

STAGING SHAKESPEAREAN PLAY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PAST AND PRESENT

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims at illustrating the difficulties and differences of staging Shakespearean drama then and now. While writing this paper strictly keeping in mind the facts that Shakespearean plays were written for the sixteenth century audience, based on the historical and cultural background of Shakespeare's time. There are multiple differences and difficulties the actors faced and are facing both then and now. Firstly, the stage of Shakespearean time was different from now; it had both the advantages and disadvantages of technicality. Shakespearean stage was open from all sides and the entry and exit of the stage was visible for everyone whereas the contemporary stage is one side open and three sides closed, making the postures and actions for the players difficult keeping in mind that they need to mostly face the audience. On one hand the contemporary players face the complications of staging the language, culture and behavior of the sixteenth century English folks, on the other hand the actors of Shakespearean time found it difficult to entertain the audience because of lack of female actors which was prohibited during the time of Shakespeare, for example in Twelfth Night, the role of Viola was played by a male actor playing a female character who was disguised as a male creating farce and complications. Staging Shakespeare in the contemporary times has proved to be quite difficult as there are multiple modes of entertainment, also the audience is difficult to please due to the well-known plots being used and reused in different versions of adaptations of Shakespearean dramas on stage, in films and television soaps. There is an alienating effect for the contemporary audience as the chorus, music, language, costume and props constantly remind them of the distance between the generations, therefore making it hard to keep them interested.*

KEYWORDS: Stage, Shakespeare, Modern theatre, Actor and Actress

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages since the sixteenth century Shakespeare's plays have been acted and played over a thousand times in different modes of performances and yet the question keeps arising over and over again how to perform a Shakespearean play? The anxiety and fear of adapting the Shakespearean play without hindering his ingenuity and originality keeps working in the minds of the writers or directors. The task becomes challenging as the theme in the present day often is overused and productions of adaptations poses many questions as to modify the existing one or do something new, to work with setting, costume, style, entry and exit, the action of the drama or applying the original acting practicing and following the original plot.

It is curious to observe for the modern audience that writers of the Elizabethan era worked in a different way than the present day playwrights. The production of a play was difficult as the producer had to present a company with an idea for the plot in front of the senior actors, writers

and managers before the play was accepted to be performed and payment to be completed. Shakespearean theatre lacked a director and it was all on the shoulders of the actors to act, sing, prepare costume and also remember the entry and exits. The actors did not even get the entire script but only their parts and they did not meet the other actors before rehearsal. It was only the fighting scenes which used to be practiced ahead of the performance. One of the important fact about Shakespearean drama was that the characters were created keeping the actors in mind and therefore Shakespeare created his character for instance like Hamlet keeping Richard Burbage in mind (Richard 1). The experience of the actors of Shakespearean time was outside-in as they were the model for the characters and on the other hand the experience of the modern actors are inside-out as they get to read and internalize the characters and feel sympathetic towards them. Directors and actors of the contemporary stage also have a new kind of feeling which could be termed as universal as they share a strange bond and they feel as if they know each other and also can play each other's role. This universal feeling of bonding between the characters or rather actors is a result of long months of practice together and listening to each other's dialogues and personalities. An actor also interprets a character in his own way which could be a new experience for each actor.

Background

Shakespearean dramas were written eloquently and masterfully using contrast, allusions, juxtapositions of words and ideas. Adrian Noble in his text *How To Do Shakespeare* poses the question to the readers 'When did you last go and see a play? This week, last week, a year ago? Hamlet tells the actors newly arrived in Elsinore 'We will hear a play tomorrow'. We won't see a play; we'll hear a play.' Noble says that somewhere in the last 400 odd years, there has been a shift; a shift either in meaning or perception from the ear to the eye. One of the many things that changed since the sixteenth century performances was the shift in perception and meaning of drama, as it changed from hearing to seeing (Noble 1). However some critics argued that Shakespeare's theatre was not only rich in language but was also famous for its spectacle and lack of props were made up by extravagant costume and make-up.

