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**‘A little easy and modern for the times’:  
A Documentary of Productions of Ben Jonson’s Plays by Major  
Professional Theatre Companies in England,  
1977-2000**

**Two Volumes: Volume One**

**by**

**Amanda Jane Penlington**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy in Renaissance Studies**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The lack of a modern edition of Jonson's complete works necessitates any writer on Jonson to select textual editions most appropriate to their thesis. Whilst every writer on Jonson is indebted to the eleven volume edition by Herford and the Simpsons (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52), I have chosen to use the more recent editions of individual playtexts in The Revels Plays series for their scholarly accuracy and modernized spellings, where these are available. For *Every Man in His Humour* and *Epicoene*, where there are no Revels editions currently available, I have consulted versions from the Regents Renaissance Drama Series.

The interviews with theatre practitioners were undertaken between April 1996 and September 1999. For reasons of space and relevance, not all of the interviews that were conducted are directly quoted in the thesis. However, all were important in creating new leads to neglected performances, substantiating the evidence available and providing insight into the theatre's working methods for an academic purpose. I am grateful to all those interviewed in person, those interviewed by telephone, and those who felt they had little to contribute to an interview but still wrote letters giving some details. I am especially indebted to those who co-operated further by suggesting other people to contact or supplied supplementary material and those who answered queries after the initial interview and/or were interviewed twice: namely, Simon Bass, Stephen Boxer, Michael Boyd, Henry Goodman, Guy Henry, Richard Hudson, Jonathan Hyde, Robin Soans, Malcolm Storry, Diane West and Gary Yershon.

The lack of archive material for theatres outside London and aside from the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, complicates the job of the theatre researcher. I am grateful to the staff of the Shakespeare Centre Library, the Theatre Museum and the NT archive for their assistance. Where possible original reviews have been sought but, as these have been kept in archives and catalogued according to productions, page numbers and sometimes publication details have been lost. Where access to original reviews has been limited or unsuccessful, the journal *Theatre Record* has been utilized. However, this journal featured productions outside the capital only from the mid-1980s and, therefore, is a limited source to researching provincial productions before that time. When *Theatre Record* has been used the titles of reviews have been lost. Theatre companies have donated some material and I extend my gratitude to Compass Theatre Company, Method&Madness and Sheffield Crucible Theatre.

Whilst some quotations feature in the relevant chapters, valuable material has been gained from all the interviews conducted, whether directly quoted or not. This material has been drawn on substantially in the discussions of productions in Part Two. Photographs have been integrated into the thesis at the relevant points of discussion. The quality of some of these photographs is poor in their original format. Nevertheless, they have been reproduced here to provide as much information as possible for each production. Production details have been placed at the beginning of chapters in Part Two for quick access. Character spellings and crew job titles have been standardized throughout. Some of these production lists are incomplete due to a lack of available archival material. In some cases this lack has been addressed by personal recollections or privately owned programmes but because theatre research sometimes relies on the



goodwill and co-operation of others, not all of the gaps have been filled. This is regrettable.

Nevertheless, I hope this thesis will function as a spur to other writers on Jonson in the theatre in providing, as far as has been possible, the relevant documentary evidence to support future investigations.

I would like to thank The British Academy for their funding and support of this thesis for three years and the staff and students of the Centre for the Study of the Renaissance, the School of Theatre Studies and English and Comparative Literature for their assistance, support and faith in me as both a student and a tutor.

Finally, I am personally indebted to my family for their love, emotional and financial support and tolerance of the disruption research can cause. Thanks to Pat and Adrian for staying up late and providing transport on demand. Thanks to Vera for giving me time and space to write without interruption and a frequent tenner for a trip to Stratford. Thanks to Emma and Ben for the theatre trips, their interest in the interviews and their thoughtful post-show discussions on Jonson and others. All of you soothed my research blues with unceasing love and support. This is dedicated to you all with much love and thanks.

Amanda Jane Penlington, April 2001.

### **DECLARATION**

This thesis is the sole work of Amanda Jane Penlington. It does not contain any material previously used or published. The thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university nor previously any other degree at the University of Warwick.

## SUMMARY

This thesis is a collation and discussion of productions of Ben Jonson's plays in England between 1977 and 2000. It focuses on mainstream theatre productions. Therefore, amateur and Fringe productions, adaptations and productions by small-scale theatre companies are not included. It contains previously unreleased material of interviews with theatre practitioners who have been instrumental in staging the productions covered.

Whilst scholarship has concentrated on recent productions of Shakespeare, studies in Jonsonian performance have been neglected. With the recent resurgence in popularity of Jonson's texts in the English theatre repertoire, it is now pertinent to assess the methods used to stage the work of this playwright. This thesis focuses only on the staging of texts presented between the two dates; this does not cover all of Jonson's texts. Contained in two volumes, Part One raises issues of performance, whilst in Part Two productions are considered within chapters on each play. An Afterword (in Volume One) considers the future of production and the action needed to be taken for future progression in performance and performance studies. The Appendix (in Volume One) contains detailed venue information. The thesis is intended as a documented record of productions, in order to stimulate future research into Jonsonian performance methods. By examining recent productions the failures and successes of the contemporary theatre's approach to Jonson have been noted. This will contribute to an understanding of how Jonson's texts continue to work on stage. The title of this thesis comes from *Bartholomew Fair*, a play that addresses the need to assimilate the presentation of theatre within contemporary concerns.



## ABBREVIATIONS

After their initial use in full, the following entries have been allocated the corresponding abbreviations.

Birmingham Rep	The Birmingham Repertory Theatre
CTC	Cambridge Theatre Company
DIR.	directed by
DSM	Deputy Stage Manager
ESC	The English Shakespeare Company
NT	The National Theatre; from 1988 known as The Royal National Theatre
OSC	The Original Shakespeare Company
RSC	The Royal Shakespeare Company
RST	The Royal Shakespeare Theatre
TOP	The Other Place

# **PART I**

## INTRODUCTION

### RESEARCH ON JONSON: THE CONTEXT

#### STATEMENT OF RATIONALE BEHIND THE RESEARCH

There is no single archival source for those undertaking research on Ben Jonson. The academy's recognition of the literary worth of Jonson's writing is founded on the plays. All writers on Jonson owe a debt to the scholarship of Herford and the Simpsons in their multi-volume edition of Jonson's texts. However, their attainment has not brought about the related efforts of the creation of a Jonson library or a series of monographs detailing theatrical production. A disparity exists between the academic status of Jonson as a writer of literature and the amount of research produced on the performance of his plays.

The fundamental reason for writing this thesis was quite simple, it has not been done before: there is no one existing source that details Jonsonian performance. The absence of material on Jonson in performance was revealed when the first academic conference on 'Jonson and the Theatre' occurred as recently as 1996. This conference reflected the growing interest in considering the place of the texts as performance pieces. The few monographs on Jonsonian performance date from 1966, 1972, 1985, with two notable additions in 1999 and two more in 2000.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Jonson on the Restoration stage see Robert Gale Noyes, *Ben Jonson on the English Stage, 1660-1776*, Harvard Studies in English, 17 (London: Benjamin Blom, 1966); for a discussion of the texts as original prompt books see Franz Fricker, *Ben Jonson's Plays in Performance and the Jacobean Theatre*, The Cooper Monographs Theatrical Physiognomy Series 17 (Basel: Francke Verlag Bern, 1972); for a discussion of *Volpone* performances 1938-83 see Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *Volpone: Text and Performance*, Text and Performance Series (London: Macmillan, 1985); for a text considering a range of textual and performance subjects and drawing on the conference 'Ben Jonson and the Theatre' at the University of Reading, 1996, see Richard Cave, Elizabeth Schafer and Brian Woolland, *Ben Jonson and Theatre: performance, practice and theory* (London: Routledge, 1999); for more critical essays on texts and performance see Martin Butler, ed., *Representing Ben Jonson: Text, History, Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1999), Richard Dutton, ed., *Ben Jonson*, Longman Critical Readers (London: Longman, 2000) and Richard Harp and

The lack of material on Jonsonian performance is surprising when the wealth of productions is considered. The period covered by this thesis (1977-2000) has produced the most performances of Jonson's plays since the Restoration. Despite this resurgence in performing Jonson, scholarship is only now beginning to address the issues of Jonsonian production with the publication of the volumes edited by Cave, Schafer and Woolland and Butler. Whilst particular performances and texts are considered according to the contributors' individual research interests in these books, the performances of Jonson as a whole remain an untapped source. With the preparation of a new edition of the *Collected Works* underway at Cambridge University Press it is particularly appropriate that a full record of Jonsonian performance is produced. There is also a climate of renewed interest in Jonsonian performance amongst audiences and theatre companies, largely generated by the wealth of recent Jonsonian production.

This thesis aims to consolidate the material on Jonsonian performance over the period of the last three decades into one accessible source. There is no predecessor for the approach of this thesis but it will unite disparate material, often from otherwise inaccessible sources, in order to begin a debate about the nature of Jonsonian performance within the cultural context of England between 1977 and 2000. Therefore, this thesis will raise the profile of Jonsonian performance amongst scholars through a consideration of the key issues of performance: the modernization of text and setting, theatre space, directors' approaches or 'concepts' and acting styles.



## WHAT IS MEANT BY THE TERM “DOCUMENTARY” IN THE CONTEXT OF THE THESIS?

The research and presentation of this thesis has been conducted in order to document the productions in the fullest way possible. The thesis is classified as a “documentary”, a term which best describes the intention to present the resources available without the implementation of any one particular critical theory. The thesis does not aim at a singular view of either the productions or the documentation of those productions. The manifold information available for each production is a rich, sometimes contradictory, source that promotes differing perspectives on the same performances. The objective of this thesis is to open up the resource of Jonsonian productions for the reader and to encourage a plurality of debates.

## FUTURE USES OF THE THESIS

Whilst considering what future use may be made of the thesis it is worthwhile to discuss here the value of the thesis's subject matter. In other words, what has been achieved by the first three decades of continuous Jonsonian performance since the Restoration?

Firstly, Jonson has been re-introduced to the British theatre after a long absence and a repertoire of Jonsonian comedy has become established. This repertoire has been used to fill venues of all sizes, by mainstream companies of varying sizes – in addition to performances by Fringe companies, not discussed here. Jonsonian plays, and in particular *The Alchemist*, *Volpone* and *Bartholomew Fair*, are a staple of the British classical theatre once again. This vogue for Jonson has been reflected in a recent resurgence of scholarly interest in the playwright. New monographs on Jonson utilize critical theory to consider the plays in addition to the poetry and masques and the publication of a new complete works is imminent. This thesis may be seen as part of this general resurgence in interest. But it may also be considered apart for its unique value as a document that records an area of Jonson studies that remains unrepresented by current scholarship, namely the issue of Jonson as a currently-produced playwright.

Over the last three decades productions of Jonson's texts have not merely asserted the writer's place in the British classical repertoire, they have also provided varied responses as to how Jonson might be staged. This thesis aims to show that the productions have re-written Jonson according to the contingent exigencies of directors, actors and audiences. In collating the evidence of such varied performances in one volume this thesis disproves absolutist notions of

what 'Jonson' is. The convergent aspects of Jonson's own character (bricklayer-scholar) and the diversity of his work has continually baffled critics who fail in their attempts to reconcile Jonson's use of classical allusions with his delight in scatological jokes. Jonson's texts are, of course, a combination of all of the contradictions frequently expressed but they rarely reveal these contradictory elements at the same time in any one text. This accounts for the eclectic approaches of productions and my own call for a variety of styles to be used within performance.

The thesis reveals what three decades of performance have demonstrated: that Jonson can successfully be played in period or modernized; that even when the text is substantially altered it does not necessarily facilitate an audience's fuller understanding; that a synthesis of broad comic techniques and realistic detail can satisfy the changing demands of Jonsonian characters; that some plays work in any theatre, regardless of venue size, but that one particular auditorium presents an ideal environment for Jonson.

In documenting such information this thesis will be of use to practitioners, audiences, students and scholars of Jonson's texts. One of the main aims of the thesis is to liberate studies of the texts to include considerations of performances because (regardless of Jonson's preparation of the Folio) the plays were initially written with the theatre in mind. The thesis will encourage future research into Jonsonian performance when I hope others will proceed to build on and contest the partial, selective, subjective attitudes to Jonson in performance offered here. I hope that this thesis will highlight the limitations of the current repertoire and inspire future practitioners and scholars to consider placing the unperformed Jonsons – *Sejanus*, *Catiline*, *Cynthia's Revels*, *The Case is Altered*,



*The Staple of News, Every Man Out of His Humour, The Magnetick Lady, Poetaster, A Tale of A Tub, The Sad Shepherd* and the collaborative play *Eastward Ho!* – on the British stage once again. Future editors of Jonson's texts will be able to consult the thesis for information on that text in the contemporary theatre. By consulting this thesis practitioners and audiences will be able to situate their own experiences of Jonson in the theatre within the larger framework of an existing performance tradition. And by drawing together past performances, this thesis aims to enable others to conceive of alternative Jonsons in the future. For it is only in performance that Jonson's dramatic texts can fulfil their intended purpose: to communicate with audiences in a shared time and space.



## THE PARTICULAR STRUCTURE THE ACCOUNT ADOPTS

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part One begins with an introductory section on the rationale behind the research and an explanation of the term “documentary”, as used in the thesis title. The future uses of the thesis are also considered in this Introduction.

Chapter One raises the crucial issue of an appropriate theatre space for Jonsonian performance. Chapters Two to Four continue to discuss performance issues; namely, the modernization of text and setting, directorial concepts and acting.

Chapter Five considers the wider theatrical context of the period covered by the thesis.

Part One, in Volume One, concludes with the Afterword, which provides some conclusions for future performances using the findings of the research undertaken in Part Two. I am aware that the Afterword would normally be placed at the close of the thesis but the conclusions are given here in the first volume to enable Part Two, in Volume Two, to be self-contained in the presentation of the documentation of each production. Therefore, Part One concludes with the Afterword, followed by an Appendix that gives venue information as a supplement to the chapter on Space, and a Bibliography of texts and secondary reading.

Part Two begins with a short examination of the process of documentation. This takes the form of a defence of the chosen methodology and a discussion of the particular usefulness and limitations of the ephemera documented.

Each subsequent chapter in Part Two focuses on one play in performance. These chapters are ordered alphabetically according to play title. At the beginning of each chapter production details are given, in addition to indications of the archival resources available for each performance covered. Within each chapter the productions are documented in chronological order. Photographic information, where available, is presented alongside reviewers' comments to substantiate or subvert the opinions expressed. The production sources are contextualized further by the inclusion of relevant comments from practitioners. The critical reception of each production is organized to reflect, where applicable, attitudes to the text or production as a whole, the visual impact of the production and the effectiveness of the performances.

## CHAPTER ONE: PERFORMANCE ISSUES

The accounts of the various productions which feature in this thesis are intended as aids to research and should be utilized and interpreted according to each reader's particular requirements. To assist greater understanding of the ensuing material, these chapters aim to highlight a number of issues concerning the staging of Jonson's plays.

Four crucial issues may be identified in regard to the staging of Jonson's plays in the late twentieth-century. All of the points for consideration are particular to the contemporary theatre and do not reflect the original staging methods for Jonson's plays in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The decisions that determine these issues are taken before each production reaches the stage for performance. The issues listed are not a formula for theatre practitioners to use to produce Jonson in the future. Nor is it suggested that previous producers have acknowledged these areas as a list of concerns to be addressed during the processes of production. Rather, the issues discussed are a researcher's means for categorizing the series of decisions taken as part of a production's preparation for the theatre once that production has reached the stage. This facilitates comparisons between productions and focused examinations of individual productions. The issues highlight the techniques of the theatre – whether or not addressed by the producers as such during the production process – thereby dispelling the notion still common in large companies that preparation for production is an organic process. Each of the four issues will be examined in turn in the following chapters.

The question of whether or not there is a type of venue most suited to the performance of Jonson's plays will form the body of this chapter. Chapter Two will debate the issue of the modernization of Jonson's plays through changes to the spoken texts and/or the transposition of the plays' settings to other periods or locations. The issue of directorial approach forms Chapter Three, where the idea of a directorial 'concept' is considered with reference to productions. The final performance issue is acting. Chapter Four debates the value of different acting styles in Jonsonian performance. Readers may note the exclusion of theatre design from this list of performance issues. Design has not been forgotten as an important issue but the discussion of the four aspects of performance identified above also feature examinations of the idea of design at relevant moments.



## SPACE

The spaces used by the productions documented in this thesis range from a temporary tin shed theatre, capacity 160, to a concrete auditorium seating 1160 people, within an arts complex. Productions of both *The Alchemist* and *Volpone* have occurred in both of these venues, The Other Place in Stratford-upon-Avon and the Olivier auditorium in the National Theatre; so the two most frequently produced Jonsonian texts appear to be adaptable to a wide variety of spaces. Over the last three decades a range of audience-actor configurations and a variety of different sized and shaped auditoria have been employed for staging Jonson's plays. It would therefore be useful to reflect on what each of these spaces has contributed to Jonsonian performance and consider whether one particular type of space promotes successful Jonsonian production.

What will follow is a brief survey of the theatres that housed the productions discussed in the following chapters. They are discussed in groups according to their size. This is done to allow the productions to be placed within their spatial contexts. Factual information on each venue is given within an Appendix at the end of the thesis.

