Producing Shakespeare

Is there a “traditional” tradition?

In 400 years of Shakespeare productions, the concept of a single standard is a moving target.

By Lue Morgan Douthit

This 1999 production of *Antony and Cleopatra* at Shakespeare’s Globe had an all-male cast, as Shakespeare would have. Paul Shelley plays Mark Antony and Mark Rylance plays Cleopatra. OSF also has had an all-male production: *Henry IV, Part II*, directed by Libby Appel in 1999.

John Tramper

My introduction to Shakespeare was in middle school, attending performances at what was then called the Great Lakes Shakespeare Festival and a production of *Hamlet* at the Cleveland Play House. I must confess that I don’t remember much about any of those productions, but one that did stick was the Franco Zeffirelli film of *Romeo and Juliet* I saw in my freshman year in high school. How he told that story left such an impression on me that every production I have seen since is put up against it. I guess you could say that film represents my “traditional” Shakespeare.

What I mean by that is everyone has a sense—in their mind’s eye—of how Shakespeare should be produced. Mine was initially based on those first productions I saw. It wasn’t until later in my theatre-going practice that I learned there were ways to produce the plays other than in Elizabethan costuming.

What is defined as “traditional” means essentially something called “original practice”—costumes and settings that strive to accurately replicate those of Shakespeare’s time. How “historically accurate” has been defined in the 400 years since the first Shakespearean productions is the subject of this article. In truth, it’s hard to say.

First of all, we don’t really know what those first productions looked like. We have some circumstantial evidence from which we can deduce a few things: There is a prop and costume list from theatre producer Philip Henslowe, a rival of Shakespeare’s company; we have a drawing of the Swan Theatre from a Dutch visitor; and we have Henry Peacham’s drawing of a scene from *Titus Andronicus*, which shows actors in toga-style tunics along with Elizabethan costuming.

> *In Shakespeare’s time, there was little attempt at what we might deem “historical costumes.” For the most part, the costumes consisted of contemporary clothing.*

But really we have no substantive knowledge of what the actors wore or what the acting style might have been like. We don’t think there was much scenery, and as for costumes, it seems there was little, if any, attempt at what we might deem “historical” costuming. For the most part, the costumes consisted of contemporary clothing. This speculation comes from Henslowe’s list, which documented specific pieces of clothing that we think were recycled from various royal patrons. As a matter of fact, we think the first “historically accurate” production of a Shakespeare play was *King John*, in 1842, in which producer and lead actor William Charles Macready tried to replicate what people might have worn in 13th-century England.

Although we can be certain of little when speaking about how Shakespeare’s plays were originally produced, some things seem a safe bet. There were two kinds of theatre: an open-air structure (similar to our own Elizabethan Stage) and an indoor one (the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia, is a fine replica). There were companies of actors who were patronized by royalty, a gesture much appreciated because actors were considered vagabonds. All the roles were played by men or boys; actors learned only their lines, or “sides,” and there was no one style of acting. Because plays changed frequently—the average length of a run was 10 days—actors kept thousands of lines in their heads. It is hard to imagine that every actor accurately recited a playwright’s words, especially since each production employed a prompter to help the actors get through it. This is pretty much how things were until 1642, when the Puritans closed England’s theatres.

The Restoration to the 18th century

Following Charles II’s restoration to the English throne in 1660, the playhouses in London were open for business again—with some big changes. The theatres were exclusively indoors. Costumes tended to be the latest fashion. Women were now allowed to perform women’s roles. Shakespeare’s plays were in fierce competition with the new comedies of the age, such as *The Belle’s Stratagem*. Shakespeare was produced almost solely in adaptations (such as William Davenant’s reworking of *The Tempest*, in which practically everyone has an additional sibling). It wasn’t until the middle of the 18th century when actor-manager David Garrick insisted on the superiority of Shakespeare’s original texts that the playwright’s works grew in popularity in England.

