



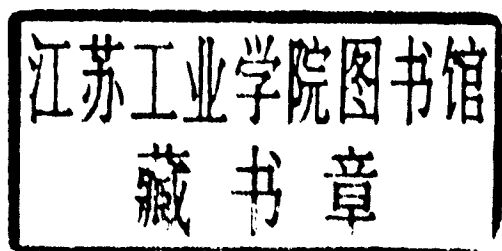
Pronouncing Shakespeare

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CAMBRIDGE

Pronouncing Shakespeare: The Globe Experiment

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To all at Shakespeare's Globe

For three days in June 2004, Shakespeare's Globe presented their production of *Romeo and Juliet* in original, Shakespearian pronunciation. This book tells the story of how it happened.

PREFACE

This has been a curious book to write – an unusual blend of biography, narrative, and academic content. It reflects the unusual nature of the experience. It cannot be often that academic linguists find themselves so intimately involved in the theatre world, or for theatre practitioners to be so heavily involved with historical linguistics. But the integration of the two domains is exciting, in whichever direction one travels.

The person who made this journey first, in living memory, was John Barton, who approached it from the opposite direction. If this book were being dedicated to any one person, it would have to be him, for his production of a Shakespeare play in Elizabethan pronunciation took place in 1952, when I was eleven and had yet to see my first Shakespeare play (Paul Robeson's *Othello*, seven years later – in which, incidentally, Sam Wanamaker played Iago).

When I met Barton, while preparing this book, his first words to me were: 'You are a lucky fellow.' I knew it. In my non-linguistic life I have had a lifetime amateur or semi-professional relationship with the theatre. I have acted in several repertory companies, as has my wife, directed a few times, and toured my own shows. We have a son who became a professional actor. For years we have spent an annual holiday in Stratford. So it is easy to imagine that, for me, there could be no more entrancing world outside linguistic walls than this one; and to be involved in it, for a few months, was fortune indeed.

It was, in many ways, the project of a lifetime – a real voyage of exploration, for all concerned. All praise to the Globe, I say, for committing themselves to it. And my thanks to the prime movers there, for asking me to be part of it.

The book had to be written quickly, while the performances were fresh in my mind – and in the minds of those who participated. I am most grateful to everyone at the theatre for their help in making all the arrangements which enabled me to be in the right

PREFACE

place at the right time, and to talk to everyone involved, both directly and virtually.

David Crystal

Holyhead, July 2004

PROLOGUE

Tim Carroll

Almost everything about this project was last minute. The decision to go ahead, all decisions about *how* to go ahead, even the appointment of a dialect coach – they all happened long after they should have done, if we were to do the thing properly. The reasons for this are boringly easy to imagine (money, scheduling problems, my own lack of organization); what is not so easy to explain is why it ended up working so well.

Over the last few years that I have worked at the Globe, I have spent a lot of time thinking about the nature of Shakespeare's language. I have always been very interested in what, if anything, Shakespeare's use of verse implies about the way the plays should be spoken. In particular, I have often noticed that an actor can create quite a pleasing effect by picking out those phrases (not so rare) which are still in use today

and speaking them in as modern and ‘street’ a way as possible – ‘What do you mean?’ ‘How do I look?’. I have often felt that this short-term success came at a long-term cost: that it is a bit like performing a play in French, except that every time you come across a word like *association* that is the same as the English word, you pronounce it in English. This might help understanding fractionally, but it would destroy any chance of our believing we are listening to a language that anyone ever spoke. I have long felt that a strict attention to the metre might well create a language that, even if it took a little getting used to, would sound unified, and therefore more lifelike.

The three performances of *Romeo and Juliet* in original pronunciation gave me a glimpse of that longed-for event. Imperfect as it was, it was nonetheless possible to hear that real people were talking to each other. To be sure, some previously well-known words were less familiar, but in that they were in the same boat as the characters in their original-practice costumes: we might not recognize them, we might not understand or even like them, but we can see that they belong together, that they

come from one world. Out here, in the yard, in the galleries, in the chimney of Tate Modern – all around us – is another world. And what an extraordinary place it is where these two worlds can meet.

