

Elizabethan Theatre Reconstruction: Fetish, Fascination, or Folly?

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- On August 11, 2002 *The Guardian* reported that after negotiations broke down between organizers and the Stratford-upon-Avon town council, Shakespeare's World would be built in Midland, Pennsylvania. According to *The Guardian*, Shakespeare's World, with a projected budget of \$320 million, will be constructed around water representing the Avon and Thames, "allowing visitors to cross between the capital city and the birthplace of The Bard, 'reliving life as he knew it'." Visitors to Shakespeare's World will enter the complex through an electronic 'time tunnel', using special effects from the film industry. Attractions will include a tournament field, archery butts, siege weapons, stocks and a ducking stool. There will also be a maze and chessboard with life-size pieces representing the Bard's famous characters and professional performers will stage street productions of the plays. Kris Kliszewicz, chairman of Shakespeare's World, told the BBC's *World Business Report* that this project was not going to be mere crass commercialism, "'It's no theme park, there's no mechanical rides: It's a complete faithful reconstruction of Stratford in his time and parts of London as it was, and there will be living centres and the houses and businesses will be functioning.'" Kliszewicz takes great offense when his project is referred to as a theme park and insists that it should be called a "visitor experience centre."
- In December 2001, Shakespeare & Company of Lenox, MA announced receipt of a one million dollar federal grant to support the development of an International Center for Shakespeare Performance and Studies, with the authentic reconstruction of the Rose Playhouse as its centerpiece. The Rose Playhouse U.S.A., scheduled to open roughly in 2007, will be surrounded by a collection of buildings inspired by the Elizabethan spirit of Bankside around 1590. These structures will comprise the Rose Village which will house a year round museum and exhibition center, gallery, classroom and rehearsal space, and working artisan shops where leather and armor work, costumes, stonework, herbs and flowers, and printing will be produced and sold. Tina Packer, artistic director of Shakespeare & Co., asserts that the complex "will provide a year round cultural attraction in the Berkshires, and promises to have a dramatic economic impact on Western Massachusetts." The final budget for the envisioned project has not been released but the company's webpage concedes that it will cost "several million dollars."

What are we to make of these types of initiatives? Are these legitimate artistic, educational projects or do they represent a disturbing trend—what Charles Marowitz

referred to (in another context) as the harlotry in bardolatry?¹ Should we applaud Packer for the purity of her vision and question the motives of Kliszewicz? Are such ventures new versions of Colonial Williamsburg, or are they variations upon Epcot Center and high-rent Renaissance fairs? Should we ask why such replicas are being built in America in the first place, or even the reason for such efforts at all? Do such initiatives further our pedagogical goals as educators or do they ultimately undermine them? And finally, is there any real qualitative difference between these efforts and Sam Wanamaker's vision of Shakespeare's Globe in London?

The questions I have posed are loaded, pejorative and judgmental. First of all, there is the implicit assumption in my query that sites such as Colonial Williamsburg are somehow more valid—have more inherent integrity—than say Epcot Center. But why? This is a supposition predicated solely on class snobbery. The same holds true comparing the efforts of Packer and Kliszewicz. Is Tina Packer to be applauded for appealing to the wealthy Berkshire summer crowd—for providing another form of cultural tourism to the Tanglewood groupies (in part, at taxpayer expense), giving them the kind of experience that Donald Kennedy refers to as “commodity art.”² Packer's efforts will be based on the best historical research, there will be an educational center, and the works of the Bard will be performed by a group of well-trained professional performers. The patina of high art will glow in the Berkshire sunset reflected off glasses of chardonnay as the smell of Brie wafts in the wind. In contrast, Shakespeare's World, located in the environs of working-class Pittsburgh, just north of West Virginia, will invariably attract a very different crowd. Families will pull up in minivans and pick-up trucks. Patrons dressed in T-shirts and shorts will pour into the theme park, munch on hotdogs and quaff beers (most certainly served in yard-size Tudor steins) and gawk at the street performers. Since both projects are barely off the drawing board, this is all wild supposition. I think it is safe to say, however, that a journey to Shakespeare's World—despite the tasteless kitsch—will be a hell of a lot more fun than a somber self-important

¹ Charles Marowitz. *Recycling Shakespeare*, New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1991.

² Dennis Kennedy, “Shakespeare and Cultural Tourism, *Theatre Journal* 50 (1998), 180.

trip to Lenox, Massachusetts. I also think it is a safe bet that the prices at the gift shop in Shakespeare's World will be lower than those at Shakespeare and Company.

