

‘Costume, Scenography, and the Role of the Designer in Performance’

Abstracts

Seminar convenor: Ella Hawkins

Nicole Sheriko – ‘Puppets and Children in Shakespeare’

Contemporary productions of Shakespeare’s plays often rely on puppets to play the parts of children. This strategy radically departs from early modern plays’ reliance on child actors while still invoking the strong associations between child actors and puppets in the early modern imagination. This essay brings together practical and conceptual links between puppetry and children across early modern and contemporary performances of Shakespeare, combining critical work on boy actors with my own expertise in historical puppetry. I ask what contemporary puppets playing children can illuminate about child characters in Shakespeare and the relationship between child characters in plays and child actors performing plays. I examine productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company, at Shakespeare’s Globe, and at the American Shakespeare Center to examine how contemporary performance uses puppetry to replace child actors (like Mamillius in *The Winter’s Tale*) and to physically manifest child characters that never appear on stage in the original plays (like the changeling boy in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). I draw on archival production photographs and some surviving puppets to situate puppet children alongside other uses of puppetry to play nonhuman characters and create special effects, offering frameworks for how to combine children and puppets in ways that leverage their early modern overlap to offer interpretive insight in addition to spectacle.

N. Amos Rothschild – “‘Me thinks this apparell makes me learnd”’: Of Scholarly Habits and Erudition’

Scholarship on the history of academic dress has painstakingly reconstructed the component parts of historical learned attire at English universities and catalogued historical changes and emergent distinctions at individual institutions. However, such work rarely analyzes the semiotic significance of such clothing in any depth. Meanwhile, work on early modern clothing and costumes more broadly has paid only passing attention to scholarly attire and its broader social significance. In this paper, I consider the cultural significance of caps, hoods, and gowns by examining their visual and textual representations in sources ranging from Albrecht Dürer’s vivid woodcuts for Sebastian Brandt’s *The Ship of Fools* (in Alexander Barclay’s English translation), to the sumptuary statutes of Oxford and Cambridge, to early modern drama, where academic attire appeared as material costuming on stage. In so doing, I offer a more nuanced understanding of the “vestimentary system”—to use Roland Barthes’s concept—operating on and through early modern England’s attire for the learned, examining both its putative function as a visible guarantor of erudition, and the attendant anxiety about impersonation it often provoked.

Angeline Morris – ‘Costuming Kingship in *The Hollow Crown: Richard II* (2012)’

As Robert I. Lublin notes in his introduction to *Costuming the Shakespearean Stage*, costumes help not only to bring certain aspects of characters to life, but can also shape the ways in which audiences interpret the play’s narrative. This becomes even more significant when the play covers a topic that modern audiences are not as familiar with, such as a history play.

In this paper, I examine the ways that costuming is used in the BBC’s 2012 production of *The Hollow Crown: Richard II* to highlight Richard’s failed performance of kingship. I argue that Richard’s costumes, which visually echo depictions of Christ and emphasize his wealth and position, highlight his inability to be the good king England needs. Odile Dicks-Mireaux’s choices of pinks and whites with gold accents not only communicate to the audience Richard’s status, but also provide a visual cue to his changing sense of self, becoming less ornate as his conflation of the king’s two bodies – the body natural and body politic – begins to come apart at the seams. Ultimately, Richard’s Christlike appearance reveals him to be not a king but a martyr, blurring the lines between the mystical and the human even in death.

Michael Ullyot – ‘Media Archaeology and Theatrical Space in Filmed Shakespeare Productions’

In 2016, the Royal Shakespeare Company partnered with technology companies to represent *The Tempest*’s most spectacular elements, including the marriage masque. According to the director Greg Doran, the production realized the kinds of spectacles that court masques (“the multimedia event of their day”) once sought to realize, in an “imaginary lineage of againness” recapitulating the masque’s own reuse of Italian sources (Aebischer: 2020).