Previously the writers of the sixteenth century and most importantly Shakespeare has given importance to dialogue and lack of set was substituted by powerful speech and words. Shakespeare was full of foresight and a practical man of the theatre as he wrote plays to be performed after a short time of rehearsal to a cross-section of the society from the highly educated and cultured to the illiterate, from the noble class to the lowest section of the society. The audience of the Globe theatre in southwark was very difficult to please and pretty hostile. "Shakespeare had to grab their attention and keep it. To do this, he had to make them listen. How did he do this? He chose stories and characters that would capture the imagination and wrote texts that gave the actors all the ammunition they would need to engage the audience for the two or three hours of the show" (Noble p2).

Analysis

Comparison of Actors and Stage in Different Times

The experience for 16th-17th century actors were different than from the modern actors as they had to relate to the imaginary situations or use their language efficiently for the props which was absent as the Elizabethan and Jacobean writers wrote their plays in such a way that the audience could imagine their set. The stage could be imagined as anything. As King says in his article *Shakespeare and Elizabethan stage sets* "The empty space, that was extended out

into the audience and could be viewed from three sides, could be a small prison cell, a battlefield, a royal court, a crowded city street, an ocean, and any other place, in rapid succession, without changing a thing” (King 1). The modern directors have the privilege of electricity, sound system, modern props, making the set as the play requires whereas the Elizabethan actors had no such privilege. The Elizabethan stage was also more realistic “When Hamlet kills Polonius; he drags the body off, allowing the next scene to take place somewhere else, without the dead Polonius lying in the wrong place. Those playwrights always contrived ‘realistic’ ways to remove bodies. In the modern version the dead body just gets up and walks away during the blackout” (King 1).

Comparison between Traditional Shakespearean Theatre Vs 21st Century Technologically Enriched Theatre

There were certain realistic aspects of the Elizabethan theatre as well, as they had the upper gallery which “could be a tower, a battlement, a bedroom window, a hilltop or, most famously in *Romeo and Juliet* a balcony” (King 2). Whereas in the modern theatre the set can be changed with the help of props made of wood for instance a wooden balcony is made and a backdrop is used to show a battlefield or Hilltop and modern technology like the projector and moving backdrops could also be used in order to make it more picturesque.

Shakespearean stage was open from all sides and the entry and exit of the stage was visible for everyone whereas the contemporary stage is one side open and three sides closed which is also known as a box set, making the postures and actions for the actors’ difficult keeping in mind that they need to mostly face the audience. The Elizabethan theatre was mostly three sided making all the movements and gestures and postures visible for the crowd whereas the modern theatre in many institutions lack an amphitheatre or a three sided theatre therefore making it difficult for the actors to move freely not showing their back towards the audience. However the structure of the modern box set theatre has certain aspects which makes it comparatively easier for the actors as they can be involved in their dramatic world without being interrupted by the audience on the other hand it was really difficult for the actors of the 16th century to act as the audience took active participation in their act and also certain dialogues involved the audience to take an active part in their play.

Confusion in Interpreting Stage Directions

Interpreting stage directions is another difficult hurdle for the contemporary directors as the instructions in some instances aren’t clear to the reader for example “Moreover, the signals that are provided often are uninformative or confusing or inconsistent (as in the nunnery scene in *Hamlet* where reader today can never be certain when Hamlet becomes aware of the eavesdroppers, if, indeed, he notices them at all)” (Dessen20). According to Dessen, editors and stage historians differ significantly about the authority they seek. They have given more emphasis on the dramatist’s copy rather than the playhouse’s copy. ‘Thus, in 1790 Edmund Malone decided ‘that the very few stage-directions which the old copies exhibit, were not taken from our author’s manuscripts, but [were] furnished by the players’ (Dessen 22). Therefore interpretations and many different editions make each performance different from the original version of the play.

