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*Twelfth Night* , and: *Measure for Measure* , and: *King Lear*  
(review)

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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).

*Measure for Measure*

Presented by the **American Shakespeare Center** at the **Blackfriars Theatre**, Staunton, Virginia. June 20–December 6, 2008. Directed by Patrick Tucker. Costume design Terry Southerington. With John Pasha (Duke), Rene Thornton, Jr. (Angelo), Stephen Jorne Williams (Escalus) Sarah Fallon (Isabella), John Harrell (Lucio), Gregory Jon Phelps (Claudio), Eliza Hofman (Juliet, Boy), Allison Glenzer (Mistress Overdone, Francisca, Friar Peter), James Keegan (Pompey), Alyssa Wilmoth (Froth, Mariana), Chaney Tullos (Provost), Thomas Keegan (Justice, Abhorson), Sasha Olinick (Barnadine, Friar Thomas).

*King Lear*

Presented by the **American Shakespeare Center** at the **Blackfriars Theatre**, Staunton, Virginia. June 17–December 5, 2008. Directed by Jim Warren. Costume design by Jenny McNee. With James Keegan (Lear), Alyssa Wilmoth (Cordelia), Allison Glenzer (Goneril), Sarah Fallon (Regan), Stephen Lorne Phillips (Gloucester), Gregory Jon Phelps (Edgar), John Pasha (Edmund), John Harrell (Fool), Christopher Seiler (Albany), Sasha Olinick (Cornwall), Chaney Tullos (France, Oswald), Thomas Keegan (Burgundy).

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Since 1998, the reconstructed Blackfriars in Staunton, Virginia has been a living laboratory for original staging practices. The shows are performed with no sets, universal lighting, and other elements of original staging practices. One of the major differences between original and modern staging is the interaction between audience and actors. Because of the universal lighting, audience members can see and be seen. In addition, members of the audience can choose to sit onstage or in the Lord's Gallery above the stage. Consequently, the actors frequently draw the audience into the play. At times, actors speak directly to the audience, or momentarily include them in the action as accomplices or even props. These interactions, along with the other original staging practices, result in shows that are the exact opposite of museum pieces—the performances often reveal how powerful, funny, and modern the plays are when played under the conditions for which they were first written.

*Twelfth Night* was both the popular hit of the 2008 summer season and a stellar example of how engaging original staging practices can be. During the gulling scene, Fabian and Feste passed out branches to the audience members sitting on stage, thereby creating a garden that the actors could hide behind as Malvolio read his letter. Andrew Aguecheek

hid aloft, in the Lord's Gallery, and his "Her C's, her U's and her T's? Why that" was directed to an audience member, allowing that person to shrug, whisper an answer or, (as has happened more than once), point to the appropriate region of the body in explanation. The latter reaction, especially, turned what in many productions is often a throwaway line into an extended moment of hilarity. Later on, during the duel scene between Aguecheek and Viola, audience members were coached to act as trainers, giving shoulder massages and pep talks.

None of these comic interactions, however, would matter if the play were not well acted and it is important to emphasize that the ASC hires excellent performers and, furthermore, trains them in speaking and acting the verse. The actors neither declaim the lines nor ignore the poetry, and their delivery is fluid, rapid, and unrushed. As well, the ASC makes use of two of the most important elements of staging in Shakespeare's day, the repertory system and doubling. This means that the actors know and trust each other deeply, and that even minor parts are handled by strong actors.

*Twelfth Night* especially emphasized how the ASC values these renaissance staging elements, and there was not one weak link in the cast. Viola/Cesario is, of course, the linchpin of any production. Alyssa Wilmoth was utterly fresh as she managed to enjoy the complications her disguise allowed her. Upon discovering that Olivia loved her, Wilmoth delivered "I am...the *man*" to the audience with wonder and just a touch of cocky self importance, as though Viola had just recognized the potency of her masculine sexuality and was elated by how well she had performed her role. Wilmoth's most moving performance, however, came during the reconciliation scene with Chaney Tullos's Sebastian. The twins' reconnection was warmly genuine, resisting sentimentality by fully exploring the wonder of their reunion. After almost two hours of comedy, many audience members found themselves blinking back tears.