For reasons of brevity, and due to a lack of sufficient information, all the venues visited by touring productions (for example, the ESC's *Volpone* and CTC's *The Alchemist*) are not included. Rather, the venue that prompted the majority of press coverage on each tour has been chosen as representative of the space required by that production. This is a difficult area and productions can change significantly due to a transfer to another venue. Therefore, where there is more information

available and the production transfers for a significant period to one venue other than its original space both venues are noted, as in the case of both Stratford and London playing spaces for RSC productions. However, the RSC's regional residencies (lasting only one week per production) in Newcastle, Plymouth and elsewhere are not noted. When a production originated elsewhere but played subsequently in London the London transfer is noted in addition to the original venue. In the case of *The Devil is an Ass* at the Lyttelton in 1977 the original venues are not noted as these are outside the time limits of this thesis, (at the Edinburgh Festival, 1976 and Nottingham Playhouse, 1972).

#### SMALL-SCALE VENUES

Three venues, each with a capacity under 250, have housed six productions of Jonson. *The Alchemist* played at Sheffield Crucible Studio and TOP. *Volpone* has played at TOP and on two separate occasions at the Pit. *The Devil is an Ass* was also produced at the Pit on transfer from Stratford.

Smaller venues do not appear to be the most obvious choice for staging Jonson's texts. However, the critical reception of these productions indicates success in bringing performers and audiences closer together in confined spaces. All three small venues – the Pit, Sheffield Crucible Studio and TOP – are studio style spaces with temporary, variable scaffold seating and unraised stages laid flat on the auditorium floor. Such a layout would benefit the playing of *The Alchemist* and *Volpone* as both texts utilize temporary illusions as their subject matter.



Studio spaces need simplistic designs but detailed performances from actors because the spatial dynamic relies upon the creation of shared illusion in a shared space, rather than the distant, elaborate spectacle more suited to larger auditoria. TOP is probably the best example of a shared space between actors and audience. This dynamic was intensified at the old tin hut structure (before the brick built replacement in 1991) because audiences and actors had to share the washroom facilities. There was no front of house, the doors of the theatre were the limits of the playing space, giving performances an atmosphere of a shared social event. The playwright David Edgar has recalled the ‘closeness of the world outside’, which intensified the audience’s concentration: ‘Paradoxically, this sense of the imminence of the surroundings served to concentrate attention inside’.<sup>1</sup> The director Michael Attenborough has concurred with Edgar that the old TOP gave the impression of danger, categorizing it like Peter Brook’s ideal of a ‘rough space’: ‘It is not in any sense protected’. This sense of danger, that the shared illusion could be destroyed because ‘When someone bangs on the door, they are banging on the door of the theatre’,<sup>2</sup> gave performances of *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* at the venue a sense of urgency and complicity between performer and audience. The actor Ben Kingsley has suggested that at TOP ‘we have | learned to brave a much closer level of scrutiny from our audience, moving from “us and them” to “you and I”.’<sup>3</sup> Theatre analysts Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason have figured audiences at TOP as ‘voyeurs,

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<sup>1</sup> David Edgar, ‘Housing the New: Post-war British Theatre Architecture and New Writing’, in Ronnie Mulryne and Margaret Shewring, eds., *Making Space for Theatre: British Architecture and Theatre since 1958* (Stratford-upon-Avon: Mulryne and Shewring, 1995), pp. 84-88, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Attenborough, ‘Directing for the RSC: the Classical and the New’, in *Making Space*, pp. 89-91, pp. 89-90.

observers, participants, fellow travellers or shocked conspirators'.<sup>4</sup> The dynamics of such a space would work well as the audience is invited to participate in enjoying the con tricks of *Face*, *Subtle*, *Dol*, *Volpone* and *Mosca*. Close actor/audience relationships can encourage participation but they may also make the audience feel a sense of discomfort, even claustrophobia, as they are contained with the action in a small space. If the audience feels uncomfortable in a small space, where they are likely to be more visible to the actors and other audience members, then laughter - the ideal response to Jonson's comedies - could be stunted. The lack of barriers to define stage and auditorium in studio spaces gives performances an air of experiment, away from the more regulated areas in main house venues. As such, studios figure the audience in an apperceiving role, a dynamic particularly suited to Jonson's drama. However, the director Terry Hands has suggested that the acting most suited to TOP is 'at its best when like television it ignores the audience'.<sup>5</sup> The bravura performances of Ian McKellen and John Woodvine in Nunn's *The Alchemist* in 1977 are in direct contrast to Hands's recommended style for the space. The critical reception of Nunn's production register enjoyment of the virtuosi acting styles. Hands's judgement about acting in studio spaces is also problematic because although audiences can enjoy performances in close up as they can via the media of television, any form of theatre that 'ignores the audience' denies both the performers and the audience one of the defining qualities of the art form.

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<sup>3</sup> Ben Kingsley, quoted in Micheline Steinberg, *Flashback: A Pictorial History 1879-1979, One hundred years of Stratford-upon-Avon and the Royal Shakespeare Company* (Stratford-upon-Avon: RSC Publications, 1985), pp. 108-109.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason, 'The Changing Stage', in Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason, (eds.), *Shakespeare in Performance* (London: Salamander Books, 1995), pp. 22-31, p. 31.



What makes studio venues so exciting for Jonsonian performance is the temporary layout of the venue and the increased visibility of performers and audiences. The lack of traps or flying facilities in studios prevents spectacle and forces simplified staging without excessive settings. The close proximity of audience to actor helps to prevent histrionic acting. For example, when Posner's *Volpone* transferred from the mid-ranged Swan to the Pit the production gained in effect by utilizing a pared-down scenic design and extraneous actorly gestures were reduced. In contrast, Warchus's *The Devil is an Ass* suffered in the Pit from an increase in design elements as the designers and director aimed to make the production 'more spooky'<sup>6</sup> because of the underground location of the Pit and its claustrophobic layout of raked seating on three sides. The production failed to work in the Pit due to an extravagant aesthetic that was not conceived for the original production and which filled the limited space with incongruous elements like bones hanging from the low ceiling and small gravestones for Fitzdottrel and Pug's first meeting. The difficulty in transferring Swan shows to the Pit can be seen by the amount of changes made for *Volpone* and *The Devil is an Ass* to fit into the Pit. Because TOP's layout and size is more similar than the Swan's to the Pit's it is easier for TOP shows to transfer to the Pit, as Alexander's *Volpone* did without any real problems.

Therefore, studio spaces can work well for Jonson if the design elements utilized are integrated with the production style and nature of the space. The potential of staging Jonson in small venues was seen as early as 1975 when Buzz

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Hands, 'Towards the Future', in Ronnie Mulryne and Margaret Shewring, eds., *This Golden Round: The Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan* (Stratford-on-Avon: Muryne and Shewring, 1989), pp. 159-160, p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Warchus, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 5 August 1998.

Goodbody planned a production of *Epicoene* at TOP. The production never occurred due to Goodbody's death but her foresight of staging Jonson at TOP and other confined spaces has since been proved as full of possibilities.

## LARGE VENUES

Seven venues, each with a capacity of over 700, have been home to eleven Jonsonian productions. The Aldwych, Barbican, Lyttelton, Manchester Royal Exchange and Round House theatres have each housed one Jonson play; Birmingham Rep has housed two; the Olivier has produced three. All of these venues have accommodated *The Alchemist*, with the exception of the Lyttelton and the Round House, which have respectively housed *The Devil is an Ass* and *Bartholomew Fair*. In addition to *The Alchemist*, Birmingham Rep produced *Volpone*, with *Volpone* and *Bartholomew Fair* in addition at the Olivier. Despite the similarities of capacity, each of the venues has a distinctive shape and therefore produces different effects in performance.

The Aldwych is noted for being an intimate venue despite its size, as the designer William Dudley suggests: 'we all know how intimate the Aldwych is. [. . .] [The RSC] have since desired to come back to a warmer, intimate theatre in London'.<sup>7</sup> One element of the comedy in *The Alchemist* is the use of farcical devices – a succession of quick changes and slamming doors. Such elements would perhaps work best in a 'warm' theatre, once famous for its farces. The promotion of laughter from farce works well at the Aldwych because, although closely situated to the stage, the audience is at a comfortable remove from the action due to the framing



device of the proscenium arch. In an alteration to the Stratford production at TOP (which spatially situated the audience within the confines of Lovewit's house), at the Aldwych the framed dynamic of separating audience and action was intensified. The new design did not just place the interior of Lovewit's house within the proscenium but added another frame by placing a cross section of the whole house on stilts on the stage. This device helped to scale down the focus on the large Aldwych stage. Because the difference between the stage and auditorium was intensified the audience no longer felt as complicit as they had done at TOP but they could enjoy the gulling of victims from a privileged distance. Placing the Jonson play that most adheres to the Neo-Classical model of unity in place, time and action within a proscenium arch venue is particularly appropriate. The designated separate spaces of stage and auditorium showed, in addition, that Jonsonian performance can successfully achieve comic effects by exaggerating the difference of Jonson's texts from our own time, rather than aiming at assimilation. The double framing device of the stage was mirrored by a verbal frame (written by Peter Barnes) of setting the action in its own time, with cries of "Bring out your dead!"<sup>8</sup>

Like the Aldwych, the Lyttelton, Birmingham Rep, Barbican and Olivier theatres all have proscenium arches but these venues have forestages that can make the action extend into the auditoria. The Lyttelton is the second largest and the Olivier is the larger venue in the NT complex. The Lyttelton has a deep rectangular auditorium but the proscenium element is not so obvious in the venue as in the Aldwych; as Brian Beardsmore has suggested, the arch is 'strangely undefined by

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<sup>7</sup> William Dudley, 'Designing for Spaces', in *Making Space*, pp. 97-8, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Barnes's changes to the text will be more fully discussed in the section on Modernization.

the architecture and much more delineated by lighting and areas of blackness'.<sup>9</sup> The sense of looking down a long auditorium at a stage surrounded by blackness would benefit the fantasy element of *The Devil is an Ass* but the general width, height and distance from the stage to the furthest point on the circle would be large obstacles to overcome for the successful execution of the comedy. This would be particularly difficult in the second half of the play where it is vital for the audience to instantly recognize that the Spanish Lady is Wittipol in drag. This would be no problem for those in the ripple seats – audience members sitting there would provide an immediate response to the joke. However, even though the Lyttelton (and the Olivier) operate using a different hierarchy to most theatres, in terms of seat price and placing within the auditorium, the effect is the same: those at the front may laugh but this has little effect on enabling the comedy to reach those at the back.

Various practitioners have suggested that the Lyttelton is a poor venue for actor-audience relations. Richard Eyre, NT [Artistic] Director 1988-97, calls it 'completely flat. There is no curvature, no attempt to embrace the stage. You are left struggling to focus the action, not embracing it' | 'It is very wide and very high. You have to think if a play will fill the space.' The designer William Dudley thinks that the Lyttelton is 'an extremely audience-un-friendly auditorium [. . .] there is no visual or easy oral contact between the stalls and the circle [. . .] [it] appears to have suffered in the design stage from too little sensitive planning'.<sup>10</sup>

*The Devil is an Ass* was not a new production for the new Lyttelton space but a hosted transfer from Birmingham Rep. Therefore it was not specifically designed

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Beardsmore, 'Detailing the Drama', in Colin Amery, (ed.), *The National Theatre: 'The Architectural Review' Guide* (London: The Architectural Press, 1977), pp. 31-42, p. 40.



for the Lyttelton space. As such it is difficult to decide whether the Lyttelton is a good space for Jonsonian performance. Practitioners appear disillusioned with the space and the programming of the Lyttelton means that it houses the NT's mid-ranged shows that are too small to fill the Olivier and too large for the experimental Cottesloe studio. The Lyttelton is a confrontational space, rather than a participatory space, therefore, it cannot embrace and encourage the audience to become involved with comedy, despite its relatively appropriate size. In addition, the lack of any other Jonsonian productions in the Lyttelton since 1977 would suggest that it is perceived to be an unsuitable space for Jonson's comedies.

The NT's other venue that has housed Jonson is another problematic space for practitioners. Like the Lyttelton, the Olivier front stalls 'provide a "ripple" of response for the actors', according to Beardsmore.<sup>11</sup> Tim Goodwin suggests the venue's effectiveness for actor/audience relations, it is a 'fan-shaped auditorium, | carefully designed to match an actor's effective span of vision, so that the whole audience can be held within the compass of his eyes'.<sup>12</sup>

Denys Lasdun, the architect of the Olivier has suggested that he intended a space that, 'above all else, would promote a dynamic and emotional relationship between audience and actor'. He sought, 'an open relationship that looked back to the Greeks and Elizabethans and [. . .] forward to a contemporary society in which all could have a fair chance to see, hear and share'. This sharing of space and the curved nature of the stage contribute to the fact that the Olivier has no safety curtain

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Eyre, 'Space and the Director', in *Making Space*, pp. 92-4, pp. 92-3; Dudley, p.98.

<sup>11</sup> Beardsmore, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Goodwin, *Britain's Royal National Theatre: the first 25 years* (London: National Theatre in association with Nick Hern, 1988), pp. 97-8.

or orchestra pit, either of which would act as a barrier between the stage and auditorium.<sup>13</sup>

The democratic intentions behind the space are made clear here and an acknowledgement of the highly social nature of the space is intended to feature in an interplay between actors and audiences. Of course, social concerns are at the forefront of Jonson's drama as he intends to inform and reform his audiences with examples of bad and good behaviour. Peter Hall, NT [Artistic] Director 1973-88, and director of *Volpone* in the Olivier in 1977 has pointed to social concerns in his evaluation of the space:

The relationship between actor and audience is not confrontation – as in the conventional proscenium stage; it is rather participation – where the spectator is made to consider and evaluate the arguments of the actor. The Olivier is therefore a great epic theatre [. . .] it does not communicate understatement.<sup>14</sup>

Because the venue 'does not communicate understatement', directors and designers of Jonson's texts in the venue have utilized the well-equipped technical aspects of the space. Warchus's *Volpone* made effective use of the double revolve to suggest different Venetian locations and provide contained settings on the vast stage to concentrate attention. That production also experimented with the flying options available by having Nano, Androgyno and Castrone aloft on wires to watch the opening of *Volpone*'s initial nightmare, played as a chase, utilizing the double revolve. Beardsmore's description of the other technical facilities points to devices employed in Hall's *Volpone*, Eyre's *Bartholomew Fair* and Alexander's *The Alchemist*:

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<sup>13</sup> Denys Lasdun, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 20 and in Beardsmore, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Hall, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 20.



The back of the stage can be opened up or closed off to suit the scale of various productions. The front edge of the stage can be varied in shape [. . .] Behind the stage [. . .] are scene assembly spaces from which scenery can be moved on motorized wagons.<sup>15</sup>

The adaptability of the features of the Olivier means that almost any staging devices could be called upon to stage Jonson within the venue. If this is one of the Olivier's strengths it is also one of its drawbacks. Whilst the mobile wagons worked well for Hall's *Volpone*, to bring on Volpone's bed and Celia's window, the motorized sets of Alexander's and Eyre's productions dominated the stage, not as spectacular *coup de théâtres* but they delayed the action of the plays as stage hands could be seen to assist the hydraulics. The designers and directors of those productions had considered the wealth of facilities available in the Olivier but produced their plays around them, instead of considering the best way of fitting the plays into the space.

The opinion of Richard Eyre, director of *Bartholomew Fair* in the Olivier in 1988, would at first appear to coincide with Hall but his appreciation of the intentions of the space are tempered by practical experience:

When it works – a full house for a successful production – there is no auditorium in the world that is as intoxicating, and when it is less than full, or the audience are less than totally engaged, it's a space that is ungenerous both to actor and spectator. It's a hard stage on which to focus attention, hard to design for, and hard to animate.<sup>16</sup>

The seeming perfection of the adaptability of the space and its sociable design are undermined by Eyre. The 'hard' quality of the Olivier is both metaphorical and literal. The main building material of the entire NT complex is concrete, including pre-fabricated areas of concrete to create the superstructure within the auditorium. William Dudley, the designer of *Bartholomew Fair* in 1988 and *The Alchemist* in

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<sup>15</sup> Beardsmore, p. 36.

1996, both Olivier productions, has spoken against the materials employed and called the venue ‘the most difficult space I have worked in for a wide diversity of plays’. For Dudley the Olivier is ‘unyielding’, and ‘cluttered with too much concrete where you want space to adapt for the changing dynamic of different kinds of shows’. A designer who has worked in the space many times once again disproves the intention for the space to be infinitely adaptable.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately it is the scale of the theatre that Eyre objects to, he has condemned the Olivier’s ‘capricious acoustics’ where ‘the sound is washing about in a huge space’. He suggests the Olivier ‘obliges you to do work that uses public address, and acknowledges the existence of the audience’, echoing Lasdun and Hall’s participatory visions, but goes on to suggest ‘too large a space can overwhelm an actor’.<sup>18</sup>

From a knowledge of the Jonsonian plays performed at the Olivier one would expect this large auditorium to complement the vast scope of *Bartholomew Fair* and to be less successful for the plays which focus on a single room, that is, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. However, in considering an ideal space for Jonsonian production we must look at the successes and failures of these past productions in order to gain practical insight. Perhaps Eyre has unintentionally discovered the reason for the Jonsonian failures in the Olivier. He suggests that the venue ‘needs open space *plus* scenic elements [*sic*]. Or it needs some sort of false proscenium to create a focus’. Neither *Bartholomew Fair* nor *The Alchemist* utilized any devices like these: both used overpowering scenic elements whilst leaving open spaces around the dominant

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<sup>16</sup> Eyre, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 120.

