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1603 Quarto Hamlet in between RSC and Post –Dramatic Theatre**

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**An Examination of Acting Aesthetics in a Reinterpretation of the
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ABSTRACT

The aesthetic of Shakespearean acting in the UK is constantly in tension between the work of the country's major producers: the Royal National Theatre, The Royal Shakespeare Company, and recently Kenneth Branagh's company in the West End, and other interpretations, mainly from overseas, which question the acting values of actor training. Using the 1603 quarto of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' as a live action exploration, I take a group of American actors trained in the UK drama school in traditions of Shakespearean performance, to fully explore alternative possibilities of text in a public performance. My question in staging the production is to ask if a coherent performance aesthetic can be maintained through this post dramatic post-modern approach, and if the actors training can sustain this shift in performance experience. In my paper I will discuss how my production of Hamlet addresses questions of post dramatic acting aesthetics as they pertain to actor training: Expectations of language are challenged by the use of the American voice (often transformed even in the USA by use of standard American, mid-Atlantic, and even faux-British accents). Expectations of movement and naturalism are challenged through Chinese opera techniques, and verse delivery through a contemporary operatic exploration of spoken word against a strictly metronomic musical score in the play within a play. Gender is explored in the multiplicity of casting options used.

Keywords: actor-training; post-dramatic; alternative; Shakespeare; Quarto

This is a version of a paper given to a panel on the Education and Training of Actors, 30-31 May & 1-2 June 2016, Athens, Greece as part of the 7th Annual International Conference on Visual and Performing Arts hosted by the Athens Institute for Education and Research (ATINER). The original presentation used many photographs, videos and sound excerpts to aid the illustration. These, and other materials regarding the production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* discussed below, can be found on the Birmingham UK School of Acting Website. <http://www.bcu.ac.uk/acting>

In December 2015, to herald the UK celebrations of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, I decided to create a production of the 1603 quarto text of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for Birmingham School of Acting, one of the UK's leading Conservatoires. The production would be performed by students studying on the MFA Acting (The British Tradition) course, as one of their final year productions. Not only is this a rarely performed text, but I felt it was an excellent vehicle through which to explore the aesthetic of performing Shakespeare in a post-modern post-dramatic world. Could actors trained in the British Tradition, embrace a post-modern approach to production and create a theatrical whole? Furthermore, when training actors, I felt it important that they were challenged in using the various forms they may meet in all areas of contemporary theatre, not just the mainstream, and the challenge of the production was therefore also one which tested the flexibility of their training.

To this end, the choice of the 1603 quarto was purposeful. The unfamiliarity of the 1603 quarto of *Hamlet* is to the contemporary UK audience almost like a post-modern reflection upon the far better-known Folio version with which most will be acquainted. In using the 1603 quarto one has a sense of something that we know being subverted. We believe we know what to expect, but are suddenly presented with a similar alternative. The text of some of the most famous passages is entirely different. For example, the opening lines of 'to be or not to be' in the 1603 quarto are startlingly unexpected when one is accustomed to the Folio:

To be, or not to be - ay there's the point.
To die, to sleep - is that all? Aye all.
No, to sleep, to dream, ay, marry, there it goes,
For in that dream of death, when we're awaked
And borne before an everlasting judge
From whence no passenger ever returned -
The undiscovered country, at whose sight
The happy smile and the accursed damned.
But for this, the joyful hope of this,
Who'd bear the scorns and flattery of the world -
Scorned by the right rich, the rich cursed of the poor,¹

Compare this to the better known 1623 Folio:

¹ *Hamlet* 1603 Quarto, lines 115-125.

To be or not to be - that is the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die: to sleep-
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to? 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die: to sleep-
To sleep: perchance to dream. Aye,² there's the rub,

This has the effect of shocking the audience into an almost Brechtian displacement, out of the world of the play and into a more critical mode of thinking. It makes us question what we value and makes us question the aesthetics of those values. The questioning of these aesthetics was central to the concept of this production. Being generally referenced as the 'bad quarto' by academics, the 1603 play-text gives license to the audience to reject what they see as 'inferior'. However, in directing the play I felt that this could also be exploited as the fool's license to question authority figures - in this case the textural authority in performance of the Folio.

