The Shoemaker's Holiday (review)

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in 1972 by John Houseman and Margot Harley and also based in Minneapolis, tours internationally, touting such alumni as Kevin Kline, Patti LuPone, and Rainn Wilson.

Rather than relying on the accoutrements of a television studio and 1950s costumes and music for support, this production of Henry V was actor-centered, with most cast members playing at least three different parts, and some playing as many as five. Every cast member except for King Henry took on part of the Chorus. Costume changes, minor set changes, and props were handled on-stage for the most part, with cast members also doubling (or tripling) as stage managers. The numerous character changes were aided by innovative asymmetrical zippered costumes in shades of grey and brown, with panels that could be zipped on and off to switch an actor from French to English (and back). Class differences were almost impossible to discern in these costumes, though quick shifts in acting style facilitated surprisingly believable character transitions: Andy Grotelueschen alternated between Ely, Bardolph, Orleans, Bates, and York, while Georgia Cohen played the Hostess, French Mayor, Herald, and the Queen, mixing gender, class and nationality with little aid from costumes or props.

The only cast member to play just one part was Matthew Amendt as a cool, sleek Henry V. He delivered a notably nuanced and moving performance in the wooing scene with Katherine at the end of the play. There were no remnants of a playful Prince Hal to be found in this interpretation—Amendt’s King was in complete control throughout the production with no sign of his “greener days” peeking through. Amendt’s youth, emotional versatility and depth as Henry suggest that he may well become one of the more renowned alumni of this program.

As part of the “Shakespeare for a New Generation” initiative (co-sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and Arts Midwest), this production eschewed the sort of gimmicky tactics employed by Dowling’s Two Gentlemen on the Guthrie mainstage. Perhaps this is a hopeful sign—the Shakespeare offered to a “new generation” is a production concentrating on the play itself; the “new generation” may not need their Shakespeare staged as a television show in order to appreciate it.

*The Shoemaker’s Holiday*

Photos by Peter Kollar. With Gareth Bennet-Ryan (Firk), Robert Carretta (Simon Eyre), Kitty Chapman (Sybil), Greg Cheverall (Lincoln), Nicholas Kempsey (Hodge), Mike Evans (Hammon, Askew), Lucy Grainger (Margery), Ellie Hale (Jane), Suzanne Marie (Rose), Patrick Ross (Lacy/Hans), Warren Rusher (King of England, Lovell, Dodger, Warner, Servant), Andrew Southern (Sir Roger Oatley), James Tweedy (Rafe).

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Four hundred and nine years after its premier in 1599, Thomas Dekker’s *Shoemaker’s Holiday* received its first postmodern revival at the recently opened Rose Theatre in Southwark on the site of the remains of the Elizabethan playhouse of the same name, just a short distance away from Shakespeare’s reconstructed Globe on Park Street. It was a rare opportunity to see Dekker in performance, and the strategy of re-performing Dekker in the Rose space was clearly the Rose Theatre Trust’s determination to keep attention on its historical site in order to attract funding for further excavation and restoration. Spectators had the opportunity to stand in the undercroft of a commercial building on Park Street, on a viewing platform pitched across the actual remains of Philip Henslowe’s Rose, to watch Dekker’s play of London life. As we approached the Rose on foot from New Globe Walk, we first saw a faux-Elizabethan playbill pasted to the wall outside the Rose entrance. Entering the site, we then heard contemporary pop songs that gradually modulated into Elizabethan music. Walking into the viewing platform that also served the performance as a bare stage, we saw the outlines of the Rose foundation marked out in red rope lights. The Trust’s strategic setup—a theatrical prologue to this modern-dress production—prepared the audience (mostly scholars, students, and patrons of the Trust) for a mood change, attempting to register a sense of historicity in this performative space, as if commemorating symbiotic afterlives of Dekker and the Rose.