<sup>17</sup> Dudley, p. 97.



sets unused. In Warchus's production of *Volpone* Richard Hudson's set design would, therefore, be a successful example of Eyre's principles about the space in action: scenic, contained and open. As Eyre concludes, 'it's a virtue of the space that it discourages the use of a lot of scenery'. Perhaps this is a lesson Eyre learnt after his production of *Bartholomew Fair* with its over-busy fairground sets that deadened all other action on stage. Nevertheless, it is a theory that holds true and that should have discouraged William Dudley's excessive designs in the first place. In fact, the only time when Dudley's settings for *Bartholomew Fair* did work was in the first scene, where a smaller stage for the Littlewits (on a wagon) on top of the large Olivier stage allowed the audience to focus their attention down without being distracted by other scenic elements.<sup>19</sup>

One way of tackling the 'hard'ness of the space may be to experiment with the structural elements for one season at a time, in the way that the RST space at Stratford has been experimented with in the 1976 and 1999 seasons. Directors and designers should also experiment with resisting the temptation to use all the technical facilities of the space, for example, the stage wagons that transport pre-fabricated sets. These should be used when required but not as a gimmick in themselves.

Like the Olivier, the RSC's London main stage of the Barbican is a well-equipped venue with a variable forestage and proscenium. Despite the audience's relative closeness to the action, playing comedies in the Barbican has been described as difficult. Declan Donnellan, the Artistic Director of *Cheek by Jowl*, has

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<sup>18</sup> Eyre, pp. 92-4.

<sup>19</sup> Eyre, p. 94.

suggested: ‘you don’t really feel connected to people in the audience [...] Ultimately, it’s very difficult to make people laugh’.<sup>20</sup> The opinion of Michael Attenborough, the RSC’s Executive Producer since 1990, would appear to concur with this view. He acknowledges the problem of enjoyment for the audience members at the farthest point: ‘if you go and sit on the top level you are a long way away from the stage.’ However, he calls the space, ‘excellent’, for the reason that ‘most directors, designers and actors enjoy working in it’.<sup>21</sup>

The views of the actor Simon Russell Beale, who has played (non-Jonsonian) comedy and tragedy in the venue, complicates our response to the opinions of Donnellan and Attenborough. While they had suggested that the Barbican’s size makes it a problematic venue for the audience, Beale concurs with Attenborough that the venue is beneficial for the actor: ‘I enjoy the Barbican [...]. It’s to do with the shape of the auditorium, that curve around that embraces the stage’. This element may ease the tension felt by those furthest away in the audience as actors perform confidently, reassured by the shape of the space.<sup>22</sup>

The Barbican theatre was an unusual choice of venue for *The Alchemist*. It was caused by the RSC scheduling the repertoire from three Stratford theatres into two London venues. Swan and TOP shows were mostly presented in the Pit but a shortfall of RST shows for the Barbican theatre meant that one non-RST show had to transfer to this larger venue. Jonson and *The Alchemist* were given a vote of confidence by the RSC to fill the Barbican theatre. Mendes’s production was re-

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<sup>20</sup> Declan Donnellan and Nick Ormerod, ‘Directing, designing and Theatre Space’, in *Making Space*, pp. 104-6, p. 106.

<sup>21</sup> Attenborough, p. 90.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Russell Beale, ‘Space and the Actor’, in *Making Space*, pp. 107-8, p. 107.



designed for the transfer: where the Swan had represented a single room in Lovewit's house, the Barbican's open stage forced the new design to make greater reference to the world outside. This echoes the transformation of Nunn's 1977 production of the play from TOP to the Aldwych.

Instead of placing the whole house on top of the stage (as Nunn had done) Mendes's production had the room filling the dimensions of the stage, despite its large size. The exterior world was suggested by a high cyclorama above the room, depicting a vertically-distorted London cityscape, in front of which was an upper walkway that surrounded the perimeter of the room. This walkway adapted a key element in Mendes's original Stratford production. Before the run at the Barbican Mendes spoke of enjoying plays which "head towards a miniaturist conclusion. Say, *The Alchemist* with Face left alone on stage after that kaleidoscope vision of London." In the Swan, apart from the neighbours scene where the set remained essentially unchanged, the outside world had only existed when a previously hidden London panorama was opened out at the back of the set to reveal the characters named in Face's final speech standing, silhouetted, in the rain. At the Barbican the revelation of the division between winners and losers was less spectacular as the named characters lined up on the upper walkway, still in silhouette but without rain. The impact was lessened for two reasons: the set did not magically open to present the reveal, and the walkway and panorama had been visible and used in the action previously. The difference between these closing moments would appear minimal

but it disproves the notion of the Barbican as a venue better equipped to deal with spectacle (and thematic resonance) than the smaller Swan theatre.<sup>23</sup>

The production certainly made good use of the height of the venue and did well to resist introducing extraneous elements of furniture or set in an attempt to fill the space – the focus was still successfully maintained by the actors. The size of the auditorium effectively doubled the size of potential laughs from the audience. Laughs could be louder at the Barbican but they would depend on the comedy carrying to the furthest reaches of the auditorium. It would seem that, as in the Olivier, those sitting in the stalls (that is, the majority) would enjoy the production without any drawbacks but those on the galleries may have found the room in Lovewit's house too large and distant to be able to fully interact with the comedy. In addition, however well *The Alchemist* worked on the Barbican stage it could not echo its resounding success at the Swan where the audience was more complicit in the con tricks due to their closeness to the action. As with the characters on the stage, at the Barbican the audience was spatially divided into winners below and losers above.

Birmingham Rep's size and shape immediately questions the suitability of the space as a Jonsonian venue, due to the needs of close actor-audience relations for comedy. The slight curve of the uninterrupted blocks of seating are positive elements of the design but the negative elements of the steep rake and wide auditorium outweigh these.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sam Mendes, quoted in Irving Wardle, 'Beyond his Years', *Independent on Sunday*, 12 April 1992.

<sup>24</sup> See David McGillivray, ed., *The British Alternative Theatre Directory 93-94: the comprehensive guide* (Cardiff: Rebecca Books, 1993), p. 230, and Barry Turner, ed., *The Actor's Handbook* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), p. 106.



Another problem for the Rep is its status as a (well-respected) regional theatre. Occasional productions gain national interest through a good critical reception but this has little effect on the Rep's audience composition, which is largely made up of a loyal local audience. It is difficult to fill such a large theatre within a regional location. For *The Alchemist* the Rep relied on the (television) reputations of its leading actors to attract audiences.

In *Making Space for Theatre*, Bill Alexander, Artistic Director since 1992 and director of *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* in the Rep, suggests that: 'the best use for a large space is classical and non-naturalistic. The key is to use as little set as possible'. Despite this principle a prominent design feature dominated both his Jonsonian productions. In *Volpone* it was a large bridge that worked on an aesthetic level but which slowed down the movement of the actors across the stage as they negotiated the stairs. In *The Alchemist* William Dudley's fantasy set, with moving trucks on each side, created an exterior surround for Lovewit's house. The scene changes became ponderous as actors moved furniture in blackouts and waited for the correct positioning of the stage machinery.

Alexander has also suggested that 'The stage is best used for epic. [...] You need to find plays that go best in a large space, artistically, politically, in terms of design.' Alexander may have discovered from experience that Jonson's plays have not reached their full potential in the Rep. Future productions at the Rep may elucidate whether this is because Jonson is fundamentally unsuited to what

Alexander sees as a 'a difficult space' or whether the plays have failed here so far due to an incompatibility between artistic theories and working practices.<sup>25</sup>

The Round House and Manchester Royal Exchange have large capacities but, unlike the venues discussed above, the layout of these auditoria radically differ from proscenium arches. Both spaces present theatre-in-the-round.

The details given here about the Royal Exchange precede the extensive rebuilding of the theatre in 1998 after severe bomb damage. The Exchange was Britain's largest theatre-in-the-round with a glass and steel auditorium situated inside the former Cotton Exchange in Manchester. The theatre's designer, Richard Negri, has explained the layout as a:

free-standing performance structure within a building, a transparent supporting framework [. . .] in which audience, actors and operational crew share the same intimate space and can enter from all sides. The sharing of this space means that all equipment [. . .] becomes open to view and part of the excitement [. . .]. The vast space [. . .] allowed the concept full scope.<sup>26</sup>

The Round House is a found space with variable seating: a former railway turning shed. It is frequently used for circus performances and its architecture is reminiscent of a Big Top. This means that the arrangement of the auditorium is always different, according to its temporary use. As at the Exchange, the rigging of the Round House enables the audience to see how effects are created. Illusion is not invisible at either venue but an acknowledged collusion between stage and auditorium.

In addition, there is a sense of shared space at both the Exchange and the Round House, with entrances to the auditoria shared by actors and audiences. At

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Alexander, Anthony Clark and Gwenda Hughes, 'The Birmingham Repertory Theatre: Directing at the Birmingham Rep', in *Making Space*, pp. 80-2, p. 80-1.



both venues the audience watches the play as other members of the audience remain visible throughout. Just as practitioners have praised the concentration of audiences at the RSC's old TOP – despite the potential distractions of exterior noise – so theatre critic Robert Hewison has suggested the ‘distinctive echo’ from ‘the surrounding void’ around the steel and glass Exchange theatre creates ‘absolute concentration on the playing area’. Declan Donnellan has complimented the venue’s ‘intimacy, the height *and* the sense of temporariness you need’ from a venue for Renaissance texts.<sup>27</sup> The Artistic Director of the Exchange, Braham Murray, goes further in suggesting the effect of staging classic texts like those by Jonson in that theatre:

The effect it has on plays, especially classics, is to strip them of all unnecessary disguise/dust, and because its emphasis is on an actor in the right clothes in a light, sharing an emotional experience directly with the audience, it brings up the most hackneyed and proscenium arch classic as a fresh piece.<sup>28</sup>

The engagement between stage and auditorium need not be merely ‘emotional’: the glass structure within the older building may encourage an audience to be more critical of what they are watching. Like the Round House, the Exchange is a participatory space, rather than a watching space, partly due to the visibility and audibility of other audience members watching the production. They are both highly social spaces for actors and audiences and the tiered or raked seating encourages a focus on the stage.

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Negri, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Hewison, ‘The Empty Space and the Social Space: A View from the Stalls’, in *Making Space*, pp. 52-60, p. 59; Donnellan and Ormerod, p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> Braham Murray, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 160.



It is no coincidence that the Exchange's almost lecture-theatre environment produced a version of *The Alchemist* that encouraged the participation of the audience's minds through complex visual metaphors, for example, the burning of a doll on the central cauldron. The venue could even promote a sense of claustrophobia as a structure within a building, another useful tool in the production of a closed play, like *The Alchemist*. Being able to see and hear through the structure elucidates the practicalities of performance to the audience – the presence of the actor as actor is always there as they wait for cues for entrances, characters only appear within the playing area. This magnifies the importance of the stage as a site of converging levels of awareness. The use of period costume within such a space may encourage the audience to question the value of such a setting, more than if the production was performed in a more traditional proscenium arch venue. The effect of the futuristic design is perhaps more akin to a microscope than Hewison's suggestion of a 'spacecraft'. It is therefore surprising that, considering Jonson's desire for judicious spectators, the Royal Exchange has not produced any play by Jonson since *The Alchemist* in 1987.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to the thoughtful environment of the Exchange, the Round House's similarity to a Big Top, its use as a venue for non-dramatic events and its qualities as a found space created a fun environment for Barnes's *Bartholomew Fair*. The production aimed at recreating a period funfair with stalls open to patrons before the start of the play. As a mixture of event – with real circus attractions – and theatre, Barnes's *Bartholomew Fair* fitted well within the Round House venue. The Round House is only occasionally used as a theatre venue and can often be 'dark'

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<sup>29</sup> Hewison, p. 59.

for long periods. This adds to the temporary sense of event, the excitement associated with productions and it ensures ever-changing spectacles for varied audiences. In this respect the Round House echoes *Bartholomew Fair*'s original venue, the Hope, which was by turns a theatre and a bear-baiting arena. It is no coincidence then that the diverse action of *Bartholomew Fair* would superficially work well at the Round House.

Large venues carry mixed blessings for Jonsonian performance. When the technical advantages of each space are appropriately utilized in production large venues can house successful performances of Jonson's texts. When directors and designers use technical elements just because the venue is well-equipped, without considering the consequences for the play, then the presentation of the text can suffer. The other major disadvantage of large capacity venues is that, for any comedy to work, audiences are more likely to laugh if the auditorium is full.

#### MID-RANGE VENUES

Seven venues, each with a capacity of 250-700, contained fifteen Jonsonian productions. The Almeida, Cambridge Arts Theatre, Mermaid and Nottingham Playhouse were each home to one Jonsonian play. The Hammersmith Lyric and Young Vic each housed two Jonsonian productions. The Swan is unique amongst all the venues of all sizes for housing seven different Jonsons. The nearest rival to the Swan's claim for being the most favoured auditorium for Jonsonian production is the large-scale Olivier which has been home to four productions. The choice of plays



amongst the mid-range venues has more variety than those in either the large or small-scale categories. *The Alchemist* was produced at Cambridge Arts Theatre, Hammersmith Lyric, Nottingham Playhouse and the Swan. The Almeida, Hammersmith Lyric and the Swan housed *Volpone*. The Young Vic was home to two different productions of *Bartholomew Fair*, including one transfer from the Swan. *Every Man in His Humour* played at the Mermaid as well as at the Swan. In addition to *The Alchemist*, *Volpone*, *Bartholomew Fair* and *Every Man in His Humour*, the Swan's other productions were *The Devil is an Ass*, *The Silent Woman or Epicoene* and *The New Inn*.

Cambridge Arts Theatre, Nottingham Playhouse and the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre are all proscenium arch theatres with unraked stages. All have to draw on loyal, local patrons to make up the majority of audiences. As such these venues can sustain Jonson plays in repertoire for a short time or as hosted touring productions. The appropriateness of Neo-Classically modelled theatres for *The Alchemist* has been discussed with reference to the Aldwych but the principle is applicable to these venues as well. The proscenium contains the temporary fantasy of the play – and also that of *Volpone* at the Lyric – whilst the energy of the slapstick may spill out of the frame onto the forestages at the Lyric and Nottingham. The forestages also allow more direct actor-audience address. The flying facilities at the Lyric enabled Dol to appear on wires as the Pantomime Queen of Fairy. In Jones's production, *The Alchemist* appears to have fitted well within the Lyric's proscenium arch. The ESC's *Volpone* was not as successful in this space but that may be due more to the lack of coherence in that production as a whole and not dependent on any particular failure



of the space. The critical reception of the production at other venues suggests that the choice of venue was not the primary failure that the critics objected to. Certainly the use of a proscenium would again be utilized as a containing element, this time for the fantastic and eclectic version of the play as directed by Luscombe.

Nottingham Playhouse is slightly different in its layout to the Lyric and the Cambridge Arts Theatre. The architect of Nottingham Playhouse, Peter Moro, has spoken of his desire to ‘combine [...] two seemingly incompatible forms of theatre; open and proscenium stage’. He calls the shape ‘cylindrical’ and suggests that the proscenium ‘is just a gap in the surrounding wall’. He goes on, ‘this gap can be closed by continuing the auditorium wall treatment or by other scenic devices and the action transferred into the auditorium by the provision of a large mechanically raised thrust stage’. However, he draws attention to the usual form of the theatre, ‘it is the proscenium form which is now preferred’.<sup>30</sup> Ruth Mackenzie, Executive Director since 1990, thinks that, despite its size, the Playhouse has ‘an unusually intimate feel’ which comes from ‘an immediacy between artist and audience, and a flexibility of stage / auditorium relationship’.<sup>31</sup> The added element of the cylindrical form at the Playhouse enables audiences to remain aware of their place within a larger social gathering, in a similar way to thrust and in-the-round spaces. This allows the combination of the formal proscenium style and the ‘intimate’ atmosphere that Mackenzie proposes. These factors and the Playhouse’s medium sized capacity – and the willingness to schedule Jonsonian comedy into the repertoire in the past – would suggest that Nottingham Playhouse is a potentially

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Moro, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 130.

<sup>31</sup> Ruth Mackenzie, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 130.

successful venue for Jonson. Nevertheless, these elements cannot be reinforced or refuted with regard to *The Alchemist* in 1978 because very little evidence of that production survives and no other productions of Jonson's plays have been produced by the venue since that time.

The Almeida, the Young Vic, the Mermaid and the Swan all have thrust stages that place the action at the centre of the audience. All four venues are known for their intimacy.

Mark Foley, the architect who converted the former lecture theatre of the Almeida, has suggested the concern for intimacy in the venue as he endeavoured to 'maintain the intimate relationship between audience and performer [...] [and] enhance the warm, textured quality of the space through the use of lighting, colour and materials'. The Joint Artistic Directors of the venue, Jonathan Kent and Ian McDiarmid [who played the title role in the 1990 production], have praised it as 'one of the most charismatic spaces in London. [...] The performance space is similar in size to the auditorium [...] it allows "epic theatre in an intimate space" [...] has a high reputation amongst artists as a sympathetic space in which to perform'.<sup>32</sup>

At the Almeida *Volpone* was pared-down from the original text to exclude the Would-Be subplot. The excision of the Would-Bes tightens the audience's focus onto the action of the main plot. Within an intimate auditorium with a medium capacity this compression would be particularly effective. In this venue it could create a claustrophobic atmosphere that mirrors the enclosure inherent in the play.

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<sup>32</sup> Mark Foley, Jonathan Kent and Iain [sic] McDiarmid, all quoted in *Making Space*, p. 178.



The production added to this theme of enclosure by having Androgyno, Nano and Castrone emerging from caskets, like the rest of Volpone's treasure.

This production could have fitted well within another auditorium. However, relocating to a larger, more spacious auditorium would probably have lessened its effect. The overall cutting of the subplot lessened the comedy and increased the tension in the play. The venue allowed the savagery in the play to be magnified by its closeness. The Almeida, true to its theatre-club atmosphere, presented an alternative *Volpone* that was suited to its intimate space and its loyal audience.

