than edification, the production remained light-hearted for the most part and made much of the play's innuendo-laden and comedic dialogue. Lines relating to the filling of noblewomen's linen, the grinding of tobacco, riding, standing stiffly, stale mutton versus fresh meat, sons and moons being "in conjunction", breeches and codpieces, were all delivered with relish, and the action revelled in the opportunities for gestures to emphasise the bawdy lines, as well as visual jokes, such as Openwork's falling to his knees in front of Moll, close to "the low countries", and Mary's attempt to hide from Sir Alexander behind Moll's 'viol' (a double bass in this production).

There were also many vigorous attempts to engage the audience directly in the play, from Sebastian's charming offer of his umbrella to shelter audience members from the rain in which he stood whilst laying out his plans to trick his father, to Sir Alexander's assuming a place amongst them from which to spy on his son, and Moll's singling out of individuals as the subjects of her observations, praise and questioning. There were several moments where modern interjections were added to the text, much to the audience's delight, such as Sir Adam Appleton's announcing his rejection of an offered wheelchair on the basis that "I can walk from here" (1.2), and Openwork's self-satisfied response of "I was, yes", to his wife's statement "I thought you had been born perfect" (4.2) One of the most comically indulgent scenes involved Prudence Gallipot's asking "who are all these people?" while reading Laxton's references to characters from classical drama, and then appealing for the audience to help her think on her feet and determine how she might trick her husband into supplying money for the greedy Laxton (telling the audience "I'm actually asking you!"), and foisting on individuals the torn pieces of Laxton's 'love letter' in an attempt to hide them from her husband (3.2).

In enjoying the play's humour, the production made no apologies for any remaining confusion within the plot, for the fast and furious nature of the entertainment, or the jarring of time periods but, like Moll, showed a joyful disregard for convention and celebrated the incongruities, with a lightness of touch that counteracted the density and muscularity of the language. A few, more serious moments were introduced, some of which were genuinely moving, such as Mistress Openwork's heartfelt reconciliation with her husband, Moll's visible affection for her maid, Sebastian's open-minded appreciation of Moll's individuality and Mary's quiet determination to assert her free will.

Initially not considered to be enough of a valuable commodity by Sir Alexander, and in danger of remaining unmarried, the seemingly conventional, submissive, fresh-faced and demure character of Mary Fitzallard was given a stronger, and more physical presence in this production than is perhaps apparent in the text, and Faye Castelowe's pretty, petite Mary was shown to revel in her moment of liberation from the restrictions of corset and bustle in 4.1, when she wore a brown checked suit similar to those of the gallants, to assume her male disguise, in which she was aided by Moll, and for which she had the blessing of her suitor Sebastian, who gleefully told Moll "I think every kiss she gives me now in this strange form is worth a pair of two". Sebastian demonstrated some solidarity with Moll's desire for independence and showed his continuing commitment to the view that "man ne'er truly loves... that winks and marries with his father's eyes".

Notwithstanding her own objections to the married state, her bawdy humour and defiant rejection of concerns about her reputation, as with the other female characters in the play, Moll's potential transgressions were minor and no real harm was done to the status quo of the rigid Victorian society in which she operated. Dillon stayed true to the moral, principled version of 'Mad Moll' originally created by Middleton and showed no serious intention

to indulge in law-breaking or unchaste behaviour. Peter Kirwan notes that, whilst others refer to Moll using the term *Roaring Girl* in a derogatory manner, Moll does not describe herself this way, but rather, sees herself as a “bold spirit”, “loose in nothing but in mirth” (2.2), Moll is essentially a good-hearted and forgiving woman who defends the innocent and wishes women to understand that “she that has wit and spirit, may scorn to live beholding to her body for meat” (3.1). In the twenty-first century, we are perhaps no longer shocked by Moll’s apparently anti-social behaviour, but the production was still able to convey a sense of the liberation experienced by a character unfettered by the opinions of others. The joyous way in which Dillon ripped away her bridal disguise in the final scene (much to Sir Alexander’s horror) and revelled in the freedom of her trousers and tartan vest, highlighted her ability to retain a fascination for modern audiences through her determination to express her personal liberty and reject society’s attempts to subjugate, define or categorise her because of her gender.

Her success in helping the young lovers Sebastian and Mary to overcome the social and economic objections to their union could perhaps have resulted in Moll’s closer assimilation into their social world but, though she exerted a positive effect on others and was a catalyst for change, Moll’s own character remained fixed and she was unaffected by her encounters. In this production, the rebel retained a clear sense of her indifference to group acceptance, remaining visibly distant from the celebrations and convincingly maintaining her personal view that “Perhaps for my mad ways some reprove me: I please myself and care not who else loves me” (5.1). That sense of individual freedom was temporarily shared by the entire cast at the end of the play, as they engaged in a vigorous and upbeat feel-good group dance finale (featuring Jack Dapper in a pink punk wig on the electric guitar, as an ‘honorary cutpurse’) before leaving the audience to exit the auditorium to the sound of Beyoncé’s *Run the World (Girls)*.



It was perhaps inevitable that, by placing such a strong emphasis on the female voice in this production, along with others in the *Roaring Girls* season, would face a degree of criticism. Alongside the risk of these outspoken women being regarded as a one-season curiosity, for some critics, a female protagonist will perhaps never be as highly respected as a male one. As Erica Whyman pointed out, there are those who do not consider a woman to be in a position to speak for 'everyman' as, for them, a woman on stage may reflect a version of womanhood, but cannot represent humanity as a whole (Whyman, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, 2014, pers. comm.). *The Telegraph's* Charles Spencer found Davies' production "over the top and underwhelming", "wearisome" and full of "course comic acting". He resented the RSC's "enterprise in positive discrimination" (2014 online) and had more praise for the performances by Joe Bannister and Timothy Speyer than for any of the female actors. Peter Smith also felt that it "offered us a confused production of a confusing play" (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online). However, *The Independent's* Paul Taylor found Dillon's portrayal of Moll to be "cool", "witty" and "utterly arresting" (2014 online), and Lisa Dillon concluded that plays which "perhaps at first seem creaky and archaic" do "deserve to have new life breathed into them" (Dillon 2014, *What's on Stage*, online). Whatever the gender politics or theatrical preferences of the audience, there is little doubt that this production provided a valuable opportunity to see a boisterous, witty and rarely performed Jacobean play which really can 'roar', and "where a woman doesn't end up either married or dead" (Davies 2014, RSC video, online).



### 3.2 “Conscience is a word that cowards use”<sup>1</sup>

#### *Arden of Faversham* (Anonymous)

Polly Findlay, Swan Theatre (13 June and 26 August 2014)

Joining *The Roaring Girl* in the Swan in April 2014 was Polly Findlay’s modern-dress production of the anonymous *Arden of Faversham*. First printed in a Quarto edition in 1592, the play’s comprehensive title is

The most lamentable and true tragedy of Master Arden of Faversham in Kent, who was most wickedly murdered by means of his disloyal and wanton wife, who for the love she bore to one Mosby, hired two desperate ruffians, Black Will and Shakebag, to kill him.

That same “disloyal and wanton wife” is the character around whom most of the action revolves, since the play concerns the real Alice Arden’s conspiracy (with her lover Mosby) to murder her landowner husband Thomas Arden in 1551. These events had been described in Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* in 1577 but it was unusual for domestically-based events to be the subject of a tragic drama.

Catherine Belsey suggests that the scandal caused by the story “lies in Alice Arden’s challenge to the institution of marriage, itself publicly in crisis in the period” (Belsey 1991, p.133-134). Belsey states (p.138) that historical evidence indicates there was a widespread belief amongst men that unhappy wives were becoming more likely to murder their husbands, though there is no evidence to suggest that more of them actually did so. In this particular case, as each murder attempt failed, more people become

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<sup>1</sup> *Richard III*, 5.3 (312)

involved in the plot, thus widening the circle of people who knew about Alice's infidelity, and increasing the chances of a scandal.

*Arden of Faversham* is rarely performed at Stratford – the last production having been staged in 1982 (directed by Terry Hands at The Other Place). In an interview at the RSC in Stratford in June 2014, Findlay described the play as having “a fab part for a female protagonist” which, as the largest part for a woman in Elizabethan drama, was “still unusual even in new writing”. Findlay felt that the text was challenging to read, with many arrhythmic verse lines, and it underwent significant editing by Findlay and Zoë Svendsen, to reduce it from eighteen scenes to fourteen. The intention was to make the production, “short, snappy and uncompromising”, whilst also being “tonally exciting and challenging”, and always “staying one step ahead of its audience” (Findlay 2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, online).

The play's authorship has long been debated and has been variously attributed to Kyd, Marlowe and Shakespeare, amongst others. The middle portion, particularly the quarrel scene between Alice and Mosby (Scene 8), seems distinctive in its tone and use of language, and probably provides the strongest indication that Shakespeare may have been one of the writers. This view is supported by Jackson (2014, p.64), who suggests that Scenes 4 to 9 were all likely to all have been written by Shakespeare, and Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen chose to include *Arden of Faversham* in their RSC edition of *Shakespeare Apocrypha* (2013), with Bate asserting that “at least one scene – a central encounter between the lovers – is by Shakespeare and ... possibly, Thomas Kyd is the author of other scenes” (Alberge 2013, online). Kyd's authorship is also still disputed but, for Findlay, this uncertainty was “creatively freeing” and gave the cast a “licence in becoming active storytellers” without being preoccupied by the intentions of the writer (Findlay, 2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, online). Since the play is also rarely performed, Findlay felt “relieved from the shackles of

responsibility of handling a text everyone knows so well" (2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.).

Findlay indicated that she was attempting to address a tendency to present female criminals as "more demonic", "more vindictive" and "less complex" than male ones. The conventions of tragedy would suggest that our sympathies should be with the eponymous victim, Thomas Arden, but Arden's lack of realisation of his own failings contrasts with his wife's own final moral awakening and acknowledgement of guilt. Findlay argued that this, together with Alice's role as the central agent of the dramatic action, almost inevitably led us to identify more closely with the wife than with the husband. The director also alluded to the original economic context of the play's events, at a time of growing preoccupation with personal wealth and status, often at the expense of the common good. Findlay suggested that this spoke directly to our modern interest in global markets and commodities, and our lack of a strong sense of community. This influenced her decision to use a modern setting for the production, in which religion and morality were replaced with a shallow quest for individual financial gain and social status.<sup>1</sup>

In Findlay's production, the former mayor of Faversham, the eponymous Arden (Ian Redford), was now the prosperous owner of an Amazon-style factory warehouse which despatches cheap and tawdry trinkets, including gold-coloured lucky Chinese / Japanese waving cats. In order to show what it might be like "if Arden supplied the pound shops" (2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, online), the production began with a brightly-lit pre-show, which revealed Merle Hensel's design for Arden's work place, containing an abundance of brown cardboard boxes of various sizes, each with a photograph of Alice Arden's face on them and featuring the slogans "Arden

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<sup>1</sup> Production images available at <https://www.rsc.org.uk/arden-of-faversham>  
Trailer available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdSFxi0BbQQ>

of Faversham”, “Love it” and “Buy it”. Moving around the light grey, shiny factory floor (with yellow line markers to indicate storage bays), workers in dark green overalls (the colour perhaps suggesting the countryside setting) used strips of shredded white paper to pack the boxes, and an electronic (beeping) chain hoist to lift the larger boxes ready for despatch. A variety of noises from electric pallet trucks and warning claxons sounded, as Arden sat at his office desk, on which were placed a snow globe (which predicted the weather which would later feature on the night of his death) and a shiny mug featuring a pair of naked breasts (presumably symbolising the commodification of women). There was also a plastic nodding Jesus, which was one of several religious symbols turned into disposable items, including a poisoned cross created by Colin Anthony Brown’s Bradshaw, and a bible which Alice claimed she would burn in penance for arguing with Mosby in Scene 8.2. These symbols represented a world in which the idea of God was used only to support individual ambition (rather than to provide moral guidance), and indicated the patriarchal society in which Alice was trapped.

This was Arden’s business empire, at the back of which was a shiny red venetian blind, which resembled the shutter door of an industrial unit, and which would later reverse for the domestic scenes, to reveal a painting of Arden’s house and country estate. Towards the end of the shift, one worker began absentmindedly to open and repack boxes which had already been packed, another stared into space and the cleaner (Elspeth Brodie’s Susan) swept up the shredded paper with a giant brush. When the final claxon sounded for the end of the night shift (an electronic announcement had earlier stated the time as 6:18 am), they lined up for the foreman Michael (Arden’s servant, played by Ian Bonar) to sign them out on his clipboard.