Sasha Olinick's Feste and James Keegan's Sir Toby Belch were other standout performances. While rotund and clownish in appearance—complete with red nose, striped socks, and satchel containing a plastic fish, boxing glove and other essential items—Olinick's comedic talents complemented Feste's perceptiveness and helped him moderate the character's tendency towards melancholy. His most profound insights were tinged with humor as he shared his perspicacity with audience. As for Sir Toby, there is always the risk that the character can become one dimensional—either a charming playboy or an unrepentant bully. Keegan, however, managed to be both and more. His proclivity for trouble-making was



Alyssa Wilmoth as Viola in the American Shakespeare Center's 2008 production of *Twelfth Night*, directed by Rob Clare. Photo by Tommy Thompson.

edged with a sometimes unnerving sexuality, enhanced by his six-foot-something frame—in fact the sexiest “love” scene of the season involved the smacker he laid on Maria. Further, as he bellowed at Malvolio about “cakes and ale,” many of the audience, along with Sir Andrew, were left quaking in their boots.

John Harrell's performance of Malvolio was astounding. His physicality bordered on the chaotic, but was reined in enough to elicit the audience's sympathy and laughter. His transition from scowl to smile at the end of the letter scene was almost uncomfortably long. Yet finally, with razor sharp precision and not a nano-second too soon, his forced beam assaulted the spectators, who disintegrated into side-clutching helplessness. And while many productions either pull back from the brutality of Malvolio's imprisonment or provide an extra-textual scene of reconciliation, (or revenge), the ASC embraced the open-ended discomfort of the ending as written. Harrell's anger and shock in the final scene were not undercut by an ounce of humor, but, it was also not dwelt upon—an interesting choice considering the contemporary tendency to give Malvolio the last “word.”

Unfortunately the audience-actor collaboration that worked so splendidly in *Twelfth Night* fell flat in *Measure for Measure* because it seemed as if the director was reluctant to let Shakespeare's comedy emerge from the

language. This was regrettable as the ASC prides itself on its commitment to allowing the text to reveal all; however in *Measure* the ASC's pledge to honor the alliance between text, audience and actors was surrendered for cheap laughs. Consequently the actors struggled to find subtlety, variation, or development in their characters. For instance, Alison Glenzer's Mistress Overdone lived up to her name, punching up the bawdiness until it was indeed overdone, and Sarah Fallon's Isabella was one dimensional, *only* revolted by Angelo's sexuality. Keegan's Pompey—with campy white pancake makeup and wearing multi-colored ribbons in his beard—sporting an obscenely oversized “bum” which overwhelmed the text. Furthermore, the exchange between Pompey and Abhorson (4.2) was almost offensively suggestive as Pompey wielded the executioner's blade between his legs. Inappropriate erections also proved to be a problem for Angelo. In 2.2, as he uttered “What's this, what's this? Is this her fault or mine?” it became clear to the audience that he was not so much wrestling with a tortured conscience, after Isabella made her desperate pleas for Claudio's life, but with an embarrassing inconvenience that has made many a Catholic schoolboy shudder with embarrassment. As Angelo shared with the audience his horror at this unwelcome presence, the complexity of his agonized musings over the source of temptation was utterly lost.

One of the most problematic moments in this production came at the end of 3.1. As the Duke shared his plans to rectify Angelo's offences with the audience, he broke into a peculiar chant. It seemed that the director wanted to highlight the shift from prose to verse and emphasize the Duke's almost mystical control of the character's lives. But between the difficulty of the speech's imagery and the shift in performance style, the meaning became lost, especially because Pasha seemed uncomfortable with the heightened style. What should have been a dramatic punctuation before intermission ended up as merely confusing.

In much the same way, the ending also suffered from a good idea that was not integrated with the play as a whole. In many modern productions Isabella decides to reject the Duke. This production was open to the ambiguity of the textual silence but, Isabella's decision making process was caricatured. The Duke held out the necklace of his office, while the Nun dangled a cross, and Isabella vacillated between them, with an indecision unsupported by the previous two hours. If Isabella had grown and change from her early stance of absolute piety, showing her attraction to both the cloister and the court would have been a profound and satisfying ending, but instead it seemed merely like an excuse to segue into an upbeat dance number and audience-pleasing happy ending.