The Young Vic's auditorium is variable in capacity and shape due to its flexible seating. However, the more frequently-used layout is the thrust stage. Frank Dunlop, the Young Vic's Director 1970-8 and 1980-3, has explained the importance of the name; it was intended as 'a young people's theatre: un-conventional, classless, open and welcoming to the theatre's lost generation': 'we asked for a cross between the Elizabethan Fortune Theatre, Guthrie's Assembly Hall, and a circus'.<sup>33</sup>

Bogdanov's *Bartholomew Fair* placed an emphasis on circus skills for his modern-dress production, designed to premiere his new Young Vic ensemble in 1978. In 1999 theatrical history was repeated as the RSC rejected the option of taking its own modern-dress *Bartholomew Fair* to either the Pit or the Barbican in favour of the Young Vic. Supple calls the venue the 'ideal modern auditorium'. He goes on to explain that its success lies amongst the space's combined contradictory elements: 'intimate enough for detail and understatement, open enough for the

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<sup>33</sup> Frank Dunlop, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 172.



influence of dance, music and physical theatre'; 'informal and yet its shape creates great focus'. He concludes that it is 'a place of action and sensation'.<sup>34</sup>

It is noticeable that two productions of the same play, which is rarely performed in itself, should be chosen specifically to be presented in one venue. It is equally unusual that no other Jonsonian plays have been performed in the Young Vic. For both its London transfers of *Volpone* (1984 and 1999) and for *The Devil is an Ass* (1996) the RSC chose the Pit as the ideal venue and for *The Alchemist* (1992) the production was upgraded in size to fit the Barbican. However, the play simply has too large a cast to fit into the Pit and it would prove difficult to find audiences to fill the Barbican for *Bartholomew Fair*. Therefore, the RSC had to find a mid-range venue. Nevertheless, the reason for the suitability of the Young Vic for *Bartholomew Fair* needs to be addressed.

One reason for the Young Vic's success with *Bartholomew Fair* may be due to the temporary nature of the building, as Donnellan has already suggested that Renaissance plays work best in theatres with a sense of temporariness, for example, Manchester Royal Exchange. The temporary feel of the Young Vic is particularly apt for the temporary nature of the events portrayed in Jonson's play. Hewison identifies that the Young Vic was a "'temporary" building [...] which has now become a permanent fixture' and considers it to have a 'genuine sense of theatre – as – forum'.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of the venue as a 'forum' also complements the characters' differing opinions in the play's cross-section of society. Perhaps the idea of a

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<sup>34</sup> Tim Supple, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 172.

<sup>35</sup> Hewison, p. 54.

‘forum’ as a formal event with judicious spectators allows the explosive play to be contained within a recognised framework. Even so, the ‘informal’ aspect that Supple identifies aids the sense of community celebration on which the play concludes. The place of the Young Vic as an experimental space, which encourages the participation of young people, may also be particularly fruitful for the presentation of *Bartholomew Fair*, which depicts the youthful vigour [as well as gullibility] of Bartholomew Cokes. The reputation of such a space would especially aid an RSC production that sought to alienate its more usual older audience with drum and bass music, strobe lighting and references to drugs.

The physical layout of the theatre as a thrust stage aids the close relationship between audience and actors and the use of aisles between seats (and the theatre bar for Bogdanov’s 1978 production) enables the antics of the Fair to spill out into the auditorium to further the notion of a sense of shared space. The audience are, quite literally, involved in the space as Fair-goers. It is perhaps for these reasons that *Bartholomew Fair* has found a home at the Young Vic.

The Mermaid is a converted space, formerly a warehouse fronting the River Thames, refurbished 1978-1982. Mulryne and Shewring have noted the negative effects of the redevelopment of the space, which stem from the building materials used: ‘hitherto the parallel and ancient stone walls of the warehouse flanked audience and actor, uniting both in a single theatrically-charged space however elongated. In 1981 the side walls were fanned outwards in banal brick’. Despite these changes the redevelopment did not remove one of the negative elements of the



original design, 'the low arc of the old roof which always lacked lighting bridges has been retained'.<sup>36</sup>

The success of *Every Man in His Humour* depended on the novelty and charm of its original venue – the Swan in Stratford. Its London transfer was to prove difficult: it had to be radically re-defined in order to fit into a different venue. The Mermaid was chosen over the more usual choices of the RSC's London bases.

Since its re-modelling in 1978, the Mermaid (after a period of success from its opening in 1959) has become a forgotten venue, situated on the North bank of the Thames, on the edge of the City of London. It does not have the prestige of an arts complex nor the readily-available audience of a West End venue. It has endured many periods of being 'dark' and does not enjoy an established reputation for comedy or classic plays. Mulryne and Shewring suggest that this is because 'a succession of commercial managements have found it progressively more difficult to fill'.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, the thrust stage would recommend the venue as a suitable London base for Swan productions – even though it has not been used as such since 1987. The production of *Every Man in His Humour* faltered in London as the company attempted to recreate the success of the run in Stratford. Caird's production was conceived for the Swan, with no plans to transfer to any other venue. The decision to transfer *Every Man in His Humour* to the Mermaid was a direct result of its success at the Swan but the production could not reach its full potential in the London venue.

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<sup>36</sup> Mulryne and Shewring, *Making Space*, p. 180.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



Perhaps the relative failure of *Every Man in His Humour* at the Mermaid was not because the venue was unsuitable for Jonsonian comedy but that this particular production was so site-specific in its original form that it was unsuitable to transfer to this space or any other at that time. Despite this, Mulryne and Shewring see the RSC's residency as a high point in the Mermaid's recent fortunes, suggesting 'only a season of RSC productions from the Swan in 1987/8, for which temporary side galleries were installed, have recaptured the power and focus of the old Mermaid'.<sup>38</sup>

The Swan is one of three RSC venues in Stratford-upon-Avon. It opened in 1986 and is built inside the original Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, which burnt down in 1926. The Swan is modelled on the Jacobean style with a thrust stage and seating on 2 galleries and a ground level. Trevor Nunn claims that the design team had 'explored the nature of a Jacobean theatre not as a conscious archaism, but in order to achieve [...] that fundamental stage-audience relationship'.<sup>39</sup> The architect Michael Reardon has concurred with Nunn's statement, saying the Swan was 'not to be a reconstruction [...] but a new performance space [...] to re-create the relationship that exists between actor and spectator, when both are contained within a common architectural framework'. He sees the venue as one where 'the art of the actor takes precedence over that of the scene painter'.<sup>40</sup> Reardon has gone further in other comments, suggesting that the space be literally shared equally between performers and audiences: 'a very strong architectonic form – a framework within which the actor and audience would exist on *equal* terms and interact [my italics]'.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Trevor Nunn, 'From Conference Hall to Theatre', in *This Golden Round*, pp. 1-8, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Reardon, 'Designing the Swan Theatre', in *This Golden Round*, pp. 9-14, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Reardon, 'Sacred Space and Secular Space', in *Making Space*, pp. 25-7, p. 25.

Keith Parsons and Pamela Mason suggest the effect of the Swan auditorium on the audience's reading of any play and note the links between Renaissance theatres and the venue:

As the audience wraps around the stage, a range of experience is provided. The view of the stage puts the action not in the fixed visual context of setting but in the human arena of an embracing audience. What takes place on the stage is tempered, intensified, modified, qualified and complicated by members of the audience reading the response of others. The use of artificial light does not negate our bond with audiences of 400 years ago because the shape [...] resists exclusive lighting. We can never forget where we are, nor with whom we share the experience.<sup>42</sup>

One of the enduring challenges of the Swan is its sightlines. Reardon has acknowledged that 'the sight lines from the upper levels at the sides are very steep' but he feels that the manner in which 'the audience hangs over the galleries and heads move to follow the actors' movements a positive aspect'.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, John Caird, director of *Every Man in His Humour* and *The New Inn* in the Swan, has suggested that the sightlines and the size of the stage are not ideal for the conclusion of Jonson's comedies, in this case, *Every Man in His Humour*: 'there's one absolutely stiff, stinkingly difficult scene – [...] the final one. Getting everybody into the right position on the stage is almost impossibly complicated'.<sup>44</sup>

Lois Potter has suggested that 'problems with visibility' are less problematic in the Swan due to the increased sense of 'audibility' and the nature of Jonson's texts: 'The visual traffic jam is not necessarily disturbing in a Jonson play, because so much is generally going on anyway that no one can pay attention to all of it at once'. In addition she sees the space as promoting an increased sense of audience

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<sup>42</sup> Parsons and Mason, p. 31.

<sup>43</sup> Reardon, *This Golden Round*, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> John Caird, 'The Director in the Swan', in *This Golden Round*, pp. 66-72, p. 68.



awareness: ‘the theatre’s shape makes the spectators aware of their surroundings’ through the visibility of the galleries and lighted exit signs.<sup>45</sup> Adrian Noble, [Artistic] Director of the RSC since 1991, has suggested that the Swan makes one ‘more aware of the audience than in any other theatre I know. It is a place of congregation’: ‘all successful productions acknowledge this easy relationship’.<sup>46</sup>

Another aspect of the Swan’s design which has been regarded as problematic by some is the chief building material used, Reardon explains: ‘the galleries are the dominating feature [...] and the light-coloured wood and austere detailing of these were initially criticised [...] on the grounds that they were visually too obtrusive’.<sup>47</sup> Attenborough acknowledges the warmth of the auditorium, calling it ‘the Swan feel-good factor’: ‘the audience sits with, if not a literal, a metaphorical grin on their faces’.<sup>48</sup> Terry Hands, the RSC’s Artistic Director when the Swan opened, has suggested that the light wood is the only drawback of the space, ‘if there is any danger with the Swan it is of a generalised warmhearted bonhomie’.<sup>49</sup> David Edgar has suggested that the consequence of this ‘warmhearted’ space is that it is particularly suited to what sounds like Jonsonian comedy: ‘a brilliant space for rumbustious comedy, the theatre seems to embrace you as you enter it’.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the undoubted warmth of the Swan on entering, Jonsonian productions have been able to subvert what Hands saw as the enemy of audience uneasiness, as Potter has pointed out using Boyle’s *The Silent Woman or Epicoene*:

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<sup>45</sup> Lois Potter, ‘The Swan Song of the Stage Historian’, in Martin Butler (ed.), *Re-Presenting Ben Jonson: Text, History, Performance* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 193-209, p. 197, p. 201.

<sup>46</sup> Adrian Noble, quoted in *Making Space*, p. 168.

<sup>47</sup> Reardon, *This Golden Round*, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Attenborough, p. 89.

<sup>49</sup> Hands, p. 160.

<sup>50</sup> Edgar, p. 88.



Dauphine not only directed his (concluding) line directly at Morose but hit him across the face with the documents [...] Depending on the performance, the audience either gasped or reacted with stunned silence. Jonson might have approved: after all, Truewit's final request for applause makes sure the spectators remember how much agony Morose has already suffered from just the kind of noise they are being asked to make [...] an automatic symbol of closure was turned into a potentially difficult moral choice.<sup>51</sup>

One positive consequence of the design of the Swan is articulated by Nick Ormerod, stage designer and co-Artistic Director of *Cheek by Jowl*, 'a brilliant space': 'the bliss of the Swan is that the actor is bang there in the middle. Any set is really redundant'.<sup>52</sup> Potter has illustrated how seamless the transition from designer's set to theatre venue can be using Mendes's *The Alchemist*, where 'the set extended to the actual brick walls of the theatre'.<sup>53</sup> However pleasing this aesthetic of the Swan as set may be for actors and audiences it can inhibit the work of some designers. If more elaborate designs are used it certainly makes the job of the production staff difficult: 'the Swan conspires to frustrate the efforts of anything but the simplest of stage settings'. Geoff Locker, Production Manager for the Swan, explains the practical consequences of this since 1986:

The 'get-in' for all scenery had to be via standard double fire doors. Storage of scenery and props was below stage via an opening not more than 8'0" square, and at that time no scenery was to be stored in the auditorium.<sup>54</sup>

The lack of set places the focus on both the actors and, of course, their costumes. Locker admits that the scale of the theatre creates pressure on the standards of the RSC's costume department: 'Costume generally accounts for between 60% and 70% of a show's production budget.' He continues to explain the reason for these

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<sup>51</sup> Potter, p. 202.

<sup>52</sup> Donnellan and Ormerod, p. 106.

<sup>53</sup> Potter, p. 202.

<sup>54</sup> Geoff Locker, 'The Technical Scene', in *This Golden Round*, pp. 95-100, p. 96.

percentages ‘the intimacy of the Swan forbids any shortcuts. Actors often seen only from the front on larger proscenium stages are seen all around in the Swan, and attention to detail is therefore paramount’.<sup>55</sup>

Locker points to the thinking behind the apparently impractical technical and production facilities, quoting from Nunn’s ‘Plan for the Swan’, Locker says:

Those early directives dictate that “the key to the whole operation is that the internal design [...] amounts to a permanent staging. [...] It is the simplest possible structure on which to present the pre-proscenium plays of our dramatic tradition”.<sup>56</sup>

This brings into play the importance of Jonson within the scheduled repertoire of the Swan since its opening in 1986. Despite productions of *The Alchemist* and *Volpone* at TOP the RSC really re-discovered the Jonson repertoire through utilizing the Swan. During the construction process Nunn admits that he ‘coined journalistic phrases’ to indicate the intended repertoire of the new space, for example, ‘the repertoire will be the plays of 1570-1750’. He has since admitted that these statements ‘reflected our passion to discover more, research more and present more of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre – and the theatre post-civil-war too’. Nevertheless, Nunn acknowledges the RSC’s relationship with Jonson before and after the building of the Swan:

It’s quite disgraceful that the RSC went *that* long doing so little Ben Jonson [*sic*]. [...] it should now be statutory that a Jonson is done every year. It seems to me now that we have the Swan, that until the RSC has presented everything stageable and playable of Jonson – over the next ten year period – then a degree of shame will attach to the Company.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Locker, p. 98.

<sup>56</sup> Locker, p. 96.

<sup>57</sup> Nunn, p. 7.



Those remarks were published in 1989 and the RSC has yet to fulfil Nunn's promise, despite the ten-year period already having expired. However, Potter is right to assert the importance of this venue in the history of Jonsonian production, the Swan has 'done more for Jonson than any other dramatist of his period' and the venue was home to 'Jonson's biggest successes'. She is also correct to point out that the early Jonsonian successes in the Swan were indicative of Caird's style in the Swan, rather than a generic Swan house style for Jonson. She persuasively argues this in contrast to Boyle's production of *Epicoene*, the next Jonson comedy in the space, which employed in Potter's words, 'grotesque costumes and hairdos' to ensure 'no one would miss the absurdity of the characters'. In contrast to Caird's productions many critics saw this performance as a failure because of the contrast with those Jonsons which had gone before. Potter acknowledges the difference between the two but concludes by suggesting that the play *Epicoene* 'is better suited to the large theatres and bravura acting' because it 'is less in tune with the late twentieth century'. In suggesting this, however, Potter appears contradicted by her own assertion that some critics assume 'that there is only *one* Jonson [*sic*]'. In calling for a plurality of readings of Jonson one must also call for a plurality of production styles within one comparable space. The Swan would appear to be the theatre space that enables audiences, theatre practitioners and critics to do that.<sup>58</sup>

The unique success of the Swan and the critical reception of productions at the Almeida and the Young Vic suggest the particular suitability of mid-ranged venues for Jonson's texts. The ability to fill mid-ranged venues to capacity gives a potentially beneficial audience response to the comedy. In addition the shape of

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<sup>58</sup> Potter, p. 201, p. 203, p. 204.



these auditoria, where audiences visibly surround the action, encourages a warm reception for comedy; unlike the cooler distance of larger proscenium spaces or the intense concentration gained in smaller venues.

Whilst various productions of Jonson's texts will continue to succeed in auditoria of all sizes and shapes, the mid-ranged Swan at Stratford provides an ideal spatial model that encourages continual experiment in Jonsonian production.

## CHAPTER TWO: MODERNIZATION

Modernization of Jonson's texts for production takes two forms: textual alterations to printed editions of the plays and changes made to the play's original contextual settings.

### TEXT

In his exegesis of performance criticism W. B. Worthen uses the terminology of G. Wilson Knight to indicate a pervasive dichotomy about theatre: “‘dramatic quality’ [...] can only be seized in performance’ but “‘theatrical technique’ is, surprisingly, incapable of penetrating to the “deeper meanings” available to literary analysis’. Worthen goes on to suggest that Knight’s analysis renders performance criticism ‘an expendable enterprise’; in other words, it is an analysis of a transitory entertainment that is cut off from the “deeper meanings” of the texts presented.<sup>1</sup>

Worthen’s monograph debates the value and practice of performance criticism. However, the idea that interests me from Worthen’s examination of Knight may be seen with reference to the issue of preparing Jonson’s texts for performance: that theatre processes avoid textual scrutiny and, because of this, the theatre is subservient to literary analysis in producing meanings from the performed texts. I hope this thesis will go some way in refuting these assumptions and providing in this chapter additional responses to editing Jonson for the theatre, whilst discussing the idea of the classical repertoire and the editorial role.