Coolly observing his workers, the well-set, grey haired Arden wore a blue suit with a white and red striped shirt and red braces (reminiscent of a 1980s ‘yuppie’) and presented the confident impression of the power-hungry employer surveying his kingdom. The real Thomas Arden had made his



fortune buying up enclosures and trading in former monastic properties and, according to Catherine Belsey (1991), Holinshed's version presented him as having been domineering and avaricious. Strolling around his office, Arden shared a brief exchange with his loyal friend and business associate, Geoffrey Freshwater's Franklin (in a simple brown suit, beige overcoat and glasses), and showed little interest in the activities carried out by his hard-working employees. This echoed the real Arden's apparent unconcern for the locals whose lands he had annexed in order to assuage his own greed.

Into this dry atmosphere of money-making and endless routine, Arden's wife Alice (Sharon Small) entered, as a breath of fresh air. Appearing as the stereotypical glamorous Essex trophy wife, but with a country accent which sounded more south-west than south-east, Alice wore a tight short black skirt (which she regularly smoothed with her hands) and high heeled boots, and would sport an abundance of garish blouses and loud jewellery, to go with her long bleach-blond hair and heavily applied bright red lipstick, false eyelashes and blue eye-shadow. Supremely body conscious, and with more than a hint of the brash barmaid about her, she flirted, tottered, and applied all her charm in conspiring with her wide-boy lover to escape her tedious life. Sharon Small's provocative outfits provided her back-story as a woman accustomed to using her physical attributes to determine her own future.

As the bored, neglected but volatile housewife, Alice did her best to feign affection and loyalty towards her husband, stroking his shoulder, assuring him (in Scene 1.4) that "never woman loved her husband better than I do thee" and appearing offended at the (correct) accusation that she had begun an affair with a local butcher (actually a 'botcher', or tool mender, in the original play), named Mosby (Keir Charles). She and Mosby then proceed to amuse themselves, and the audience, by duping Arden into believing their assurances of their innocence, to the extent that Arden entrusted Mosby with Alice's protection during his impending visit to London.



Dressed in black jeans and a patterned shirt, with a gold chain, hi-top trainers, bracelets, a signet ring and a single diamante earring, the dark-haired, smarmy gum-chewing lover Mosby clearly seemed to view his relationship with Alice as an opportunity to increase his wealth and status and, in Scene 8, bemoaned that his supposed abandonment of marriage to “an honest maid / Whose dowry would have weighed down all thy wealth” had not yet paid off (2014, p44). He gave no indication of a guilty conscience about his decision to collude in Arden’s death, wheeling himself around in the boss’s office chair in Scene 1.7, and showing an impatience to be rid of the husband who stood in the way of his financial goal.

Despite the potentially unappealing nature of the lovers, Alice and Mosby’s entertaining speeches were expressed in such a way as to elicit a degree of sympathy for the frustration caused by the unbreakable bonds of marriage. At the beginning of the play, Alice claimed that murder was not *necessarily* the solution she would have chosen and that “Might I without control / Enjoy thee still, then Arden should not die; / But seeing I cannot, therefore let him die” (Scene 1, p14). In Scene 10, Alice suggested that her husband has no right to “govern me that am to govern myself” and Catherine Belsey believes that “In these instances, the play presents Alice Arden’s challenge to the institution of marriage as an act of heroism” (Belsey 1991, p137).

With a fast moving storyline, and a running time of only one hour forty-five minutes (with no interval), Findlay did not want to break the increasing sense of pace and freneticism (2014, *RSC Director’s Talk*, online), and she provided little time to dwell on the rapidly changing murder plot, which first saw the sinister painter Clarke (Christopher Middleton) employed to provide a poison, in exchange for Mosby’s offer of his sister Susan, as bait to attract his services. Clarke wore a distasteful outfit of beige trousers and a blouson jacket, with 1980s style glasses, greasy hair and boils and sores along his jawline. Middleton’s representation was chilling, particularly when he carefully presented Alice with a poisoned crucifix enclosed in bubble wrap

and hazard tape in Scene 10.2, and when his lecherous interest in Mosby's sister timid Susan suggested that, should this plan to marry her have succeeded, she would have been made very miserable indeed.

In the original text, Susan is mainly as a plot device, a saleable commodity whose virginity facilitates the recruitment of fellow conspirators. However, in Findlay's production, Susan was more visually present, and her stillness and silence were used to emphasise the hopelessness of her situation, and her anxiety at being used as a bargaining chip. Dressed in a dowdy beige knee-length skirt and jumper, with white knee-high socks and long mousy brown hair, Elspeth Brodie's interpretation of the quirky, fragile cleaner at Arden's warehouse showed her to be a nervous, damaged, and very reluctant pawn in the murder plot. With the suggestion of an unusual psyche which caused her to twirl in circles during her tea break, she was often unnoticed by the other characters, and took the opportunity to hide whenever possible. She clearly hated being the centre of attention whilst Clarke man-handled her (1.7) as though she were a life-sized doll, as he smelled and stroked her hair, and admired her over-applied rouge and lipstick. Her yellow marigold gloves remained on her hands as much as possible and she seemed to seek solace in the slow, dream-like application of her feather duster. Brodie's detailed characterisation left us in no doubt that she wished to be left alone and, in Scene 13.2, she would refuse Michael's silent proposal (through the offer of an engagement ring) by shaking her head in horror. This resulted in a murmur of sadness from the audience, at what might be seen as a lost opportunity for the only two sympathetic characters to find solace and escape from their vicious companions.

Slim, with short dark hair and a moustache, the timid Michael (Ian Bonar) also hoped to win Susan as his prize, but his affection seemed to be of a more respectful nature, and he gazed lovingly at her whenever the opportunity arose. Like Alice, he was drawn into the murder plot against his will and, in Scene 4, Michael delivered a soliloquy which explained how he

was torn between his fear of the latest of the appointed murderers (Shakebag and Black Will) and his master's potential desire for retribution, should the murder plot fail and his involvement be discovered.

However, it was clear from the start that this was to be a comedy, and the laughter began with Alice petulantly flinging spoonfuls of porridge around the stage, to hide the poison in her husband's breakfast. Following this initial failure to rid herself of Arden, Alice (and Mosby) recruited the services of Tom Padley's Greene, whose lands Arden has stolen. The cockney 'Dick' Greene wore a black tracksuit covered in logos, black trainers and a cross on a chain at his neck. He had a short ponytail and an earring, and spoke of his anger at losing his property, whilst absent-mindedly picking up the nodding Jesus from Arden's desk, as if to summon the wrath of God to support his cause. Alice turned on her charm and played the wronged woman to great effect, in recruiting Greene to seek revenge on Arden.

He then sub-contracted the work to the accident-prone thugs Black Will (Jay Simpson) and Shakebag (Tony Jayawardena), whose names seem to be a satirical reference to William Shakespeare (as Shakebag's real name was Loosebag). The villains made several darkly comic attempts to accomplish the murder, announcing their entrance into the play in Scene 2 with a series of intimidating actions, including Will's pointing a gun at Greene and grasping the goldsmith Bradshaw by the throat in order to rob him. The somewhat vacant thug Shakebag appeared to catch and eat a fly, and a series of comedic bumbled exploits showed their repeated incompetence and failure to do away with Arden. Findlay said this was inspired by Coen Brothers' movies which have a "completely bewildering, slipping moral framework, with nobody really sure who exactly is in charge" (2014, RSC

video, online),<sup>1</sup> and also by the Ealing comedy, *The Ladykillers*, in its use of “slapstick with an incredibly dark heart” (2014, *RSC Director’s Talk*, online). These scenes were fast-moving, and made use of scenic effects such as fog and darkness to enhance the confusion. The bumbling included Shakebag impulsively hitting Will on the head with his crowbar (with the result that blood spurted out over the front row of the audience), and then later hitting him again, this time breaking his nose. In Scene 9, they failed to read an instruction manual quickly enough to work out how to use their sniper rifle against Arden and Franklin (the Chinese lucky cats in Franklin’s carrier bag perhaps protecting him on this occasion), and in Scene 11 they stumbled around in the fog, with Shakebag falling through a trap door into the sewer.

After several of their bungled attempts, Alice was driven to distraction and, having abandoned her feminine wiles, she eventually came to the conclusion that if you want a job doing well, you should do it yourself, and determined to take a lead role in engineering the murder. Findlay stated that she wanted to show how people might be driven by their selfish short-term goals to stray “further and further from the moral line” until their behaviour became completely “outlandish, ridiculous and abhorrent” (2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.). However, she also told *Exeunt* magazine that she wanted to illuminate the unpredictable Alice’s “emotional availability... openness and charm”, as well as her “naivety, her innocence, her positivity” (Findlay, 2014, online). These qualities were all present in Small’s portrayal of Alice, which was also vibrant, engaging, colourful, and highly entertaining.

The stage and first few rows of the stalls were often well-lit, which encouraged the actors’ interaction with audience members. In Scene 2, with the audience in bright light, Black Will boasted of his abilities in physical

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YpKpdk3Fbg>



intimidation, and the line “I have cracked as many blades as thou hast done nuts” was changed to end with “as thou hast lost hairs”, which enabled Will to address himself to a bald man in the audience and stroke his head, before grabbing another man by the ear to illustrate a point made about holding a barrel “by the ears till all his beer hath run out”. The nervous Michael also spoke directly to the audience in Scene 3.1 as he read out his attempt at a letter to Susan, causing laughter at this realisation of the inappropriate nature of his expressed hope that the object of his affection would “let my passions penetrate, or rather impetrate mercy of your meek hands” (p31).

Mosby, too, addressed the audience on a well-lit stage in Scene 8.1, whilst speaking of his “troubled mind” which was “stuffed with discontent” caused by his fears of betrayal by his co-conspirators and his longing for his “golden time ... when I had no gold ... yet I slept secure”. He spoke directly to a woman in the audience as he complained “Ah, how you women can insinuate”. This approach of attempting to charm, antagonise or appeal to the audience reflected Findlay’s belief that the selfishness of each character’s goals facilitated a very individual type of audience interaction, and there was a clear commitment to emphasise the “same-room-ness” of this “peculiarly beautiful theatre” (Findlay 2014, *RSC Director’s Talk*, online).

Arden, though, did not speak to the audience, and seemed to be a fairly one-dimensional character, concerned primarily with his pursuit of profit and desire for a comfortable home and dutiful wife. In scenes 1.5 and 10.1, he was pursued by Lizzie Hopley’s Mrs Reede (Dick Reede in the original text), here the widow of a neighbour whose land he had stolen and who, in this production, was one of Arden’s employees (as indicated by her green uniform). Mrs Reede was regarded by Arden as an irritating distraction from his business matters, although Findlay considered her to be part of a “triumvirate of the female experience” (2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.), alluding to the differences between: the woman with no power



(Susan); the woman who asks for power but fails to gain it (Mrs Reede); and the woman who actively uses her own power, but to ill effect (Alice).

The other two significant characters who unwittingly become involved in the conspiracy are Bradshaw and Cheyne. In this production, Colin Anthony Brown's Bradshaw was a keen cyclist, in a high visibility jacket and helmet, with bicycle clips, a blue and beige water-proof jacket and brown corduroy trousers. Cheyne was another comic creation, appearing first in his lime green tracksuit whilst undertaking his daily outdoor warm-up exercises, accompanied by his personal trainer (in Scene 9). With the air of a very well-spoken, supremely confident ex-public school boy, Joe Bannister's Cheyne exchanged pleasantries with Arden, and later (in Scene 13.2) came to the landowner's house to investigate his murder.

The preparations for the final attempt (successful this time) to rid Alice of her husband began with Susan staggering onto the stage carrying a large table (for which she received no assistance from the men present) and then anxiously setting it for dinner, whilst Michael stroked the hair of a small plastic doll he had named after her, in a slightly worrying manner. The dark air of tension increased as nerves were on high alert to the slightest sudden sound or movement. The hired killers entered quietly by crawling awkwardly between Michael's legs and crept up behind Arden. Will attempted to strangle him with a green towel, and Mosby and Shakebag to stab him. However, with Arden still able to stand, Alice stabbed him three times in the stomach in the interests of thoroughness, and he fell to the ground.

In Scene 13, the murder and its aftermath were outlandish. There was a substantial amount of blood, which Alice attempted to clean up but which "cleaveth to the ground and will not out" (reminiscent of a similar problem experienced by Lady Macbeth). The conspirators tried to hide Arden's body by packing him into a large cardboard box and suspending him from the electric hoist and, as a knock at the door announced the arrival of the unsuspecting Bradshaw, Susan frantically read the back of her *Cillit Bang*

bottle in a seeming attempt to discover magical properties, before abandoning this plan and covering the blood with white shredded paper. The ridiculousness of the scene increased as blood from the suspended cardboard coffin began to drip onto the floor, and into the wine glass held aloft by Mosby. Upon Bradshaw's departure, as Greene slipped around on the blood and Alice retched, the body was prepared for its removal to a field.

