New Synergies in Contemporary British Shakespeare Performance
— Reading through Programs —

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*Othello, Twelfth Night, and Hamlet* what might these three plays have in common. They are the proof of Shakespeare’s popularity in the last few years. Many may still remember the hassle of people trying to purchase the tickets to see Ewan McGregor’s Iago, Derek Jacobi’s Malvolio, or Jude Law’s Hamlet. With this clear show of popularity in numbers there also have been some changes in programs sold at the theatre. Other than theatre companies like the Royal Shakespeare Company or The New Globe Theatre it was rare to see any Shakespearean scholars writing and submitting articles to such booklets. Yet today when a person purchases a program as a souvenir at theatres they would be surprised by, however introductory they are, its academic contents. This is also no exception in the West End. In 2004 the production of *As You Like It* opened at the Wyndhams theatre on the West End. This production’s program did not include any scholarly or literary articles to explain about the play the audiences are about to see. However, in 2008 at the same theatre Donmar Warehouse performed *Twelfth Night* and their program included a two full page article by Russell Jackson, Professor of Drama at the University of Birmingham. What brought this kind of change in the publication process of programs? This paper discusses the programs of four productions: *Anthony and Cleopatra* at The New Globe in 2006, *Much Ado About Nothing* at the National Theatre in 2008, *Taming of the Shrew* by Royal Shakespeare Company at the Novello Theatre in 2009, and *Twelfth Night* by Donmar Warehouse at Wyndhams Theatre in 2009.

Programs of all four productions include one or more academic articles. They not only explain the synopsis of the play but also explain the problem or some traditional questions which arise in the audience when these plays are performed. All the articles try to inform the audience what point they should know before the play starts and gives the necessary background knowledge to watch the performance. By steering the audience’s attentions to particular places and providing necessary information it becomes easier for directors to concentrate on a particular point they want to emphasise or a particular style used in order to interpret the play. The articles may serve the role of conclusions by giving the necessary information and or informing the audience of the reason or style of Shakespeare’s age. It may also work to steer the interest

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of the audience to come back and watch the same play again or different play. Or, it may help the audience who are not used to watching a Shakespearean play or any kind of live theatre. Nevertheless, some might consider these actions as “overprotection”.

To enjoy and understand a Shakespearean play in live format to its full extent it may be considered a consumer friendly guidebook. Although children across the UK do study Shakespeare from year 7 to year 11 as a statutory requirement\footnote{The National Strategies, *Shakespeare for All Ages and Stages*, Department for Children, schools and families, 2008, PP 8–9} some may not have the chance to actually see a live Shakespearean play during those years. Since live theatre is quite different from cinema. Therefore the school must prepare them by asking the students “What is the effect of live audience on the actors? Can different audience reactions alter the experience of being in and of watching the play? Can any two productions of a play be exactly the same?\footnote{The National Strategies, *Shakespeare for All Ages and Stages*, Department for Children, schools and families, 2008, PP 42} If they can give answers to one or more of these questions they would be able to appreciate, enjoy or criticise the performance. Then they would be able to answer questions such as “A theatre production is essentially a sociable experience so does this affect how we relate to other members of an audience in the theatre? Why do we have intervals in the theatre and not at the cinema?\footnote{The National Strategies, *Shakespeare for All Ages and Stages*, Department for Children, schools and families, 2008, PP 42}”. However to have these sessions before or after a theatre experience is difficult for adults. By reading the programs of each production the adults can also have the similar experience before and after watching productions. Doing so also helps to understand the play without the barrier of language, time and space.

With articles provided by the academic scholars it also works to let the public know that there are numerous scholars still studying and analysing Shakespeare and that their work is not detached from the productions being played today. Especially when the information provided by the article is directly reflected in the performance the audience can actually see the relationship between the performance played right in front of their eyes. That the interpretation of the play has a certain solid reason for being so having their base on solid background information both historically and academically and reflecting the trend of the academic world as well as the current society. If the audience can find connections between Shakespeare’s play and the current society it helps to provide a deeper understanding of the problem or the play and their outcomes. In addition, it allows the audience to actually know and feel the universality of Shakespeare’s play, which have been explained either in an article or by English teachers when they were attending school.