This chapter is not concerned with the process of editing Jonson’s texts for publication but with the issues associated with editing Jonson for

performance. The prompt books, which preserve the texts as they were performed, often do not credit the published edition used as the source for the performance text and the prompt books are sometimes typed to unify the appearance of the text so that if many editions have been consulted the reader remains unaware of the specific editions consulted. This chapter does not assume that those who edit Jonson for performance had access to original Folio or Quarto texts. Therefore, the relative merits of the Quartos and Folios as performance texts are not addressed here. A valuable discussion about the Folio being read as indicative of performance devices may be found in Cave, Schafer and Woolland's *Ben Jonson and Theatre: Performance, Practice and Theory*.<sup>2</sup>

A discussion about editing Jonson for performance should first consider the availability of the texts used in each production. With the exception of most RSC and NT productions retrieval of the text as it was performed is almost impossible. The RSC and NT archives contain prompt books for most of their productions but some omissions occur and it is worth noting here those texts currently accessible: *The Alchemist* (RSC 1977, RSC 1991, NT 1996); *Bartholomew Fair* (NT 1988, RSC 1997); *The Devil is an Ass* (NT 1977, RSC 1995); *Epicoene* (RSC 1989); *Every Man in His Humour* (RSC 1986); *The New Inn* (RSC 1987) and *Volpone* (NT 1977, RSC 1983, NT 1995, RSC 1999). This selection of plays – which accounts for the entire existing Jonsonian repertoire – reflects the fact that the Jonson processed to audiences through performance is the writer of comedies: no performances of *Sejanus* or *Catiline* have been professionally staged since the Restoration. Whilst some information about

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<sup>1</sup> W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 151-2.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Cave, 'Script and performance', in Cave, Schafer and Woolland, pp. 23-32.



textual alterations are given in this section more detailed analyses of the performance texts may be found in the production chapters.

Each prompt book may be compared to other sources of the performance text, for example, archival videotapes where available. Where more than one source of the performed text exist problems can arise in asserting the authority of any one piece of evidence.

The archival video records only one performance and is subject to contingent errors. For example, an understudy may take the place of the performer named in the programme or areas of the performance text may have been forgotten and, therefore, lines were altered due to an actor's lapse of concentration. Neither of these events necessarily occurred at any more than the one performance that is recorded and yet they exist as indicative of that production, remaining accessible to readers long after the production itself has disappeared.

The theatre researcher reads the prompt book as the ultimate representative of the textual changes played at every performance. But for the theatre company the prompt book is a working document in rehearsal and performance, which logs original rehearsal alterations and cuts discovered during playing the text. As a hand-prepared document the prompt book is subject to human errors in the scribing and/or typing processes. Of course, the stage manager acts as the scribe for the alterations in the prompt book and his/her hand unifies the plurality of authors and occasions of editorial intervention.

It is worth pointing out here that Barnes is exceptional in his named editorial status for productions of *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Devil is an Ass* in the late 1970s. The identity of the editors for other productions

remains unknown. For each production editorial actions are likely to be the result of any number of the following combinations:

<u>Action taken by</u>	<u>Occurring</u>
Textual editor, for example, Barnes	Before rehearsal
Director	During rehearsal
Actor	During production run
Literary Manager	(including on transfer to a new venue)
Assistant Director	

Whilst acknowledging the problem of editorial authorship, I have chosen to refer to the (plural or singular) editors of Jonson for each performance as ‘the editor’.

Having stated the inadequacies of the prompt books as a reliable source of evidence it is important to assert that there are more prompt books available than any other means of recording the performance texts. Therefore, whilst I acknowledge their inherent problems, prompt books may be read as a worthwhile source of information about particular productions. The prompt book is an overt representative of the text spoken in performance, providing additional information about actor blocking, music and lighting cues and the placement of stage furniture. In addition, each prompt book may be read for their covert value systems with regard to audiences, meaning and authorship.

No archival source is wholly representative of the production it documents. The impossibility of identifying a definitive source that gives access to the text as performed is an important reminder of the variant circumstances that occur during each performance of the same text. It is worth noting here that although all of the prompt books available demonstrate evidence of some textual alteration, none of the prompt books present a completely updated version of Jonson’s text that re-figures the text into the modes of English current at the time of performance. In this respect textual modernization may be seen as different to



the modernization of setting for production, where the world of the audience is directly referred to in the use of particular costumes, stage sets and properties. Nevertheless, the very act of editing Jonson's texts before they reach the theatre bespeaks modernization.

Occasionally, where neither prompt copies nor video records exist for productions the retrieval of performance texts seems impossible. Regrettably, this is often the case – particularly with non-RSC/non-NT productions. But some information about performance texts can be gleaned from other sources, such as reviews, programmes and articles. For example, the programme and the reviews for Alexander's *Volpone* at Birmingham Rep concur that Androgyno, Nano and Castrone were elided from the text. Similarly, the critical reception of Hytner's *Volpone* at the Almeida corroborates the information given in the programme, that the Would-Bes and Peregrine were excised for this production. Whilst the existence of two sources of this information in both cases allows us to confidently assert these alterations to *Volpone*, it is unlikely that other information about the individual treatments of the text can be ascertained with any certainty. The scope of this discussion will remain incomplete unless theatre companies are able to deposit a copy of every prompt book in a centralized theatre archive.

The lack of available performance texts validates the implications of Knight's comments, shown in Worthen's exegesis: that the text is seldom considered to be of importance by critics and audiences. Ironically, the text is at the centre of the liberal humanist regard for the classical repertoire. The lack of knowledge amongst critics and audiences about the creation of edited texts for performance is concomitant with a general lack of information from practitioners



about the performance process. Therefore, Knight's remarks are perhaps an understandable reflection of how the text is cut off from audiences and critics by a production process that obscures as it creates.

The "dramatic quality", which is seized upon by Knight as the sole, vital component of performance, is the audience's only means of communication with the prepared performance text. It is perhaps not surprising then that audiences pay less attention to the peculiarities of the actual text delivered than to the other non-textual elements of production: the acting, the setting and the directorial concept.

As one of the pioneers of theatre criticism, J. L. Styan suggested that the classical (Shakespearean) director's and actor's 'first duty was to be loyal to their author by first making him acceptable to their audience'. Styan's comments may have extended to the editor of the (Jonsonian) text for performance.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of the classical repertoire is an avatar of the liberal humanist approach to literature, reifying chosen texts to canonical status. Such an approach presents the texts as paradigmatic of continuity, promoting their educational, moral and humane qualities and therefore, figuring the writer as prophetic bard. In this environment of instructive edification the duty of the editor is to faithfully serve the original author in the production of intended meaning. The extension of this view of the theatre figures spectators as a captive audience enthralled by the transcending truths of the play. However, this prescriptive attitude to the timeless significance of classical texts is challenged by the very fact that, from the evidence of the available prompt books, the productions documented all played scripts that had been altered in some way for performance in the late-twentieth

century. The editor's actions will always be engaged within a process of cultural exchange with contingent exigencies and the text presented is always produced by the editor's subjective experience. For example, when Barnes changed the ending of *The Devil is an Ass* his personal response to the text was presented to those members of the audience unaware of Jonson's text as being representative of Jonson's play. In other words, the last three decades of Jonsonian performance have used *time-bound*, not *timeless* texts in order to communicate with their audiences.

Nevertheless, the idea of textual fidelity was put forward by both sides in a rare public debate on editing Jonson for performance. It was Barnes's work on *The Alchemist* and *The Devil is an Ass* that prompted the debate between the critic Bernard Levin (who called Barnes's versions a 'horrid execution' and 'egregiously foolish re-writing'), and the directors of the two productions.<sup>4</sup>

At the time of adapting *The Devil is an Ass* for Burge, Barnes was already an acclaimed playwright with successes like *The Ruling Class* (1968) and *Bewitched* (1974). His own writing has an affinity with Jonson's in its use of satire and focus on social structures. Barnes's use of language is akin to Jonson's, both create an evocative vocabulary with strong consonants and short vowel sounds to give the impression of energy and attack. This passage from Barnes's *The Bewitched* demonstrates its debt to the opening argument in Jonson's *The Alchemist*:

MARIANA: Cribbage-faced ape-leader.  
 ANA: Carbuncled crone.  
 MARIANA: Buss-beggar.  
 ANA: Cock-bawd.  
 MARIANA: Toad-eater.

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<sup>3</sup> J. L. Styan, *The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Levin, 'How to devalue the philosopher's stone', *Sunday Times*, 18 December 1977.



ANA: Crab-louse.  
 PARROT: *Pretty Joey! Pretty Joey!*  
 MARIANA: Piddling German fustock. I made you a Queen; made  
 you my son's wife.  
 ANA: 'Tis why I hate you, thatch-gallows.<sup>5</sup>

In his introduction to *The Bewitched* Ronald Bryden suggests that Barnes's play was 'Jacobean – a sense of things falling apart, a bitter delight in their new randomness, an appalled disgust at the superstition and brutality revealed by the collapse of the old order, which brought to mind Ben Jonson'. *The Bewitched* was, for Bryden, 'genuinely Jacobean in thought and texture: only a writer saturated as Barnes is in the language of Jonson [. . .] could have produced the brilliant, thorny, fantastic speech'.<sup>6</sup> When Barnes adapted Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, *The Devil is an Ass* and *Volpone* for performance the texts he rendered for the stage were dramatically effective. The resulting texts may be judged to be versions of Jonson but they should also be considered as collaborations between the two playwrights, like Marowitz's new versions of Shakespeare, with Barnes lending his own dramatic skills to enable Jonson's texts to work on stage in new ways. The influence of Jonson on Barnes's own writing may be seen in *Red Noses* (1978), a play written by Barnes after his work on Jonson in the previous year, though not produced until 1985.

Nunn and Burge defended their chosen editor with comments that coalesce with Styan's liberal humanist view of theatre practitioners serving the original playwright's interests through uncomplicated actions, whose prime aim is audience accessibility. Nunn suggested that the performance text of *The Alchemist* employed 'substitutions of vocabulary [...] in cases where a word [...]

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Barnes, *The Bewitched*, I.1, in Peter Barnes, *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1989), pp. 199–200.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Bryden, 'Introduction: *The Bewitched*', in Barnes, *Plays: One*, pp. 185-9, p.186; p. 187.



has disappeared from our language'. Burge's comments presented Barnes as a restorer of an otherwise impenetrable play, who enabled audiences 'to see a stage performance accessible to modern audiences after centuries of neglect'. Barnes has concurred that his 'additions' saved Jonson from theatrical obscurity – 'not been performed in England for some hundreds of years' – because his work 'helped to clarify the fiendishly involved plot' and 'made clear what a remarkably entertaining and prophetic work this is'.<sup>7</sup>

The Levin/Barnes dispute raised audience awareness of the issue of textual modernization for a short time. However, some reviewers were flippant about the value of such a forum, one suggested that Barnes's changes 'may be the subject of much scholarly debate, but for the bulk of the audience they are irrelevant'. Using this review and Nunn's, Burge's and Barnes's reactions to Levin, Levin's review can be read as violating an unuttered assumption about theatre production. This pervasive belief figures critics and audiences as silently disinterested in how Jonson's text has been altered for performance and contented instead with the "dramatic quality" of the performance itself. The usual response of theatre reviewers is, therefore, paradigmatic of the audience's response: the performance is autonomously prescriptive both in its presentation of the text and in the time awarded to the audience to have contact with the text, there can be no pre- or post-show access to the text as it is performed. Only those undertaking scholarly research may interrogate performance texts through prompt books and videos (some time) after the performance has taken place.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Trevor Nunn, 'Plays in aspic: the way to kill the classical theatre' and Stuart Burge, 'Graceless ingratitude to the man who helps the audience', both in 'Lambasting Levin', *Sunday Times*, 15 May 1977; Peter Barnes, 'Staging Jonson', in Ian Donaldson, ed., *Jonson and Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 156-62, p. 161.

<sup>8</sup> Anon., *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, [December 1977 (?)].

However much Barnes protests that ‘the original text has not been irreversibly [*sic*] changed. The original remains; this is just a version’, performances cannot be read in isolation but as part of a process of cultural exchange. Barnes’s version does have an effect on how we read Jonson’s play. Like Barnes we may consider a version of the text to be analogous to other processes involved in every theatre performance: ‘every living production of a play is a version – the text refracted through the individual vision of the director and the actors’. However, without any justification, Barnes goes on to suggest that his editorial work is unlike that of ‘most productions’: ‘I do it before, not during rehearsals’, thus denying the director or actors any input into the text their work presents. Even though Barnes’s textual alteration is an autonomous act, his ‘individual vision’ cannot govern the meaning of the text in performance, which can never be prescriptive or contained.<sup>9</sup>

In 1978 Barnes combined the jobs of textual editor and director for *Bartholomew Fair* at the Round House. Although no accessible prompt copy exists Barnes’s essay ‘Staging Jonson’ contains some examples of his editorial work: “‘for one undermeal” – “for one afternoon”; “licence” – “marriage licence”; “white money” – “silver”; “stepp’d aside” – “gone astray””. These alterations depend on literal translations and substituted jokes, as if the editor were preparing a foreign playtext for performance in English and one is forced to question Barnes’s intervention because the substitutions appear varied in their degrees of obscurity. The first change mentioned is probably justified but the inclusion of the word ‘marriage’ to precede ‘licence’ appears an excessive alteration, given that the context of the term ‘licence’ would be made obvious

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<sup>9</sup> Barnes, ‘Staging Jonson’, p. 159.



from the surrounding dialogue in the scenes where it is used. Similarly, 'gone astray' is an equally unnecessary substitution: both words are still in general usage and their meaning may be easily gained by the context.<sup>10</sup>

Barnes has suggested, echoing Styan's concerns about staging the classical repertoire, that his actions are concerned with the need for clear plotting and comedy: 'audiences cannot laugh if they do not understand [...] the play has moved on and you are lost. The slightest verbal obscurity will kill a joke or a plot point'. His argument is strengthened by the assertion that his substitutions use 'phrases of *equal force and beauty* but whose meaning is immediately clear' (my italics), echoing Styan's belief in remaining 'loyal' to the original playwright. Barnes's justifications appear to be reasonable common sense. His interest in textual fidelity figures him as a chief supporter of the continued production of Jonson's texts and he attempts to demystify the editing process – 'In editing a text, I cut and substitute words and phrases'. But when the above alterations for *Bartholomew Fair* are examined as translations, in addition to the oversimplification of the editing process and his comment that Jonson requires substantial alteration even before rehearsal, Barnes's actions are more questionable. Despite his good intentions, his subjective editing style reinstates the notion of Jonson as both inaccessible and inappropriate for the British theatre repertoire.<sup>11</sup>

*Bartholomew Fair* was not the first time that Barnes had edited Jonson for performance. As he did with *Bartholomew Fair*, in 'Staging Jonson' Barnes draws attention to the changes he made to *The Devil is an Ass* for Burge's Lyttelton production in 1977. No promptbook is available at the NT archive but a

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<sup>10</sup> Barnes, 'Staging Jonson', p. 160.



copy of the Lyttelton prompt book may be accessed in the Birmingham Rep archive. The inside cover of the prompt book states that it was used at all venues (Birmingham, Edinburgh and NT 1976-7) this prompt copy is, therefore, a reliable source of the Lyttelton performance text.

Barnes's work on *The Devil is an Ass* casts further doubt on his professed sensitivity to the text. His version does not treat the text with 'equal force and beauty' but includes completely re-written plots, inserted dialogue and characters of Barnes's own invention to no apparent purpose other than personal taste. He reports that he cut Jonson's ending to the play, which favours mercy, and created an entirely new scene in Hell because 'one felt the need to see the resolution of the play's framing device – Pug's abortive mission on Earth'. Barnes's new ending may be found in 'Staging Jonson'. However, Barnes does not indicate the elided elements of the Jonsonian text. In this case the prompt book is invaluable in revealing the amount of material that has regrettably disappeared, as will be discussed in the chapter on this production.<sup>12</sup>

Barnes's version of *The Alchemist* began in as questionable a manner as his version of *The Devil is an Ass* had ended. Barnes inserted a cityscape soundtrack placing the action in plague-ridden London before Face and Subtle's quarrel, which began offstage. Barnes's new opening is given in detail in the chapter on Nunn's production. Despite this new start, the prompt book reveals that Barnes's propensity for extensive re-writing, evident in the prompt book for *The Devil is an Ass*, was adjusted for *The Alchemist*. There was some relocation of speeches in *The Alchemist*, for example, Face's intention to meet Surly was

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<sup>11</sup> Barnes, 'Staging Jonson', p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> See Barnes, 'Staging Jonson', pp. 160-1 and Prompt Book for *The Devil is an Ass* at Birmingham Rep, Edinburgh Festival and the Lyttelton, 1976-7, in the Birmingham Rep archive, Birmingham Central Library.

excised (II.4.13-18) and relocated to precede II.5. 89. The longer speeches containing mythical or alchemical descriptions were the loci of Barnes's greatest cuts at II.1.92-104, II.3.140-157 and II.3.158-176. These elisions denied the audience access to Jonson's skill with various modes of discourse although the cuts did not alter the plot.<sup>13</sup>

The inconsistencies identifiable in Barnes's alterations for *The Devil is an Ass* and *The Alchemist* further problematize Barnes's editorial decisions. In the final scene of Barnes's *The Devil is an Ass* Merecraft's speech reads, 'They cozzened Master Fitzdottrel and tried to cozzen me [*sic*]'. However, for *The Alchemist*, also performed in 1977, Barnes obviously considered 'cozen' an obstacle to audience understanding because he changed "'Slid you'd cozen, else' (II.5.59) to "'Slid, you'd cheat them else'.<sup>14</sup>

In the year that *The Devil is an Ass* and *The Alchemist* were performed Peter Hall approached Barnes to edit *Volpone* for performance in the Olivier. Barnes prepared the text but Hall deemed it inappropriate because he had cast John Gielgud in the role of Sir Politic: Barnes's version had excised Sir Pol, Lady Would-Be and Peregrine from the play. However, Barnes reports a reputed conversation between himself and Hall; it reveals the editor's and director's attitudes to the text in contemporary performance. Barnes recalls himself saying:

we did agree that the play was too long and though the scenes are marvellous [...] they come [...] when we want to know what is happening to Volpone himself and not a minor character who is only tangentially related to the main plot.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Prompt Book for *The Alchemist* at TOP and Aldwych, 1977, in RSC archive, Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon.