As snow fell around the edges of the stage (representing the outdoors), the action suddenly slowed considerably, and the tone became more sombre, as we were given a Coen brothers style 'pan out' (Findlay 2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, online) and saw the consequences of the murder. Findlay agreed that there were potential comparisons with *Richard III*, with whose scheming we feel complicit to a certain point, before his selfish actions are taken too far, and the audience is left behind (2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, online). Our enjoyment at the comedic plotting of the murder therefore turned to horror as we watched Arden's body slowly roll from its box and the grasping Mosby stole his wallet, whilst an unseen singer lamented "I died of love". As Alice continued her indoor cleaning, Cheyne and his fellow watchman arrived with Franklin to arrest the murderers.

For the epilogue, the house lights went up and the red blind was removed to reveal an entire back wall filled with large waving lucky gold cats which appeared decidedly sinister. As Cheyne and Franklin (who usually delivers the epilogue) stood at the back of the stage, the conspirators sat almost motionless on chairs, at various angles facing the audience as, in her own (Scottish) accent, Small informed us in a serious tone of the fates of the plotters. Even those who were only peripherally involved, like Bradshaw, Michael, and Susan, were put to death, which left quite an unpleasant taste, since they seemed essentially innocent of any deliberate wrong-doing. After a sombre curtain call, the audience was left listening to an ironic recording of (*Love lift us*) *Up where we belong* by Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes.

The play's early scenes of this production varied significantly in tone and there was perhaps some initial uncertainty about what kind of production this would be: comedy or tragedy; documentary-style depiction of real historical events or satire on modern capitalism; sympathetic portrait of an unhappy wife or critical portrayal of selfish desire. In the end it was all of these things, carefully crafted into a short but very memorable piece of theatre. The critical reception was extremely mixed, with some appreciating what they saw as a fast-paced comedic romp, and others raising concerns about issues such as: the quality of the text; the slapstick nature of the deliberate comedy; the lack of depth of character; and the updating of the play to a modern setting. Michael Billington (2014, *The Guardian*, online) felt that the decision to update "defies common sense" because the text "reeks of documentary realism" and should have been portrayed as a "fascinating historical document". However, Eoin Price, writing in *Shakespeare*, believed that it was "perfectly reasonable for the RSC to offer a modernised version of the play" (2015 online, p 319 - 321), since some of the precise political resonances of the play may not transmit well to a modern audience; though he shared some misgivings about the emphasis on comedy, which he felt created "lurid caricatures" with "little opportunity for subtlety". Joanna Matthews (2014, online), in the *What's on Stage* review, claimed that "Sharon Small ... is given little to do here ... other than simper and wobble about on silly high heels". However, Charles Spencer in *The Telegraph* (2014, online) found Small "compelling" and suggested that "the mixture of lust, greed and dark humour has a distinctly contemporary edge" which made this a "guiltily enjoyable production", though he acknowledged that there was "barely a single likeable character". Despite the reservations of the critics, it is undeniable that the humour in this production was enjoyed enormously by audiences, and that it offered a significant role for a female actor, with a chance to drive the action from the centre, rather than just being a victim of it.

### **3.3 “When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions”<sup>1</sup>**

#### ***The White Devil* by John Webster**

Maria Aberg, Swan Theatre (18 August and 30 October 2014)

The third production to appear in the *Roaring Girls* season (in July 2014) was John Webster’s violent 1612 tragedy, *The White Devil*. Last performed in Stratford in 1996 (also in the Swan), the play concerns the destructive and highly visible extra-marital relationship between Duke Brachiano and Vittoria Corombona, who appear to believe they are immune to scandal. The affair is facilitated by Vittoria’s brother Flamineo and conducted in front of Vittoria’s husband Camillo and Brachiano’s wife Isabella, who is worshipped by the banished Count Lodovico and her brother Francisco.

The RSC’s previous production (directed by Gale Edwards) was set in sixteenth-century Italy. It had elements of humour and pathos amongst the violence and tragedy, particularly through the performance of Richard McCabe as Flamineo, who showed a cynical humour and a suggestion of remorse alongside his cruelty, and Jane Gurnett’s Vittoria, who vacillated between power and fragility. However, Maria Aberg’s 2014 modern-dress production was unremittingly dark, with Brachiano (now Bracciano) and Flamineo (now Flaminio) portrayed as the instigators of the ensuing tragedy and Vittoria presented as merely a pawn to be manipulated in their schemes.

Aberg had recently presented two other productions for the RSC - *As You Like It* (2013) and *King John* (2012) - having previously directed Roy

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<sup>1</sup> *Hamlet*, 4.4 (73-4)



Williams' *Days of Significance* and Dennis Kelly's *The Gods Weep* for the RSC in London. As in her previous RSC stagings, Aberg's emphasis was on "an exploration of misogyny, power and female identity" and, in a short video for the RSC, she described *The White Devil* as being "visceral, bloody", "exciting and entertaining", "sexy" and "like a combination of a seventeenth-century revenge tragedy, *The Sopranos* and *Natural Born Killers*" (Aberg, 2014, RSC video interview, online). Aberg was keen to promote the play as a portrayal of lust, amorality, violence and aggression, and a major motif for the production was the shallow decadence and hedonism of a bleak society in which nobody seems to be truly happy, and many are prepared to carry out acts of cruelty for personal gain. When playing Vittoria Corombona in Aberg's production, Kirsty Bushell spoke of the physicality of a plot in which events spiral out of control and characters are "vibrating on an intense level right from the start of the play" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.).

In this production, the instrumental role of Vittoria's malevolent brother Flamineo was given to her *sister* Flaminio, played by Laura Elphinstone. This decision was taken partly to increase the number of major roles for women, and partly to show how females conform to male definitions of power and internalise them in order to "collude in corruption and the objectification and subordination of women" (Aberg, 2014 RSC video interview, online). Gender switching is becoming a recognised feature of Aberg's treatment of Shakespeare (she cast Pippa Nixon as The Bastard and Paola Dionisotti as Pandolph, in her production of *King John*). Although she stated in an interview for the *Coventry Telegraph*, that there is "an artistic reason for doing it that comes from inside each concept or each production in a different way", Aberg also suggested that "...we have a responsibility as theatre-makers to consider gender-blind casting as much as we consider colour-blind casting" (Aberg, 2014, *What's on Stage*, online).

Aberg produced her own edition of the text, with the support of Bristol University's Professor Martin White, which was shaped to communicate the

messages relating to gender inequality and sexual politics which were supported by Naomi Dawson's design.<sup>1</sup> The set, the pastel-coloured jackets worn by the male characters, and the party scenes, were all influenced by the 2013 Italian film *La Grande Bellezza* (*The Great Beauty*), by Paolo Sorrentino, which looked at Roman high society, and highlighted the contemporary, party-driven, male-dominated society of the rich. The design made significant use of reflective surfaces, including a shiny gold tiled floor and white circular fluorescent overhead lighting tubes. White net curtains were drawn across a white, glass-lined rectangular light box with sliding doors at the back of the stage, which had a mirrored back wall and which was used for dumb shows and for characters to observe the centre-stage action. A functional, gold-edged modular pink sofa was reminiscent of the marble seat which featured in the publicity posters for *The Great Beauty*, and the RSC's audio introduction described the set as "silicon chic retro", in a world which is "stylish" and where "fashion is everything" (2014 online).

Aberg was influenced by theories on the predominance of the male gaze and submissive female sexuality on film, as explored in the writings of Laura Mulvey (in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, 1975). Video projections (designed by music video director Nathan Parker) were therefore used, (together with music by Django Unchained) to prefigure the action involving Vittoria Corombona and, in the opening scene, Kirsty Bushell's Vittoria played close attention to a projection of the desirable woman she was about to create<sup>2</sup>, as she stood on a bare stage in her underwear and stared defiantly at the audience. Bushell (who had appeared in the RSC's 2012 *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, and *The Comedy of Errors*) showed no obvious emotion as she assumed her femme fatale outfit of blond wig with

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<sup>1</sup> Production images available at <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-white-devil>

Trailer available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6U2\\_UuvSV4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6U2_UuvSV4)

<sup>2</sup> Onstage footage available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfTntzlvf\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfTntzlvf_8)

short tight gold and black dress and sling-back high heels. She would repeat this process just after the interval, for her wedding celebrations.

She was observed by her sister Flaminio, the north-eastern-accented Laura Elphinstone, who was dressed in an androgynous slim black jacket and jeans, black patent lace-up shoes, a thin gold chain belt and a small crucifix on a chain at her neck. With slicked-back, short dark hair and green eye-shadow (perhaps indicating envy), her tone was mostly one of the angry, determined schemer and there was little of the subtle, seductive charmer about her. However, some critics disagreed and suggested her speeches showed a varied expression of the different facets of the character. In an interview for the RSC's Summer School in August 2014, Elphinstone described the process of changing Flamineo from a brother to a sister as challenging, requiring her to understand how women try to use men's misogyny in an attempt to "pull something [for themselves] out of this horrendous world" (2014, pers. comm.). In an interview for the *Coventry Telegraph*, Aberg suggested "it's just slightly more complex if you have a woman at the centre thinking she could win by playing a man's game – but in doing so she is selling out on her own gender and identity". (2014, online). Despite playing by male rules, by the end of the production, Flaminio fared no better than her sister in the vicious world of the modern Roman court.

As Vittoria exited the stage, Flaminio observed a conversation between the disgraced exile, Count Lodovico (Joseph Arkley) and his companions Antonelli (Mark Holgate) and Gasparo (Jay Simpson) about Lodovico's anger at his recent banishment. Lodovico wore a shiny red bomber jacket, black skinny jeans and black shoes, and spoke with an East London accent. His companions also wore jeans, with T-shirts and casual jackets. With slicked-back hair, all three provided an air of danger and recklessness, before giving way to a group dance featuring an assortment of revelers. The women were all in short, tight outfits and the men were in cotton jeans and loud shirts. Vittoria's sister Flaminio was joined on the balcony by her maid

Zanche (Joan Lyiola) and, in Act 5, Flaminio would be observed kissing Zanche, although Elphinstone suggested that Flaminio was simply using Zanche, since she was “incapable of an equal loving relationship” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.).

Vittoria made an entrance through the middle of the dancers, flirting with the men and smiling benevolently at the women as though she were the hostess and ‘main attraction’ of the evening, before moving back into the light box to drink champagne. Flaminio then immediately began to put her plot into action, by assuring Bracciano of her plan to “divide my brother-in-law from his fair bed-fellow” (1.2), and she encouraged Keir Charles’ slightly sulky Camillo to give his wife more liberty. Although he was described by Flaminio as having the appearance of a politician, Camillo was actually dressed in a loud flowery shirt and shiny jacket. However, her assertion of his dull-wittedness did ring true and he was presented as a bit of a buffoon, with an air of naivety and a slightly overdone cut-glass accent. Inevitably, he was convinced by Flaminio’s assurance that delaying his next conjugal visit would increase his wife’s desire, and was happy to suggest that Flaminio should lock him in his chamber overnight, to prevent him from relenting.

This paved the way for Bracciano and Vittoria’s playful encounter on the pink sofa and their flirtatious exchange of rings as a symbol of their commitment, as well as his more serious assurance that “I’ll seat you above the law and above scandal”. David Sturzaker’s Duke Bracciano was presented as a largely superficial amoral seducer, who enthusiastically conspired in the horrific murder of his wife, but who gave little indication of any underlying character. He was quite casually dressed, in a pink patterned cotton shirt and grey jeans, and his encounter with Vittoria was observed by Flaminio (from the light box) and by Vittoria’s mother, Liz Crowther’s Cornelia (from the balcony). Cornelia wore a tight black and white knee-length dress and a blond wig, with a silver cross around her neck to indicate her piety. Flaminio was irritated by Cornelia’s interference, as she descended to express her



outrage at Vittoria's "Judas-like" behaviour, and informed her with great disdain that "I would the common'st courtesan in Rome, had been my mother rather than thyself" (1.2).

In Act 2, we encountered Faye Castelow's Isabella, who was dressed in a smart, respectable green lace dress and high heels, with a small gold cross around her neck. She was accompanied by her son Giovanni (played in rotation by three different boys), who appeared only briefly, dressed in a rabbit costume. Although Giovanni featured in several scenes (often in 'fancy dress', which sometimes emulated the costumes of his elders), he was always carefully chaperoned on and off the stage, in an attempt to shield him from the more graphic images of adultery and murder.