To the audience who purchased the program reading an academic article working as an introduction and or conclusions to the play may show the inseparable nature of the academic world and the performing production. The production needs the work of academics to convey the necessary information and problems of the play to the audience in a most effective way. To the
scholar providing the maximum information in minimum words is part of their work. Audiences may feel comfortable with the authority of the article provided by the scholar. Then, to what extent would the scholar benefit? It is to show that the scholar’s work has a connection to actual production and performances of Shakespeare performed today and through it provides the connection to problems in society today. Both the production and the scholar showing a united front to the audience about their view of the current trends and problems of Shakespeare’s production is a clear sign.

With the academic world and the performance world showing a united front, this would certainly steer the interest of the audience to a particular point. This would ultimately provide more explanation of the play to the audience and it may ignite more interest in the play itself, thus making the audience become interested in the production of Shakespeare and encourage a return to see many performances of both the same and different plays. The introductory and concluding articles provided by the scholars would change the audience into a one-time customer to frequent visitors. This process could commercially support the numerous productions of Shakespeare but it also supports the academic world. It provides the performance and the scholars to actually show their interest and connection to the current society and the Shakespearean performances to actually reflect such problems and in some ways provide the feel of universality of Shakespeare. And with the help of academic articles the production could be as complicated as possible, but with the presence of a scholarly article there is less danger of the production being totally misunderstood or disconnected from the audience.

An academic articles in programs have numerous functions to connect the actual performance and academic world to be shown in a very revealing way. This somehow provides the audience with the information that the performance they are watching is connected to the actual world in numerous ways including the academic world. Therefore provides the familiarity that may cause the audience to come back and find more familiarity with the plays of Shakespeare with the help of articles in the program.

The New Globe’s Anthony and Cleopatra (2006), program contained many academic articles. In this respect I would like to focus on two articles: “A Fine Excess” by Frank Kermode and “An Eclectic Aesthetic” by Jean Wilson. Kermode’s article “A Fine Excess” has many similarities with articles of other programs discussed in this paper. It explains the plot, background, which works as an explanation to a novice audience. However what makes this article different is his discussion of the use of language and its metaphorical nature and the richness of language spoken by Cleopatra or the change in the preference of language by Anthony.

The language of the play has to be capable of containing both Roman virtue and Egyptian excess. The conflict, both ethical and political, must be reflected
in language appropriate to the contrast between the two men and the two cultures. Anthony, once a hardened old campaigner, cannot resist Cleopatra’s luxuries and follies. He grows soft and irresponsible; neglecting his Roman duties, he is unable to take seriously his marriage to Octavius’ sister—though politically prudent, it conflicts with his desires; ‘Though I make this marriage for my peace, / I’th’ East my pleasure lies.’—Octavius—the adopted son of the great Julius—is Machiavellian, preying on his rival’s weakness.\(^iv\)

With these points being reinforced the article is preferably to be read before the play starts so that the audience could listen to the play and concentrate on the points being made by the article. This works to increase the audience’s enjoyment while watching the performance. However the nature of the article by Wilson is quite different.

The Elizabethan vision of classical antiquity was, of course, inaccurate. So is our own. We think of classical statuary as monochrome: it was painted. Our version of classical costume, however researched, is modified by our own expectations of costume and by our own physique. We read what we see through the spectacle of modernity.\(^v\)

The target reader for this article is clearly for academics or audiences who have prior knowledge of Shakespeare’s performance history, it will not matter how vast or limited the knowledge is. What matters is that the audience has prior knowledge of the play. It could be said that the novice audience will not be interested in the contents of the article but it is clear that a certain amount of knowledge in the history of English literature seems essential.

The sole evidence for the performance-style of Shakespeare plays, the drawing by Henry Peacham of a scene from Titus Andronicus gives us a suggestion as to how the Roman plays might have been costumed.\(^vi\)

Wilson’s article would probably be intended to work as a conclusion or provide more knowledge to the nature of the performance. As the information provided in the article shows far more in-depth background information than that of Kermode’s article.

