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Duke of York (review)*

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The Third Part of Henry the Sixth, with the death of the Duke of York.

Presented by the **Atlanta Shakespeare Company** at **The New American Shakespeare Tavern**, Atlanta, Georgia. November 20–23 & 30, 2008. Directed by Jeff Watkins. Costumes by Anne Carole Butler. Lighting by Lorraine Lombardi. Music by Clarke Weigle. Fights by Drew Reeves. With Daniel Parvis (King Henry VI), Laura Cole (Queen Margaret), Joshua Lee Jones (Clifford), Maurice Ralston (Richard, Duke of York), Drew Reeves (Richard Plantagenet, later Duke of Gloucester), Paul Hester (Northumberland), and Mary Ruth Ralston (lots of Messengers).

KEVIN CRAWFORD, *Reinhardt College*

Visiting the Middleton Place Plantation, South Carolina, intrepid Kazakh investigative journalist Borat Sagdiyev marvels at a “Historic Interpreter” who planes wood with an instrument conspicuously devoid of a Dewalt logo:

Eighteenth-Century Historic Interpreter: (*Proudly*) This is a very ancient kind of tool.

Borat Sagdiyev: (*Nonplussed*) But it is a shame now to use this primitive tool. We have a machine now...it can chop wood...without a man.

Interpreter: Now, you have to understand what we’re about here. This is the eighteenth century. OK? I am a historic interpreter.

BS: You are a slave?

Interpreter: I am not. I am a historic interpreter. I am a museum educator.

BS: Can I buy you?

Interpreter: No, I’m afraid you can’t.

BS: In Kazakhstan, we think USA very... technology very good; now I see is very primitive.

Interpreter: This is two hundred years ago. We are not in the year 2002 here. We are take...this is a time machine back to the year 1750 or 1760.

BS: (*Incredulous*) You make a time machine?

Interpreter: (*Exasperated, to the plantation director*) Can you please explain to him what we’re doing?

Sacha Baron Cohen’s hysterical send-up of historical re-enactment kept coming to mind as I watched Atlanta Shakespeare Company’s admirable attempt to mount all three parts of *Henry VI* culminate in a sadly disappointing production of *Part Three*. Having seen the RSC’s magnificent Histories cycle March 2008, I had hoped to write a glowing review and champion a regional US company devoted to Shakespeare—a kind of “we

can do it too!” blurb. The fact is that I was frustrated to the point of actual anger; indeed, I felt personally insulted after spending a mere five minutes in the theatre, by which point I had been implicitly accused more than once of being “elitist” because I sometimes enjoy early modern dramas directed, designed, and performed in ways that suggest I’m not living in 1594. In fact, it wasn’t so much the *production* that was dissatisfying—it was everything *surrounding* it. There were so many theatrical paratexts in the form of program notes, explanatory fliers in the lobby, online company manifestos that leap out at ticket-buyers, directorial introductory speeches and fundraising pleas, and constant “Original Practice Playhouse®” boasts that I actually started responding in writing to them before the performance began, and continued to do so throughout my production notes. Therefore, this account of what I now consider to be a three-phase breakdown of my playgoing spirit is more about the experience of seeing a performance at The New American Shakespeare Tavern than a critique of the performance itself (which can, unfortunately, be addressed and dismissed all too quickly). This concerns not merely a “traffic was bad, and we had to skip dessert to rush here only to fight for parking” set of peripheral circumstances; much more to the point, it concerns a company which, before the stage action even began, had hubristically announced a credo to which they did not adhere in practice, sneered at academia, and proudly disdained four hundred years of theatrical practice and theory. Taking a cue from Borat’s incredulity at the wood-worker of the twenty-first century who is resolutely hidebound to the eighteenth, we might say that Atlanta Shakespeare’s ultimate failure to realize the promises strewn throughout their paratextual material grimly accentuates the servile adherence to outdated and largely ineffectual conventions that so often characterizes “Original Practice” companies in general.

Original Practice Exercise One: Getting to the Theatre

As I bought my ASC tickets online, I was invited on the main page to read an essay on “Original Practice®” by Artistic Director Jeff Watkins, which one reaches by clicking on the company’s “Original Practice Playhouse” logo. (The ® is real; it appears after “Original Practice Playhouse” identifiers in both program material and on the company’s website.) Watkins’s essay codifies his “approach to performing Shakespeare that assumes a burning desire to understand Shakespeare’s text as it was understood by the actors who first spoke that text and by the audience who first heard it. It also assumes an appreciation and respect for the stagecraft originally employed by Shakespeare’s company.” He

later acknowledges—begrudgingly?—that “it is impossible in the absolute sense to know exactly what Shakespeare meant when he wrote any given line of text.” But he believes that “there is so much to be gained in the attempt” to decipher authorial intention that he has “dedicated [his] entire working life to this pursuit.” This pursuit, it should be noted, is carried out in wary suspicion of what Watkins elsewhere describes as “arrogance, elitism, and excessive cleverness.”