Bracciano was then reproached by Simon Scardifield's Duke Francisco and David Rintoul's Cardinal Monticelso for his neglect of his wife, in favour of "an insatiate bed" (2.1). Both Francisco and Monticelso were dressed in pale coloured cotton jeans and white shirts, with black shoes, with Francisco in a yellow jacket and Monticelso in a red one, with a large cross worn around his neck. Monticelso would later change into an extremely sumptuous off-white robe, when he appeared on the balcony to assume the role of Pope just before the interval, at the end of Act 4.

Francisco's accusations were delivered in a calm, arrogant and casual tone, which he would maintain throughout the play, and which was presumably intended to suggest a quiet air of menace but which gave no real sense of zeal to his claim that "our anger is making thunderbolts". Bracciano appeared unruffled and disdainful, and his subsequent behaviour towards his wife was distant, suggesting that he was weary of her attentions and wished to be rid of her as soon as possible. Castelow gave a strong performance as the wronged wife who attempted to put aside her own emotional pain and anger in an attempt to regain the love of her husband, and who decided to assume the blame for their separation in order to preserve his reputation, following his angry return of her wedding ring.

Following a warning from Monticelso that rumours of his cuckoldry were spreading, Camillo was despatched by Flaminio (assisted by her brother Marcello) in a dumb show within the light box, by having his neck broken whilst he engaged in some erotic Japanese bondage activity with a number of women dressed in white Lycra cat suits (similar to those featured in Lady Gaga's *Bad Romance* video), who were wrapped suggestively in red ribbons. The death was observed by Michael Moreland's Dr Julio (who wore a dark suit which gave him a mobster-like appearance), together with Bracciano, as a projection showed an erotic image of a woman's red lips and gold pearls between her teeth (which was also featured as the central image in the production's programme). As her husband was killed, Vittoria slept on the floor, facing away from him. This directorial decision was presumably taken in order to minimise her direct involvement in the act of his murder although, immediately prior to sleeping, she was seen dressed in her pink and turquoise underwear, kissing Bracciano whilst a projection of a blood spill spread across the net curtain behind her. This left us with some uncertainty about the extent to which she had been involved in the murder. On waking, Vittoria watched a projection of herself being arrested, and took off her wig in preparation for her trial scene (3.2).

Hopkins (2002) points out that *The White Devil* is amongst a small number of significant renaissance plays with leading female characters which had a focus on the law. Female identities of the time were legally hidden within those of their husbands or fathers and women were considered "incapable of independent action and not fully responsible for any actions which they might in fact take" (Hopkins 2002, p.87). The notorious trial scene was therefore very different in tone, as the action slowed, and focussed in detail on Vittoria's attempt to exert her own independence. Wearing a white dress (presumably in an effort to convey an image of chastity) but with black high heels and a black wig, Vittoria was pursued by photographers (in a style reminiscent of Lady Gaga's *Paparazzi* music video) and was watched by lawyers with brief cases, note takers and her mother. It was perhaps the

strongest scene of the production, and was highly effective in emphasising the venom of Monticelso's ferocious public accusation against Vittoria. Bushell commented that, since she is "man-handled and verbally abused in nearly every scene", she is conscious that "everyone has to look after themselves in a very dark, disturbing, disgusting world" (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). Vittoria therefore demonstrated an intelligent and witty defiance, and contempt for her accuser, observing that charity is "seldom found in scarlet" (3.2). She shared her scorn for a society which judged her for her immorality, whilst recognising her own powerlessness – "O woman's poor revenge which dwells but in the tongue".

As the widow went to prepare for exile in the House of Covertites, Bracciano witnessed another dumb show, this time of Isabella's death. Dr Julio's provision of an envenomed picture of her husband was visually dramatic, as she convulsed whilst blood oozed from her mouth and drenched her pyjamas. She was observed by her relieved husband and found dying by the horrified and devoted Lodovico and her hardened, expressionless son Giovanni. An angry Lodovico made obscene gestures as he informed Flaminio that she was a pander to "a damnable whore", and Francisco's cold demeanour and lack of expression made it challenging to ascertain any feelings upon his sister's death, beyond his removal of his jacket and a stated intention to exact revenge.

In 4.1, the light box became the House of Convertites (presided over by Harvey Virdi), to which Vittoria had been banished. The inmates were drugged and the words "ora pro nobis" (pray for us) were projected behind them. The staging was visually striking, with one woman heavily pregnant, another clearly confused, and all wearing dirty, stained white underwear (the colour was presumably intended to purify them), whilst carrying out a penance for their supposedly immoral behaviour. We were clearly invited to take pity on their plight, in a scene which had echoes of the gates through which the Convent's white clad novices peered at the outside world, in the

film *The Great Beauty*, as well as Robin Thicke's demeaned and subservient line up of naked women in his 2013 *Blurred Lines* video.

In 4.2, in very quick succession, and in a manner which suggested something of a scramble towards the interval, Bracciano plotted for his escape to Padua with Vittoria, Francisco consulted the page of murderers available for hire in Monticelso's 'little black book' of criminals, and the Cardinal was elected pope. Francisco and Lodovico were united in their desire to seek revenge, and the fleeing couple were excommunicated.

The interval was placed unusually late, at the end of Act 4, after which we observed Vittoria and Bracciano's wedding celebrations, for which Vittoria assumed a 'fallen angel' costume which seemed to be a reference to Juliet's outfit in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*. She picked up her wedding bouquet and began to mingle with the emerging guests, who included her siblings - Flaminio and Peter Bray's Marcello (who had the shape of angel wings cut out of the back of his T-shirt) - and Zanche (in a short, tight black and white nun's habit). The costumes were presumably intended to mock the Christian church's condemnation of the marriage and, as the newly-weds danced, Vittoria broke free and began a wild provocative and aggressive dance which reminded us yet again of a Lady Gaga video (this time *Bad Romance*) in which a highly sexualised dance is performed for the benefit of a male observer. The three "worthy gentlemen" in Franciscan habits (Lodovico, Antonelli and Gaspero in disguise) interacted with Francisco, (whose unconvincing disguise as Mulinassar consisted solely of a pair of sunglasses), and shared their plot to murder Bracciano.

In 5.2, Cornelia (dressed in a pink, blue and yellow patterned suit) witnessed Flaminio's sudden stabbing of Marcello in the stomach and neck, at which the mother screamed, was held back from her son's body by Bracciano's servant Hortensio (Lizzie Hopley in a black bra top with white collar, red braces, black trousers and a black wig), and managed to resist the urge to attack Flaminio with the murder weapon. In her interview for the *RSC*



*Summer School* (2014), Elphinstone suggested that Flaminio makes a split-second decision to kill her brother, because of her anger at his weakness and lack of purpose.

In 5.3, handed his blue wrestling helmet by a woman dressed in an orange provocative PVC nun's outfit (who then retired to the balcony to snort the cocaine which was presumably her payment for her role in Bracciano's forthcoming murder), Bracciano stumbled dramatically to the ground as the poison in his helmet began to take effect, and was clutched by the distraught Vittoria before the audience responded with laughter to his lament at being left to die "mongst women howling". He was placed in a body bag and strangled with a thurible chain by the unobserved Lodovico and Gasparo before Vittoria removed her wig (presumably as her role as the desirable woman was no longer required). Scene 5.4 showed Giovanni standing by his father's white coffin (adorned with white flowers) and Cornelia dragging the body of her son Marcello across the stage. Her grief at his death was perhaps intended to be moving but this melodramatic moment of overt mourning seemed awkwardly at odds with the modern staging and evoked laughter from the audience.

The final scene began with Vittoria preparing for her death by taking off her skirt and tucking a blood bag into her underwear whilst observing her death scene on a projection. In an interview for the *RSC Summer School*, Bushell explained that the placing of the blood bag reflected the fact that the director was "uncomfortable about portraying a woman being killed in a sexualised way without any comment being made on it". By enabling us to see this action, Aberg aimed to create some distance for the audience, as well as for Vittoria, who wishes to "get out of her own narrative".

Having earlier, somewhat confusingly, having tried to ingratiate herself with a very charmless Francisco in an attempt to secure her escape, Zanche was now stuck in the middle of an interaction between Vittoria and her sister, which proceeded at a slow pace, in a seeming attempt to explore their

relationship in more detail. The bitter and murderous Flaminio tried to trick them into believing that she meant to die with them in a triple suicide and there was laughter from the audience as Vittoria and Zanche nodded and dishonestly promised “most religiously” not to outlive her. Flaminio pretended to be wounded, but there was no opportunity to dwell on the effects of Flaminio’s deception, as the women were swiftly attacked by Lodovico, Gasparo and Antonelli, wearing their familiar Franciscan habits. All three women died bravely, and with a somewhat surprising and counter-intuitive sense of solidarity which seemed to be intended to reinforce a sense of the inevitable victimisation of women by male aggressors, and which Kirsty Bushell described as enabling them to “rise above the hatred and misogyny in their deaths”, “choose how to die”, and “support each other in a profound way” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.).

Flaminio and Zanche were each stabbed in the stomach, by Lodovico and Antonelli respectively, whilst Vittoria was stabbed by Gasparo in the groin. There was more audience laughter at the irony of Flaminio and Vittoria’s apparent sudden sense of familial affection, as Flaminio told Vittoria “I do love thee” and Vittoria smiled in return. As the murderers were arrested by armed guards, under the order of Bracciano’s heartless son, Giovanni remained alone on stage with the bodies, kicking Vittoria to ensure that she was dead, and laughing with pleasure at her demise. Presumably this was intended to remind us that he was already significantly affected by what he had witnessed and the cycle of insensitive and callous oppression and selfishness would be continued in the next generation.

Critics varied greatly in their levels of appreciation for Aberg’s previous productions for the RSC. José Pérez Díez points out that “academic reviewers were consistently positive” (2015, *Shakespeare*, p.322, online) about her 2012 production of *King John* but, in an interview for *What’s on Stage* in June 2014, the director reflected on her surprise at some of the negative critical receptions this production had received from the press.

These were, she felt, due to the use of modern cultural popular references, which she said were intended to highlight the “two-dimensionality and simplicity of them as cultural expressions” but which actually resulted in criticism that “we were doing something two-dimensional and facile”. She stated that “because we made it look glossy and hollow and kind of loud and brash, they didn't appreciate that was a choice and a reference” (Aberg 2014, *What's on Stage*, online). However, it is also perhaps possible that some *did* appreciate this was a choice, and they simply didn't like it.

Peter Kirwan suggests that, though he had valued Aberg's bold retelling of King John, concerns arose with *The White Devil*, since “the difficulty with Aberg's production was its accentuation of spectacle at the expense of psychology” (2015, *Shakespeare*, online). Aberg's productions are clearly intended to appeal primarily to young audiences, and Guy Thornton's review for the Stratford-upon-Avon *blogspot* pointed out that, whilst some critics responded positively to the modern staging of this “floating world of celebrity culture” (Thornton, 2014, online), others believed that a period-staging would have been more effective, as the contemporary setting and the political power of the patriarchal church were at odds with each other.

The modern-day costumes were perhaps also, at times, a little testing, as it was difficult for those who were unfamiliar with the play to determine the hierarchy and relationships between characters. As Michael Billington pointed out, *The White Devil* might be seen as “a play of great scenes” [rather than] a play with “a coherent narrative” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). This production may have added to the potential confusion, since the costumes gave little indication of the high born status of Bracciano, Lodovico and Francisco, or the religious influence of Monticelso. Subservient characters such as Zanche and Hortensio were not distinguished visually from the nobles they served.

As the central female character, Vittoria Corombona is both a tragic victim of, and a participant in, the male suppression of women but, although Aberg

described her as being “incredibly powerful” (Aberg, 2014, *Coventry Telegraph*, online), in this production, there was actually very little suggestion of Kirsty Bushell’s Vittoria having any power at all, other than through her visible assumptions of sexually-desirable female personae. Although Bushell felt the production had successfully navigated the “fine line between exploring objectification and actually objectifying” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.), it could perhaps be argued that the portrayal of women as objects of sexual gratification can sometimes have the opposite effect to the one intended. Although Aberg expressed the wish to show the “dangerous trap that faces women today of trying to play the man's game and thinking that is going to change things” (Aberg, 2014, *What's on Stage*, online), the constant reminder of overt female sexuality may have been seen by some as reinforcing, rather than arguing against, female stereotypes.