The crowning achievement of the season was undoubtedly *King Lear*. While the original staging practices make comedies more raucous, the intimate nature of the small theatre and the universal lighting made the tragedy of *King Lear* almost unbearable. A perfect example of this intensity was the sequence of scenes from 2.2 to 2.4. In many productions, when Edgar enters to declare his decision to masquerade as Poor Tom, he is usually in spotlight, or in front of the lowered curtain, so that the stock Kent (who obviously cannot exit) is not visible. At the very least, Edgar is on a different level to show that the scene takes place elsewhere. But on the stage of the Blackfriars, Kent was fully visible just a few feet from Edgar. The image of the two wronged men intensified the plight of both, and the audience did not need to be concerned about exactly where the scene took place. Greg Phelps succeeded brilliantly in playing all the various roles Edgar adopts while never entirely allowing Edgar to disappear. When Gloucester shows up in the storm scene, Phelps expressed subtle but clear longings to reveal himself to his father, and a second later fully inhabited the role of Poor Tom. The intimate size of the Blackfriars only increased the power of Phelps' performance; with no lighting cues to direct the audience's attention, Phelps was able to shift his emotional register subtly and frequently, aware that someone was probably watching him every moment. Gloucester's blinding was also intensified, horrifically, in such an intimate space. The ASC privileges the imagination over special effects and as Cornwall rammed his foot into Gloucester's stomach in preparation to pluck out the "vile jelly," the audience was allowed to construct the appalling action for themselves as the perpetrators surrounded their prey. Consequently, even the presence of a quivering eyeball on the end of Cornwall's sword—a prop that could potentially negate something of the scene's grisly potency—did not lessen the horror.

Unlike in *Measure*, interaction with the audience was very finely tuned in this production. Lear did not acknowledge the audience until his mad scene, at which point the line "See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief" was directed to two audience members who were then told to "Change places" and the entire play was paused while the two decided what to do. Edgar almost never addressed the audience, but Pasha's Edmund engaged constantly—seducing various spectators with a sinister yet mouth watering sexuality, and making them co-conspirators in his plans.

Harrell's Fool was a magnificent mixture of comedy and pathos. Dressed like the other characters in basic browns and grays, but with a fool's cap, he carried a death's head on a stick. This prop was no false





John Harrell as Fool in the American Shakespeare Center's 2008 production of *King Lear*, directed by Jim Warren. Photo by Tommy Thompson.





James Keegan as Lear in the American Shakespeare Center's 2008 production of *King Lear*, directed by Jim Warren. Photo by Tommy Thompson.

bauble; it was used variously as a pointer, a microphone, a wheel of fortune, an umbrella and a stand-in for Goneril. Armed with this sinister device, Harrell exemplified the all licensed fool; this production offered no shivering fool, clinging desperately to his master for comfort from the storm, but a philosophical and wry commentator on the nature of life, death and kingly responsibility.

While all the performances were strong, that of Lear was especially outstanding. Keegan is younger than men who typically play Lear and although he looked old enough for the part, he was vigorous and strong enough to make his threats and curses frightening—here was a Lear who could very well have taken back his kingdom, a Lear who would not have had a problem killing the soldier hanging Cordelia. While Keegan's vigor made the King's decision to give up his kingdom seem less rational—rubbing up against the text and its indication that he is old and failing—it made the motivations of his daughters completely believable. Keegan also offered tremendous vocal range, shifting easily from a muted whisper to a bellow. This range was particularly apparent when he entered howling, carrying the dead Cordelia. Keegan, a professor as well as an actor, explored several interpretations of Lear during rehearsal. He explained his central question as he created his Lear: "Does Lear look solely into the abyss...or is there some deeper vision of truth there—some odd teetering balance of the redemptive and nihilistic potentialities?" In the Blackfriars space, whilst uttering these lines, Keegan's exploration of this delicate balance was crystal clear. Certainly, on a stage with no scenery and only necessary props, Keegan's voice was his greatest asset, making him kingly, insane, and tragic in turn.

The ASC's *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night* demonstrated the power and energy that original staging practices can offer, and also succeeded completely as productions of two of Shakespeare's favorite plays. *Measure for Measure* on the other hand, demonstrated the danger of not committing fully to the practices—if a production is half-hearted in embracing the virtues of original staging, it will fail to deliver a coherent and enjoyable performance.