This paper addresses Doran’s production, among others, in relation to Aebischer’s and others’ arguments about film technologies layered atop theatrical spaces. Like most viewers, I saw this production on a streaming platform rather than live onstage. As prestige companies (like RSC, NT, and the Stratford Festival) distribute hybrid filmed-theatre productions, they have also layered film projections atop stage performances. How have productions like Doran’s and Robert Lepage’s 2018 *Coriolanus* made film’s expansive capabilities subservient to theatre’s rough magic, in both their production designs and their global distributions? And how does the Wooster Group’s reconstructed live performance of John Gielgud’s 1964 filmed theatrical production of *Hamlet* reverse the theatre-film trajectory (and representational hierarchy) by returning live performance to its rightful place?

Christine Roth – “Do not talk of [her] but as a property”: The Human Scenography of All-Female Shakespeare Productions’

One way to understand how the staging and design of Shakespeare’s plays speak to contemporary issues and contribute to the ongoing relevance of this work is to think about how productions continue to challenge audiences. This is not a difficult task in a country where 75 anti-LGBTQ bills were passed into law in 2023. In this moment of resurgent homophobia and transphobia, costuming and performance offer a multitude of innovative and engaging ways to resist heteronormativity and to play with multiple gender identities. Indeed, in the past five years, we have seen male witches in *Macbeth*, female King Lear, an all-

female *Richard III*, and a gender-fluid *As You Like It*. We've seen androgynous Hamlets; black, queer Hamlets; feminine Hamlets; transgender Hamlets; and all-female casts of *Hamlet*. Eddie Izzard is even working on an Off Broadway one-woman show of the play. Here's the rub: at some point, critics and reviewers have charged many of these productions with going too far, playing too freely with the text, or not doing the text justice. So, using textual and performance scholarship, reviews, as well as the pre-production meetings for UW Oshkosh's spring 2024 production of *Twelfth Night*, I want to ask what it means to go "too far" with cross-dressing and gender play in Shakespeare. What boundary are we crossing? At what point might a production's casting and costuming frustrate a coherent interpretation of the text? Are there limits to how Shakespeare's plays can engage contemporary issues without losing their identity?

Stephen M. Buhler – “There Lies the Scene”: Kit Surrey's Designs for Bill Alexander's *Troilus and Cressida*: Washington DC, 1992'

Over decades, Kit Surrey has crafted unitary stage sets that strikingly and simultaneously evoke diverse geographical locations. A relatively early case in point was his work for the Royal Shakespeare Company and Bill Alexander's 1988 production of *The Merchant of Venice*, presented both in Stratford-upon-Avon and in London. Ghetto, Rialto, and Belmont came into focus and faded, depending on the scene and with swiftly introduced elements – such as a tent for Shylock's "home office" and illuminated backgrounds including a stark cross for the Rialto (and the Duke's court of law) and a shrine to the Madonna for Belmont. The competing sites were highlighted or de-emphasized but were remained visible throughout. Surrey's set and costume designs for Alexander's 1992 *Troilus and Cressida* – presented at the then-new Landsburgh mainstage for the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington DC – not only negotiated ably the spatial demands of the playtext but also evoked vastly disparate times. The mythic past of Greece and Troy mingled with an imagined dystopian future, along with unmistakable visual references to recent events still resonating with the production's own present time and place: the aftermath of the First Gulf War as experienced (and often repressed) in the capital of the United States. The most vivid topical reference was a Trojan setting composed of shattered classical pillars. Over time, the pieces of the broken pillars had revealed their component parts to be empty oil drums. What had literally propped up the topless towers of Ilium was oil; what had kept the Greeks fighting was Helen, was honor, and was the resource that once filled those drums.

The visual commentary on the recent war carried over into Surrey's costuming and Alexander's casting. The production cast white actors as the Greek generals and black actors as their most valuable fighters on the front lines. Surrey and Alexander were aware of how over-represented persons of color were in actual combat during the First Gulf War. The generals' camo fatigues were in decent condition even after nearly a decade of conflict; the combat attire of Achilles, Patroclus, and Ajax was worn, torn, sometimes gone. As a white observer, I noticed the visual scheme and implicit commentary and approved. Some time later, *Shakespeare Quarterly* published an epiphanic review of the production by Miranda Johnson-Haddad, who had attended a performance with a group of her Howard University students. Her report of their reaction to the overall visual scheme – and the interplay of casting and costuming – both reminded me and enlightened me how messages in performed interpretations can be received in ways that cannot be contained or controlled.