The casting of a female Flaminio was also an interesting choice. The possibilities for indicating a potentially incestuous interest by Flamineo in his sister were replaced by a slightly puzzling relationship in which Flaminio's antagonism towards her brother and sister was perhaps not fully explained. Michael Billington also felt that the cross-gender casting “contaminated the play's misogyny and lessened its impact”, and that Aberg had used a “contorted argument to justify a strange piece of casting” (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). However, Jose Perez Diez (2015, *Shakespeare*, online) felt that the misogyny shown by the female Flaminio had great potency and, with cross-gender casting becoming more commonplace, it could possibly also be argued that, particularly within the context of the *Roaring Girls* season, that the savagery of human nature was more shockingly evidenced by the casting of a woman in such a powerful role.



### 3.4 “*Alas, I am a woman, friendless, hopeless*”<sup>1</sup>:

#### *The Witch of Edmonton* by Dekker, Ford and Rowley

Greg Doran, Swan Theatre (28 October 2014)

The fourth, and final, play in the *Roaring Girls* season was Greg Doran’s production of Dekker, Ford and Rowley’s 1621 *The Witch of Edmonton*. Although Doran was repeatedly badged by Erica Whyman as an ‘honorary roaring girl’, as Eoin Price suggests (in his review of the production for *Shakespeare*), having a male director for the production which closed the season was perhaps an unfortunate choice, despite Doran’s unique position as Artistic Director (2015 online).

In Doran’s version of what he termed “an extraordinary play”, he stated that he wished to emphasise the “stresses and strains that lead people to do terrible things” (2014, *RSC Director’s Talk*, pers. comm.). Doran described the ‘Roaring Girl’ of the play (the socially isolated Mother Sawyer) as a “scapegoat” for any or all misfortunes of her neighbours. As a poor, lonely woman of advanced years who lives alone, without children or a male protector, she is perhaps regarded as being of little benefit to society, and speculation about her supposed dabbling in witchcraft abounds. Referring again to real events, the play is based (very loosely) on the life of Elizabeth Sawyer, who was executed for witchcraft in April 1621, only a very short time before the play was first performed.

Whilst recognising that Jay Simpson’s central character ‘Dog’ had “all the best arguments” (2014, *RSC Director’s Talk*, pers. comm.) and provided the only real cohesion in the play, Doran stressed that he viewed Eileen Atkins as the “icing on the cake” and his “lucky talisman” (2014, *RSC Director’s*

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<sup>1</sup> *Henry VIII*, 3.1 (86)

*Talk*, pers. comm.) in the role of Mother Sawyer. Through her portrayal of the persecuted old woman, the director hoped to draw attention to the relevance of Early Modern belief in witchcraft, as exemplified by James I's own 1597 publication *Daemonologie*, which endorsed the practice of witch-hunting, but warned against feigned witchcraft and the tendency to use accusations of witchcraft to persecute the innocent. Dominic Cavendish points out that, whilst the play seems to allow for the existence of the supernatural, "it's insinuated that it's a human construct, a means of explaining away individual failings and communal vices" (Cavendish, 2014, *The Telegraph*, online).

With two quite major sub-plots, featuring a bigamous young man who murders one of his wives and a clownish local yokel who befriends the 'devil dog' who brings about the tragedies, Sawyer is only a *part* of the play's narrative, and there are just a few scenes in which we are shown the effects of her life of solitude and poverty, and the harshness of her treatment at the hands of her neighbours. However, Doran suggested that modern audiences would be able to see for themselves that the cruel behaviour of the play's characters still has resonances with today's pre-occupation with immigration as a focus for twenty-first-century frustrations in the West. He advocated that our wish to identify "outsiders" as the cause of our ills resulted from our own contemporary attempt to identify evil as an "external force" in order to try to "absolve us of responsibility" (2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, pers. comm.). However, Doran believed that a modern setting for the play would be incongruent with the play's focus on Sawyer's persecution for witchcraft. As he stated in his interview with Paul Allen, in a modern-dress production, the danger is that "there's a point where you stop illuminating the play, and it starts obfuscating the play" (2014 online). His was therefore the only *Roaring Girls* production to be set at the time of the play's initial publication.

Niki Turner's design featured a dark sponge-like floor (made of recycled tyres), which was intended to resemble peat and earth, and upright bundles of twigs which were situated around the back of the stage, and the edge of the auditorium. These were designed to suggest a reed-bed in the fenlands of North London, although Kate Kellaway points out that they could also be interpreted as having been "pinched from a witch's broom to make a thicket" (Kellaway, 2014, *The Observer*, online).<sup>1</sup> There was little use of furniture or props, and the staging was quite simple, with all of the play's action taking place centre-stage, and without the balconies being used.

Doran joked that, with two previous modern-dress *Roaring Girls* productions (*Arden of Faversham* and *The White Devil*), and one Victorian one (*The Roaring Girl*), it was "probably time for the odd farthingale" (2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, pers. comm.). Atkins' Mother Sawyer was therefore dressed in simple, ragged seventeenth-century costume, with a hunch-back and stick. Her portrayal was of an ordinary, poor, powerless and neglected woman, whose isolation had presumably increased with her old age. When Cuddy Banks invites her to cast a spell on the young woman who is the object of his affections, he attempts to flatter Sawyer by saying 'witch or no witch, you are a motherly woman' (2.1). The best compliment you can pay an old woman then, is to call her motherly, and thus suggest that her body has been used profitably at some stage, to produce children, and that she still has a function in being able to care for the young. Sawyer, however, is clearly considered to have outlived any usefulness she may have had previously, and has little to keep her company except her own anger and misery, asking "why should the envious world throw all their scandalous malice upon me?... Must I... be made a common sink for all the filth and rubbish of men's tongues to fall and run into?" (2.1). She explains how the

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<sup>1</sup> Production images available at <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-witch-of-edmonton>

accusations of witchcraft make her wish she *was* a witch, so that she could take her revenge on the local bullies, claiming “Tis all one to be a witch as to be counted one”.

Hopkins points out that, along with *The White Devil* this play offers a rare (for the era) opportunity to see women “contesting the images offered of them, rather than being merely constrained by them” (Hopkins 2002, p.6).

However, regardless of her courage, Sawyer is beaten and scorned, and not even allowed to gather a few dried sticks for firewood without being accused of theft by her neighbor Old Banks. Inevitably, towards the end of the play, as the neighbourhood is ‘tidied up’, the crotchety old woman is whisked off for execution, with little hope of redemption due to her lack of repentance (though her continued defiance was perhaps justified, given that she never actually did any harm).

Kellaway remarks that there was a “marvellous off-handedness about her performance” and that Atkins managed to combine humour with being disagreeable and pitiable, being “careful to excite only limited sympathy for her character” (Kellaway, 2014, *The Observer*, online). The Jacobean costumes of Sawyer and the rest of the cast, together with the emphasis on seventeenth-century moral and religious standards inherent in the play, seemed to suggest that the production was speaking more directly to the past than to the present. This was perhaps strengthened by the somewhat drawn-out buffoonery of Dafydd Llyr Thomas’ clowning morris-dancer Cuddy Banks, whose hapless pursuit of Elspeth Brodie’s Katherine Carter was partially accompanied by musicians playing a variety of Early Modern instruments.

Reflecting Cavendish’s view that it is “part and parcel of the play’s frustrations and fascinations” that Dekker’s Mother Sawyer is “quite a marginal figure” (Cavendish 2014, *The Telegraph*, online), Michael Billington wished that she was more prominent, in order to provide greater acquaintance with Atkins’ “richly textured performance” and “brooding



presence". Despite a few key scenes in which we are witness to Sawyer's venting of her anger and distress at her cruel treatment, it could be argued that *The Witch of Edmonton* was perhaps an odd choice as the final production in the *Roaring Girls* season, given that, in performance, there was little sense of Sawyer being at the centre of the production. Peter Smith suggested that the play offers "precious little in the way of developed character or even a coherent theme" (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online) and, with Doran perhaps struggling to achieve the "fluidity between scenes" which he was aiming for (Doran, 2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, pers. comm.), since "too many playwrights spoil the plot" (Kellaway 2014, *The Observer*, online), the greatest attention seemed to be given to Ian Bonar's compelling performance as Ford's bigamous murderer, Frank Thornley. Ford's strand of the play appeared to be the strongest, both in print, and in performance, and Doran clearly intended that the audience's sympathies would be with the young man, despite his heinous crime and his preoccupation with material wealth, as a "grasping youth" (Cavendish 2014, *The Telegraph*, online) whose primary concern is getting speedy access to his inheritance. Doran saw him as a casualty of his father's ambition, stating that he wished to draw attention to Thornley's plight, as a young male victim of an enforced marriage, who came to believe that he had "sold his body for money" (Doran, 2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, pers. comm.). Young Thornley's poetic language of the tortured and contrite soul, which was clearly intended to invite sympathy, and the emphasis on his sufferings, seemed to place the play more securely within the category of domestic tragedy, rather than tragic-comedy, as it has sometimes been described. Although Shvorne Marks' Winifrede gave a sympathetic performance as the wronged maid, and was eventually financially rewarded for her patience and fortitude, there was little to celebrate at the end of the performance, when both Thornley and Sawyer were led off to their deaths.

Doran expressed the view that "you have to get the dog right, to get the play right" (2014, *RSC Director's Talk*, pers. comm.), as he features in all three

strands of the play, and his ability to “take over the imagination of whoever he talks to” perhaps places him in a more considerable position of importance than any other character in the piece. Jay Simpson’s portrayal of the sinister creature was very effective. Covered in black body paint, with dog ears, a wire tail and dragon-like spikes, he alternated between showing a devious but excitable eagerness to please, and generating a more menacing sense of stillness. He was present as an apparent silent instigator of much of the play’s tragedy and mayhem, and his malevolence was energetic, creative and disturbing. Despite the strength of Simpson’s performance, though, it could perhaps be argued that added interest may have been created by casting a woman in this central role of Sawyer and Banks’ familiar. Perhaps this might have provided an opportunity for a stronger female protagonist, and validated the position of the production within the season which, (as the only one to be directed by a man) did not appear to have a female voice at the heart of the play, or to be in direct conversation with women of any era.

## ACT IV

### Revolting Women in The Other Place

**“Do you not know that I am a woman? When I think, I must speak”<sup>1</sup>**

***Midsummer Mischief* by Wertenbaker, Birch, Crowe & Zakarian**

Erica Whyman and Jo McInnes, *The Other Place* at the Courtyard Theatre (14 June 2014)

When speaking about the *Roaring Girls* season, Erica Whyman stated that “I knew even before we were in production with these plays that what we were still missing was contemporary female voices” (2014, *What's on Stage*, online). Whyman therefore commissioned four female playwrights to each write a short new work for the brief *Midsummer Mischief* programme in June 2014. Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Ant and the Cicada*, Alice Birch's *Revolt. She said. Revolt again*, E.V. Crowe's *I can Hear You*, and Abi Zakarian's *This is not an Exit* were performed in an informal studio space within what was formerly the Courtyard Theatre. They were intended to offer “a celebration and a provocation”, and to ask questions about modern gender inequality both on stage and in the world (Whyman, 2013, *The Telegraph*, online). Whyman stressed her belief that “there are still arenas in which things happen according to gender rules and when a woman challenges that, either by what she wears or does, we are shocked and surprised” (Whyman, 2013, *The Telegraph*, online). Suggesting that women today are still accepting a range of compromises, within which “we pretend we've got equality” (2014, *What's on Stage*, online), Whyman wanted to

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<sup>1</sup> *As You Like It*, 3.2 (191)

encourage an atmosphere of radical questioning, and cited Timberlake Wertenbaker's appreciation of the RSC's providing a voice for women who are "not just there to be attractive, but to be active" and "badly behaved", since "misogyny on stage is not the portrayal of *wicked* women, but of *invisible* women" (2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.).

The four new pieces (split into programmes A and B) certainly featured a number of highly visible female performances, but Wertenbaker's concern that the work may be silenced through being ignored due to a lack of critical engagement was perhaps justified, as was Whyman's frustration with critics, many of whom focussed largely on the fact that the works had been created by women, and gave little detailed critical attention to the content or quality of the pieces themselves. Few national reviews were published, and substantial engagement with the content of the work was mainly confined to blogs, and a few online websites used to highlight activities of local interest.

The temporary studio used for *Midsummer Mischief* was still very much a work in progress, as part of the re-establishment of The Other Place,<sup>1</sup> which Erica Whyman was re-developing into a flexible performance and rehearsal space in which to "play, explore, experiment and make theatre" (Whyman 2015, *Radical Mischief*, online). *The Telegraph*'s Dominic Cavendish described the studio experience as "squatting inside the partially defunct Courtyard Theatre" on "bum-numbing seats of a sort usually found on the fringe", for which "an air of indulgence" was required (2014 online). However, some amongst the audience were clearly excited to see the progress of Whyman's resurrection of The Other Place, having witnessed her stated commitment to demonstrating that "the spirit of experimentation is at the heart of who we are" (Whyman 2015, *Radical Mischief*, online).