<sup>14</sup> Prompt Book for *The Devil is an Ass*, 1976-7; Prompt Book for *The Alchemist*, 1977.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Barnes, 'Staging Jonson', p. 156.



Ultimately, Gielgud's involvement actively increased the amount of Jonson's text delivered in performance. In addition to playing Would-Be he spoke the Prologue (which is usually not performed) whilst Paul Scofield retained the Epilogue as Volpone. There were some internal cuts but, without Barnes's editorial services, very few notable changes. Despite Hall's expulsion of Barnes's services, many practitioners and critics regard Barnes as the authority on editing Jonson for performance. This is because, notwithstanding my criticism of his methods, his versions did actually help to reinstate Jonson's texts into the English classical repertoire for the first time since the Restoration.

More recently Caird's productions of *Every Man in His Humour* and *The New Inn* in the late 1980s caused critics and audiences to regard him as the saviour of Jonson's (forgotten) texts for current performance. The editor for Caird's *The New Inn* did not substantially alter the text, despite the production being the first time the play was professionally staged since its disastrous premiere in 1629. The longest consecutive cut was of only five lines (I.3.120-4) and the most cuts in any one area were from Lovel's second oration at IV.4.152-4, 161-3, 167-8, 181-3, 188-9, 205-7 and 210-13, but these only amounted to twenty lines. Little of the language was changed, for example, Frampul's 'servants' were refigured as 'suitors' at I.5.53 and I.6.62. In performance Lovel's long treatises were delivered with the minimum of visual interference – the listening characters were grouped around Lovel in a tableau whilst he delivered his orations with minimal gestures and moves in a softly-focused spotlight. The impression given by the treatment of the text and the simple, romantic style of performance was of deference for Jonson's text.



Judging by the critical reception of the earlier production of *Every Man in His Humour* in the Swan, Caird was already figured as the conduit for a clear communication of the Jonsonian text. For example, Thomas Sutcliffe suggested that Caird's direction (and by implication the editorial action) 'reclaims Jonson from the scholars by the odd strategy of paying a scholarly attention to the dialogue'. Caird's production of *The New Inn* came out of this successful reclamation of the unknown Jonsons as performable.<sup>16</sup>

However, the editor took a more radical approach to *Every Man in His Humour* than that later taken by the editor of *The New Inn*. The production used Jonson's revised English version of *Every Man in His Humour* from the 1616 Folio but the editor re-fashioned the ending using the Quarto text. This was due to Caird's personal interpretation of Ed Knowell's defence of poetry: 'I developed this character further than is clear in the text by making it an obvious portrait of the young Ben Jonson', imagining that this speech was 'an obviously subjective authorial statement'. The exact changes to the final scene will be given in detail in the chapter on the production. However, the effect of the change, with regard to the current discussion about editorial actions and the classical repertoire, was to focus on authorial intention and the personality of the author despite the editor's decision to conflate two different texts into one homogeneous performance text.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Caird's productions resembling personal exaltations of the unknown Jonsons to enlarge his place in the performance repertoire and Barnes's continued attachment to the performance of Jonson, the ideas of a classical

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Sutcliffe, 'Elizabethan figure-skating', *Independent*, 15 April 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Caird, p. 68.

repertoire, textual fidelity and practitioners being 'loyal' to the 'author' are displaced by more recent critical approaches to text and performance.

Analysing Shakespearian performance criticism and Styan's important early contributions, James Bulman suggests that Styan's consideration of Shakespearian performance renders the texts as 'stable and authoritative, that meaning is immanent in them, and that actors and directors are therefore *interpreters* rather than *makers* of meaning [*sic*]'. Bulman considers that performance criticism has moved away from Styan's humanist approach because of its failure to address the 'radical contingency of performance – the unpredictable, often playful intersection of history, material conditions, social contexts, and reception that destabilizes Shakespeare and makes theatrical meaning a participatory act'. Worthen concurs with Bulman's idea about performance in his reading of literary criticism, which has been engaged in 'displacing meaning from within the verbal design that was said to contain it to the contingent relationship between *a* text and the contextualizing, even constitutive practices that are seen to produce it [*sic*]'.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, in a reaction against the traditional liberal humanist approach, evident in Styan's approach to criticism and Barnes's and Caird's approach to editorial practice, critics like Bulman have forced a rejection of figuring the audience as interpreters of stage-mediated but text-generated meaning. Instead they prefer to situate the audience as the locus of meaning in the theatre, placing emphasis on the indeterminacy of textual and theatrical meaning and celebrating the plurality of subjective meaning. Theatre is, therefore, not simply a sensory enactment of the playwright's words. Because the



creation of meaning is the audience's individual responsibility theatrical meaning begins before the audience enters the auditorium, according to personal attitudes and beliefs.

When the audience is refigured from being the receivers of textual meaning to being the creators of meaning the notion of the editor's fidelity to the original author's text is made meaningless. The texts shift from being the Ur-texts or 'blueprints for performance', according to Styan's reading of Granville-Barker, to being one contributory element of the meta-text of each performance.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the received meaning of the text is certainly influenced by the decisions made by the production team. When Boyle directed *Epicoene*, the editor re-arranged the title of the text to *The Silent Woman or Epicoene*. This action indicates a perceived lack of understanding about the word 'Epicoene' and the resulting effect on the play in performance was more substantial than the alteration may at first suggest. The text itself was not substantially cut or altered for performance: the longest consecutive sections of text cut amounted to eight lines each at three separate points in the play (II.3.60-8; IV.6.56-63; V.3.117-24). In addition to these sections there were occasional instances of short cuts intermittent throughout the play. The difference in understanding between the 1609 and 1989 audiences, regarding the title, alters the effect of the central motif of the play – Epicoene's act of gender impersonation – and the responses of the other characters to his 'real' and feigned identities. In 1609 the audience would have been aware of Epicoene's questionable gender from the start of the

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<sup>18</sup> James C. Bulman, 'Introduction: Shakespeare and performance theory', in James C. Bulman (ed.), *Shakespeare, theory, and performance* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-11, p.1; Worthen, p. 154.

<sup>19</sup> Styan, p. 235.



performance, signified by the play's title. However, the ignorance of the audience in 1989 was manipulated further by the production team because the programme feminized the name of the actor in this role and reviewers were encouraged 'not to disclose the fundamental secret' of the plot. By changing the title the editor had effectively shifted the dynamic of the play. It was no longer aimed at an all-knowing audience laughing at deceived characters but a performance that was more questionable in its attitude to the relationship between the audience and text, focusing on the construction of identity through social expectations.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst Boyle's *The Silent Woman or Epicoene* changed the dynamic of the play according to twentieth-century understanding, Alexander's productions of *Volpone* in 1983, *Volpone* in 1993 and *The Alchemist* in 1996 all presented differing approaches to the text. The critical reception to the 1983 *Volpone* suggested that Alexander had chosen to play a complete text, which could be read as a liberal humanist gesture towards the centrality and self-contained qualities of the text. His later *Volpone* (1993) reflected a change in attitude when the text was cut in accordance with the chosen directorial concept. In 1996 the editor's version of *The Alchemist* failed to produce a coherent and performable text. Alexander's productions, therefore, may be seen to register a shift from a traditionalist perspective through a considered approach to the text to achieve a particular effect through to a disintegration of the text due to the lack of an overriding concept.

As previously mentioned the only significant change to the text for the 1993 *Volpone* was that 'Volpone's three special minions' were cut, according to

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<sup>20</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Brutal comedy reigns supreme', *The Times*, 6 July 1989; the same review

Alastair Macaulay's review. This resulted in a more genteel central character in accordance with the nineteenth-century setting of the production. The excision of the freaks moves the style of comedy away from the grotesque to an increased focus on individual satiric portraits (based on the greed and gullibility of individuals), removing the potential for overt visual comedy until Would-Be's tortoise shell disguise. In addition to these effects, the production removed the musical element from the play with the elision of the freaks, in addition to Volpone's song to Celia: 'Alexander has cut [...] such songs as Jonson's Catullus translation "Come, my Celia, let us prove"', reported Macaulay. Unfortunately, the Rep archive does not currently hold a prompt book of the 1993 *Volpone* and, therefore, these suggestions remain tentative. If and when this information is released it will no doubt prove a valuable record of one director's changing approach to the same Jonsonian play.<sup>21</sup>

In 1983 Alexander's *Volpone* was received by critics as an uncut version: John Barber called it a 'full length revival' but admitted 'I had no idea it would play for nearly four hours'. The similar reactions of other critics suggests dissatisfaction with the idea of a full text due to the resulting increased playing time. Inspection of the prompt copy reveals that, according to current theatre practice, the text was edited for performance. There were short cuts throughout the text but large omissions also occurred, notably in the songs (including 'Come my Celia') and the Sir Pol scenes but also in some of the hero's main speeches, I.4.144-59, II.1.4-13 and 26-31, II.1.86-100 and 102-22, II.2.10-20 and 125-99,

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appeared as Irving Wardle, 'Brutal comedy is irresistible', *The Times*, 8 July 1989.

<sup>21</sup> Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 4 June 1993.



III.3.3-20, III.7.165-82 and 235-8, IV.1.49-85, and scenes V.6, V.7, V.8 and V.9 were excised in their entirety. The Epilogue was retained for performance.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to most productions, the stage manager's notes for *Volpone* record intentions to ask John Creaser, the editor of the printed edition chosen as a source text, to explain certain areas of the text: for example, p. 58 of the notes is '3:2 line 15 – check this line with John Creaser. Also p. 127 line 65-70 [*sic*]'. The page and line numbers mentioned correspond with Creaser's edition and suggest difficulty in rehearsal with Mosca's lines to Bonario (III.2). Examples of intentions to contact Creaser occur throughout the notes. However, no correspondence from Creaser is included in these records and it remains uncertain how much influence Creaser had in the final presentation of the text in performance.<sup>23</sup>

Like his lengthy but largely-cut 1983 *Volpone*, Alexander's version of *The Alchemist* ran for almost half an hour longer than its predecessors – (Barnes's ran at 2 hours 55 minutes; Mendes's was 2 hours 45 minutes; Alexander's was 3 hours 10 minutes). Slow pace – both in the verse-speaking and creation of stage images – accounted for this long playing time. The slow delivery may have occurred because of a lack of understanding of the text by the actors (and, by assumption, the audience). This lack of textual pace – shown particularly in the opening argument where lines were slow and considered

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<sup>22</sup> John Barber, 'Elephantine *Volpone* [*sic*]', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 October 1983; Prompt Book for *Volpone* at TOP and Pit, 1983-4, in RSC archive.

<sup>23</sup> Stage manager's notes in 'Production Records' for *Volpone* at TOP, 1983, in RSC archive, p. 58; see also p. 55, and p. 60; Ben Jonson, *Volpone, or The Fox*, ed. by John W. Creaser, The London Medieval and Renaissance Series (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978).



instead of over-lapping shouts of insult – was mirrored by the slow movement of the stage machinery needed to operate the extravagant set design.<sup>24</sup>

Certain phrases were altered throughout to attempt textual clarity but, as with some of Barnes's changes, these alterations often appeared unnecessary because understanding may have been gained by context, 'a halter' was changed to 'the gallows' (I.2.42), 'shift' became 'change' (I.4.9), and 'courser' became 'stallion' (V.1.23). Some words were altered for no apparent purpose, 'tonight' became 'last night' (I.2.147), 'seraglio' became 'harem' (II.2.33), 'Don' became 'Captain' (II.3.301), 'divinity' was altered to 'theology' (IV.1.9), 'house' became 'home' (IV.1.81), 'on 'em' was changed to 'on that' (IV.1.175) and 'here's Jeremy' became 'it's Jeremy' (V.2.1). Some changes were inconsistent, 'bawds' was altered to 'pimps' (II.2.57) – yet 'bawds' was retained at II.3.248 and 264 and 'bawdy-house' remained at II.3.298. Just as Barnes's subjective actions in his edition of *The Devil is an Ass* resulted in Levin's dissatisfaction with the over-simplification of the text, so the actions of Alexander's editor in 1996 appeared limited by his/her own comprehension of the text. Where other editors had not viewed the text as problematic, this editor chose to provide modern glosses on Jonson's chosen words as much as possible. This rendered the play in performance tedious – the pace was held up by the slow set, the actors' lack of confidence in the text and the frequent additional explanation provided by the editor, for example, an explanation preceded Dol's theological recitation at IV.5.1: 'Oh sir, your mention of theology puts me in mind of Hebrew Pagan genealogies'. Similarly, when the philosopher's stone was first mentioned the editor altered the text's existing explanation of Subtle's alchemy, 'The

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<sup>24</sup> Performance running times taken from *The Alchemist* TOP programme, 1977; *The Alchemist*

*magisterium*, our great work, the stone;’ (I.4.14) was cut and replaced with, ‘Our greatest work, the philosopher’s stone, that cures the known diseases of the world, that will turn all base metals into gold’, returning to the text at I.4.15. This editorial act seems less problematic than the words given to Dol because it does not insert an explanation of a character’s actions (as the IV.5.1 example does) but amplifies an existing area of the text to ensure that the central metaphor of the play is understood early in the performance.<sup>25</sup>

The failure of the production was not merely due to the text but a combination of confused textual procedure, bad design, ineffective acting, all resulting from the lack of a coherent directorial approach.

One of the most difficult areas of Jonson’s texts to edit for performance today concerns the metatheatrical devices inherent in the texts. In 1988 the editor of *Bartholomew Fair* for Eyre’s NT production chose to retain the Induction scene: a key device for the inaugural production at the Hope on ‘the one and thirtieth day of October 1614’ (Induction, 68). But the editor excised those portions of the text that stipulate the performance date and place (Induction, 65-6, 67-72), revising the contract between the audience and stage as ‘Articles of Agreement indented between the spectators or hearers at the National Theatre on the one party; and the author of *Bartholomew Fair* on the other party’. This compromise was a satisfactory means of retaining this metatheatrical facet of the text, whilst rendering it applicable to the contemporary performance.<sup>26</sup>

The chief effects of the editor’s version of *The Devil is an Ass* for Warchus’s 1995 Swan production were seen on the presentation of character. The editor changed Engine’s gender from male to female without any line

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Swan programme, 1991, *The Alchemist* Olivier programme, 1996.



alterations. The effect was profitable because as a female Engine was now another example of a working woman (like Pitfall) and the audience could place her against their experience of the leisured women: Tailbush (who is essentially aristocratic, despite her financial interests), Frances and Eitherside. The gender-change also enabled a sense of visual illustration, previously unavailable in the text. For example, talking of the Spanish Lady, Merecraft assures Fitzdottrel ‘She knows, from the duke’s daughter to the doxy, / What is their due just, and no more!’ (II.8.38-9). On the mention of ‘the doxy’ he gestured at Engine, suggesting another area of her working life. Her gender also facilitated Merecraft’s use of Engine’s intelligence about fashion, an area of knowledge related to the feminine sphere: ‘To say he wears cioppinos, and they do so / In Spain’ (III.4.13-4). The interaction between performance and text in this way in Warchus’s production may be seen to validate Worthen’s suggestion that ‘stage performance [...] enlarges on the text, forces it to speak in languages not determined (as the language of critical analysis appears to be) by the words on the page’.<sup>27</sup>

But, like Eyre’s *Bartholomew Fair*, Warchus’s *The Devil is an Ass* needed to address Jonson’s use of metatheatrical conceits. In this production Fitzdottrel still desired to see a play at ‘the Blackfriars playhouse’ (I.6.31), despite the production being watched by the audience occurring in the Swan. This difference was partially overcome by hanging a banner over the entrance to the Swan from the foyer, with ‘the Blackfriars theatre’ inscribed on it. Within the performance the play’s title was increased for clarity from ‘*The Devil*’ (I.4.44) to ‘*The Devil is an Ass*’. But Jonson’s metatheatre caused a greater problem by

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<sup>25</sup> Prompt Book for *The Alchemist* at Birmingham Rep and Olivier, 1996, in NT archive.



mentioning 'Dick Robinson' (II.8.64), a Jacobean Jonsonian actor, as a candidate to play the Spanish Lady. This time the editor chose the modern equivalent of, 'Dougie Henshall', the actor playing Wittipol in the production at the Swan. However, as Lois Potter has commented, this joke relied on Warchus's audience having read their programmes in advance of the play (which was made difficult by low lighting and ultra-violet lights used in the auditorium as the audience entered to create an atmosphere indicative of Hell). In addition, as Potter suggests, 'lines about Robinson's offstage impersonation were cut'. This was an excision at II.8.66-74.<sup>28</sup>

The critical reception of Luscombe's ESC *Volpone* in 1990 suggests the editor's attempts to use the devices of pastiche and cliché favoured by postmodernism but these devices caused the critics to react more strongly than usual to the place of Jonson's text in performance. The Argument (usually omitted) was conceived as 'a musical-comedy chorus', complete with 'funny costumes, coloured balloons, squawks and screeches, frantic writhings, any number of agitated skips and jumps', according to John Gross. Gross suggested that 'even a good production would have trouble recovering from a start like that'. Billington, along with Charles Spencer and Paul Taylor, pointed to the inclusion of verbal and visual innuendo and topical jokes. For example, Volpone's 'doll-like Dwarf cries, as Volpone unzips a banana, "O, that's a big one"' and Scoto was 'a tartan-suited Scotty hailing from "the place where the

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<sup>26</sup> Prompt Book for *Bartholomew Fair* at Olivier, 1988, in NT archive.