The audience's expectation of the delivery of Shakespeare's text is closely tied to the hegemony of theatre performance in general in the UK, and specifically to the status of British theatre productions of Shakespeare, as exemplified by the RSC, the Royal National Theatre, and by other mainstream and West End companies, such as those run by Peter Hall and Kenneth Branagh, as well as to the BBC history of broadcasting Shakespeare. In actor training in the UK the delivery of Shakespeare's text is mostly governed by the work of voice and speech teachers, chief among which would be Cicely Berry³, along with Kristin Linklater⁴, Barbara Houseman⁵, and Patsy Rodenburg⁶. Their books are found on the reading lists of all major theatre schools in the UK.

Birmingham School of Acting has a strong tradition of teaching the voice and text approaches of these practitioners. Alongside its actor training conservatoire programmes the school teaches an MA in Professional Voice Practice, for those who wish to become voice tutors, which was created with the support of the Royal Shakespeare Company, who also gave a student bursary during its first three years. Students training to be professional actors will therefore be steeped in the work of these practitioners, and in the expectation of audiences that they as actors will balance a naturalistic portrayal of character tied to a Stanislavski based appreciation of the given

² Hamlet 1623 Folio, lines 56-65.

³ Berry, C. (1973). *Voice and the Actor*. New York, Collier Books.

⁴ Linklater, K. (1992). *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice: the Actor's*

⁵ Houseman, B. (2002). *Finding Your Voice: A Complete Voice Training Manual for Actors*. London, Nick Hern Books.

⁶ Rodenburg, P. (2002). *Speaking Shakespeare*. London, Methuen.

circumstances, while creating a vocal delivery which gives weight to the poetic rhetoric of the verse: indeed, a performance of naturalistic emotional empathy that Hamlet himself would have recognised:

Why, these players here draw water from eyes
For Hecuba. Why, what is Hecuba to him,
Or he to Hecuba?⁷

The actors in the company were in their second year of ongoing voice training based in the work primarily of Kristin Linklater, but with a wider understanding of a range of voice and text approaches. As part of the rehearsal process the cast also had intensive workshops personally delivered by Cicely Berry, Barbara Houseman and Alison Bomber (the then current voice and text practitioner working with the Royal Shakespeare Company), who used their published approaches to focus upon the Hamlet text, working with the individual actors.

The talented MFA group I worked with were all American actors in training. They all used their own accent in the production. The American voice immediately calls into question the hegemony of British received pronunciation, which even in the USA still has huge social and cultural caché. The actors were able to take on board all the voice and text work which they had been taught by the British mainstream practitioners, while using their American accent, without any loss of sense, articulation, poetic delivery, breath control, or muscularity of diction. The accents varied depending on the location the actor originated from within the USA, but had a uniformity of being ‘American’, and also as such was clearly removed from any class judgements which might be held in relation to accents in the UK.

The most extreme deviance from an expected delivery of text within our production was employed by the players in the play within a play (The Mousetrap). This was spoken to a strict metronomic beat composed by James Christopher Oldham, set against a score written for violin and viola. The unflinching metronomic delivery, the musical underscoring, combined with physical gestures and movements derived from symbolism used in Chinese Opera (choreographed by Andy Yau), created a non-naturalistic approach devoid of any Stanislavski influences, without any of the conventional verse work in which the cast were steeped. The audience at first would laugh at the strangeness of this delivery, but as the scene progressed they became absorbed into the relentless forward movement of the rhythm and the highly dynamic nature of the underscoring. The King’s ultimate reaction to the revelation of his crime reflected in the play’s performance, had a heightened emotional resonance partly due to the sudden stopping of the relentless rhythm created by the play within a play, the horrified silence which followed, and then the rush and cacophony of the court’s exit calling for “lights”.

⁷ Hamlet: 1603 Quarto, line 405-407.

