DIEGETICS IN DRAMA
SPACE AND LOCATING A PERFORMANCE OF TWELFTH NIGHT

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Diegetics in Drama: ‘space’ and locating a performance of *Twelfth Night*

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Abstract

‘New Historical’ approaches have allowed for the reinvention of Shakespearean productions in a variety of adaptive processes that operate in many instances "against the grain". The politics of performance has never been more visible than in many recent productions both in Australia and internationally. This paper argues that the "space" between the actor and the character in Shakespeare’s dramas is most creatively negotiated with young performers if the excitement of Shakespeare's intersubjective potential is unleashed and their performances are allowed the freedom of expression that more overtly politicised constraints may inhibit. Drawing on the praxis-led research undertaken with final year, Honours and postgraduate students in the Creative Arts at Murdoch University (2009) this paper will offer a case study of a production of *Twelfth Night*.¹ "Space" in this context is presented as a field of orientation whose alignments flow from the central sensibilities of the dominant characters in the play.

**Keywords:** performance, adaptation, modality, new historicism, praxis

Introduction

In second semester 2009 I confronted the challenging task of directing a play by Shakespeare with a group of differentially skilled actors, enrolled in a unit I teach to final year students in English and Creative Arts. Based on my knowledge of their abilities I selected – not without some hesitation – my favourite among the comedies, *Twelfth Night*, secure in the belief that I could cast the principals fairly easily and that they would be open to a ‘new historicist’² approach in interpreting the text for our performance. We anticipated audiences from Year 8, 9 and 10 in local high school and embarked on a project that had an explicit Theatre in Education (T.I.E.) agenda; one that offered insights into and knowledge about the metaphorical ‘landscape’ of the play. It was clear to me from the outset that this would be as important to the participants in the production as

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¹ All references to Shakespeare’s plays are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 1997.
² Stephen Greenblatt together with critics such as Louis Montrose are regarded as the founding fathers of an approach to Shakespeare Studies that rejected the ‘old historicism’ of traditional scholars such as E.M.W. Tillyard for a new approach that challenged the validity of source study as a means to unpacking the layered meanings of the Shakespearean text. They were less interested in the texts that Shakespeare and his contemporaries might have read than in the ideas which were circulating at the time. Shakespeare, for a New Historicist, is a product of his culture, one voice among many others that are worth listening to in the attempt to understand the complexities of the period in which he lived and wrote.
well as (we hoped) to the audiences we attracted. *Twelfth Night* is relatively less well known than the tragedies from this period of Shakespeare’s output and certainly cannot compete with *Much Ado About Nothing* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the popular imagination.

The project, then, to devise and direct Shakespeare’s 1602 comedy, *Twelfth Night*, was conceived from the outset as an ‘anthropological’ exercise with two inter-related research facets: one of which was to be ‘praxis-led’; the other, adopting the more honoured ‘traditional’ approach.

**Praxis-led Research.**

This primary phase of the project involved the creation and production of the work through rehearsals with actors, set designers, sound artists, costume and make-up designers. It always involves critical engagement with the text and its co-texts as well as (re)interpretation on the part of the director/devisor. It is moreover research-informed in that it is founded on analysis and generates decisions about the focus of the adaptation which are drawn from a range of theoretical approaches.

**Traditional Research**

This, the ‘secondary’ phase of the project transpired in the research paper: it located the question in discourse and offered critical insights and/or solutions which, in the case of this specific production, gestured to a reconsideration of the role of character as ‘touchstone’ for the interpretation of *Twelfth Night*.

The praxis-led component for those of us working in the new ERA (*Excellence in Research Australia*) climate is as legitimate as the traditional research article and, in my view, generates the primary research component which we deploy in interpreting/devising a play for performance. When taken together, these two processes of research can in effect ‘value-add’ to the research outcome, enhancing each phase dialogically. What this article attempts is a ‘traditional’ account of a performance process that resists containment within the usual reporting structures but which generated a
number of insights into the problems actors (and audiences) might encounter when confronting a diegetic situation in the Shakespearean play at odds with a contemporary ‘world view’.