Localized Interpretation of Shakespearean Drama

In the South Asian subcontinent the interpretation of Shakespearean Drama is quite local and therefore the experience of the actors and directors also becomes interesting. Though the influence of the colonial England is strong as most students and teachers are acquainted with the history of the colonial England but without knowing and experiencing the native English history and culture of the 16th century England it becomes a learning process for the actors. Many has to go through the transformation of learning not only another culture but also another language and that too Shakespearean language which contains apposition, metaphor, metre and pulse, line endings, word play, vocabulary , also shape and structure. Therefore the original script is often compromised as the interpretation becomes multilayered and sometimes there is more than one editor. In order to write the script for non-professional, non-native speaking students the script often loses its original charm and is only an adaptation of another kind. Often in order to make the actors understand the plot of the play the director uses local analogy and interprets it in local context. There are also many adaptations done in other languages and many movies made in Hindi and Bengali for the audience of the Indian subcontinent, specially keeping the local audience in mind and therefore become a different story. Nevertheless the adaptations of Shakespeare in many language and culture prove that his stories are universal in theme and meaning.

An important aspect of stage direction is dramaturgy (stage instructions) which was lacking in the original Folio and the directors of the contemporary theatre finds it quite difficult to give stage directions in certain cases as Dessen puts it more accurately

An on-stage gesture can thereby clarify, even italicize a theatrical metaphor. But given the frequent absence of stage directions in the extant scripts, the editor, critic, or director often cannot determine from a given passage alone what gesture or action or property (if any) would have been used in the original production. Sometimes, we feel certain that the actor would have pointed to something yet cannot tell what that something would have been. Thus when Lear in his madness says ‘This’ a good block’(IV.vi.I80) the spectator at the Globe would not have found the moment ambiguous if the actor pointed to his head or his hat or the stage floor or even to empty space(thereby telling us not about the ‘block’ but about Lear’s state of mind). Lear’s (and Shakespeare’s) point, whether literal, metaphoric, or illusory, would have been apparent then but is difficult if not possible to ascertain now.(Dessen 66)

Therefore many times “This” depends on the interpretation of the director and actor whether it is metaphoric in meaning or symbolic or literal. In original texts many instructions are missing, and later editions of playhouse scripts could be found with interpretations of the instructions which make the motive of the playwright quite murky.

Interpretation of Staging in Light/Darkness

Another important stage instruction dilemma which the directors or actors of the modern theatre face is the interpretation of staging in light/darkness. Though modern technology is much advanced in this area and the trickery of light could portray the distinction between day and night, the Elizabethan theatre lacked advantage or disadvantage of modern technology or lighting, therefore the question arises about playing the night scenes on stage or the indications of night scenes. The knowledge of Elizabethan approach to stage light could be quite significant when it came to modern application and interpretation of Shakespearean stage.

“As Lee Mitchell pointed out thirty years ago, Shakespeare’s ‘imaginary darkness’ had distinct advantages, especially since ‘no matter how deep the imaginary gloom, the audience could always see the performer quite clearly.’ With such ‘high visibility,’ Mitchell argues, ‘although characters on stage might not be able to recognize one another, the audience could always recognize the characters. Tragic mistakes could be foreseen in the making, surprises anticipated, and deceptions penetrated.’ As Mitchell shrewdly observes, ‘many scenes of imaginary darkness actually depend upon daylight visibility for their full effect.’” (Dessen 76)

The modern techniques can often be a curse in disguise rather than a helpful tool as the plays were written often fit to be acted on the original Elizabethan stage rather than the modern stage.