This delivery, as used by the players, was echoed in the scenes where Ofelia sings and reveals her unbalanced state of mind. Ofelia in her madness entered as if in a cabaret-style performance world, as a torch song singer, lit using a follow spot, but she also employed some of the symbolic Chinese Opera movements, especially in her expressive use of a large red fan. The same fan was used by the Player Queen, and was also carried by Corambis, and used symbolically to represent the arras behind which the character fatefully hides in the “closet scene”. We also referenced Odin Theatre’s performance of JUDITH, where the actress bends forward and fans out her long hair into an extraordinary display of flowing forms. The external referencing of other theatre forms and productions was purposeful in the refusal to create a self-contained hermetic place of escape for the audience. From the outset we were signalling to the audience a self-referential approach, acknowledging the ongoing stage history of the play, what Judith Buchanan in her essay on the Wooster Group *Hamlet* has wittily called “cultural necromancy”⁸. An air of “necromancy” was appropriate for a play so concerned with death, and was further echoed in the set, described below. Ofelia’s songs were by the same composer as the play within the play and echoed that challenging aesthetic. Music was used at other points in the play to break the flow of story and reference contemporary culture outside the world of the play. For example, the pre-show (described below) ended with the king figure of Claudius encouraging the others to join him in an American song, “Little Ghost” by Jack White, which tells the story of someone who falls in love with a ghost which nobody else can see. Ofelia played a cheap electric keyboard- singing “At Last”, while Queen Gertrude and the King danced, which echoed President Obama and the First Lady who danced to this tune at his inauguration ball.

Other aspects of the production had a conventional, naturalistic, and character-based approach to speech and character. The scene between Hamlet and his mother, (Hamlet 1603 Quarto, Act 2: sc. 2, known as the “closet scene”) contained the use of pauses and emotional charge in voice and physicality expected in naturalism, but also allowed the rhyme and rhythm of the verse to heighten the emotional drive of the scene, as developed by the RSC and the voice and text practitioners discussed above.

Gender expectations were challenged and explored in the multiplicity of casting options used in the production. For example, Leartes was played by a woman in woman's dress (a period costume, but with contemporary short hair), but all text references remained male. This highlighted and challenged the gender preconceptions not just of the audience’s expectations of the portrayal of gender, but but also those expectations as they exist within the play. The only cultural difference between Ofelia and Leartes within the play was the gender assigned to them, and all their treatment and the cultural expectations imposed upon them by other characters can be seen to stem from this.

⁸ Buchanan, J. (2016). 'Look here, upon this picture': Theatrofilm, The Wooster Group Hamlet and the Film Industry. *Shakespeare in Ten Acts*. G. M. a. Z. Wilcox. London, The British Library. p.213.

After the death of Ofelia, both Queen Gertred and Leartes wore almost identical “masculine” black trousers and jacket. Leartes continued to be addressed using the male pronoun, and again, sexual attribution, gender, and costume were explored as constructs independent of each other. The world of the play and the real-life world of the audience were thus highlighted as being two separate spaces in dialogue with each other.

The inconsistency of gender appropriation within our production was further explored through the character of Corambis (the Polonius character in the Folio). Corambis was played by an African-American female with costume and textual references gender-realigned as female. The actor later later appeared as the gravedigger in male costume, addressed by the other characters as a male.

The British aesthetic landscape in which the production was placed, and in which the actor-training of the cast rested, is worth briefly noting at this point, as it is to this landscape that the production sat in playful response.

The Royal Shakespeare company came into being in 1960, under the leadership of Peter Hall. The company style had its roots in the preceding history of Shakespeare performance at Stratford and in London, in which Peter Hall and Peter Brook had already played a major part. The style and pre-eminence of the company was firmly established very quickly due to the outstanding critical success of productions such as Peter Brook’s *King Lear* with Paul Scofield, *The Wars of the Roses* created by Peter Hall with John Barton, and Peter Brook’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. One often overlooked influence on the British tradition in Acting Shakespeare is that of the French actor and director, Michel St Denis and the work of his RSC Studio.