"Shaped Space: locating a performance of Twelfth Night"

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The Production Context

Since the Second World War productions of Shakespeare’s plays have tried to reinvent themselves, perhaps the most notable in this tradition being Peter Brooks’ Dream, in the early 70s. Directors and actors have consistently felt the pressure to give audiences productions of the plays that reinvigorate tired versions of the texts inviting a new generation of viewers to enjoy the multifaceted offerings that the canon affords us to this day. (Baz Luhrman’s [1996] Romeo and Juliet was a film manifestation of this impulse. There have been many others including the ‘homage’ paid to Olivier’s Henry V in Kenneth Brannagh’s film of 1989).  

3 Penny Gay’s survey and critique of productions of Twelfth Night since the Second World War in As She Likes It: Shakespeare’s Unruly Women (1994), offers a useful critique of the varieties of reinvention directors have displayed in approaching the play. Her insightful chapter focuses on the ways in which gender and sexuality developed as interpretative tropes in ‘modernised’ productions from Walter Hudd’s in (1947) to Bill Alexander’s production in 1987.

4 A case in point is the recent twitter production of Romeo and Juliet (The Royal Shakespeare Company joined with the cross-platform production firm Mudlark and Channel 4's digital investment fund, 4iP, to
Pragmatic as well as artistic rationales for the design of a (student) play are always, in my experience, in some kind of tension: the budget is never adequate to our design ideas, and compromise must be reached in the realisation of the set and costumes. In this production, though, I wanted to use the skills of the group, among whom were several trained dancers, to illuminate the key idea of ‘misrule’\(^5\) that critics have perceived as crucial to an understanding of the play.

![Master of the Revels](image)

\[2: Master of the Revels\]

launch *Such Tweet Sorrow*, a drama in real time and 4,000 tweets, very roughly based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that seems to extend the parameters of performance in an, as yet, critically uncharted fashion. In this expanded dramatic transmission, audiences are necessarily discrete (solipsistic) receiving entities for the most part, separated in space and time from the performers and other audience members, though simultaneously – and paradoxically - connected which begs questions about the empathetic engagement traditional theatre spaces generate and the consequences for performances and performers of these more radicalised communication modes.

Thus was born the concept of the Lord of Misrule as a dancer whose presence would be conjured in the framing meta-text – which I called, Master of the Revels – by a linking character (a fusion of ‘Shakespeare’, David Tennant as ‘Dr Who’ and the all-purpose character, ‘Prologue’) who guided the performers and the audience with comments and suggestions to interpretations we considered significant or at least worthy of consideration. Conceptual coherence was, we hoped, enhanced by a decision we took about the music: the eastern orientation of Illyria as a site of the dramatic world of the play.

This generated a musical landscape infused with tones from the soundtracks of – among other films - “Zorba the Greek”\(^6\) and The Weeping Meadow Trilogy from a film by Theo Angelopoulos,\(^7\) as well as original compositions.

\(^6\) This is the production made famous by Anthony Quinn’s performance.
\(^7\) The original music for the film was composed and played by Elena Karaindrou, ECM records, 2004.
But any new production in the over-determined context of a play by Shakespeare must be (subliminally or consciously) inflected by the aesthetic and political frames currently in circulation and available to the director and/or actors. This is especially the case when the director and students, as in my case, are involved in a programme of study in addition to the performance in question. In approaching our production, then, I resolved to abandon overt political statements (about gender, sexuality or class, for example) in the casting and design in order to avoid, as far as possible, the limitations that reiterations of these points of thematic interest place on the dramatic situation and which, in my view, had been explored exhaustively in any number of professional productions accessible, these days, in a multiplicity of formats – both digital and print. The production I devised, in a sense problematised ‘reinvention’ as a strategy and asked questions of the actors and audience about ‘authenticity’ in a contemporary production. What would be a ‘true’ production of a work first performed over 400 years ago? To pose and then address this question, I devised a dramatised meta-theatrical, framing play-outside-the-play, Master of the Revels.