<sup>27</sup> Worthen, p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> Potter, p. 203; Prompt Book for *The Devil is an Ass* at Swan, 1995, in RSC archive.

rottweilers come from, Manchewer”’. Billington labelled such insertions a ‘witless travesty’ of Jonson’s text.<sup>29</sup>

So if the ESC editor’s ‘witless’ attempts at postmodernism failed to be appreciated by the critics does this rule out radical ‘travesty’ interpretations of Jonson’s texts in the future? The answer to that question, when we consider one of the most recent Jonsonian productions, is probably ‘no’. In 1997 *Bartholomew Fair*, directed by Lawrence Boswell, the editor chose to excise large sections of text. Haggis, Bristle and Whit were denied their first textual entrances – III.1 was cut in its entirety. The cutting of IV.6.15-30 altered the dynamic of the relationship between Edgworth and Quarlous – in the text Quarlous rejects Edgworth after the latter’s offer of ‘part of a silken gown’ (IV.6.18) causes him to expel himself from Edgworth’s company and his ‘companions in beastliness’ (IV.6.21). Without this short conversation in performance Quarlous’s rejection of Edgworth into the hangman’s hands (V.6.81) appeared more shocking, immediate and questionable in motivation. This example reveals the effect of editorial cutting on the actor’s interpretation in addition to the effect editing has on design and directorial approach. An actor following a rehearsal technique based on plotting the character’s through-line in the text would find this excision particularly difficult. Rob Edwards, the actor who played Quarlous has pointed out:

I’m very sorry we’ve cut that scene between them. Edgworth says, “do you want anything else?” and then all his anger comes out at Edgworth, which I think is like, “Why is my life always like this? Why am I always in the gutter with people like this?”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John Gross, ‘A pair of giants get duffed up’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 February 1991; Michael Billington ‘Camping it up with bananas and lingerie’, *Guardian*, 8 February 1991; see also Charles Spencer ‘Massacring a masterpiece’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 February 1991 and Paul Taylor, ‘An embarrassment of superficial riches’, *Independent*, 8 February 1991.



The actor rationalized Quarlous's actions at the end of the play in accordance with this reading of the character, transferring the moment of anger at IV.6, missing in production, into another outraged moment of angered revelation:

I don't think he has any real idea of what he's going to do at the end [of the play]. I think it's just the sad sight of Mrs Overdo sitting in her own puke, rather pathetically wondering where her husband is, and suddenly the whole thing kind of snaps in him I think.<sup>31</sup>

The puppet show was considerably reduced (with elisions at V.4.167-70, 173-4, and 184-7) and after these internal cuts, the scene was cut from V.4.197 to the end at 351. The character of Val Cutting was excised completely and his lines re-attributed to various characters in turn: this rendered problems with the rapid exchange of dialogue according to the game of 'vapours' in IV.4. In addition to these noticeable changes there were smaller internal alterations to the text. However, none of the examples given above as Barnes's changes for *Bartholomew Fair* in 1978 were re-used by the editor of the 1997 production. This suggests a difference in opinion about the need to change particular lines but it may also indicate a recent change in attitudes about the presumed knowledge of the audience.<sup>32</sup>

Like Barnes's changes, the alterations made by the editor of Boswell's *Bartholomew Fair* shifted the meaning of the play from being Jonson's highly-organized portrayal of disparate events and characters within parallel comic frameworks (highlighted when the authority figures of Wasp, Overdo and Busy are brought low in the stocks) into a more fractured depiction of chaos: the gallery of individualized characters (whose costumes had no discernible unifying design features) moved across an essentially empty stage, lit by fantastically

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<sup>30</sup> Rob Edwards, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 8 January 1998.



coloured lights, focused from sharp angles, to the disorientating soundtrack of a drum and bass score mixed with pastiches of calypso, reggae, fairground music and amorphous sound effects. In other words, the heavily-cut text was one part of a directorial concept that prescribed a fractured, postmodern approach to performance. The one area of performance that failed to coalesce with the approach to the text and design was the acting style: this will be examined further in chapter four. Finally, there was no Induction scene in Boswell's production, therefore, there was no initial opportunity to allow the audience to apperceive their role in the performance. This is particularly ironic in a production that drew the audience's attention to traditional theatrical conventions, like the stage-centred gaze and the fictive 'day' figured through naturalistic lighting states, through continued subversion.

Boswell's production may be indicative of an increasing interest in the decentralization of the classical text in English mainstream theatre. Liberal humanist approaches to production will continue, just as liberal humanist criticism still exists. However, because neither a stable, authoritative text nor a completely accessible text can ever exist, new working methods – both in the editing and other rehearsal processes – should be sought in order to generate a plurality of meanings in the interaction of texts and performances. Instead of the simplistic assumption of some editors, like Barnes and Alexander's editor of *The Alchemist*, that modernizing the text creates instant audience accessibility, producers of classical texts should fully utilize the resources available, according to the staging techniques and facilities of the time. By experimenting with innovations in the service of old texts Jonsonian production will avoid the

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<sup>31</sup> Edwards.

'museum-like' approach vilified by Bulman in his criticism of British Shakespeare productions.<sup>33</sup>

Editors should not seek to prescribe meaning, as Barnes did; the difference of Jonson from the more familiar classical repertoire may encourage the audience's participation as they endeavour to engage with the production to determine meaning for themselves. Audiences need to be encouraged to listen harder than they are assumed to by Barnes and editors like him: by not providing easy glosses to the text audiences are forced to confront the gaps in their knowledge and become 'Judging Spectators' (*The Alchemist*, Prologue, 3). The substitution of modern equivalents for areas of the text may limit Jonsonian production because it figures the audience as ignorant and the texts as ineffective. It denies the production of meaning from the contingencies of performance.

Jonson's frequent addresses to his audiences and his need to set out contracts between the stage and auditorium reveal the texts' continued concerns with audience-centred meanings. In the creation of a Jonsonian repertoire an audience for Jonson may be built up, as Potter has suggested with reference to the Swan. Through continued experience such audiences become acquainted with Jonson's modes of language to the point where his references appear less in need of translation. If Jonson's language becomes more commonly heard in the theatre the editorial process may eventually be based on the length of performances and directorial concepts (as it was in Alexander's 1993 refined *Volpone* and Hytner's 1990 *Volpone* where the comic subplot was cut for savage effect), rather than on textual obscurity. Such an approach confirms the place of Jonson within the

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<sup>32</sup> Prompt Book for *Bartholomew Fair* at Swan and Young Vic, 1997-9, in RSC archive.

British classical theatre repertoire, encouraging future productions that will employ a variety of production methods.

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<sup>33</sup> Bulman, p. 8.



## SETTING

Recent scholarship on Renaissance plays, especially Shakespeare, has advanced the idea of the indeterminacy of the text. This academic movement has been reflected in theatre practice in the plurality of meanings offered by Shakespeare production. This has been particularly evident since the explosion of foreign Shakespeare production, where the idea of the text as sacred is subverted by the act of translation (and often re-translation into English surtitles for performance in Britain). The worldwide consumption of different Shakespeares has caused an increase in the use of settings according to directorial concepts and the theatre technology available. As Dennis Kennedy has suggested ‘Shakespeare’s text [...] had been rewritten by the visual’ by intercultural productions.<sup>1</sup>

Corresponding to this growth of visual devices in production there has been a growth in the discussion of the role of scenography in the twentieth century theatre, with Kennedy at the forefront of this activity. So far this focus has concentrated on the use of scenography in Shakespeare but it is perhaps time to conflate our attitude to Shakespearian production methods with recent performances of Jonson’s texts.

Using Elizabethan costumes for productions of Elizabethan plays in the theatre today is, according to Robert Smallwood, ‘what used to be thought of as the standard and straightforward way of presenting Shakespeare’. Although utilizing an Elizabethan style for a play written in that period is a relatively recent phenomenon (originating with Garrick’s occasional use of the style in the eighteenth century and Poel as its chief supporter in the nineteenth century), it is regarded as being ‘straightforward’ or the most obvious and appropriate choice

of setting. Smallwood is correct to assert that this ‘*used* to be thought of as the standard’ means of production, that is, that alternative settings are used by directors and designers within mainstream Shakespeare production today. However, Smallwood’s remarks deny the hegemony of heritage within the culture industry, which insists on the ‘straightforward’ presentation of its selected classic texts.<sup>2</sup>

Susan Bennett’s exegesis of the contemporary fetishization of the past draws attention to the promotion of the heritage ideology within the arts for political ends, through the use of terms such as ‘conservation’, ‘continuity’ and ‘tradition’: ‘a seamless past has [...] been an important strategy in the politically regressive governments of the New Right (most obviously in the United Kingdom and America)’. Therefore, whilst reading about productions that present Jonson in Elizabethan, Jacobean or Caroline dress we may consider whether such a presentation automatically endorses such policies or whether the use of traditional costuming is more questionable.<sup>3</sup>

Any production of what may be termed a classic text, especially if that text is from the English Renaissance (which marks the beginning of secular, commercial theatre), may be read as a component of that heritage industry. This is particularly the case if the production is presented by putative centres of artistic excellence in receipt of government subsidy, such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre. It is important to be aware of this debate. However, it would be a dangerous oversimplification to

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 265.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Smallwood, (ed.), *Players of Shakespeare 4: Further essays in Shakespearian performance by players with the Royal Shakespeare Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 2.



reduce the divergent nature of performance to a singular process, figuring the production as politically and theatrically conservative and the audience as a unified body unaware of any cultural-political exchange. As Bennett, pointing to Graham Holderness's work on heritage, has suggested, 'it seems less than sensible to dismiss the complex interactions between the multiplicity of performances marketed at an equally | diverse demography of consumption'.<sup>4</sup>

Because meaning in theatre is ultimately subjective it would be foolish, as Bennett and Holderness suggest, to see the audience as 'manipulated' by heritage forces, and the reason for attending the production of classic plays in Elizabethan dress as finding refuge in the past away from their own 'cultural degeneracy'. Once we have accepted the essentially conservative nature of theatre today and the ideological position of companies which utilize 'Royal' or 'National' in their nomenclature it may be possible to read performances from within these companies as more radical than perhaps at first appears.<sup>5</sup>

Jonathan Dollimore's view of reading Renaissance texts as capable of radicalism, both within their original context and in performances today, may profitably be applied to the production of Renaissance texts in the British theatre. He suggests that 'a current, political engagement with Shakespeare is inseparable from what others have | already made Shakespeare mean; the rewriting is as much a critique of existing interpretations as it is a production of new ones'.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, we may regard Jonsonian production, even within companies like the RSC and RNT, as potentially capable of presenting critiques

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the contemporary past* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, pp. 12-3.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Holderness, quoted in Bennett, p. 12.



of the process in which they are engaged. Dollimore's exegesis relates further to the presentation of classic texts by drawing attention to the cultural-political processes at work in what Smallwood calls 'straightforward' productions.

Dollimore suggests, like Bennett, that traditional production styles are inherently political: 'what others have done with Shakespeare is as political as what Marowitz is doing. Often, interpretation is most biased, most timebound, when it claims to be most impartial'.<sup>7</sup>

Despite editing a volume that investigates culturally and ideologically diverse performances, James C. Bulman has negated the value of performances from within the British theatre system. He has suggested that the current vogue for intercultural Shakespeare production 'is resulting in more playfully eclectic productions in touch with a ludic sensibility which museum-like productions of Shakespeare have lost'. Bulman's singular view of British productions as being 'museum-like' contrasts with Bennett's call for 'multiplicity', both in production and readings of productions. This is not the place to investigate the purported disparity between the staging practices of British and international productions of Shakespeare. However, Bulman's attitude to the British theatre is worth noting as representative of many who consider productions of classic texts, whether in a 'straightforward' Elizabethan setting or modernized, as incapable of radicalism.<sup>8</sup>

So far we have established that although the promotion of heritage values can be seen in the business of producing classic texts in traditional settings, it is limiting to see the productions too simplistically as wholly conservative. The convergence of meanings within performances means that productions may

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. xiii-xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Dollimore, p. xiv.

rehearse more radical views whilst operating within an essentially conservative framework and a 'straightforward' production is as culturally and theatrically emotive as a modernized production, despite Bulman's critique.

It is now time to theorize the setting options available to directors and designers in the production of Jonson's texts. Smallwood identifies four other categories of settings in his discussion of Shakespearian performance. As well as 'Elizabethan', there is 'modern', 'historical', 'period' and 'eclectic'.<sup>9</sup>

Thus far we have concentrated on the Elizabethan setting, which attempts to assimilate in performance each text's context at the time of composition.

Although 'Elizabethan' is the most convenient period label to use to describe the employment of this context for Shakespearian production, this term is made problematic for assessing the performance of Jonson's texts as their time of composition ranges over the reign of three monarchs – Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I. An alternative word should be substituted for the discussion of Jonsonian productions but selecting such a term is difficult.

The terms 'traditional' or 'original' have the effect of suggesting that this sort of setting is more valid than others for the production of Renaissance texts. This is problematic and it draws away attention from two important issues. Firstly, that as new plays at the time of their original performances the settings of the texts were contemporary to their audience. Secondly, that, as previously mentioned, only Garrick's and Poel's experiments with staging practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have caused the expectation of texts written in the Elizabethan period to be presented in Elizabethan costume. In other words, the 'tradition' has no firm basis in the presentation of the texts in their original

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<sup>8</sup> Bulman, p. 8.



performances: it is a later addition. If we consider the audiences of the original performances as witnessing a setting contemporary to themselves we may decide to use this word to describe Jacobean settings being used for Jacobean plays. However, the term 'contemporary' (that is, to the text) may be confused with the terminology of describing settings that are contemporary to the twentieth-century audience (what Smallwood calls 'modern' settings). Therefore, the word 'assimilation' appears to be the best alternative in order to describe scenography that presents an approximation of the period in which the texts were composed. This word enables Jacobean texts that utilize Jacobean settings in production today to be classed as categorically similar (although visually not the same) as a Caroline play that is presented in a Caroline setting in production today.

Out of the twenty-four productions documented in this thesis, twelve (that is, half of the total) have been assimilations. This is by far the largest group of productions and therefore the most popular choice of setting for directors and designers of Jonson in the late twentieth century. But within this group the productions present individual ideological differences. What follows is a survey of some of the effects of using an assimilated setting for producing Jonson.

In the late 1970s the three productions that re-established Jonson's place in the repertoire of the English theatre all utilized assimilated settings. The scenography of Burge's *The Devil is an Ass* drew attention to the use of non-naturalistic theatrical devices, such as the use of a spotlight on a spinning globe above the stage at the end of the performance and the device of freeze-framed action when the focus switched between the earthly characters and those in Hell.

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<sup>9</sup> Smallwood, p. 3.



These devices created a self-conscious mode of performance for actors and audiences, drawing attention to the fact that this was a constructed performance and not the presentation of an illusion of 'real life'. Of course, this effect was also created by the nature of the play, whose Hell scenes cannot be taken as anything other than fantasy. However, away from this fantastic framework, which was increased by Barnes's addition of a closing scene in Hell to replace Jonson's ending, the production had a propensity to aim at Jacobean realism.

This was shown in the costuming of the earthly characters, which was matched by a refusal to present typified one-dimensional characters. For example, Lady Tailbush was not portrayed as unattractive or grotesque but her place in society was emphasized through a concentration on her qualities as a seventeenth century businesswoman. The reviewer Nicholas de Jongh pointed to the difference between the presentation of the female characters in the play and Wittipol's female parody – the Spanish Lady – by noting the attractiveness of one of the female actors: the 'georgeous [*sic*] Elizabeth Power' played Tailbush, even though the appearance of Jonsonian characters are more usually presented as indicative of their inner moral status. By contrast, Wittipol's Spanish Lady was 'simpering in ringlets with a voice combining Fenella Fielding and Lindsay Kemp'. With this juxtaposition the production drew attention to the gap between impersonation and 'reality' but, of course, Lady Tailbush is as much of a dramatic construction as Wittipol's Spanish Lady. In acknowledging a difference in appearance between the *dramatis personae* and a character invented within the fiction by one of the *dramatis personae* the production unquestioningly re-

enforced the power of naturalism as the dominant mode of presentation because of the verisimilitude with which Power and her fellow actors played their parts.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to this verisimilitude the representation of Pug was exaggerated for comic effect. Like Satan, he had horns visible through his curly wig and he had a long rope tail attached to a padded body suit. The typification of Pug as a bouncy, likeable little devil – a ‘a comical rubber-ball of sub-human energy and lust’, according to John Barber – was matched by the presentation of a range of other devils specially written-in by Barnes.<sup>11</sup>

According to the prompt book, ‘Wrath’, ‘Lady Vanity’ and ‘Covetousness’ all appeared to Pug before Iniquity’s arrival and were given individual speeches, rendered in rhyming couplets. Their appearances symbolically reflected their names; the example of the stage direction for the arrival of Wrath will illustrate their visual status:

(SATAN gestures. There is the sound of a great blast of hot air. Spot Up Stage High on the giant seven foot figure of WRATH, in a torn blood stained jerkin and breeches and armlets with iron spikes on his forearms and legs. He wears a leather helmet studded with spikes – whilst his face is elaborately painted like a Chinese demon. He carries a rotten melon which he continuously gouges [...] He smashes the rotten melon over PUG’s head. PUG wipes the pulp from his face) [*sic*].<sup>12</sup>

The effect of these characters (perhaps consciously) echoed the figurative presentation of the seven sins in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, although Barnes obviously plays on the comic potential of his otherwise alarming characters here.

The scenography of Burge’s production was simultaneously fantastic and realistically assimilative, mirroring the production team’s dual attitude to the text, which had seized ‘an opportunity to savour the rare theatrical language of an

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, ‘Ben Jonson’s play has been beautifully rescued from academic oblivion’, *Guardian*, 3 May 1977.