Staging and the Alienation of Modern Day Audience

The Brechtian theory of alienation could be applied easily to the audience of the modern stage as they often find themselves alienated from the Shakespearean performances because they could hardly relate to the language and the culture of the 16th century England and mostly about sword fight, gallant knights and kings and queens, but most importantly they didn’t understand the language or the jokes or proverbs which was written in old and middle English. Therefore many could argue that in order to simplify the language for the modern audience and also the actors to remember it better the original essence of Shakespearean charm could have been lost in multiple interpretations. The audience of the modern stage also felt uncomfortable with the fourth wall breaking as they like to observe the play in silence rather than being indulged in the play which is quite contrary to original practices. Furthermore they find the plays to be more alienating as the costume, and dialogues and the acting practices constantly remind them of the artificiality of the play. Therefore the directors and actors often localize the original plays, also translates them in their own native languages. From the audience of the contemporary generation the experience could be termed as more ‘realistic’.

Modern Stage and Acting by Women

Women were forbidden to act on stage by law in the Shakespearean time. As women had no access to public professions and also the job of acting was considered quite immoral, therefore making scarcity of women actor. However from a recent source of news women actors in theatre are still lower in ratio though not forbidden anymore. The modern stage makes the drama different in this aspect that women do their own roles and therefore makes the play more authentic though some modern directors and especially in the globe theatre still practice the original acting practices of Shakespeare’s time. In an article Shehrazade Zafar-Arif says that

This practice has more recently inspired a number of productions in the original style featuring an all-male cast, such as Mark Rylance’s *Twelfth Night*, in which Rylance himself played Olivia. Such productions have been criticised for reducing the already scarce roles for women actors in Shakespeare, and led to a series of all-female productions, as well as productions where a quintessentially male part is played by a female, such as Maxine Peake playing *Hamlet* in the Manchester Royal Exchange production. The Reversed Shakespeare Company’s recent ‘gender-bent’ production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* switched the genders of all the play’s characters, most of whom are defined by their gender roles and expectations. (zafar-arif 1)

Empowerment of Women on Modern Stage

The empowerment of women character by Shakespeare in a male dominating world reflected his spirit for empowerment of women and sympathizing with them and also how they had to use disguise as a male character in order to gain status or survive in a male dominating world, be it Viola in *Twelfth Night*, or Rosalind in *As you like it* shows both empowerment and restriction of women. The disguise of women character made the role of male actors in a way easy and in another way also quite humorous as in *Twelfth Night* the character of Viola was played by a male actor who had to disguise as a male. Therefore Shakespeare carefully puts a witticism on the character, the disguiser's disguise reveals the gender of the actor.

It is paradoxical in nature that though Queen Elizabeth I was the most powerful figure in England but the women of the time were not allowed to play on stage. Although it can be inferred that Shakespeare's source of inspiration and at the same time maintaining the social order planning to stage female characters as strong protagonists yet acted by male performers was quite ingenious and at the same time it was also metaphoric as Queen Elizabeth's role was somewhat similar as she regulated power in a male dominated society within male boundaries. Queen Elizabeth could easily identify herself with the disguised female character of Viola in *Twelfth Night*, who felt a woman doing a man's job in a male dominating world (Madden).

“Cross-dressing in Shakespeare's comedies makes the heroines' gender identity ambiguous: they are both men and women, owning both femininity and masculinity, thus cross-dressing helps to deconstruct Renaissance gender stereotypes, the binary opposition of gender, and eventually, patriarchy. From a more practical perspective, the represented female character who cross-dresses relieves the boy actor, at least for a time, from the burden of impersonating a woman.” (Crossdressing 6)

Through the acting practices of some of the important female characters the actors came to sympathize with the opposite sex and also got to be in their shoes literally. Though often the young male actors who played female characters suffered severely as they had to suffer from lead poisoning due to the lead content heavy make-up they used in order to disguise as women. This led to sickness and death of many young male actors. The actors who played the female parts has also suffered as they were the younger crew members of the acting companies and had also a minimum wage and suffered different kind of harassments from the leading male actors. It was therefore symbolic with women's status and position in society.