As we noted in production discussions, the idea of constructing a ‘traditional’ version of Shakespeare was itself a radical departure from contemporary ways of designing and then realising the text.

[4: Orsino’s Court]
And we agreed moreover that, far from being authentically ‘Elizabethan’, such ‘traditional’ versions recuperate, essentially Victorian notions of ‘the’ Shakespearean production. As the rehearsals progressed and the parameters within which Twelfth Night and Master of the Revels revealed themselves it became clear to me that this essentially ‘praxis-led’ research I was undertaking with the students was located in two overlapping ‘fields of orientation’: (dramatic) space and (dramatic) characterisation. The first was handled by the design brief; replacing the traditional ‘box hedge’ in 2.5 with a Christmas tree which we assumed, albeit anachronistically, would invoke in contemporary audiences a sense of the festive season at the core of the action in Twelfth Night.

[5: The box hedge reinterpreted]

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8 Charles Taylor – in ‘The Politics of Recognition’ – stresses the need persons have for recognition, linking the notion of personal identity to recognition. This self-understanding, if dismissed, he believes reduces the person’s “mode of being” (p.25). Something of this insight found its way into the development of character in the performances of the play and, subsequently, in the theorising of self (and other) understanding among the characters in this most deceptive/deceit-filled of Shakespeare’s plays.
The second field of orientation, dramatic characterisation, however, presented problems for a contemporary actor if the play was not at times to collapse into superficiality. Malvolio’s centrality to the action became pivotal in our interpretation, but we were confronted with an intriguing question: how were we meant to ‘read’ this Puritanical construct, the butt of an extended joke in the sub-plot of the play, in a theatre in Western Australia in November 2009? What strategies for ‘self-understanding’ (by the actor; of the character) were we to deploy in realising this aspect of the dramatic presentation? For Malvolio’s character disturbs and destabilises twenty-first century actors and audiences alike.

His role in the action is that of a major-domo/butler; he represents a recognisable Elizabethan character, that of the head of a household in a medieval Great House. He is arrogant, humourless, self-deceived, alienating everyone around him, except for his Mistress, Olivia. In the ‘world-view’ of the period, no doubt, his character flaws were a source of amusement as well as a satirical play on the worst extremes of Puritanism to which the Reformation in England gave rise. In the action of the play, Malvolio is made to look a fool, thereby inverting the conventional roles ‘below stairs’, by the actions of Olivia’s maid, Maria, and the fool, Feste – in league with the more reprehensible members of the upper classes, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch. In 4.2 Malvolio, whose delusions of power, extending to marriage with his Mistress, Olivia, have been fed by the machinations of his underlings, is imprisoned and rather mercilessly taunted by them for apparent ‘insanity’. This may have played well to early seventeenth century audiences but greater sensitivity to the construction and representation of mental illness makes this strand of the action less comical today than it (presumably) might once have been.

The challenge for contemporary productions of Shakespeare’s comedies, particularly, is the recovery of meaning (or alternatively, its renegotiation) for both actors and audiences. Not all of Shakespeare’s material survives the four hundred year interlude between the Elizabethan era and early twenty-first century attempts to revive it: Harold Bloom’s
views on the timelessness and universality of the Bard, in his 1999 work, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* notwithstanding.\(^9\)

**Theoretical ‘Spaces’**

What interests me, then, in reflecting on the processes that led us to our theoretical positioning and analytical interpretation of *Twelfth Night* is how one manages as a literary critic, dramaturg, director and/or actor to access a character’s identity when that identity is not consistent with the expressed utterances of the characters; when there is a gap between what a character says (first-order diegesis) and what we, as audience members, infer from those statements (second-order diegesis).