Not everything about this project was last minute. One element that pre-dated this summer was my desire to hear a Shakespeare play sound as it might have done 400 years ago. That desire has been with me for a long time, and for its realization I am eternally grateful to Mark Rylance, who gave the project the green light; to Sid Charlton, Rowan Walker-Brown, Debs Callan, and everyone in the Theatre and Education Departments who worked to make it happen; to Tom Cornford for doing much of the heavy lifting; to Charmian Hoare for her wonderfully patient and skilful work with the actors; and of course to the author of this book. What the following account will not tell you, but you will easily work out for yourself, is that the main reason this project did not end up in disaster is David Crystal. Had he done as many of us would have done, and brought an air of arrogant omniscience to the rehearsal room, the whole thing could

have been scuppered from the start. But instead, from the very beginning, he insisted on being clear about what he knew and what he didn't. In so doing he set an example of humble enquiry that liberated the rest of us. Suddenly we were reminded of what it is so easy to forget: that the heart of the enterprise is not display but discovery.

CONTENTS

Preface xi

Prologue by Tim Carroll xv

1 Idea 1

2 Proposal 11

3 Evidence 43

4 Rehearsal 97

5 Performance 133

6 Consequences 161

Epilogue 173

Appendix 1 Chief distinctive Early Modern English
vowels 175

Appendix 2 Extracts from the transcription 177

Appendix 3 Audio-visual aids 181

Index 183

CHAPTER 1

Idea

Do you know the Globe? Shakespeare's reconstructed Globe theatre, on the south bank of the Thames, nestling between London Bridge and the Tate Modern. Look at it from the river, and at first sight it seems totally out of place, with the multi-laned city traffic to the left and the towering chimney of the renovated gallery to the right. But look from the south bank in the direction of St Paul's, and try to think back in time a little, and suddenly it is the twentieth-century traffic and chimney which are out of place. The Globe seems as if it might have been there for centuries.

And in a sense it was. For the first Globe was built in 1599 very close to where the current building stands. We know this because there are several printed panoramic views of London, dating from around 1600, which show the theatre among the

buildings of Southwark. The original site is now largely buried under the foundations of modern apartments, 200 yards away, but what is 200 yards when you are trying to achieve a vision? And that is what the reconstructed Globe is – a vision.

The vision belonged to American actor, director, and producer Sam Wanamaker, who conceived the project after his first visit to London, as long ago as 1949. In 1970 he formed the Globe Playhouse Trust dedicated to the reconstruction of the theatre and the provision of education and exhibition facilities. A huge amount of fundraising later, the site was bought and the building completed. The Globe mounted its first production, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in a ‘prologue season’ towards the end of summer 1996. It took place on a temporary stage, with much of the outside area still a building site. Then, in May 1997, the official opening took place, with the company performing four plays by Elizabethan dramatists, including two by Shakespeare. Sadly, Sam Wanamaker saw none of this. He had died from cancer in December 1993.

The reconstruction is as close to the original as modern scholars and traditional craftworkers can

make it. Excavations on the sixteenth-century site in 1990 indicated that it was a twenty-sided building with a diameter of 100 feet – fitting the description (with a little poetic licence) of the ‘wooden O’ referred to by the Chorus in *Henry V*. We know that timbers from the demolished Theatre playhouse in Shoreditch were carried across the Thames by members of the company to help build it. There are hints about its interior in contemporary accounts, both from the builders and from those who attended plays there. A contemporary sketch of another Elizabethan theatre, the Swan, suggests a possible stage layout, but the design of the Globe stage, and especially the location of the two large pillars holding up the roof, was a matter of considerable conjecture.

The project used building techniques which replicated, as far as possible, those used at the time. Green oak was cut and shaped according to sixteenth-century practice. Lime plaster was mixed following a contemporary recipe. Water-reed thatch was used for the roof, based on samples found during the excavation. Each element of the balustrades was turned by hand by woodworkers. The demands of

modern fire precautions of course placed limits on what could be done, and such things as illuminated fire-exit signs, two additional exits, and extra lighting were introduced to meet the safety needs of a modern audience, as well as to aid visibility during evening performances. It is possible to hire a cushion to reduce the impact of the wooden benches on sensitive modern posteriors. There are toilets on site. And when it rains, the groundlings in the yard, open to the elements, can buy plastic capes. But apart from these nods in the direction of modern comfort and convenience, the building gives its visitors a powerful impression of authenticity. It feels right, even though scholarly debate continues.

Or, at least, it feels like nothing else in the modern theatrical world. The Globe, despite its contradictions (such as Elizabethan dress on stage; modern dress in the audience), has presented a challenge to modern theatrical values. The journey has been a process of exploration, a voyage of discovery. Would a modern theatre audience be prepared to stand for three hours to watch a play? Would they interact with the actors, when invited to do so?