Shortage of the Number of Actor and Actress

Often directors of the South Asian subcontinent face many hurdles in order to stage a Shakespearean Drama as there are very less actors interested to act and also mostly girls feel the stage fright more than boys. As language is an obstacle which makes it more challenging for the actors to portray the perfect picture. Language was also a barrier to understand the characters and also little nuances of the play. After multiple interpretations and watching multiple adaptations the journey of the actors of the subcontinent also becomes quite challenging. Not only was the fact that they have to memorize the scripts in another language but also a very difficult and different language of another century. Casting characters in the right role is quite laborious and also the whole process is lengthy. Finding appropriate props and set design and availing the costume are also quite difficult. Even today there is a stigma related to theatre when it comes to local theater therefore very few women actors choose it as a career option in the South Asian countries, especially in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Satisfaction of Modern Day Audience Compared to Previous Time

The audience of both then and now are quite challenging to please as the audience of Shakespearean time was hostile and quite rough and the Queen and nobles were also present so the playwright had to please all sections of the society and not only that but also the audience took active participation in the play very often. From an experience of directing in Bangladesh, the observation was quite realistic when it came to the expectations of the audience of Bengali speaking crowd, therefore whether they understood the dialogues completely was not comprehensible but the actions were quite clear and the similarity of the audience of then and now is that their love for a “love story” and also for high dramatic actions especially the street fights and sword fights (*Romeo and Juliet*).

Challenges of Staging Shakespearean Play in 21st Century

The actors of the contemporary local (Bangladesh) location have many issues with costume, make-up, props and behavior and other aspects of the play. As basically with student actors costume is a laborious act both financially and also in the sense of fashion. The modern generation is fashion conscious, they find the 16th century costume outdated and also not appropriate as girls had the problem of wearing western dresses and the boys find the problems of looking ridiculous in a frock style costume which they found more feminine than masculine, therefore the cultural context changed in case of gender when it came to the 21st century. Many were uncomfortable with western ball dance masquerade or even wearing a cross. In order to get exact props and costume it took a long time and often they had to work hard to obtain their desired goal (Personal Interview).

Staging the violent scenes is another important aspect of the Elizabethan theatre as it has been an appealing factor to audiences of both then and now. Even though it is a challenging task to execute the fight scenes on the modern theatre especially when there are several fights in a singular scene for example the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet* which becomes quite chaotic if not placed and timed properly, the director or choreographer has to still incorporate one.

Although evidence about the original staging of such scenes often is very limited (e.g., ‘they fight’; ‘kills them’; ‘alarms and excursions’), scholars generally have agreed how duels, sieges, and battles would have been presented at the Globe or Fortune or Rose. For example stage historians argue forcefully that the players would have presented one to one fights (Mercutio versus Tybalt, Edgar versus Edmund) as convincingly as possible ‘in order to make the fencing scenes in their plays realistic enough to satisfy a critical audience well versed in the use of swords. (Dessen 105)

As Dessen further points out the prospect of showing stage battles were impossible due to constraint in stage size and size of the companies however they still found ‘brawl ridiculous’ appealing (Dessen 106). Nonetheless for the modern actors appropriating the stage duels and the brawl scenes are quite challenging, to imitate the behavior of the knights and kings and the nobles and also the proper timing and place needs months of practicing and a good choreographer or a dramaturge. There are several risks of injury and also the dilemma of exacting the art of sword fights.

CONCLUSION

This paper confronts many questions faced by actors and directors and editors of both the original Elizabethan theatre and the contemporary Elizabethan theatre. What are the possibilities of staging Shakespeare and how far can the actors and directors exact in doing Shakespeare. As our knowledge of the original plays performed during the Shakespearean time is very limited any kind of performance is an adaptation and an interpretation of his work and each play becomes authentic in its own right considering no two performances can ever be exactly the same. The main motive of performing his plays throughout ages is therefore to keep him alive through his works or his interpretations.

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