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<sup>1</sup> Information on The Other Place's development available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vzff03yrBE>



The audience was seated on raked, backless, padded concrete steps, and a simple wooden platform provided the stage. Whyman acknowledged that the physical location could invite accusations of the marginalisation of female voices, since it might appear as though “we were in the badly behaved corner, which we were allowed to behave badly in”. However, she expressed an intention to facilitate “the possibility of joy and humour; and naughtiness and playfulness” (Whyman 2014, *What's on Stage*, online), and it is true that the RSC has a history of staging experimental new works in its smallest space at The Other Place, as it knows it is likely to sell fewer tickets than it would for better-known works. However, it was also noticeable that the RSC shop did not produce any merchandise which specifically complemented *Midsummer Mischief* (though play texts did materialise in a volume published later in the summer), and that, in a 2016 ‘spring clean’ of its website, all content relating to these plays was removed.

Featuring a cast of six (four women and two men) and directed by Jo McInnes and Erica Whyman, the 2014 *Midsummer Mischief* productions were accompanied by a day of conversational events (*Roaring Girls Today*, 28 June 2014) which invited discussion on the role of feminism in modern theatre, politics, and society. Peter Kirwan describes how, with very few men in attendance, there were “warnings against a false sense of progress” and “calls for men to take responsibility for acting against misogyny”, as well as an awareness of “the violent, varied and knee jerk strategies [used] against women in public to enforce silence”, and “the loneliness experienced by the woman who speaks out” (Kirwan 2014, *Bardathon*, online). This loneliness might be said to reflect the experiences of some of the women represented in the *Midsummer Mischief* programme, many of whom found that their personal choices were at odds with societal pressures.

In the most conventional and steadily-paced of the four plays, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Ant and the Cicada* (directed by Whyman) featured Julie Legrand's Zoe, as a performance artist living in the old family home in

Greece. Her frustrations with the capitalist system which had led to Greece's financial crisis caused her to rail against "god the market... your irrational and capricious god", and she rejected the attempt by her younger sister Selina (Ruth Gemmell) to address her financial troubles (caused largely by increasing taxes) by selling their property to Selina's husband (John Bowe's Alex), who planned to turn the estate into a conference centre. With her interests focussed on art, culture and performance, rather than on the practical matter of paying her debts, Selina compared Zoe to the Cicada, which sings happily all summer and despises the ants, but then eventually has to ask them for help, as they are the ones who "help keep the world afloat" and who "work hard to pay for everything". Selina saw her sister as attempting to live in an unrealistic dreamlike existence, and expressed her disapproval at her sister's idealistic association with *Golden Dawn* - a far right political party which rejected immigration and supported the expansion of Greek territories. However, Zoe angrily rejected capitalist values which lead people to "martyr yourself to the economy" and reject the qualities of fairness, altruism and the right to question. Zoe therefore demanded the return of the contract of sale which she had reluctantly signed, quoting the increasingly powerless and destitute King Lear when warning them "I will do such things. What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be the terrors of the earth" (2.4).

In Act 2, the narrative was disrupted as the auditorium became the family's local amphitheatre, where Zoe's daughter Irina (Mimi Ndiweni) used a performance in the guise of the Greek heroine Bouboulina to present a satirical portrait of economists and oligarchs, in order to force Selina and Alex to rescind their contract of sale and create what Charlotte Valori describes as "an explosive, conflicting atmosphere of fulfilment and betrayal" (Valori 2014, *TheatreCat*, online). As a naval commander in the 1821 – 1829 Greek war of independence, Bouboulina had rejected Ottoman rule and fought for Greek sovereignty, resisting attempts to confiscate her property and sacrificing most of her fortune to provide food and ammunition for her

soldiers. This section of the play was perhaps the least interesting in dramatic terms, with Selena's sarcastic categorisation of Zoe's performances as "sermons" perhaps having some justification, and with the repeated attempts to demand that the audience repeat the phrase "we are all Greeks" only partially successful. Indeed, *The Telegraph's* Dominic Cavendish describes it as "overdone ... almost as if another play, about Bouboulina... is trying to get out" (2014, online). However, given that this was a less obviously feminist piece than the other works in this festival, the inclusion of Bouboulina as a strong female icon did at least provide a platform for female voices to engage in political discussion. The play also attempted to convey the complexity of sibling relationships, with Zoe informing Selena "Most of the time I want to kill you, but sometimes I want to put my arms around you and keep you".

A more overtly feminist work was presented through Alice Birch's *Revolt. She said. Revolt again.* (also directed by Whyman), in which a series of five short scenarios presented both comic and disturbing/pessimistic visions of the ongoing struggle faced by twenty-first century feminism. They demanded great versatility and energy from the performers and, with no obvious narrative link between scenes, Peter Kirwan describes how the piece "aimed to keep the audience on edge, creating the illusion that the play itself might fall into chaos at any point" (2014, *Bardathon*, online).<sup>1</sup>

Featuring a cast of four, playing largely nameless characters on a minimal set, the play began with the words "Revolutionise the language. (Invert it.)" projected on the back wall, as Robert Boulter and Mimi Ndiweni engaged in an exchange of increasingly graphic sexualised language which explored the balance of power in physical relationships between the sexes. In what could

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<sup>1</sup> Trailer available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T90BDGcNdMo>  
Audience reactions available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCIZETS8cdo>

have appeared to be a romantic scene between two lovers, the Shakespeare reference used by Ndiweni was “Is that a nightingale?” in reminiscence of Romeo and Juliet. However, this scene was looking to acknowledge that the terms often used by men (in what many might consider a socially acceptable way) to describe their sexual desire towards women can seem shocking, discomforting, and predatory, when used by a woman in a similar manner towards a man. Thus, what began with Ndiweni’s light-hearted attempt to adjust Boulter’s description of his wishes, to make them sound more like a physical union based on mutual respect (illustrated by her response of “I’m not a potato” to Boulter’s “I want to peel your dress off”) descended into phrases used by the increasingly agitated female, which suggested the violation and humiliation of the male.

The projection for the following scene read “Revolutionise the world. (Do not marry.)”. In another analysis of power dynamics, it featured a discussion between Robert Boulter’s male and Scarlett Brooke’s female, which Charlotte Valori said “deconstructs the ideas of love and marriage, romantically and practically” (2014, *TheatreCat*, online). As Brooke declared her shock at having received Boulter’s unwelcome marriage proposal whilst at a funeral, Boulter tried to convey his vision of marriage as wanting to be with someone forever, doing their online food shopping together and having children. However, for Brooke, marriage meant reducing his income tax, treating her as “chattel”, and forcing her to wear a “meringue” and hold bluebells (presumably as a symbol of her virginity) whilst “you do all the talking”. As in the preceding scene, Birch showed how the deeply entrenched ways in which we express ourselves through language can reinforce and perpetuate suggestions of sexism, and the faltering Boulter failed to find acceptable words, with his statements reduced one by one to “I want to marry you... I want to...I want... I...”

The third scene featured the projection “Revolutionise the work. (Engage with it.)”. In the most amusing of the four scenes, employee Mimi Ndiweni



attempted to explain to her boss Ruth Gemmell that she wanted to reduce her hours at work, so that she didn't have to work on Mondays. As a representative of a workaholic culture which placed career ambitions above all else, Gemmell failed to comprehend why Ndiweni could possibly need time away from work unless she was pregnant, or ill, or needed some study time to engage with professional development. The employee's simple wish to achieve a better life-work balance and have time to "sleep more, walk my dogs more, walk in the woods, ... have people to dinner" was unfathomable to the employer, who reverted to stereotypes, by offering her a "work handbag", a "spa day on Wednesdays", and chocolate (presumably because these are all material things which are supposed to pacify women). Even when the increasingly frustrated Ndiweni resorted to yelling "I will not work on Mondays!", Gemmell remained bemused, and clearly believed this bizarre request would soon be forgotten.

The fourth scene (accompanied by the projection "Revolutionise the body. (Make it sexually available. Constantly.)") was perhaps the most disturbing of the five. It highlighted the physical and emotional effects of an extreme case of a woman attempting to come to terms with the powerlessness discussed in a milder form in scenes 1 and 2. Beginning with an element of black humour, Ruth Gemmell's unresponsive character, seated on a chair and wrapped in a red sheet, was interrogated by disgruntled supermarket employees Robert Boulter and Scarlet Brookes, who wished to know "What were you doing lying in the middle of aisle seven with your dress over your head?" and observed "You'll have to pay for those melons you know". Engaging in body shaming, in a way which suggested that her lack of physical attractiveness was a greater issue than her nakedness, they informed her that "People come to buy dairy produce, not to see your flab and sausage legs, and bingo wings, pork belly, muffin top, chicken thighs...". Gemmell's eventual pitiful response was one of a weary warrior, tired of attempting to defend her battleground (her body) from attack. Having tried to bleach her skin, starve herself and bind her body in cling film, in the hope

that these things would make her more unattractive, she had failed to be able to protect herself from being repeatedly sexually violated. Worn down by the horror of her experiences, and in a miserable and distressing attempt to ensure her survival, she had decided to “lie down and be available”, and attempt to persuade herself that “you can't *take* it, because I *give* it”.

In the next scene, which followed the dark tone set by the previous one, several projections were shown, beginning with “Revolutionise the world. (Don't reproduce.)”, followed by others which included “Revolutionise the work. (Don't do it.)”, “Revolutionise the language. (That word doesn't exist here.)”, and “Revolutionise the body. (Start to shut it down.)”. Featuring three generations of women (Ruth Gemmell as the grandmother, Mimi Ndiweni as the daughter, and Scarlet Brookes as the granddaughter), Ndiweni attempted to understand why her mother abandoned her as a four-year-old child, and had travelled for three days in order to tell her mother “I understand and I forgive you”. The grandmother failed to acknowledge her family, or respond to Ndiweni's desperate concern for the effect of the abandonment on her own daughter Agnes (Scarlet Brookes). Named after the patron saint of young virgins (a child who was dragged naked through the streets to a brothel and then beheaded after a reputed unsuccessful attempt to burn her at the stake, in punishment for her Christianity and refusal to marry), this Agnes bled from her mouth and failed to understand the words “beautiful” and “kind”. She was gradually “disappearing”; and eventually cut out her tongue in a manner reminiscent of the violated and despairing Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, who was similarly sacrificed to the cycle of abuse initiated by her elders.

The final scene (“Galvanise”), featured increasingly swift, chaotic, punchy and energetic statements by each of the four actors, some of which were reminiscent of earlier scenes but which converged into a confusing crescendo of words which were uttered in competition with each other, suggesting the intense complexity of the modern world and individuals’

attempts to find a means of self-expression within it. Much of the emphasis was on the sexualisation of modern culture, and the perceived casual acceptance of sexual violence, with: a rape victim having “no evidence” of an offence, despite her bleeding and evidence of someone having broken into her house; a young girl being informed that a rapist’s punishment will be to mow lawns as part of his community service; and a woman being asked not to take part in hard core pornography because “people think that’s what sex is now”. Scarlet Brooke’s character attempted to make herself heard amongst the onslaught of negative imagery, and expressed her disappointment in the progress made towards gender equality, lamenting that she had been operating on the principle of “kindness being enough” ... but it isn’t”, and finally coming to the conclusion that is time to “take control of the airwaves” and “eradicate men”. The imagery used included bluebells again (which were physically present this time, as a known symbol of chastity, humility and gratitude), references to chopping watermelons (presumably indicating sexual violence towards women), the sale of hymens, and fire (the use of a fire extinguisher introduced Brooke’s resolution to drown out a fierce and uncontrolled world, in order to begin a new order). Brooke told us that “wastelands had grown where we thought we were building mountains”, because “the whole world failed at it”, though “It could have been so brilliant”. This gave a strong indication of Birch’s acknowledgement of the failures of feminism to date, which led Peter Kirwan to conclude that “behaviours are too ingrained, victories won at too high a cost” (2014, *Bardathon*, online). Shay Wilson expresses the view that this play highlights a “dissatisfaction with the glacially changing paradigms of the past” and wants to present us with “something more immediate and visceral” (Wilson, 2014, *Tumblr* online). However, despite the pessimistic tone, Valori points out the importance of recognising that “despair can breed luscious creativity” (2014, *TheatreCat*, online).

