

Michael Dobson
The Malone Society Dance, 1991

For those of us who first came to the SAA in the year in which the Malone Society Dance was inaugurated, 1988, that function retains a special importance. I long ago despaired of managing to assemble a live band for the occasion—that dubious privilege being nowadays reserved for the Christmas party at the Shakespeare Institute—but in 1991, when the SAA met in Vancouver, I did manage to supply some purpose-made disco music.

By then the trend was for digital sampling, but I didn't have any digital equipment and nor did my wife Nicky Watson. Our friend Diane K. Roberts (who had earlier distinguished herself by introducing us to one another in Oxford) visited us at Harvard in I think early 1989; she was later a colleague of Gary Taylor at Tuscaloosa and then again in her native Tallahassee, and she was and is an NPR journalist among much else and had one of those proper war-correspondent serious stereo cassette recorders. On this I gleaned some suitable self-parodic phrases from Marge Garber, Barbara Johnson, and Kate Belsey (who came through to give a paper from her Milton book); others were bootlegged from BBC radio; and some further contributors, including Linda Charnes, were later asked to submit appropriate phrases to our telephone answering machine. In the end I didn't get access to the necessary musical equipment until I was in Bloomington, Indiana, where I borrowed a fancy keyboard from an undergraduate—that and my long-suffering 1960 Burns Sonic electric guitar are the only instruments on the track, which we assembled at a baffled country-and-western studio a few miles off the IU campus in I think February 1991. The idea was that it should sound like *Small World* with a sequencer, though I'm not at all sure that it does.

There wasn't time for fancy sampling, so the clips were just transferred manually in the dear old analog way and the whole thing was then hastily mixed onto DAT, if anyone remembers what DAT was. (We forgot to retrieve the master from the studio when we left Indiana, so this copy has been posthumously digitized from a surviving copy of a cassette). In order of first appearance, the voices include the cast of an old audio adaptation of Gielgud's last Old Vic *Hamlet*; Tom Berger, the onlie begetter; Margaret Ferguson; Peter Conrad; Barbara Johnson; Nicky, singing "Greensleeves" over the chorus; Peter Stallybrass; Stephen Orgel; Marjorie Garber; Linda Charnes; Catherine Belsey; Gary Taylor; John Carey; and the RSC associate director Barry Kyle.

A cassette of the result was duly played over the PA at one point during the disco phase of the Malone Society Dance in Vancouver, but for technical reasons it was well-nigh inaudible; Juliet Stevenson and Fiona Shaw danced valiantly, but most people waited until the locally-hired band came back on. I think that's the end of the story.