The 2007 program of the National Theatre’s Much Ado About Nothing had articles by Peter

\(^v\) Wilson, Jean, “An Eclectic Aesthetic”, program of Anthony and Cleopatra at The New Globe, 2006, P 17
Holland and Daniel Rosenthal. Peter Holland’s article “Strange Misprisions” provides an explanation to the play. Which probably meant to answer questions asked by the audiences after the play is finished. The article explains of many “misprision” or strangeness that has been woven into the play. For instance, the timing of Benedick’s “confession” of love to Beatrice, the use of the word “strange” by Friar Francis after the “brutal and contumacious rejection of Hero at the alter”, the Presence of Spanish duke Don Pedro’s army and his officers, “Claudio is a Florentine and Benedick from Padua”, in the Sicilian city of Messina, the not clearly mentioned but performed family structure in Leonato’s household, and lastly the use of the significance of the word “maid” within the play. Peter Holland explains each problem in detail, and also goes onto how they are solved. However some problems are not so, yet Holland’s states in the article:

By the play’s end the various misperceptions have been cleared up, more or less satisfactorily, depending on one’s point of view, and the scornful aspects of misprision have modulated into something no longer quite so threateningly hurtful, if never quite erased.\textsuperscript{11}

This indicates to the audience that not all the problems are solved within the play but all the problems, or in this case “misprisions”, has lost its threatening quality to all the characters. Thus, reassuring this comedy, \textit{Much Ado About Nothing}, is finished with the usual happy wedding. This gives a feeling of conclusion for audiences who may still be puzzled of the unsolved problems and strangeness within the plot.

In the same program brief performance history from 18th century Garrick to 21st century’s BBC1’s \textit{Shakespeare Retold} series, with the comment to the TV series being unsuccessful, has been given. These information gives to the audiences how the play’s popularity has changed over the centuries and also who has played the role of Beatrice and Benedick through the ages. With this information audience may look for accessible DVDs and subsequently if a different production of the same play is being performed, they might become interested to find similarities and differences that they have seen and subsequently goes to other production of Shakespeare, which in the end would keep them interested in the theatre. Also this article, as it is said before, also provides the information of failed productions and unsuccessful filmography which might also attract the attention of audiences to see what was considered a failed production. Thus in the end creating a well informed or educated audience who is indispensable to plays.

Interestingly Phillip Hensher also contributes his view as a novelist. The article “The Light Infantry of the Merry War” takes its title from the famous line of Leonato:

\textsuperscript{11} Holland, Peter, “Strange Misprisions”, program of \textit{Much Ado About Nothing} at the National Theatre, 2008, P 13
You must not, sir, mistake my niece. There is a kind of merry war betwixt Signior Benedick and her: they never meet but there's a skirmish of wit between them. (I, i, 58–61) underline mine

This line is often used to describe Beatrice and Benedick’s relationship but in this article Hensher used the word “merry war” to explain the uniqueness of the plot. To Hensher the plot of Much Ado About Nothing is rather unusual. He states how the plot is not fit to occur in the actual renaissance court, but he goes on and states that the plot fits into the actual people’s mentality. Also he states that the plot of the drama is more fitting to a play:

The plot of mock-hostilities between a man and a woman yielding to love seems to me essentially one of the novel rather than the drama.iii

Yet he does not deny that although the play is unlikely for a Renaissance court but its social and economic setting is well used in the scene when Beatrice says to Don Pedro “your Grace is too costly for every day. (II, i, 309–10)”:

At one point Beatrice oversteps the mark in saying to Don Pedro that she wouldn’t marry him because “your grace is too costly for every day.” She remembers herself, and apologizes furiously. This is a matter of economic and social status lying in dense layer behind the exchanges, and for a moment we feel the weight of Don Pedro’s power in the world, which will only indulge itself to be teased; it is almost a moment from Stendhal.iv

Hensher goes on and compares the plot of Much Ado to various novels such as Doris Lessing’s The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five, Austin’s Pride and Prejudice, Charlotte Brontë’s Villette and Jane Eyre, Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, Richardson’s Clarissa and so on. With these popular classical novels being listed audience may feel comfortable in categorizing the plot of Much Ado is something that is familiar.