St Denis was a co-director of the RSC, along with Peter Hall and Peter Brook, and brought a methodology from Europe, from his uncle Jaques Copeau, with whom he trained, which included physical embodiment, improvisation, and the use of masks in particular. He had already by this time been the founder of more than one acting school in London.⁹

The RSC Studio St. Denis created was essentially a drama school within the Company. 10 actors would train, work within the company, and in theory progress to become fully fledged company members. Michel St. Denis took discussion groups, directed scenes, and taught mask work. Other teachers included Clifford Williams (rehearsals, limbering, movement and discussion groups), Suria St. Denis (masks and rehearsals), John Barton (tutorials and fencing), Geraldine Alford (voice theory and voice tutorials), various unnamed company members (who taught limbering exercises and voice exercises), and Peter Brook and Peter Hall (who, when available, took discussion groups).¹⁰ The range of classes in voice and speech, movement, text work, rehearsal exercises, fencing and even make-up, would still be recognised

⁹ His legacy is described in detail by Jane Baldwin: Baldwin, J. (2003). *Michel Saint-Denis and the Shaping of the Modern Actor*. USA, Praeger Publishers.

¹⁰ The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Library, Stratford Upon Avon, carries a range of memorabilia from the RSC Studio, including notes of meetings and photographs, which are as yet uncatalogued.

by all UK drama students. While not long lasting, the RSC studio made concrete in a training setting the RSC style of using psychologically realistic acting, combined with a literary and rhetorical attention to the verse speaking.

For actors in training this curriculum and aesthetic has become dominant in the UK - it is taught as the 'natural' way in which Shakespeare wants to be performed.

Let us compare this with an alternative approach as used by the Wooster Group in New York, an approach which briefly shared the stage with that of the RSC. In 2012 the Wooster Group was invited to join the RSC in a co-production of Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida" for the World Shakespeare Festival. The Group's working methods are quite opposed to those of the RSC, and that of British mainstream theatre practice in general.

The Wooster group actors work with technology. They have earphones through which they hear sometimes their own voices reciting lines, or a ghost-like invocation from another script which might give them intonation for their lines. They have videos on which other films and theatre pieces are shown which they may take as cues for their movement. Their voices are distorted electronically.

The opposition of styles seen in the production of *Troilus and Cressida* starkly exposed for me the acting tradition of the RSC, not as 'natural' but as 'naturalised', a dominant style which I had come to expect in the UK, but which in this context was highlighted as a performance choice which could be perceived as just as strange as that of the Wooster Group, depending on the cultural lens through which one was viewing the production.

The use of the word 'natural' with reference to acting is explored by Denis Salter in his essay on "Acting in a Postcolonial Space", in "Shakespeare Theory and Performance", where he makes these observations on "naturalness":

"Stage traditions notwithstanding, "natural" acting is never natural— it is always artificial – a distinctive style or mode of performance that has only been naturalised by traditions, by training practices, by critical standards, and by audience values."¹¹

Salter also states: "Acting Shakespeare unnaturally is, however, a very dangerous thing to do: actors behaving this way will be routinely censured for not understanding Shakespeare, for not respecting traditions, for not being trained properly... In brief, they will be censured not just for being unnatural but for being aberrant, perhaps even subversive. Criticisms of this type can of course put an end to an entire career."¹²

The use of the term 'natural' or 'neutral' in the voice work of Cicely Berry, Patsy Rodenburg, and other teachers at British conservatoires has also been explored and discussed by Sarah Werner, who maintains that the tropes employed by Berry, Rodenburg and others can inhibit any critical examination

¹¹ Salter, D. (1996). *Acting Shakespeare in Postcolonial Space*. Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance. J. C. Bulman. London, New York, Routledge. p.113.

¹² Salter, D. p117.

of Shakespeare's politics, especially through a Feminist reading of the plays.¹³ One of the aims of this production was to place the actors in training, as well as the audience, into a less accepting state of response to the cultural dominance of certain acting styles in performing Shakespeare, and in doing so create a fresh response to Shakespeare in one of his best know works.