*The Shoemaker’s Holiday* didn’t begin with festive merrymaking as the playbill promised: it recounted two love stories—Lacy-Rose and Rafe-Jane—located in Simon Eyre’s shoe shop, which served as the backdrop in a civic London that valued plebeian virtues over blood. Rather, this production opened its first scene with a class confrontation between the Earl of Lincoln and Sir Roger Oatley, Lord Mayor of London, who disagreed on an unequal romance between Lacy (Lincoln’s nephew) and Rose (Oatley’s daughter). Lincoln’s well-controlled RP and lush, black velvet cape and hat challenged Oatley’s citizen status, accent, and Lord Mayor’s outfit; in return, Oatley’s sartorial register spurned upper-class
snobbery. To disrupt this potential match with mutual “scorn,” Lincoln and Oatley enacted a strategic maneuver. Oatley shut Rose up at home, and her imprisonment was figured behind the metal fence that cordons off the historic Rose remains from public access.

To protect Lacy from marrying the “churl’s” daughter, Lincoln contrived to have Lacy appointed by the King to fight in France. Yet Lacy isn’t an obedient child: he disguises himself as a Dutch shoemaker called Hans and seeks work at Eyre’s shop in working-class London. In David Pearce’s production Lacy was neither a truant nor a “lovelorn nob” as Benedict Nightingale observed in a review of John Dexter’s 1981 National Theatre’s production (theatre review in *New Statesman*, 26 June 1981), but an intelligent, comic entertainer who not only dared to “venture his life upon the indignation of the King” but also skillfully put on a sustained, convincing disguise, singing and mingling with a group of noisy shoemakers to pursue what his heart set upon. Onstage aristocratic Lacy abandoned all his “silks and gay apparel,” dressing down in a multi-colored work suit in order to fake class, trade, accent, and nationality. Playing the garrulous Dutch denizen, Patrick Ross tirelessly spoke cockney Dutch, rendering Lacy/Hans as a comedian who made himself understood through sounds and gestures. As a congenial shoemaker, Lacy’s marvelous disguise bought him the journeyman Firk’s liking and friendship. Having become Eyre’s worker thanks to Firk’s recommendation, Lacy/Hans proved himself an efficient, streetwise helpmate. Clothing such “cunning with the Gentle Craft,” Lacy/Hans was always in “fair shape,” fair enough to stealthily enter Rose’s house and urge her to flee from Oatley’s custody. In this production blonde Lacy was not a dodger, but a first-rate performer who prioritized love to duty.

Lacy’s comic presence provided a sharp contrast to Rafe’s sentimentality and patriotism. Rafe was Eyre’s shoemaker who willingly fulfilled his duty when conscripted into the army to fight in France. Rafe’s personality and emotional register were troped by his black clothes. Before heading for France (conscription figured in marching across the stage), Rafe in black gave his wife, “blubbered Jane,” a pair of shoes “seamed” by himself in lieu of rich men’s “jewels and rings,” bidding her to “remember me” and “pray for my return.” Returning home from the front line with a crutch and entering Eyre’s shop where everyone was celebrating Eyre’s new status as sheriff, brave Rafe was again in black, and his injured body silenced the noisy, merry shoemakers. Pearce’s decision to stage Rafe in a realistic fashion was very different from that of the 1981 National Theatre’s production in which Dexter’s heroic Ralph “received
a tumultuous welcome” (Anthony Parr, ed., The Shoemaker’s Holiday, p. 50) before revealing his lameness to his brethren. At Eyre’s shop, having learned about Jane, who, during his absence, had agreed to marry Hammon (a dashing wife-hunting courtier, whose look, fedora felt hat, and fine suit eclipsed Rafe, and who had forged a letter to report Rafe dead), heavy-hearted Rafe performed an emotional scene. At the sight of Jane’s old shoes, brought to him by Hammon’s servingman who asked Rafe to make a new pair for Jane’s wedding, Rafe trembled for his lost love. But he was determined to reclaim his lost properties with his band of brothers, headed by Firk, who brought cudgels and weapons to confront the newlyweds-to-be at St. Faith’s Church.