It appears in the first instance that the primary (indeed, *only*) access we have to the interior landscapes of the characters in Shakespeare’s plays is provided by the sum of the linguistic utterances asserted by the character. And this, as is well documented, can be confronting, even alienating for contemporary audiences. The usual examples given of this reaction are to the anti-Semitism apparent in attitudes to Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* or to the racism in *Othello* and the sexism in *The Taming of the Shrew*: these facets of the characters, conceived and elaborated in a different time and place, at the beginning of modernity, are experienced by many contemporary readers and audiences as diminishing what Horst Ruthrof calls the assumed ‘work ideology’\(^{10}\) of the plays, and effectively diminishes the aesthetic evaluation – the moral centre - of the play and, by extension, that of the author\(^{11}\).

The representational process, when remaining ‘true’ to an interpretation of the text, is our only access to the presented world of the play. Within the confines of such a theoretical

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\(^9\) Bloom’s extremely radical view, expressed in this work, that Shakespeare writing in early modernity, provided the framework for what it means to be human, has been criticized for its overt Eurocentricism. His views, from the heights of his Ivy League ivory tower at Yale, however, continue to hold sway in the spaces within academia where New Historicism and Cultural Materialism have yet to penetrate.


\(^{11}\) In a Royal Shakespeare Company performance of *The Taming of the Shrew at Stratford* in the 70s, the audience booed and jeered at Kate’s submission in the final scene of the play, resisting the ‘closure’ that many earlier productions had accepted as appropriate.
approach, these issues of ‘contaminated work ideology’ seem intractable. How are we to ‘read’ (perform) utterances that appear, at first glance, bigoted, oppressive, insensitive to modern audiences? Elsewhere I identified an ‘immanent narrative situation’ that allowed subtly coded ‘indices’, embedded in the text, to correct the surface reading generated by linguistic ‘marks on the page’ - by modalising them - in order to account for what narratologists regard as ‘unreliable’ diegesis/narration.\textsuperscript{12}

When engaging with modality in the dramatic text, then, I believe that a similar theoretical distinction, drawn within the representational process in the dramatic work, could allow for the recovery of a ‘work ideology’ encoded in the plays and released when actors are able to access this second-order diegetic strand. What we are confronted by when this occurs, is a modalised dramatic situation that functions to ‘correct’ or shape our responses, resetting them – in the case of Shylock, say - to one of empathy for, rather than antagonism towards the character. Another way of putting this would be to say that the ‘work ideology’ can be realigned to mesh with the moral order of the contemporary audience.

So it becomes possible, then, to reconfigure the ‘work ideology’ of a dramatic text. In doing so, the director and actor realign the meaning of an utterance so that its impact may be felt in a manner that would not be available to the audiences (or the actor) in an unmodalised reception of the dramatic situation. To an extent, here, I could be seen as complicit in Bloom’s agenda: this could be taken as an attempt to recuperate, theoretically, Shakespeare as ‘timeless’ (“Not of an age but for all time” as Ben Jonson described his work). And there is something extraordinary about his work which performance and rehearsing toward that point, so often reveals. His subtlety in constructing his characters – particularly the complex, ambiguously situated ones such as Malvolio, Shylock and Kate in The Taming of the Shrew – seems to me to ensure a creative ‘unreliability’ at the core of his dramatic situations that continues to elicit re-orientated ‘readings’ of their state and intentions. If, in The Merchant of Venice, (3.1) the

audience were to fail to recognize the **touchstone** function of Shylock’s rhetorical riposte to Salerio, “I am a Jew … Hath not a Jew eyes? … If you prick us, do we not bleed?” they would, I suggest, misconceive the nature of Shakespeare’s ‘work ideology’ in this play: they would miss the clues that illuminate a second-order diegetic strand that allow for a re-visioning of the play’s contentious – apparently reductive - anti-Semitic construction of the Jew.