The 19th century

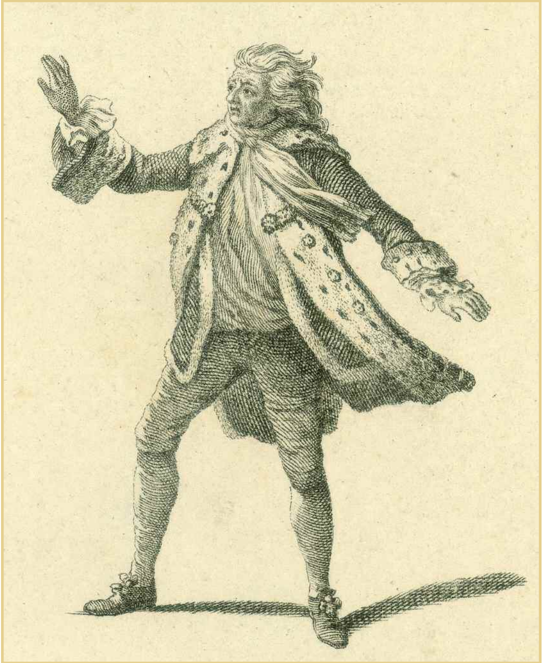
Perhaps one of the most significant developments in this century was the desire for historical accuracy. Companies now sought to recreate the fashion and style of living of the period in which the play was set. The current notion of “traditional” Shakespeare stems from this era. Along with restoring Shakespeare’s full texts, theatre artists at the end of the 19th century were also interested in examining and replicating the history of the plays, including how they might have looked in their original productions. As the great 20th-century British actor and director Tyrone Guthrie once noted, "What we of the 20th century have inherited is not a Shakespearean tradition, it is merely a legacy of 19th-century theatrical conventions."

The 20th century

As a reaction to the rise of historical accuracy in the 19th century, early 20th-century audiences began to see productions in modern dress—especially in the 1920s with Barry Jackson's productions at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in England.

In turn, a reaction to this movement gave rise to what is labeled "Stratford Elizabethanism," which insisted on a strong, historically based Elizabethan look in costuming.

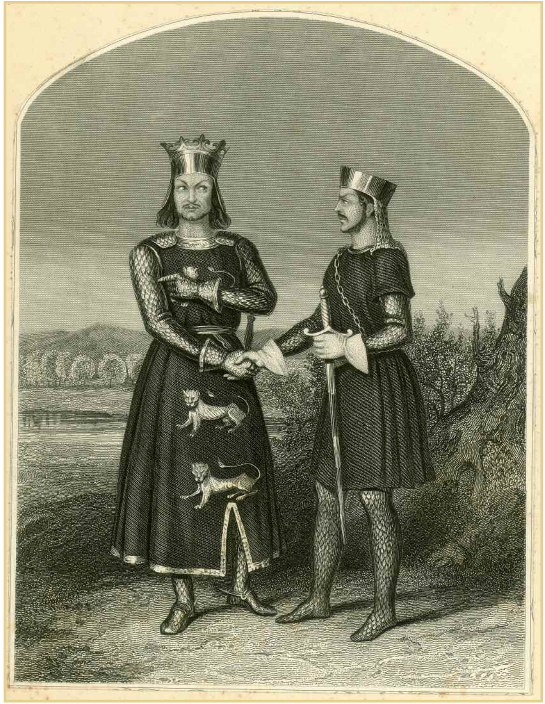
In the middle of the 20th century, directors began setting Shakespeare's plays in specific historical periods to help express their unique interpretation of the play. Guthrie, for example, set the war-torn *Troilus and Cressida* in Edwardian England. He wanted the English audience to bring their knowledge about that period to bear on the characters. In such a "metaphor production," the setting is moved to a different time period. It shakes up the play in what may seem like strange and unnatural ways to bring out certain ideas in the text.



1742

A drawing of David Garrick playing King Lear in a 1742 production. The style then was to wear contemporary dress, as had been done in Shakespeare's day.

Beginning in the 1960s, directors started using larger theatrical gestures to create visually provocative pieces. Peter Brook's famous *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comes to mind. Trevor R. Griffiths describes the production as follows: "Brook's staging is neither Elizabethan nor Athenian, nor did he have any truck with mimetic woods: the permanent set was a white box which reminded critics of a circus ring, a gymnasium and an operating theatre." For literary journalist Ron Rosenbaum, that production seminally hooked him on Shakespeare, as he notes in the introduction to his 2006 book, *The Shakespeare Wars: Clashing Scholars, Public Fiascoes, Palace Coups*.



1842

One hundred years later, historical productions became all the rage. Actor/manager William Charles Macready (left) plays John, and John Cooper plays Hubert in an 1842 production of *King John* that is set in the 13th century—perhaps the first Shakespeare production to aim for historical accuracy.

1892

Fifty years later, Elizabethan is in. Ellen Terry plays Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII*, wearing Elizabethan garb with touches of contemporary high fashion.