Jane and Hammon made themselves a beautiful couple: with her bridal veil and handcrafted shoes, accompanied by dashing Hammon, Jane beamed with a happiness that outshined straight-faced Rafe, who stood aside in black with a crutch. Such theatrical chiaroscuro, designed by Pearce, was meant to interrogate Jane, an elusive woman who, after Rafe’s conscription, “flung away,” and “never returned, nor said bye nor bah.” For the apprentice Hodge, Jane was “a stranger here.” When, at St. Faith’s Church, Jane saw Rafe and the shoemakers standing before her, she was dumbstruck. But curiously, while Hodge angrily proposed that she “choose her man,” Jane neither took off her bridal veil nor ran to Rafe. She stood there, asking a damned question: “Whom should I choose?” The scene froze. Wearing Rafe’s memento symbolizing an unfailing love resistant to emotional wear and tear, Jane stood petrified. Strikingly, while she was deciding between Hammon and Rafe, it appeared that she was choosing between Hammon’s sophistication and Rafe’s humbleness, fine taste and simplicity, new life and old love, fake gentility and reliable honesty. And we, the audience, were drawn into her dilemma. While she still hesitated, all on the stage pointed to Rafe! The scene froze again. As Dekker exercised his emotional blackmail to make a plebeian appeal, Pearce not only questioned Jane’s steadfastness but also visually staged kinds of “crafts”—“Gentle Craft” was clearly a subtly nuanced term—through costuming that coded intentions. Jane’s final decision to return to Rafe was a difficult one: she chose Rafe because of public pressure even as she also declared that she loved him.

Simon Eyre’s “delicious shop,” in which all spoke cockney, provided a vernacular setting for these two love stories which yielded insights into the Londoners’ irrepressible personalities and value system. While the jolly apprentices bantered with one another in work suits and yellow woolen hats, Eyre and Firk (Eyre’s foremost stage collaborator, the
play’s comic *sine qua non* present almost in every scene to conjure up a congenial working fraternity) worked with bubbly energy to entertain the audience. But Simon Eyre was more than a master shoemaker whose workplace was also a living space filled with diligence, mirth, songs, and dance. As soon as he learned about Lacy and Rose’s star-crossed love, he and his wife Margery (played by Lucy Grainger) willingly stood in their defense against any who might seek to cross the match. Serving the roles of alderman, sheriff, and Lord Mayor of London, Eyre prided himself as the patron of civic values. Over the course of the play, we saw not only his sartorial transformation through investitures, but also a considerable change in emotional stature from a tetchy master and male scold to a generous patron who, putting on airs and gravitas, pampered his wife and apprentices with a luxurious feast to assert his magnanimity. At his shop, where love could grow, virtue and harmony were placed above all else. In the celebratory finale the King of England (played by Warren Rusher, who also doubled Dodger the spy and Hammon’s brother-in-law Warner) entered Eyre’s shop to grace his well-deserved status by granting him certain privileges, and at the same time marked himself as a royal patron who privileged *gentilesse* over class to legitimate Lacy and Rose’s union.

Not all of Dekker’s ideas of the festive and imagery of abundance came off in this production. The cordwainers’ working tools—rubbing pins, stoppers, dressers, sorts of awls, balls of wax, paring knives, thumpleathers—that constitute the salient features of the Elizabethan shoe-making industry were scant. The merchandise symbolizing Elizabethan affluence—“prunes, almonds, sugar candy, carrot-roots, turnips”—were absent. We didn’t see the London places (Guildhall, Tower Street, Leadenhall, Old Change, St. Faith’s Church) clearly marked. Of course, the Rose space is very different from that of the National Theatre, which in 1981 used “tapestries drawn across the back with views of the Royal Exchange, St Paul’s” (Anthony Parr, ed., *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, p. xxx) to stage locality. The sizzling feast where food came alive could only be imagined. As *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* was tailored for the Queen in the year of Jubilee, hyperbole in this play constituted a significant Dekkerian emphasis on carnivalesque festivities. However, owing to the Rose’s heritage status, it was impossible to stage a full-scale production with dense details. As we watched this rare London play re-performed in this exciting venue, we were only too pleased to mind the missing parts.