During a season in 2008–9 a sold-out productions of Shakespearean plays were produced by Donmar Warehouse, named “Donmar West End”. Within the previous season Donmar produced

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iii Hensher, Phillip, “The Light Infantry of the Merry War” program of Much Ado About Nothing at the National Theatre, 2008, P 15
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*Othello* with Chiwetel Ejiofor in the title role and Ewan McGregor as Iago. There were of course mixed reviews but from overall point of view with its ticket being sold out rather fast shows the acceptance by audiences. The same theatre had produced *Twelfth Night* with Derek Jacobi as Malvolio. If the tickets sales were a barometer of the popularity or the acceptance of the play the result was obvious. Then what of the program? The programs were also a sold out. With its souvenir quality it was not a surprise. Also the article provided by Russell Jackson had both the quality of providing the brief performance history of *Twelfth Night* and introduction and or conclusion. For background information Jackson provides dates and surrounding information for the probable first performance, with the brief mention of a law student who saw the performance at Middle Temple.

Twelfth Night or What You Will was probably written in 1601, soon after Hamlet, and a performance at the Middle Temple, one of the Inns of Court, is recorded in February 1602 in the diary of the law student John Manningham, who admired the “practise” (trick) by which Malvolio is fooled. The first part of the play’s title refers to the final night of the Christmas holiday, with its election of a ‘Lord of Misrule’ to lead the revelry and masquerading that represented both the climax and the end of festivities, in the play, licence (“what you will”) gives way to normality, but not before the latter has been reassuringly set at a discount.\(^{\text{v}}\)

Jackson then goes on to explain the nature of the play. Comedy even though the characters are faced with distress would eventually lead to happiness. In other words *Twelfth Night* “Luckily for most of the play’s characters, they are in a comedy, where distress can give way to delight.”\(^{\text{vii}}\) With this the explanations of each character: Olivia, Duke Orsino, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Malvolio, and Viola provides a deeper understanding to the play, and considering the nature of the explanation it could both work as a introduction to be read before the play so the audience could have a deeper understanding of the performance, and also as a conclusion to the play as an answer to some of the question that would have come up while watching the performance. In the same article “fortune” of Viola is discussed in detail:

> It is by good fortune (‘perchance’) that Viola has been saved from the shipwreck, and that same chance may have rescued her brother (….) For Viola, fortune

\(^{\text{v}}\) Jackson, Russell, “The accident and Flood of Fortune”, program of *Twelfth Night* by Donmar Warehouse at Wyndhams Theatre, 2009, P 11

\(^{\text{vii}}\) Jackson, Russell, “The accident and Flood of Fortune”, program of *Twelfth Night* by Donmar Warehouse at Wyndhams Theatre, 2009, P 11
has thrown her into the court of Orsino, and good sense has suggested she protect herself by pretending to be a boy—and love is soon to complicate matters. Viola insists that she is not an actor (‘a comedian’) but has to admit to Olivia that she is not what she ‘plays’. Can this really be the person she or he seems to be? Perplexing confusions, inexplicable appearances and amazing reversals of nature’s law have become common place.iii

Almost half of the remaining article devotes itself to discussing “reality in the theatre” or “theatrical reality”. Of course the tempest, shipwreck, and playacting are discussed but the main interest is of Viola “a boy dressed as a girl dressed as a boy”. This was a “vividly dangerous example of wickedness in the eye of the Puritans”iii : it was also a sign of gender or sex confusion. But interestingly the article states that “Viola is not so much un-sexed as re-sexed”.iv To Olivia the presence of Cesario was real enough to break her out of mourning, and the relationship between Orsino and Cesario took its natural course. This “re-sex” of Viola does not endure time. Violas disguise starts to take its toll as the play progresses and this might remind the audience that time “can also waste and destroy”. So are the characters, they “are conscious of time, hearing the clock, needing to accomplish tasks, hoping meanwhile that they are moving towards a resolution of their problems and desires.”v Jackson then reminds the audience that the nature of Twelfth Night is after all a comedy and “in a comedy, whether or not we know its details, the odds are that we expect some progress from anxiety through confusion to explanation and the tying up of threads.”vi With the conclusion of Feste’s independence within the play and the articles is brought to its close, with the small explanation of “detachment”, with the reminder that “detachment” in this case is without coldness. With these nature explained in details the audience will feel that the most and many questions that has come up during the play has been answered.