The experiment between the RSC and the Wooster group was by most critics deemed unsuccessful. The online blog by the University of Warwick, 'bloggingshakespeare.com' summarises some of the critics' responses at the time:

"If some of the reviews are to be believed, and if the number of walk-outs is an indication, the RSC/Wooster Group's collaboration on *Troilus And Cressida* is pretty bad. In his two star review in *The Guardian* Michael Billington called it a 'bizarrely disjointed spectacle [which] does nothing to enhance our understanding of the play', Heather Neill in *The Stage* called it 'a mess' which fails to present 'a realistic exploration of human relationships' and Simon Tavener at *Whatsonstage.com* said it's 'one of the worst pieces of theatre I have seen on the professional stage...I have never heard Shakespeare spoken so badly'."¹⁴

In my own production of *Hamlet* I wanted to explore this tension between the classical British Tradition, as exemplified by the RSC, and a post-modern, post-dramatic approach, which a company such as the Wooster Group could be seen to employ. I hoped to give a fresh interpretation of the play, and perhaps in a more cohesive way to explore presentational methods which would challenge accepted norms in the UK for Shakespeare, which it appeared as far as critics were concerned, the RSC/Wooster group collaboration had clearly infringed.

Our production was performed in a large black-box style studio space, and began by introducing the audience to a pre-show environment. The set had two trestle-style tables, used by the cast, but at which some of the audience could sit. The space was like a cross between a thrust stage and a traverse setting. This directly referenced the set for Grotowski's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, and thus employed the "cultural necromancy" discussed above. There were drinks in goblets, a half-eaten wedding cake, and various food platters scattered about the environment, all with the remains of half-eaten food. The tables would double as walk-ways, catwalks, or battlements, and the space between the two trestle table walkways could become a grave for Ophelia. The relationship with the audience was intimate and unusual, with an audience

¹³Werner, S. "Performing Shakespeare: Voice Training and the Feminist Actor." *New Theatre Quarterly* XII(No. 47): 249-258. Also responses to this article can be found in: Cicely Berry, P. R., Kristin Linklater (1997). "Shakespeare, Feminism and Voice: Responses to Sarah Werner." *Ibid.* XIII(No. 49): 48-52.

¹⁴Cowie, A. Retrieved 15.08.16, 2016, from <http://bloggingshakespeare.com/is-troilus-and-cressida-as-bad-as-everyone-says>.

member perhaps finding themselves sat next to Hamlet while he delivered a speech directly to their face. Hamlet could stand on a table and declaim to the whole audience, or speak intimately to address individuals. The ghost visibly used a microphone when not on stage. The audience were all seated, some as guests at a banquet, and filled and surrounded the acting space. They were not safely hidden behind a third wall.

It was purposefully unclear which period this production was set in: at the start of the play all the actors except for Hamlet wore Elizabethan/Jacobean period costume, although this was in rather bright if not garish tones. Hamlet was very dimly lit at the start of the play, barely visible to a lot of the audience. He was barefoot to begin with, picking at a banjo, smoking a cherry scented vape electronic cigarette, dressed in a contemporary black suit, and wearing a mortuary toe-tag on his foot. Any audience member close enough could see that this mortuary tag apparently belonged to King Hamlet, his dead father. The audience was therefore in a state of uncertainty: this could have been a contemporary production, with the actors wearing fancy-dress at a party, or indeed perhaps a more conventional period production.

The space also had the feel of a burial catacombs such as those found under the streets of Paris - an ossuary for the departed. The walls were covered in piles of skulls and bones, platforms were supported by piles of bones, and full-scale skeletons, dressed in luxurious fabric and jewels could be seen in and above the playing area, echoing the past European tradition of displaying saints' relics in churches. When Hamlet decided to feign madness as the play progressed, he stole from one of the skeletons a highly decorated shirt, covered in precious gems, which he then wore with medical paper trousers and Mickey Mouse slippers. The design of the shirt was in fact based upon a Chinese opera costume of "Water Wings", and would later be worn by one of the players taking the role of the poisoner in the play within a play.