The values embodied in this speech (3.1) alert the sensitive auditor to the fact that the other characters’ anti-Semitic cruelty is – at least in part - negatively judged by the play’s ‘work ideology’. This is not to deny that the anti-Semitism may have an illicit appeal to some contemporary audience members, but is to insist that an audience more receptive to the presence of modalised dramatic situations identify the anti-Semitism (even on the part of the main characters) as **intended** moral flaws in their complex structuration.
In our production of *Twelfth Night*, then, we foregrounded the dramatic situation as modalised – specifically with regard to the interpretations of Malvolio and the foolish knight, Sir Andrew Aguecheek. While the ‘first-order’ space of the dramatic text generated a represented world peopled by characters that we all began to flesh out, it was the ‘second-order’ space (modalising the dramatic situation) that gave depth to the actors’ performances of specific scenes.

Olivia’s line (5.1.378), “He hath been most notoriously abus’d”, offered the actors (and the audience) access to a level of empathy for Malvolio that in some productions is lost. It is a loss, I believe, that skews the ‘work ideology’ of the play, with his departing line, “I’ll be reveng’d on the whole pack of you” the cause for laughter rather than a more complex (modalised) kinaesthetic reaction to the anguish and humiliation he has endured and which we have all just witnessed. Likewise, Sir Andrew Aguecheek’s presence in the sub-plot can generate a response that coheres with that of the plotters (Sir Toby Belch, Maria, Fabian and Feste). What I term the “grids of reception”\(^\text{13}\) apply in all communication processes. But an actor who disturbs the grid of reception, who engages

\(^{13}\)“Humour and Betrayal: reading the ALITA short stories of Sarah Gertrude Millin” (1987).
with the modality of the text, can wring a response more in keeping with the nuanced ‘work ideology’ of *Twelfth Night*, as we found in the way the actor took Sir Andrew Aguecheek’s line: “I was adored, once, too.” (2.3.181) This distancing between utterance and effect (the modalising of the dramatic situation) is what we attempted in our production with some success.\(^{14}\)

Like the literary critic, Harold Bloom – and in answer to the questions students ask about the ‘timelessness’ of Shakespeare – I return, in a qualified sense, to the humanism of the plays as the reason for their relevance today.

The plays offer the director, actor or literary critic represented worlds, plots and characters - ‘spaces’- that continue to resonate precisely because of their layered, nuanced construction. First-order *spaces* (the utterances of the characters), even when apparently alienating to us some 400 years later – sexist, racist, anti-Semitic - are susceptible to second-order *shaping* of that space where the dramatic situation is modalised. The represented world of the drama, in these instances, is not being

\(^{14}\) Ingle Knight’s performance of the role in Black Swan’s recent production of the play at The Playhouse in Perth (2010) was a tour de force, drawing audible empathetic responses from the audiences every night. Compared with that of Richard E. Grant in Trevor Nunn’s film version, Knight offered a nuanced reading of the character’s vulnerability and held in check the more superficial, knock-about humour of the sub-plot.
constituted purely by the representational processes. Rather, in these instances, we are confronted by a second-order diegesis, subtle touchstones shaping our responses to other possibilities in understanding the meanings in the plays: Shylock’s speech; Olivia’s empathy for Malvolio; anguish at the mockery of Aguecheek. When the ensemble are working well together, with the design enhancing the modalised dramatic world of the play, the actors are able to deploy in their craft the embedded indices that offer a recuperation of the complex work ideology unidentifiable if we miss Shakespeare’s subtle shaping of modality.

[9: Shakespeare/Master of the Revels].

I would distance myself from the colonising notion that Shakespeare ‘invented the human’, but I would support the idea, borne out of the rehearsal process and audience responses, that he certainly knew how to represent ‘us’ dramatically.

The production in 2009 allowed us to explore these possibilities in both the process and the performances in Nexus. This paper would not exist without that primary research – it is in effect the reflective articulation of a theorising process that gained any validity it might have in the creative processes that preceded it.
References


Filmography

*Zorba the Greek* 1964 film based on the novel *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis. Directed by Michael Cacoyannis.