Programme B was directed by Jo McInnes. It began with E.V. Crowe’s *I can hear you*, in which all five actors explored the gendering of roles within a

family, following a memorial service held for a much-missed adult son, Tommy, who had died in a traffic accident. Tommy's prickly older sister Ruth (Ruth Gemmell) had taken on the role of her deceased mother (Marie) within the household for the day, but without the good grace Marie had presumably demonstrated, and her preparation of refreshments for after the funeral service, attempts to organise her father David (John Bowe), and offer drinks to her young widowed sister-in-law Sandra (Mimi Ndiweni), were accompanied by a quiet sense of resentment at the domestic expectations placed upon her and the enforced revisiting of old family wounds. There was little genuine affection shown between Ruth and David, who was the stereotypical father, preferring to watch football on the television and drink beer, rather than articulate his emotions about the loss of his wife and son, or discuss his daughter's attempts to have a baby.

In a strong and complex performance, Gemmell conveyed the sense that Ruth didn't want to take on her mother's mantle as care-giver, and wished instead to leave this chilly environment of jumpers and cardigans, and return to her partner Jim in the 40-degree heat of Dubai. At one stage, she pointed out the advantage of Sandra's situation, as her "widow's flush" meant that she no longer had responsibility for others. Ruth and David both clearly felt uncomfortable about the offer made by Sandra's friend Ellie (a Medium, played by Scarlet Brookes) to communicate with her deceased mother Marie, with Ruth dismissing the offer as "lotions and potions" and hoping that her comment "Mum had a nice life" would be sufficient to halt their suggestion. However, behind the scenes, Ellie and Sandra continued with their efforts to commune with the dead and instead of contacting Marie, actually summoned *Tommy*, who casually burst into the family home in a pink t-shirt and jeans, informing Ruth that the food at his funeral looked terrible, and that he intended to visit them every Sunday as long as his wife and sister were there, since "I'm not coming back here all the time just to sit with Dad". Tommy was self-centred, crass, belligerent and uncaring, and when Ruth asked whether he had spoken to their mother, he showed little



interest in the notion, wondering “What do you want to talk to mum for?”. Eventually, Ruth confessed that she wanted to know whether being a mother was “worthwhile”.

We were informed that Marie, who died aged 64, was a “devoted mother and wife”, who wasn’t an “in the world person” like Tommy. Her name had presumably been chosen because of its associations with the idealised Madonna, and Marie had lived a life which consisted of little other than looking after the wellbeing of others. In contemplating her own potential motherhood, Ruth appeared to reflect on whether this was sufficiently fulfilling, since Marie had presumably never been asked for her opinion on this (or indeed, perhaps, on any other subject) when alive. As Charlotte Valori points out, this was “a woman so well-behaved she was virtually forgotten by her own family” (2014, *TheatreCat*, online).

Whilst Tommy had been held in great affection, and photographs of him were displayed throughout the house, no photographs of Marie remained, and her letters had been destroyed. The supposedly personal objects produced in an attempt to summon her from the afterlife actually had very few close associations with her and it was perhaps unsurprising when Marie failed to respond positively to their appeal. Ruth found herself more and more absorbed in her now desperate quest to communicate with her mother, resulting in an apparent decision to reject the possibility of her own journey towards motherhood, until she could fill in the blanks. Her anxious realisation of the irretrievable nature of their relationship was visually compelling, and Peter Kirwan describes how Crowe explained her intention to create female characters who “aren’t sanitised, emotionally perfect, or necessarily likeable” (Kirwan 2014, *Bardathon*, online) just as we “don’t usually like King Lear or Hamlet that much, or feel we have to like them” (Carroll, online, *A Younger Theatre*, 2014). In fact, the production portrayed a family in which perhaps none of the characters were entirely sympathetic, and where “the men

ignore, control and domineer over the women, who in their turn are unable to get traction on their own lives and dreams” (Valori, 2014, *TheatreCat*, online).

Although Dominic Cavendish found this piece “oddly insubstantial” (2014, *The Telegraph*, online), it offered an interesting mix of humour, pathos, and domestic voyeurism. In creating a naturalist representation of the family’s relationships, and combining it with a ghost story, Crowe gave us a “deliciously awkward farce” (Valori, 2014, *TheatreCat*, online), or “sad black comedy” (Kirwan 2014, *Bardathon*, online). Despite the hilarity created by the ridiculous ease with which Tommy re-assimilated himself into the centre of family life, the piece raised a serious and moving question about the value placed on those women who are only truly seen to exist within the context of their relationship to men.

The final piece, Abi Zakarian’s *This is not an Exit*, was similarly both naturalistic and surrealist in its portrayal of an early middle-aged magazine writer named Nora (Ruth Gemmell), who was visited by challenging representations of three women, in a manner reminiscent of Dickens’ Scrooge being visited by the three ghosts of Christmas. Whilst sitting in the living room of her apartment, with her laptop at the ready, hiding her head in a flowered pillowcase and struggling to find inspiration for her next by-line, “Twenty-one reasons why mother knows best”, Nora’s mother Blanche (Julie Legrand) emerged from her daughter’s psyche in physical form, in order to criticise her daughter for her shortcomings. She pointed out the lapsed attention to domestic duties (such as cleaning behind the fridge and recycling), her lack of courage and inclination for political agitation (her mother had tied herself to the railings outside parliament when seven months pregnant), and the banality of her magazine articles on such meaningless topics as identifying the most flattering jeans.

A previous article by Nora referred to “releasing your inner lioness”, a topic resurrected by the next manifestation, Scarlett Brookes’ aggressive character Gulch, who was a parody of a blond, bossy and energetic

Liverpudlian life coach in a pinstripe suit and high heels, who attempted to 'empower' Nora to become "the CEO of you". She ordered Nora to "come with me into the jungle" where, like Gulch, you have to be prepared to break your heels when "stepping over the bodies" on the way to achieving career success. Following an exhausting attempt to "workshop my inner lioness" (which linked the piece with the *Roaring Girls* season at the Swan Theatre), Nora was in no mood to tolerate her final visitor.

Mimi Ndiweni's indefatigable London teenager, Riley, was dressed in figure-hugging colourful leggings and a bra top, and flaunted her sexuality by 'twerking'. She had sought out the author of the article on "879 things that will make you look thinner", in order to assail Nora with endless comments on products, fashion, and celebrity gossip, whilst insulting her appearance, by suggesting she might be "doing a no make-up selfie", and calling her "helmet hair". As Shay Wilson comments, the play suggests that "sexism is as rife as ever and the mantle of the cause has been handed down unwittingly to the latest pop sensation who has grabbed a pair of scissors and made it into a crop-top" (Wilson, 2014, *Tumblr*, online). Representing what Charlotte Valori calls "an externalisation of the million media pressures on women today" (2014, *TheatreCat*, online), Riley and Gulch's entertaining but relentless attempts to bombard Nora with criticisms and demands drove her to distraction, leading her to scream, as they mocked her by shouting "Ease up, Shakespeare".

In seeking to recall memories of her life before she entered the superficial world of modern populist journalism, Nora was reminded by her mother of how, as a child, she used to insist on singing everywhere she went, refusing to abandon her "caterwauling", even though "no-one wanted to listen". However, Nora also remembered that she and Blanche had once shared a giggle at Nora's being mistaken for a boy, and that her mother had advised her to "touch the sky" and "keep stretching". This was the memory she chose to cling to as she began to sing.

In her amusing but moving study of a female midlife crisis, Zakarian's play gave us a woman who was weary of her shallow existence within a modern consumerist culture "in which women concentrated on giving others pressurised advice rather than look to their own desires and needs" (Kirwan, 2014, *Bardathon*, online). Painfully aware of her failure to live up to her mother's example, Nora was tired, conscious of her lack of sincerity and personal impact, and beginning to despair at her loss of identity. However, Zakarian's description of the play title ("If it's not an exit, then it has to be an entrance, doesn't it?") gives us some cause for hope (*Tumblr*, 2014, online). Despite the challenges, Nora's tentative step towards remembering the simplicity of her genderless childhood interests - singing and jumping in puddles - perhaps suggested that she may be able to stave off the cacophony of voices which were stifling her creativity, in order to begin rediscovering her own personality, hopes, and ambitions.

The four pieces which constituted the short *Midsummer Mischief* season were also staged briefly at the Royal Court theatre, from 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> July 2014, and the most critically-acclaimed of the pieces, *Revolt. She said. Revolt again.* (for which Alice Birch won the George Devine Award for Most Promising Playwright) was scheduled to be staged again in Stratford in August 2016 (prior to a run at the Edinburgh festival and Shoreditch Town Hall). This was part of the similarly themed *Making Mischief* season of four contemporary plays at The Other Place, which asked the question "What is unsayable in the twenty-first century?" (RSC online, 2016). In 2014, media opinion was split between those who found the season to be "radical", "witty and inventive" (Billington 2014, *The Guardian*, online), pushing beyond "the boundaries of what know the RSC to be" (Carroll 2014, *A Younger Theatre*, online), and reviewers such as *The Telegraph's* Dominic Cavendish, who considered *Midsummer Mischief* to be "disappointingly mild" (with the exception of Birch's play in Programme A), with Programme B "slight", "loosely characterised" and generally "[not] much cop at all" (2014 online). Lisa Carroll, writing for *A Younger Theatre*, found the plays in Programme A



to be “expertly crafted”, “visually arresting”, “colourful”, and “ground-breaking”, constituting “essential viewing” which provided a “rousing call to action” (Carroll 2014, online), though she shared some reservations about the perceived lack of depth and novelty of subjects covered by Programme B. In contrast, the *Financial Times*’ Ian Shuttleworth considered Crowe’s *I can hear you* in Programme B to be “the most engaging of the quartet”, suggesting that other pieces were, at times, muddled, wacky, absurd, and “coming close to outright misogyny” (2014 online).

Whilst it is certainly true that, as Peter Kirwan points out, *Midsummer Mischief* “offered few answers, but lots of questions” (2014, *Bardathon*, online), and that the individual plays had a mixed reception from the public and the press, all four pieces were well performed by a strong cast, and provided a (arguably much-needed) platform for the expression of frustrations with the ongoing challenges for twenty-first century feminism, such as those presented by an image-obsessed and highly sexualised western culture, which still expects women to conform to physical stereotypes, and demonstrate a commitment to maternal duties and sexual subservience whilst, at the same time, increasing its demand to pursue individual ambition, and seek arenas for self-assertion and political advocacy. Shay Wilson suggests that “while we do have to take a step back and see how far we’ve come... those on both sides would agree that it would be a huge mistake to be happy with the status quo” and viewed *Midsummer Mischief* not as a representation of absolutes, but as a means of seizing the opportunity to “[bring] back to fore the idea that we can successfully use the feminine as a means rather than an obstacle to power”, and engage in an honest conversation about “where we are in our ideas about gender and the culture that surrounds it” (Wilson, 2014, *Tumblr*, online).

## ACT V

### “The wheel is come full circle”<sup>1</sup>:

#### Reflections on Summer 2014

In promoting the Director's power to create their own subjective impression of a play, John Russell Brown (2011) suggests that “plays should be staged boldly and openly, not with artistically co-ordinated care” and should “make an indelible mark” (p151). Similarly, he acknowledges that reviewers are likely to bring to their task their own “random bundle of likes and dislikes, prejudices and blind spots” (p227). It is within this context that the following summary has been produced, to provide an individual perspective on the plays staged by the RSC in Stratford-upon-Avon in the summer of 2014.

Beginning with the ‘boys’ in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Doran's *Henry IV* productions, whilst conservatively presented, in a style which was firmly fixed in the past, was nonetheless “visually stunning and extremely well-paced, focussing on lucid storytelling, while presenting the complexity of the text and exploring the nuances in character portrayal” (Julie Raby, 2015, *Shakespeare*, online). As well as providing a grand spectacle, there were some interesting twists on the interpretations of character (particularly in relation to Falstaff's dark core, Hotspur's autism and Pistol's hysteria). The brief insertion from *The Famous Victories of Henry V* also perhaps slightly enhanced the narrative thread between the two plays (which was otherwise accomplished primarily through Brimston Lewis' design, and the consistency of character portrayals). The attempt to include a direct parallel with the twenty-first century, through Rumour's modern dress and use of technology to display twitter tags, was arguably an unnecessary one, and perhaps

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<sup>1</sup> *King Lear*, 5.3 (187)

actually led us to feel at a greater distance from Shakespeare's world, rather than feeling more connected to it, and the cutesy 'business' employed by Falstaff's young Page was at times slightly distracting, rather than endearing. Although much is often made of the (somewhat brief) opportunities we are offered in these plays to witness the experiences of the women affected by the turbulence of rebellion, the overriding messages related to male ambitions, male relationships, male personal and political success and failure, and male anxieties about the burden of their responsibilities. Whilst these concerns are still prevalent today, it is perhaps unnecessary to attempt to highlight direct parallels with modern western society. As Michael Billington points out, "there is something narcissistic in the view that every play ever written has to be about us" and we can trust the intelligence of audiences to make their own connections when appropriate (2014, *RSC Summer School*, pers. comm.). These productions (now available on DVD from the RSC) were generally viewed as a safe, but strong, beginning to Gregory Doran's first summer season as Artistic Director.