“Original.” Companies that insist on using this shifting defined and inevitably misleading and false touchstone of an advertising label hoist with their own rhetorical petard. I only had to raise my gaze three monitor inches from Watkins’s essay to the photos that stretched across the banner to confirm that what Atlanta Shakespeare considers “Original” is not what other Original Practice companies consider, or what early modern companies practiced as “Original.” I’ll address but one aspect of original stagecraft here, among many possible contenders in this theatrical house of cards. Are there women performing in Atlanta Shakespeare shows? Absolutely. Watkins’s response to my post-show inquiries on the matter? “Good question . . . we do some cross-gender stuff. But the truth of the matter is that the women are better actors and I can’t afford not to use them.” Fair enough. Toss that on to the “Original Practice Except For The Things We Find Odd, Inconvenient, No Longer Acceptable, or Generally Not What We Feel Like Doing At This Particular Time” heap. Now *that* would be a registered trademark to marvel at.

Indeed, Atlanta Shakespeare’s OPP trademark stands as a remarkable theatrical paratext with which to engage, in that it actually commodifies a language of authenticity. Moreover, it does so within a larger context of competing economic imperatives: Watkins “can’t afford”—artistically, financially, perhaps even ethically—not to use actresses, and in practice chooses to hire a lighting designer for costly instruments that are far removed from the “universal lighting” allegiances of other Original Practice companies. Yet it’s the very commodification of “Original Practice,” designed as a selling point, that exposes the product’s defects. As an informed consumer—informed, not too ironically, by the very forces of scholarship that the company dismisses in other paratexts—I know that it can’t be “Original Practice” at Atlanta Shakespeare (or anywhere else that makes similar claims). Richard Burbage did not first play Henry V while completing his MFA or working towards his Equity card with hosts of scholars telling him “what it was really like”; no one sitting in the Tavern the evening I saw *3 Henry 6* is likely to have believed in the divine right of kings; nor could Shakespeare’s audiences have parked across the street

in an approximate equivalent of the Emory University Hospital Midtown Parking Deck.

Original Practice Exercise Two: The Lobby

A veritable assault of paratextual material began as I descended into Atlanta Shakespeare's lobby. It's not unusual for a company to provide some background information for audiences, especially when the production is a history play and that play is being presented as part of a trilogy. It is not necessarily problematic that Atlanta Shakespeare has an impressive amount of literature for their cycle, and I appreciated the few pop-culture references that would have likely helped younger audiences (the white or the red rose, for example, might be thought of as "an Elizabethan-era gang symbol"). Flipping through some of this literature, I read that "'Primogeniture' is a fancy term to describe the system of inheritance in Elizabethan England." Immediately self-conscious about my apparently fancy vocabulary, I wondered if it would be churlish to note that primogeniture was hardly limited to Elizabethan England, just as the roses in question weren't really *Elizabethan* gangwear either, picked and employed as they were a few years before Bess showed up. Determined not to churl, I thumbed through my program, *The First Folio* (of course it was), as my companion visited Ye Olde Laydies Roome. Therein, I found director Drew Reeves's thoughts on his production of *Antony and Cleopatra*: "I can't take what I judge to be the easy road by imposing a contemporary concept, such as making the Egyptians drugged out hippies....Although I will use a lighting cue or two (I personally think William would have approved of that)." The presumptuous fallacies here are obvious, but there was something deeper lurking in what had by now become a paratextual quagmire of conflicting arguments. Watkins admits in one paratext that it was "economic necessity that drove" him to "Original Practice," saving money by foregoing "conceptual framework or lavish sets and costumes"; but wouldn't the dreaded "contemporary concept," invoked by Reeves in another paratext, actually represent the *harder*—at least financially—path to take? A few program pages later I find Watkins's own notes for the three Henries, in which he flatly states, "The heart of the matter is that we [Atlanta Shakespeare] live and breathe the Elizabethan rhetoric, cosmology, and world view—footnotes and all—so you don't have to. And to be truthful, we have a depth of experience at the senior company level that is almost unparalleled in the American theatre." But if Atlanta Shakespeare were really inhaling, wouldn't the company recognize that modern costumes and anachronistic props and references were perfectly

at home on the Elizabethan stage and that “Original Practice” would be more truly realized by an *Antony* or *Henry* costumed by Armani with a Duran Duran soundtrack?

Original Practice Exercise Three: The Production

I’m not sure if Pembroke’s Men practiced this, but before the production proper began the entire cast and Watkins came out; the director eventually begged on his knees, literally, for more audience support and money. Ordinarily sympathetic to anyone brave enough to keep a theatre company going, and for nearly twenty years at that, my patience was by now running thin. During the pledge drive, I treated myself to yet more program scripture, which without a shred of irony (and with, perhaps, some danger of hyperventilation) invoked the company’s devotion to “living, breathing theatre (not museum replicas),” Shakespeare as “living, breathing entertainment,” and a snide code of anti-intellectualism evident in references to “so-called ‘experts’” whose scholarly introductions “were not very helpful”—all this from a troupe apparently still unaware of James’ ascension: *Macbeth* is an “Elizabethan suspense thriller,” and *Antony and Cleopatra* is “an Elizabethan epic.” Someone has really got to tell these people when Elizabeth was born and when she died, and introduce them to a fancy word like “Jacobean.” (It’s worth noting that the company chose to keep the promise of York’s death in the production’s hybrid title, which was probably constructed based on information from those pesky so-called experts who know what “octavos” are.)