I write all this with tongue firmly half in cheek—since I must admit I have been bringing my own family to the Berkshires religiously for years and my children have an entire collection of Shakespeare and Company T-shirts (which cost a pretty penny I might add...). But I also have been to Disneyworld, and with a huge amount of guilt, relished the experience of eating lunch in China and dinner in Scandinavia after enjoying the amusement rides. The experiences are really not that dissimilar—and certainly not as different as the patrons of high art would suppose. Sitting outdoors, being eaten alive by mosquitoes (and this was before West Nile virus!), and often watching a mundane performance of Shakespeare is really not inherently better than watching a high-tech, polished exhibition about a facet of American history (it must be noted that Shakes & Co. inaugurated a sleek, new indoor performance space this past summer): You just feel like a better person—and a better parent—for doing one instead of the other. In fact, it might be fascinating to see what Disney would do with Shakespeare.³

There has yet to be serious discussion among scholars regarding the efforts of either Kliszewicz or Packer. There has been, however, a great deal of debate regarding the reconstruction of the Globe in London. Serious questions have been raised about the pedagogical, aesthetic and philosophical meaning of Wanamaker's efforts. These issues have been addressed by a number of scholars including Drakakis, Orgel, and Worthen. Some of the criticism has been quite harsh with New Historicists and Cultural Materialists detecting a chauvinistic right-wing agenda in the reconstruction effort.⁴ In the five years since the New Globe opened its doors to public performance, the debate

³ See Robin Pogrebin, "Disney Enlists Theater Innovators for Theme Park Show," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2003, B1: "Think Disney, and what often spring to mind are cartoon characters and animated movies. But since it hired the director and designer Julie Taymor to create the hit 1998 Broadway production of "The Lion King," this entertainment company has been playing against type by enlisting devoted theater and opera talent for new work that is dedicated to the stage, not the screen."

⁴ Gabriel Egan, "Reconstructions of the Globe: A Retrospective," *Shakespeare Survey* 52, edited by Stanley Wells, Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1999, 14.

has moved from the philosophical to the practical. This paper will address the problematic nature of performance in such a space and the implications it has upon future endeavors.

My first encounter with Shakespeare's Globe occurred in the summer of 1995 when I taught a group of American students in London. We were able to view the reconstruction while it was still in process. The tour provided an unsurpassed pedagogical experience allowing us to physically inhabit a space that we had discussed at length. As we walked in the yard and stood in the galleries, we were able to imagine what performance in such a space might have been like. What was missing was the physical presence of actors enacting the works of Shakespeare and, of course, the Elizabethan audience that would have been present. At the time of this first visit, the platform was still a shell and the contentious pillars had yet to be installed. The space—and our relation to it—was posited somewhere between the possible and practical. It was, in retrospect, the ideal way to experience the facility before nasty little problems such as sightlines, acoustics, and questionable staging practices impeded upon our collective imagination.

All of these problems, and more, reared their ugly heads in the ensuing years. Stephen Orgel's response to the space during the inaugural season was ambivalent at best. Orgel admitted to feelings of awe and wonder at the reconstruction but concluded, despite his historical fascination, that it was a dreadful performance space. First, he pointed out that historical accuracy often carries a burdensome price. The galleries, designed for the smaller Elizabethan frame, provided inadequate legroom. Second, the acoustics were so poor that large blocks of texts were inaudible. Third, the pillars proved onerous to both spectators and actors blocking sightlines for the former and making performance difficult for the latter.⁵ Alan Dessen and Paul Nelsen also noted the problematic placement of the pillars (despite their supposed historic exactness) and the discomfort it caused the actors who insisted that it simply couldn't be accurate because it made performing nearly

⁵ Stephen Orgel, "What's the Globe Good For?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998): 191.

impossible.⁶ Orgel's response to the pillar placement controversy was simple: "The evidence overwhelmingly indicates ... that the pillars are historically correct: it is the actors who are not authentic."⁷ Orgel's pithy observation sums up a series of problematic issues surrounding performance at the so-called New Globe: What in fact is being performed? Are these "authentic" productions, reproductions or simulations? Even well received productions (not all of them have been) such as this past summer's *Twelfth Night* raise a slew of questions. Mark Rylance's performance of Olivia was indeed impressive, but was it historically accurate—either in its presentation or in its reception by the audience?

Since we have such a dearth of information about actual Elizabethan acting, it would be impossible to say if Rylance's performance was an "accurate" portrayal (whatever that means). It certainly was not an Elizabethan performance by any stretch of the imagination. The actors at the New Globe are classically trained. John Barton defines such an acting approach as the synthesis of the "two traditions": an amalgam between the system of Stanislavsky and intense vocal training.⁸ The Elizabethans of course had neither—the system didn't exist and their background in rhetoric substituted for modern vocal training, and as the work of Patrick Tucker indicates, Shakespeare's company rehearsed and performed in a manner foreign to modern actors.⁹ Equally important, the Elizabethan audience, accustomed to an oral tradition, listened and viewed a performance in a radically different manner than we do.