In his production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (also available on DVD), Simon Godwin *did* decide to take up the opportunity to update the play's setting but, perhaps wisely, chose an era in which women were still in the process of gaining their independence, and their power still had significant limitations. Whilst Sylvia's wealth and social status apparently gave her greater authority, like the more-lowly Julia, her future would ultimately be decided by her future husband. However, both Sarah Macrae and Pearl Chanda gave spirited and compelling performances, and their moment of unity at their meeting outside Sylvia's home was particularly striking and poignant. Michael Marcus' Valentine was decent, genial, adventurous and loyal, and Mark Arends' Proteus was fairly distasteful in his selfish disregard for the welfare of those he claimed to love. His portrayal could conceivably have been more disagreeable, had this not been presented as a family show, with an emphasis on comedy and celebration. The production was

highly agile, visually delightful, engaging and entertaining, and had a buoyancy and optimism which Charles Spencer (2014, *The Telegraph*, online) described as “a lovely bloom of youth”. Whilst it may not have been particularly distinctive, dynamic or inspirational in its presentation, the fact that this rarely-performed play was welcomed and enjoyed by audiences meant that it was a constructive addition to the season’s offerings in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre.

In her introduction to a special edition of *Shakespeare* on the RSC’s 2014 season, Kate Wilkinson points out that the company’s previous seasons of non-Shakespeare plays in the Swan Theatre “were all overseen by men, included plays about men; written and directed by men”, and so the announcement of the *Roaring Girls* season “represented something of a departure” (*Shakespeare*, 2015 online, p241). However, whilst it “acted as a statement of intent in respect to women’s roles both on and offstage” (Peter Kirwan, 2015, *Shakespeare* p 252, online), it also happened “in the shadow of a main house season of plays directed by men, all featuring men in the titles and performed by a predominantly male ensemble” (Kirwan 2015, *Shakespeare* p252, online), and it is striking that Gregory Doran gave very little indication of his own personal enthusiasm about the *Roaring Girls* season, leaving most of the commentary to Erica Whyman.

A number of male critics were sceptical about the value of the *Roaring Girls* season, with Kate Wilkinson (*Shakespeare*, 2015 online) pointing out that Charles Spencer’s highly critical review of *The Roaring Girl* was underpinned by his sense that these plays actually belong to men, and that even the more-acquiescent Michael Billington was ‘puzzled’ by the purpose of the season. (Billington, *The Guardian*, 2014 online). Productions in the Swan are also still notably absent from the repertoire of the RSC’s live screenings, and Kate Wilkinson suggests that this leaves Shakespeare’s contemporaries (and, by implication, the *Roaring Girls* season) “arguably somewhat marginalised” (*Shakespeare* 2015, online, p242.). However, viewed



individually, and separately from the *Roaring Girls* label, each of the four productions had something valuable to offer.

In *The Roaring Girl*, we have what is arguably the most interesting of the 'challenging' women. As a female of marriageable age, who refuses to marry, dresses as a man, and speaks her mind, it is almost miraculous that she survives and is, in general terms, apparently quite content with her lot. Lisa Dillon's Moll was confident, feisty, and humorous, and had a carefree attitude towards her scandalous reputation as "a scurvy woman" and "a creature... nature hath brought forth to mock the sex of woman" (1.2). The Victorian setting was effective in highlighting the discrepancies between male and female experiences, and the distinctions between the private and public personas of the lower-, middle- and upper-classes. In placing Moll visually closer to the twenty-first century, we were immediately drawn to her, as our guide through the play, in this well-edited and slick production.

Unlike her counterpart Maria Aberg, Jo Davies steered clear of any cross-gender casting in her production of *The Roaring Girl*, claiming that she was resisting pressure to believe that "as a woman, you haven't looked at the play properly unless you have changed male roles into female ones" (2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.) and rejecting suggestions that a female director should always attempt to say something about the lack of major roles for women in classical theatre, by reassigning the gender of one or more characters. However, given the presence of several strong and victorious female characters within the text of *The Roaring Girl*, it was perhaps easier for Davies than Aberg to forefront the female voice in her exuberant, fast-paced and joyful production.

Even the most experienced of Early Modern scholars agree that it can be challenging to ascertain what a playwright's original intentions for their text, and some directors place a more significant emphasis on how the play speaks to a *modern* audience than to an *early* modern one. When the author of a rarely-performed play has not even been ascertained, an increased

degree of freedom might be exercised, as demonstrated by Polly Findlay's *Arden of Faversham*.

Viewed historically, Alice Arden would probably be seen as using her 'soft power' to influence men and lead them into committing sinful acts which cause anxiety and suffering. However, Findlay told *Exeunt* magazine that, if Macbeth can be the 'hero' of a tragedy, then Alice Arden can be a heroine since, like her male counterparts, she is the "driving force of the main narrative thrust of the play" (Findlay, 2014, RSC video interview, online). Findlay's production was bold, brash, delightfully mischievous, comical and swiftly executed. Though there was little space to explore depth of character, As Gregory Doran pointed out in his interview with Paul Allen for the RSC, "an audience provides the thread that makes that scene work, and that character grow" (2014 online). The moments of audience interaction were used to great effect, to draw us into Alice's chaotic world, and our guilty pleasure at watching the preposterous failed attempts to murder her husband was counterbalanced by the pity we felt for the abused Susan, and the dark tone of Arden's eventual demise, and subsequent punishment of the perpetrators. The production was cleverly edited and staged, and well performed by a strong ensemble cast, led by the captivating Sharon Small.

Aberg's production of *The White Devil* placed two female actors (Bushell and Elphinstone) at the centre of the play, both of whom gave distinctive performances, as women attempting to assert themselves in an aggressive patriarchal society, in which they were ultimately powerless. This youthful production arguably worked well as a theatrical spectacle and a piece of socio-political commentary on modern gender relations, but was perhaps less effective if viewed as a faithful representation of Webster's play. In order to be appreciated beyond its visual effects, an understanding of Aberg's underlying philosophy was required, as well as foreknowledge of the play, since some of the clarity of characterisation and narrative were lost in Aberg's glitzy showcase. It was certainly dynamic and distinctive, but

opinions vary on whether it was substantial, inspiring and thought-provoking, or glossy, shallow and confusing. The re-gendering of Flaminio invited a range of opinions but, given that recent Shakespeare productions elsewhere have seen all-female casts (e.g. *Henry IV* at the Donmar Warehouse), and women taking central male roles (e.g. Maxine Peake as Hamlet at Manchester Royal Exchange), the RSC's tentative steps into the re-gendering of male roles could actually be seen as quite conservative.

In a 2014 public event, Whyman reflected on her brief to the female *Roaring Girls* directors to be bold and inventive and claimed to be excited by the extent to which they had met this brief, and the degree to which they were highlighting "the entrapment of certain domestic situations" which "[speak] of issues still experienced now" (2013, *The Telegraph*, online). She referred to the women at the centre of *The Roaring Girl*, *Arden of Faversham*, and *The White Devil* as being "sexually troubling" characters, suggesting that we would "both recognise and be discomfited by these women" (2014, *Roaring Girls on Stage*, pers. comm.). The same comments could not be made about the final production in the *Roaring Girls* season.

The 'boldness' of Doran's production of *The Witch of Edmonton* was arguably only achieved by this (for audiences) little-known play being staged at all. The casting of an eighty-year-old Eileen Atkins in the title role did ensure a degree of interest from the public, as well as from critics and academics, who were keen to see how the play would be staged. However, the production itself was very traditional, and provided few visual or textual opportunities for 'roaring', beyond Mother Sawyer's plaintive comments about the injustice of her mistreatment. Little about her behaviour was actually unconventional or shocking, and none of her actions had any direct impact on the events in the play, which were dictated much more strongly by the male characters at the heart of the sub-plots. Given how rarely the play is performed, it was perhaps a safer decision to offer a Jacobean-styled production, demonstrating a cautious approach to Doran's treatment of

Shakespeare's contemporaries. However, as Eoin Price commented in his review for *Shakespeare*, this resulted in a "characteristically competent but comparatively unadventurous production" (2015, pp.247-261, online), which served to show that Doran was somewhat at odds with the ethos of the other three productions within the *Roaring Girls* season. *The Roaring Girl*, *Arden of Faversham* and *The White Devil* had all shown a greater propensity to be inventive, shocking, and overtly feminist in their approaches whereas *The Witch of Edmonton*, as Peter Smith points out, "was more of a submissive coda than a rousing climax" (2016, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, online).

Erica Whyman acknowledged that, by employing terms such as 'mischief', 'badly behaved', and 'roaring' to describe the season, there was a potential to "invoke a feminine norm, against which to measure it" (2014, *What's on Stage*, online). However, despite the clear criticisms which the season received, Emma Whipday reminds us that the presence of these plays in the RSC's programme "restored the hidden histories of both the popular source material that informed the drama of the early modern stage, and the women who become visible to history only through their transgressions" (2015, *Shakespeare* p.273, online). The addition of the *Midsummer Mischief* programme provided an exciting taste of modern feminist writing, and offered a vital (if brief) opportunity to explore the more audacious side of the RSC's endorsement of twenty-first century drama. However, the well-placed (though perhaps a little clichéd) snatched references to Shakespeare within the texts provided an occasional reminder of the fact that the Company had not lost sight of its primary purpose.

Whyman's stated commitment to ensuring that the RSC continues to have a "balance of female directors, female voices in the programming and female writers" (2014, *What's on Stage*, online) seems to have been borne out in 2015 by the inclusion of Marina Carr's highly watchable *Hecuba* (directed by Erica Whyman) and Helen Edmundson's excellent *Queen Anne* (directed by Natalie Abrahami), as well as Polly Findlay's production of *The Merchant of*



Venice and Selina Cadell's staging of William Congreve's *Love for Love*. This was followed by another Maria Aberg production in 2016 (Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*), and Polly Findlay's version of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, and well as Melly Still's *Cymbeline*, and the incorporation of leading female roles in the 2016 *Making Mischief* season of new work at The Other Place.

Michael Billington suggested that "the whole raison d'être of the RSC is to offer permanence and continuity in a makeshift, freelance world" (interview with Michael Boyd, 2013, *The Guardian*, online). Gregory Doran is apparently conscious of this responsibility and, at the RSC's Summer School in 2014, commented that "what [the RSC] was, who we are, where we are going – it's a continuum that's inspiring and intimidating at the same time" (pers. comm.). Artistically, it seems that Doran will try to make sure that the RSC continues to try to maintain a balance between tradition and invention, scheduling regular productions of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays, providing a platform for works by his contemporaries, and offering family-friendly shows to generate income in London's West End and beyond, enabling him to set some income aside for new, or lesser-known, and sometimes experimental, works. The 2014 summer season offered a variety of directorial approaches, designed to appeal to male and female audiences, of varying ages and, whilst there was little to indicate any direct attempt to appeal to audiences from non-white ethnic groups, Iqbal Khan's 2015 *Othello* (with a black actor as Iago) and Simon Godwin's 2016 *Hamlet* (with a black actor as Hamlet) would seek, in some way, to address this issue in future seasons.

The *Live from the RSC* cinema screenings may help to assuage John Russell Brown's concern that the prevalence of visual images through film and television is one of the factors which has led to theatre-going becoming 'a minority enthusiasm, not a popular and communal event' (2011, p199). However, the company also continues to be a major attraction in Warwickshire, and has strong educational links with both the Shakespeare

Centre and the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford, as well as many schools and some Higher Education Institutions. It is also making considerable efforts to extend its reach beyond the midlands and, in the digital age, there are ample opportunities to interact with audiences in a way which reduces the relevance of the company's physical location. Stratford itself is visually appealing, and its fame as Shakespeare's home town should help to ensure that RSC ticket sales will remain strong, as long as they can continue to balance specialism with populism. On the whole, based on this assessment of the 2014 summer season, it seems that the RSC is still largely successful in its attempt to create dynamic, distinctive, and inspiring theatre, and is generating, and maintaining an interest in the work of the Bard of Avon.

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