Program of Taming of the Shrew by Royal Shakespeare Company at the Novello Theatre in 2009 is somewhat similar to the program from 2006 production of Anthony and Cleopatra at The New Globe. The two articles “The World’s Oldest prejudice” by Jack Holland, “The Battle of the

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Sexes” by Deborah Cameron, “The Taming of the Shrew and the Commedia Dellarte” by Robert Henk, serve to give perfect background information and conclusion to the questions that might come up from the audience. Holland’s article is actually an extract from his book A Brief History of Misogyny which explains the length and depth of the history of misogyny. Indeed with The Taming of the Shrew, discussion and explanation of misogyny is inevitable. Furthermore, stating that “it was regarded as perfectly normal for men to condemn women or express outright disgust at them simply because they were women” helps the audience understand the background of the misogyny in the play. As does it also reminds the audience of “when” the play was written. With the supplemental information of its history going back to Greek and Roman time Cameron, who is well known as the author of The Myth of Venus: Do Men and Women Really Speak Different Languages?, the difference between men and women in both Shakespeare’s time and 21 century is stated. However it also states that there were two conflicting ideas about acceptable women’s manner in Shakespeare’s time. It was created by the difference of class: one was from an “older, aristocratic or courtly tradition, and another which represented a newer, bourgeois and often puritan tradition.” In the article it is explained that Katherine “lost her combativeness towards her husband, but she has not lost her articulacy or her ability to construct an argument, she has merely turned those talents to other ends.” and then goes on to explain the disturbances felt by the modern audience.

Henke’s article explains the Italian influence within The Taming of the Shrew. With such information as repeated visits of an Italian company to England between 1573 and 78, when Shakespeare was writing The Taming of the Shrew. The article points out the play’s similarities with Italian commedia dell’arte’s characters: Pantalone and Dottore, innamoradi (the young lovers), and Capitano (baggart soldier) and others. Similarities within the personality of characters in The Taming of the Shrew could be considered as an evidence that the influence and popularity of Italian plays within England was much greater than it appeared.

Documents from the late 1580’s and early 1590’s, however, indicate sustained English Interest in the commedia dell’arte, with particular attention to its character types and its improvisatory method. In Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy, published in 1591 but probably written in the late 1580’s, a character praises the Italian actors for being “so sharp of wit/that in one hour’s meditation/ They would perform anything in action.” even if, in this period Italian actors were not performing in England, travelling English actors and writers could have met the on the Continent. xvii

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xvii Henk, Robert, “The Taming of the Shrew and the Commedia Dellarte”, program of The Taming of the Shrew by Royal Shakespeare Company at the Novello Theatre in 2009. P 21
The article extends these similarities to the period of Shakespeare’s writing, as *The Taming of the Shrew* is considered one of Shakespeare’s first written plays, it is natural to consider that Shakespeare has taken interesting parts from other plays, for copyright was non-existent at the time. With this information, it provides an answer to the question of why has Shakespeare choose the setting in Italy.

The articles provided by souvenir purpose programs show that they are no merely souvenirs but as a source of background information to the audience, and educated answerers for questions that might come up in the play are already prepared. Information provided by the article could serve as both introductions to be read before the play and as a conclusion that could be read after the play. Many people do study Shakespeare for their GCSE. Beyond that point unless the student is taking English literature course or Drama and Theatre Studies for their AS or A2 Shakespeare is something they would no longer study. Or with their experience with GCSE or A-level as a result they would not be able to enjoy Shakespeare with the biased that it is something that they have to suffer. Another side is that Shakespeare is no longer a compulsory in A-level so students after the age of 16 will not encounter Shakespeare. Thus the most basic knowledge of Shakespeare will decrease which would affect the audience’s reception of the Shakespearean plays. Those with limited background knowledge of Shakespeare may be intimidated by Shakespeare’s language or acting style, interpretative choices and open-ended or double and triple plot line.

By providing these articles to theatre audience in a program it becomes less intimidating in a sense that it is written as part of a souvenir and also shows that the performance is interconnected with academic ideas that has a reason and history to be performed in a particular style. Also they may start using the programs to enjoy the play in depth or will use them to look for an answer for the questions that have risen while watching the performance. This will change the purpose of programs from mere souvenirs to essential reading material before and after the play.

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