The gender issue in casting is also a barrier preventing the reclamation of the so-called Elizabethan experience in performance. Those of us who have had the pleasure of seeing Charles Ludlum, Charles Busch or even Fiona Shaw (as Richard II) perform know what

⁶ Paul Nelsen, "Positing Pillars at the Globe," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997): 324-325.

Alan C. Dessen, "Globe Matters," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998): 195-196.

⁷ Stephen Orgel, "What's the Globe Good For?" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 49 (1998): 191.

⁸ John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare*, New York: Methuen, in association with Channel Four Television Company, 1984.

⁹ Patrick Tucker, *Secrets of Acting Shakespeare: The Original Approach*, New York: Routledge, 2002.

it means when a man plays a woman on the stage (or vice versa) and it has nothing to do with late 16th and early 17th century theatrical convention. Cross-gender casting is a de facto political statement in the post-modern era whether it is intended or not. Finally, the androgynous nature of a beautiful adolescent boy portraying a woman (as would have apparently been the case) is markedly different from an older, middle-aged guy in drag—no matter how well it is done.

The costuming of actors at the New Globe also raises problematic concerns. No matter how authenticate the costumes are constructed (as they were for *Twelfth Night*); there is probably little correlation between them and those used in the original 1602 production. The 2002 *Twelfth Night* program asserts “this production is the most authentic that the Globe Theatre Company has staged to date.”¹⁰ The costumes for the production were meticulously crafted and used only materials available at that time and were constructed using Elizabethan cutting practices and tailoring techniques.¹¹ But all this research and hard work is no guarantee of authenticity, accuracy or even relevancy. Did Shakespeare’s company have a costume designer who coordinated the look or insisted on consistency? Did anyone in the audience expect or care if the costumes were of a whole? A number of scholars have noted that costumes were often bought from serving people who had inherited the finery of their masters. If this was indeed the case, many costumes—particularly the most spectacular—were probably from the early reign of Elizabeth and were already dated in 1602. More than likely, there was a great deal of diversity in the costuming, with no sense of Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*.

The audience reception of a historically accurate production of Shakespeare at the New Globe in 2002 or 2003 simply cannot be similar to how it was experienced at the original Globe four hundred years ago. The audience is radically different—physically, psychologically, socially, linguistically, etc. It is sheer hubris to think we can ever experience Shakespeare’s works in a manner akin to the Elizabethans. As Gabriel Egan

¹⁰ Zoe Gray “Clothing *Twelfth Night*” Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre: The Season of Cupid & Psyche 2002: unpaginated.

¹¹ Ibid.

points out, “there is no possibility of recreating Elizabethan London, its politics, its relation with a rapidly expanding world of commerce, and its inhabitants who visited the theatres.”¹² Sitting in cramped seats, straining to see the actors when they move around the pillars, losing chunks of text when the actors turn away, or standing endlessly in the yard does not make for a particularly pleasant theatre-going experience. Yet a great number of people seem to enjoy it immensely, particularly those playing the part of “groundlings.” So what in fact is going on here? Clearly a number of patrons relish the fantasy of participating in an interactive entertainment akin to a Renaissance fair and are willing to forgo, at the very least, personal comfort. Sure it is fun (for awhile) but ultimately what is the point?

The objective of a reconstructed performance apparently is to provide educational entertainment while maintaining a veneer of high culture. The New Globe is a sophisticated theme park for the haute bourgeoisie; a chance to enact a part (Elizabethan playgoer/groundling) while viewing a well produced production. W.B. Worthen sums it up succinctly: “The Globe is a tourist destination, and there are T-shirts and postcards and film and books in the gift shop ... Yet the Globe most resembles theme parks in what it sells: a mediated experience of the past in the present.”¹³

I would argue—as a teacher and a parent—that inherently there is nothing wrong with such an “edutainment” experience.¹⁴ The problem, as I perceive it, occurs when the viewer, scholar or artist makes sweeping claims of authenticity (which are false) or justifies a mediocre production on the grounds that works presented in such a venue are somehow beyond criticism because of the need for accuracy, and finally when such ventures suck both oxygen and resources from other artistic endeavors. The fact that the managers of the New Globe (and Kliszewicz & Packer) vigorously deny that their ventures are theme parks is revealing and fascinating. Why is there so much insecurity

¹² Gabriel Egan, “Reconstructions of the Globe: A Retrospective,” *Shakespeare Survey* 52, edited by Stanley Wells, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 14.

¹³ W.B. Worthen, *Reconstructing the Globe* *Shakespeare Survey* 52, edited by Stanley Wells, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 41.