Photos courtesy of RSC

Today we have all these choices and more. For example, the British company Cheek by Jowl explored love and gender in *As You Like It* by using an all-male cast, which, of course, was a Shakespearean acting convention.

The times and the conventions

Every production must reconcile the fact that plays take place in four different time periods: the time it was written, the time the play is originally set, the time period chosen by the director and the time the audience sees the production. An example of how these four time periods connect can be seen in this year's production of *Coriolanus*. We deliberately chose to produce the play this year because it's an election year, and we think that what the play has to say about the electorate is still relevant. The fact that Shakespeare wrote *Coriolanus* in 1607–1608 and set it in ancient Rome—both time periods foreign to us—played into director Laird Williamson's decision to bring the costume feel of the production into the 20th century, which is closer to our sensibilities.

> *British director Tyrone Guthrie set the war-torn* Troilus and Cressida *in Edwardian England. He wanted the English audience to bring their knowledge about that period to bear on the characters.*

The use of history is one component that theatre producers have always considered when producing these plays. Another consideration is production history. Because we continually produce Shakespeare's plays over and over again, we have a catalog of performances accumulated over the years. And we each have our favorite versions of these plays. For me, the best production in my mind's eye is an amalgamation of pieces from different productions. I have my favorite Juliet from one production, favorite Romeo from another, and a favorite setting from a third and so forth. And in the desire to be creative, directors over the past 400 years have looked to past productions: either to inspire them or to avoid.

One last consideration is theatrical conventions, which have changed over time. The kinds of plays that were written in ancient Greece have as much to do with the large amphitheatres and the conventions that were a result of that space (masks for instance) as with literary conventions of the time. Plays were written for specific theatre spaces. This is true of those written by Elizabethan writers for outdoor theatres like the Globe, as well as for Molière's plays, written for indoor theatres. And the larger proscenium theatres of the 19th century heavily influenced the dramatic literature of its time.

Some people think that the five-act structure of the Shakespeare plays, as printed in the 1623 Folio, is a delineation based on how long a taper (candle) would last. (So much for the integrity of dramatic action!) Other historians think that the first scene in plays written during the Restoration and into the 18th century was often just marking time—that the play often didn't start until the second scene, when everyone might have arrived at the theatre. (They didn't have the OSF convention of starting shows on time, obviously.) Richard Wagner introduced the idea of using lights to focus our attention, not on the late-arriving socialites and royalty as in Molière's theatre, but on the stage. He was the first to lower the lights in the auditorium. Each historical time period has agreed upon some of these conventions in terms of theatrical presentation.

Producing plays from different time periods means that we translate the conventions of one time period (Shakespeare's boy actors, no intermission, daylight) to our conventions (women playing those roles, intermissions, performances at night). With the rise of new technologies in theatrical productions (think video, slides, text messaging), I predict new conventions will emerge. Re-invention, after all, has always been the function of Shakespeare in performance, as noted in this brief discussion of 400 years of Shakespeare production.

As cultural historian Geoffrey O'Brien explains: "It could have turned out otherwise: If the English Civil War (1642–1660) had not disrupted the line of transmission, or if the post-Restoration theatre had not rejected the plays except in heavily revised form, we might have something more in the nature of Kabuki or Peking opera, a fixed tradition of gestures and voicings, with ritual drumbeats and trumpet flourishes marking the exits and entrances."

The point is that we don't have a performance style set in stone. It wasn't that way from the beginning, and we continue to carry on that "tradition" today. I look forward to seeing how the next *Romeo and Juliet* matches up with the vision in my head. And I like the comparative shopping. ●

Literary Assistant Lezlie Cross contributed to this article.

Note: A panel discussion on this subject with Artistic Director Bill Rauch, Lue Douthit, Costume Designer Deborah M. Dryden and other OSF staff members will be held April 23 from 12:00–1:00 p.m. in Carpenter Hall. This is a free, ticketed event. There will be a live webcast and excerpts will be available on the web. An edited transcript will also be published in the summer Prologue.

Further Reading

Editors Barbara Hodgdon and W.B. Worthen, *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*
Editors Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*
Editor Russell Jackson, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*
Editors Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*
Editors Russell Jackson, Robert Smallwood and Philip Brockbank, *Players of Shakespeare (Vol 1-6)*
Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present*
Editors Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason, *Shakespeare in Performance*
Ron Rosenbaum, *The Shakespeare Wars: Clashing Scholars, Public Fiascoes, Palace Coups*