What immediately sprang to mind, and not exactly in support of the “no museum replicas here” protestations, were the accurate Atlanta Shakespeare website descriptions of the stage’s “Globe-inspired balcony” and the building’s “Globe-inspired façade,” the latter looking very much like a mini-Globe transported out of a Disney-esque Elizabethanland. The Tavern’s performance arena is an indoor, quasi-Globe-like stage with a thrust, raised gallery, arched entrances flanking the playing area, and a discovery space framed with columns. Faux Tudor timbers, windows, and lattice work are painted on the rear wall (as telescoped during the marathon, the costumes, similarly, were mostly generic Elizabethan simple tunics over baggy pants secured by long belts in which a variety of blades could be tucked).

The production itself, presented amidst the flurry of these theatrical paratexts, simply couldn’t stand up to the company’s claims. Of the ten percent of actors I could hear with any kind of regularity, only three spoke clearly. Laura Cole’s Margaret often railed so fast—and she’s the company



Laura Cole (left) as Margaret and Daniel Purvis (center) as Henry in Atlanta Shakespeare Company's 2008 production of *Henry the Sixth, Part Three*, directed by Jeff Watkins. Photo courtesy of Jeff Watkins.

"Text Coach"—that she slurred through words only to go back and repeat them a second time. Maurice Ralston's Richard of York was simply awful, throwing away one of the play's best speeches in favor of concentrating on a Wakefieldian leg wound. Bringing a fresh reading to a set piece is welcome, of course, but it seems to me that inaudible incomprehensibility is probably not the best place to start, especially if that set piece isn't familiar to most audiences. If Atlanta crowds are seeing these plays for the first time, as Watkins repeatedly suggests, how many of them really know about women's hides and tigers' hearts? Daniel Parvis's Henry delivered a quiet, moving molehill speech in 2.5, and Drew Reeves's fight choreography, especially for Joshua Lee Jones's Clifford and his own Gloucester was athletic and thrillingly executed. Mary Ruth Ralston's Messenger, who delivered the news of York's death in 2.1, was wonderful; hers was the evening's finest performance, in large part because she seemed completely unaffected. Her manner of speech was mellifluous yet unadorned, strangely soft yet powerful. I literally sat up and listened. If, as Watkins argues everywhere, the OP driving force is to heighten the focus on Shakespeare's language, then Ralston nailed it.

I should report, in the spirit of fairness, that the spectators in the Tavern were somewhere between enthralled and dazzled: they cheered for actors and lapped up every syllable of Watkins's pre-show pleas; during the

interval, they could be overheard referring to performers with first-name familiarity—many were clearly regular Taverngoers. They loved it all.

I do not entirely relish going after fellow practitioners so critically. In fact, while writing I was often put in mind of the fictional epistler Henry Root's protest: "Goats and monkeys, man, I'm on *your* side!" But there is a real problem here. In addition to perhaps learning something more about early modern stagecraft, what "Original Practice" is really doing is creating armies of spectators—and, worse, many *young* ones—who will most likely puff their chests out and announce, "Well, I'm a purist," like the nineteen-year-old who sat in my Shakespeare in Performance seminar and tsk-ed and sighed through scenes from various film adaptations: Julie Taymor's *Titus*, Tim Supple's *Twelfth Night*, and Richard Loncraine's *Richard III*. Trevor Nunn's film of *Twelfth Night*, however, she deemed "fine" and "pretty." When pressed on the fact that the costuming and setting were far from "pure," she argued that they were "old enough." What had she seen that instilled that sense of Shakespearean purity in such a young mind? "I went on a few field trips to that Shakespeare tavern in Atlanta." She's not the only one. Watkins's opening program "Message" refers to the company's "breathtaking array of education programs that each year impact tens of thousands of young people living in 93 Georgia communities and four neighboring states." It's truly commendable that Atlanta Shakespeare has thrived for so long, and that it can provide the educational opportunities that it does. But to do so whilst declaring allegiance to the protean god of "Original Practice" simply reminds those who know better that the deity was created in the convenient image of the company itself, and that the unique identity of this particular troupe rests largely in its own paratextual fantasies.



Twelfth Night

Presented by the **American Shakespeare Center** at the **Blackfriars Theatre**, Staunton, Virginia. June 17–December 5, 2008. Directed by Rob Clare. Costume design by Erin M. West With Alyssa Wilmoth (Viola), Chaney Tullos (Sebastian), Rene Thornton, Jr. (Orsino), Sarah Fallon (Olivia), Allison Glenzer (Maria), James Keegan (Toby Belch), Gregory Jon Phelps (Andrew Aguecheeck), John Harrell (Malvolio), Sasha Olinick (Feste), John Pasha (Antonio), Thomas Keegan (Fabian, Valentine), Stephen Lorne Williams (Sea Captain, Priest, Officer) and Solomon Stone Romney (Curio, Officer).