¹⁴ Dennis Kennedy, “Shakespeare and Cultural Tourism,” *Theatre Journal* 50 (1998), 181.

about such an appellation? The answer clearly lies in the nature of the tourist trade and the commercial implications of being perceived as being *déclassé*. All of these producers are trading on class-consciousness and the profitability of high art. When you are trying to raise millions of dollars, you need to sell your product—any of us who have been involved in a capital campaign implicitly understand this.

What matters in a Shakespearean performance is the ability of actors to connect with the audience, to make the meaning of the language transparent and to create a visceral emotional experience that opens up avenues of investigation. It would be naïve to think that space has no impact on performance—the two are integrally linked. Peter Brook argued influentially and eloquently, however, that the artist must begin with an empty space and reclaim the essence of performance that in its purest form exists solely between the actor and audience.¹⁵ Brook's assertion was prompted, in part, by disgust with the ever-increasing magnificence of British Shakespearean production that emphasized glitz over substance, resulting in what he referred to as “dead theatre.” The New Globe has the potential to create the deadest kind of consumer theatre where members of the audience congratulate themselves for literally suffering through “great” art.

This doesn't have to be the case at the New Globe and thus far—on occasion, it has not been so. A number of productions have garnered both popular and critical acclaim. The continued success of Shakespearean production at the New Globe, however, will be predicated upon the company creating effective, moving theatre not because of the physical space but in spite of it. This point was illustrated last year when the company's 2001 production of *Cymbeline* was received enthusiastically at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Critics noted the ingenuity of the staging, the clarity of the language, the integration of music, the challenge of the doubling and the commitment of the actors. *Cymbeline* was a success at BAM because it was an innovative first-rate production regardless of the physical properties of the space in which it was performed.

¹⁵ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, New York, Atheneum, 1968.

Shakespeare, as a theatre practitioner seeking royal patronage, implicitly understood the necessity to be flexible in the physical conception of his plays. The goal of all Elizabethan (and Stuart) theatre companies was to have their work picked up for performance at court. It was therefore essential that the plays not be limited by spatial constraints. *The Tempest*, for example, was probably performed at the Globe, Blackfriars and in the second Banqueting Hall at Whitehall.¹⁶ Undoubtedly, adjustments in production—both textual and performative—were made to accord with the specific spatial configurations found in the each performance space. Other than the famous reference to the Wooden O in *Henry V*, there is nothing in the Shakespearean canon that suggests that his plays were written for exclusive performance at the Globe or the Rose.

At a time when the funding of the arts in America is in severe decline and both the National and the RSC in England are reeling financially, money and energy are pouring into reconstruction ventures. The New Globe is supposedly an independent entity that receives no public funding (although this is a questionable assertion—there are numerous secondary costs being absorbed by the government: The extension of the Jubilee line, various infrastructure costs, etc.); Shakespeare's World will be built entirely with private funding (but again, undoubtedly there will be tax breaks and various incentives to build in a particular locale); and, as mentioned above, Shakespeare & Company has already received a million dollars in public funding and undoubtedly more will be sought from various funding agencies, both public and private. No matter how you figure it, these efforts are subsidized to a greater or lesser degree. Support for the New Globe can be justified—has been justified—on cultural grounds as being part of the English cultural patrimony. This, in turn, has led to rather vitriolic criticism from those who believe it is a right-wing political construct.¹⁷ Shakespeare & Company does not attempt to play the cultural card, but instead lauds the project on economic and educational terms. The

¹⁶ Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, eds. Introduction, *The Tempest*, Surrey: Thomas Nelson, 1999.

¹⁷ John Drakakis, "Theatre, Ideology, and Institution: Shakespeare and the Roadsweepers", in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. Graham Holderness, Manchester, 1988, pp. 24-41.

Shakespeare and Company website claims that the Rose reconstruction will benefit the economy of Massachusetts and provide an unparalleled educational asset.¹⁸

It is fair game to question the educational, financial and cultural propriety of such initiatives that receive public or foundation support. You can't have it both ways. If these efforts are edutainment theme parks intended to be profit generating operations (such as Epcot Center at Disneyworld) then the expenditure of public funding is highly questionable. If the reconstructions are true educational and cultural centers then they should be in the public domain connected to established educational institutions (such as the Greek Theatre at Berkeley or the Folger Library Theatre in Washington, DC) and not part of a privately controlled theater organization. Ultimately the issue always goes back to defining the underlying purpose of such reconstructive activity. Is the societal goal to promote the production of theatre for the general public or is it to subsidize a privately held company that is looking for the cachet of high art? Finally, tough decisions have to be made as to the most effective way to spend limited cultural resources. Is a multi-million dollar reconstruction of an Elizabethan theatre at an elite tourist destination more pedagogically effective and socially responsible than underwriting a score of modest Shakespearean acting troupes dedicated to visiting secondary schools and colleges across the nation, particularly outside of major cultural centers? I have my doubts....

¹⁸ <http://www.shakespeare.org/rose/Reconstruction.html>