The actors performing the pre-show party scene at first appeared to be engaged in some naturalistic behaviours as might be found at a party. However it quickly became clear to the audience that the actors are performing short loops of physical and vocal action which were repeated and repeated throughout the pre-show opening section as the audience entered the auditorium.

As the play progresses and Hamlet moves towards action, he becomes more of the traditional Jacobean Revenge character. In short, he starts to kill people. This was reflected in our production in his change of costume after he returned from England, having caused the deaths of Rosencraft and Gilderstone as well as Corambis, when he was found to have changed from contemporary clothes to Jacobean period dress.

To counterpoint this change by Hamlet, as each death occurred in the play, more and more of the cast moved into mourning clothes which were of contemporary style, and gradually they were seen to take up Hamlet's position at the beginning of the play. Claudius changed on stage in front of the audience after the death of Corambis, from his Jacobean nightwear to contemporary clothing of black suit, white shirt and tie, and Gertred also changed into a black

pants suit. By Ofelia's burial, Hamlet was the only person in Jacobean clothing and the rest of the cast were in contemporary black mourning garb. The audience did not appear to find any difficulty in accepting this movement of period and time.

The lighting also reflected the non-naturalistic slippage of time and place. It moved between full contemporary use of lighting, with moving lights, follow spots, changing colour wheels, where there was never a fixed lighting state but the lighting melted and flowed with the action (the show which ran for one hour and forty minutes without an interval, contained hundreds of lighting cues). Some scenes were performed in total blackout with only voices heard (the opening scene of the ghost on the battlements for example), or were in pure candle-light (the play within a play and the following several scenes were lit only by candle). The setting therefore reflected the various unspecified acting forms and challenging production choices the audience might meet in the course of the performance.

In the RSC Flourish Magazine of Autumn 1966, Jerzy Grotowski wrote of the training he was involved with in his own company:

“What we instil in our actors is not just an assembly of recipes gleaned from all sides. The most important thing about our method is that it does not aim to teach the actor any recipes at all; Nor do we help him build up a box of tricks, there is no question of stockpiling different kinds of know-how. In our work everything tends towards the inner ripening of the actor, a ripening expressed by a tension towards the extreme, by an absolute stripping away, by the laying bare of his own intimacy. All this without the slightest trace of egoism or self congratulation. On the contrary when the actor performs he should make a total gift of himself.”¹⁵

In creating this production which made demands of the actors to embrace a range of styles and yet maintain a whole which kept the integrity of the performances intact, and to use a range of physical and vocal delivery methods, I felt we had in part achieved the aim of which Grotowski writes above. The security and trust the actors had in the skill-base they had created through the traditional conservatoire training at Birmingham School of Acting, combined with a strong artistic commitment to the values of the production, allowed them I believe to achieve a theatrical whole using seemingly opposing methods of performance and script interpretation. Perhaps giving yourself as a gift to whatever is required, without ego, as Grotowski here suggests, is as good a way as any to approach performing Shakespeare, and to avoid unquestioningly following any one particular methodology.

To develop greater inclusivity in the art form, I believe we have to raise the consciousness of actors in training to be aware of the cultural and historical context in which they are being trained and critiqued. We can help ourselves and those we train to be more aware of the rhetoric of teaching: for example

¹⁵ Grotowski, J. (1966). Flourish, Royal Shakespeare Company. Autumn 1966.

the loaded nature of words like ‘natural’ and ‘neutral’, and to be aware of the academic critical tradition governing the way we embody and present Shakespeare, and the way we judge how it is acted. The cultural acceptability of various acting tropes, styles and traditions employed when performing Shakespeare is less to do with the question “how” it is performed, but “where?, when ?, to whom? , and why?”.

I conclude with the words of the theatre-maker and musician Heiner Goebbels when he states:

“...we should educate clever young artists who are also capable of developing their own aesthetics. And as their teachers we shouldn't pretend that we already know what that should look like. We don't know. The future of the performing arts is– I hope– unpredictable; and in order to prepare our students for this complex reality, we have to involve them in our own research and put them in the position to conduct their own experiments.”¹⁶

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¹⁶ Goebbels, H. (2015). *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre*. London, New York, Routledge. p.77.