<sup>11</sup> John Barber, ‘Flash of jaws in Jonson revival’, *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1977.



unknown work by Jonson' but only through extensive cutting and re-writing. The scenography required the audience to apperceive during the Hell framework but also to be more passive in their role as spectators of a representative Jacobean world.<sup>13</sup>

Such a situation was mirrored at the Aldwych where Nunn's *The Alchemist* had transferred from TOP. At TOP the auditorium was spatially representative of a room in Lovewit's Jacobean house, complete with half-timbered walls, and the audience figured as passive observers of a realistic Jacobean action unfolding in front of them. The apparent realism of the trickster's scams occurring within the closed environment of the same room as the audience was intensified by the nature of TOP's auditorium, which was a single room whose doors really did open onto the outside world. The costumes were convincingly evocative of the Jacobean era, re-inforcing the realistic aesthetic.

At the Aldwych the production resided within a larger proscenium style theatre. The auditorium was now not the same single room as the dramatic context but a theatre with obviously delineated areas of stage and auditorium. This separation of the audience from the action was extended in the figuration of a cross section of Lovewit's Jacobean house on stilts placed on top of the Aldwych's stage. Unlike at TOP, where the audience were encouraged to suspend their disbelief and absorb themselves in the verisimilitude of the action, the Aldwych audience could view Nunn's *The Alchemist* as a simultaneous mixture of theatrical spectacle, as a commentary on the business of staging classic texts (placing a contained stage set upon an open stage) and, looking

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<sup>12</sup> *Promptbook for The Devil is an Ass*, 1976-7.



within that set, as a conventional representation of a Jacobean world (the RSC's traditional acting style, based on good speech and illusory naturalism did not change between auditoria).

At the Olivier Hall's *Volpone* presented an assortment of costumes that assimilated the Renaissance Venice social world; extra characters of Venetian courtesans were included for added realism. However, this production, like Burge's *The Devil is an Ass*, utilized a set that was neither a minutely detailed realistic set, as is often used in twentieth century theatre, nor the sort of bare staging that would have probably been adopted at the text's first Globe performances. *Volpone*'s scenography was basically an open staging, leaving most of the stage bare but featuring key materials and architectural elements. Just as *The Devil is an Ass* had used wooden scaffolding with doorways to provide entrances with key pieces of furniture, like a couch for the Tailbush scene, so the *Volpone* set had permanent doorways overhung with large abstract arches and the major property was Volpone's bed. The impressive technical capabilities of the new Olivier auditorium caught the attention of the audience as a series of doors (in different colours) could be swung in for different scenes and moving trucks facilitated the appearance of Volpone's bed, Celia's window and the court.

In addition to this spectacle the casting of certain actors provided a unique spectacle: the play was introduced by John Gielgud delivering the Prologue in a dinner suit at circle level. Gielgud's place within the English theatre should be noted as it affects the way audiences read the subsequent performance. A respected, knighted actor (who would also play the foolish English knight in the play), with an almost unique position in the English theatre

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<sup>13</sup> Stuart Burge, 'Graceless ingratitude to the man who helps the audience', in 'Lambasting

(save for Olivier himself), his presence in this production – alongside the similarly respected but untitled Paul Scofield – added a sense of the theatre establishment's endorsement of the Jonsonian text. The charm and reputations of Gielgud and Scofield as well-known theatre actors places this production within the conservative tradition of performing the English classical repertoire, especially when the director's reputation with the RSC and his place at the helm of the NT (after Olivier) is also considered. Therefore using a recognised actor as a Prologue, the gaze of the audience, as with Nunn's stage upon a stage and Burge's Hell framework device, was turned back on themselves as spectators of a constructed fiction. These elements are potentially radical theatrical devices within otherwise traditional performances.

One decade later Caird's productions caused a fundamental reappraisal of Jonson in the theatre. But this adjustment of the critics' view of the playwright was not due to a subversive production style. Instead, rather ironically, it was because of Caird's attempts, following Barton's scholarly lead, to conservatize Jonson to fit within the Shakespearian mode. Whilst the assimilation productions of ten years earlier simultaneously established the place of Jonson's texts within the English repertoire and, following trends in the theatre of the 1970s, drew attention to the conventional means (and audience's expectations) of how classical texts are produced, in the 1980s those alienation devices had been rejected in favour of obscured production methods to foreground dramatic illusion and stage 'magic'.

Barton's exegesis of the late Jonsonian text *The New Inn* as being parallel to *The Tempest*, that is, Jonson's metatheatrical farewell to the stage at the close



of his career (and life) was echoed in Caird's production. Caird's *Every Man in His Humour* promoted a similar view of the (early) Jonson as a sentimental humanist. This softening of the view of Jonson (from that of a savage satirist) coincided with a focus on obscuring, rather than exposing, the devices of the production; preferring instead detailed research into the original social context of Jonson's London, a naturalistic acting style (ignoring the presence of the audience for the most part), low lighting and using ever-more subtle costuming than those used in the productions in the 1970s. This increased use of realistic costuming meant that these costumes really did look as if they could be worn by 'real' people of the time, not stage characters. The designer of the production, Sue Blane, has explained this desire as 'we desperately wanted to make Elizabethan costumes understandable – clothes, rather than costumes'. The exceptions were the comic characters' dress, which was slightly more eccentric and in keeping with the earlier stagings of Jonson, for example, the eccentric inn staff in *The New Inn*, and Justice Clement's and Roger Formal's costumes in *Every Man in His Humour*.<sup>14</sup>

It is true that the metatheatrical setting for *The New Inn*, blending the Swan's architecture with the set's staircases and trestle stage, cast the audience in the role of apperceivers but the seamless transition between stage design and auditorium (with the Host sitting in the front row for sections of the play) obscured this difference and rather rendered the audience as more passive observers sitting in The Light Heart, the fictional inn of the play, just as the audience at TOP had been fly-on-the-wall spectators within Lovewit's house. Similarly in *Every Man in His Humour* the audience found that the new

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<sup>14</sup> Sue Blane, 'Designing for the Swan', in *This Golden Round*, pp. 87-94, p. 87.



auditorium's convention of the actors/characters using the same aisles and entrances as themselves made the boundaries of stage and auditorium more fluid. The newness of the convention did cause moments of increased audience self-awareness, in keeping with the horseshoe figuration of the venue itself, but despite these scenic elements both of Caird's productions promoted a conservative assimilated aesthetic because his metatheatrical devices pointed away from the presented fiction as a theatrical construction on a stage. It was instead like a historical reconstruction where realistic characters walked amongst the audience, rather like actors who portray 'real life characters' at living museums. Caird's productions played down the savagery of Jonson by focusing on the liberal socialism – playing the family reunions in *The New Inn* as genuine – and not disturbing the audience's empathy by using (then theatrically unfashionable) distancing devices. Potter has commented, with particular regard to *Every Man in His Humour*, that the audience remains aware of their environment because of the visibility of the rest of the audience (due to the Swan's shape) and the inescapable illumination of fire exit signs.<sup>15</sup>

This is true to a large extent but once the viewer has processed this visual information I would suggest that it is possible for audiences to lose themselves in the action of the play for long periods. However, Potter is correct to assert that an awareness of these visual elements can continue to disrupt the audience's attention during performances. This is perhaps why Caird's productions utilized low-level lighting for much of the performances.

Two scenic illustrations of Caird's approach to Jonson may be gleaned from his production of *Every Man in His Humour*. Firstly, Blane's set was

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<sup>15</sup> Potter, p. 201.

originally intended to include a row of historically evocative properties around the apron stage but, as Blane explained, this alienated the audience from the production too much, acting as a physical barrier and a barrier to audience/character empathy: 'it was enough to create a psychological barrier'.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, the set recycled this idea by having the furniture necessary for particular scenes of the play hanging on pulleys and pegs towards the rear of the stage. This, too, was a potentially distancing device, which would dislocate the realistic frame of the action during set changes. However, Caird overcame this by having actors relocate objects during scenes, remaining (silently) in character; at such times the dramatic focus was maintained by the speaker whose spotlight illuminated them clearly. Perhaps the reason why Caird's productions were conservative were because they took the plays seriously and rarely attempted to subvert the playing of the play with intrusions of actorly spectacle or breath-taking theatre technology. By inviting the audience to experience the plays in a nostalgic way Caird's productions may be seen to subscribe to the heritage ideal of a 'seamless' romanticized past, a reassuring illusion of a realistic world that never existed.

The past was certainly not romanticized in Boyle's 1989 production of *The Silent Woman or Epicoene*, which followed Caird's productions as the next Jonsonian text produced in the Swan. This was as much of an assimilation of the Jacobean period as Caird's *The New Inn* had been an assimilation of the Caroline and his *Every Man in His Humour* had been of the Elizabethan periods. However, whilst the light coloured wood of the Swan had encouraged Caird's

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<sup>16</sup> Blane, p. 89.



comforting view of the past, it acted as a spur to emphasize the bare savagery that Boyle had placed on its stage.

Boyle's production began with an image of the construction of the presented self: Jared Harris as Clerimont – wearing only a long, blond wig and white knickerbockers – was dressed by the Boy (played by a woman, Liza Hayden). The audience was confronted with a series of signs to decode during this moment. The auditorium lights were fully up on a bare stage with a curtain at the rear, which reproduced an existing coloured panorama of Jacobean London. Into this bare environment, with only the curtain's image as an abstract reference to the dramatic location of the action, and entering through the stage left audience aisle, stepped the bare but complex sign of the actor/character. He was pieced together as a dramatic character as he spoke Jonson's lines and was dressed by the fictional character of the Boy, whose dual identity of a male dramatic character and a female performer were immediate sites of contention for the audience.

This problem of identifying the body with the role was paradigmatic throughout the performance. Other actors/characters presented obviously constructed selves; for example, La Foole's major gestus lay in exaggerated gestures, the repeated use of an atomizer and an affected laugh. His costume picked up on these points: he was dressed in a pink silk jacket and breeches, with a long, blond wig and a hat that was topped with a flowerpot. Just as the external characterization of Clerimont had appeared before the audience's eyes so the artificiality of the Collegiate ladies was evident in their made-up faces, extravagant costumes and brightly coloured wigs (rendered in peaks or towers of curls). Some characters had plague sores visible – indicating a very real and ever-



present threat in Jacobean London, as reviewer Paul Taylor recognised – but the presentation of none of the characters aimed at period verisimilitude.<sup>17</sup>

The focus of this production was very much on the characters'/actors' bodies as significant sites of interpretation, rather than on the set. The Swan stage remained bare for the performance and, after the first scene, the London curtain opened to allow a gallery level above the stage to be used. The questionable status of the sign of the presented self is, of course, at the heart of the play and it reached its climax in Boyle's production when Epicoene removed his dress and wig with Dauphine's help, just as the Boy had helped Clerimont at the start of the action. The echo of the near-naked male body confronted the audience's gaze of expectation of the well-dressed and contained presentation of classical texts in performance today.

The 1990s have seen less assimilation productions than previous years but Posner's *Volpone* at the close of the decade was perhaps indicative of a return to the values present in earlier productions where actor/character presentation was not a site of semiological debate but a given and where the first entrance of each character marked the presentation of 'fully rounded' characters. Posner's production focused on the rich spectacle of the characters' costumes, with Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore making particularly impressive visual and aural impacts with large, heavy robes, an approach that has come to be particularly associated with the RSC's style of presenting the classical repertoire as 'big costume dramas'. Nevertheless, Posner's production echoed the theatrical effects of the NT's production of the play over twenty years earlier.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Taylor, 'The noisy inheritance', *Independent*, 7 July 1989.

<sup>18</sup> Jules Melvin, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 2 July 1996.

As in other assimilation productions the stage for Posner's *Volpone* was sparsely decorated but an overlarge bed dominated the thrust stage with a cupboard at the rear containing Volpone's golden hoards, which was the same overlarge size as the bed to enable the bed to be retracted within the cupboard for scenes outside Volpone's chamber. Overhanging the inner stage were stuffed animals on hooks – rabbits, foxes, swans, pheasants – and a chastity belt was flown in for Corvino's persuasion of Celia (although this remained unseen for the rest of the play). The animals were an effectively savage visual statement, if not a directly metaphorical one – there were at least two foxes and no crows or ravens – but this boldness was not echoed by the conservative acting style and these overhanging elements were never pointed to by the characters, apart from the chastity belt. As such the scenography made an empty though appropriate impact, which remained unexpressed by the rest of the production.

The only other assimilation production in the 1990s was Warchus's *The Devil is an Ass*. Following Boyle's lead in pointing to an unromantic view of the Jacobean past, some of Warchus's characters were shown both in an unglamorous light and engaged within the process of constructing their social selves. Lady Tailbush first appeared with a balding head (the actress, Sheila Steafel, wore a skullcap wig with fine hair attached), and in thick white make-up. Her first action was to apply a thick layer of rouge, lipstick and eyeliner and add beauty spots. The difference between the fictional 'reality' and the dramatic society's acceptance of the created self was revealed when Manly arrived as her wooer (with a bunch of flowers) and was horrified to see Tailbush without hair. After he gasped and turned away Tailbush put on her red, curled wig and only then he turned towards her and greeted her without referring to her former



appearance. For the Tailbush scene Lady Eitherside, Frances and the Spanish Lady all wore similarly heavy make-up, drawing attention to the female face in society as a presented sign or mask. This was in stark contrast to the same section in Burge's production, where the attractiveness of the 'real' women in the play highlighted the misogyny of Wittipol's female impersonation. In Warchus's production the outward figuration of Wittipol as the Spanish Lady matched that of the 'real' women in the play: an interesting device in our post-feminist environment, placing the attractiveness of women as residing with social expectations of wealth, fashion and painted faces. The costumes – especially for this scene – relied on strong colours and rich fabrics to make spectacular (as well as socially evocative) statements. However, other costumes, like Fitzdottrel's first purple suit, were broken down and more soberly styled, suggesting realistic Jacobean clothes. Most characters – apart from the females mentioned above – had mud-splattered shoes and hose, subtly signifying the grime of Jacobean life in a realistic way.

The symbology of the stage reflected this idea of the grimy world of everyday life, in contrast to the pristine hyper-reality of polite society, by having the top gallery of the Swan above the stage decorated with a miniature golden cityscape. This was an idealized model of London and before the last scene of the play the justice Paul Eitherside descended from this area on a gold ladder, in gold robes with a shower of gold confetti falling around him and a shaft of gold light, like a glittering (and rather camp) *deus ex machina*. Beneath this excessively golden world was a bare, dark wood stage with wooden stakes leading up to the gallery, whose foundations were large clods of mud. Literally and figuratively the dirty 'underworld' of Jacobean London supported the



idealized image of the city above. When Pug was dragged back to Hell some false bricks fell from under the cityscape, signifying the crumbling of this arrangement; as the bricks fell a pyrotechnic was fired, rendering the appearance, sound and smell of a small explosion. This spectacle physically aided Shackles's lines in the final scene when he reports the presence of real devilry to the feigning Fitzdottrel:

A great piece of the prison is rent down! [...]  
 Such an infernal stink and steam behind  
 You cannot see St Pulchre's steeple yet;  
 They smell it as far as Ware as the wind lies  
 (V.8.124, 132-4)

Spectacle such as this was the main effect of the Hell scenes, which utilized ultraviolet lighting and an amorphous soundtrack before the play started as the audience entered the Swan. The stage was cloaked in a black cloth with spatters of white paint, which were picked out by the ultraviolet light. Pug and Iniquity wore fluorescent green, padded costumes that presented individual mélanges of animal shapes. Satan sat on the top gallery (the cityscape was covered by a black cloth for this section) but it was more difficult to see how he was figured because he was situated above the angle of the ultraviolet lights. He appeared to have small, green filigree wings and a long wig. His predominating feature was his booming voice, which was supplied by a head-mike and an amplifier that altered the pitch as well as the resonance of the actor's voice. Satan and Eitherside were linked in more than just their spatial realms – Michael Gardiner doubled to play both parts – and just as Eitherside descended to attempt to pass judgement on the Londoners, so Satan appeared below to summon Pug back to Hell after his plans had failed. At that point Satan appeared on stilts, with a tall hat and long coat (and no wings). In a spectacle of the technical capabilities

of the theatre, Satan was back-lit by a revolving green light and his hat included two small green lights that reflected on the actor's face daubed with ultraviolet-activated make-up. The illusory effects used in the Swan attempted to make the Hell scenes a genuinely scary element in the production.

The beauty of illusion was also presented by the production during the meeting of Wittipol and Frances at consecutive windows. This took place at the rear of the stage on two wooden scaffolds, pulled into the centre of the stage during a blacked out scene change and partially hidden by the low, horizontal, purple curtain that signified the interior of Fitzdottrel's house. As the curtain opened to form the aperture between the two balconies the scene was illuminated and a narrow, vertical curtain with a blue skyscape 'magically' unfurled from the top gallery between the two mini stages. The warm light used and the subtle musical underscoring of the end of Wittipol's song created a quiet and delicate moment in the production, which could be contrasted with the brutality of their first meeting within Fitzdottrel's house (which was still visible with the chairs, chests and the curtain set downstage throughout this scene, although rendered in blackout). This brutality was more obviously manifest when, as suggested by the text, Fitzdottrel popped up from behind Frances; a lighting change and the sound of thunder accompanied the action of him beating his wife to make the scene more menacingly dark.

In contrast to Burge's production, Warchus's *The Devil is an Ass* mixed assimilated Jacobean realism with spectacle instead of more naïve comic visual effects. Warchus's production encouraged the audience to take delight in the spectacular artifice of the contemporary theatre, whilst alerting them to the



dangerous potency of artifice in the place of ‘reality’ within the dramatic action of the play.

From the examples given we have seen that using an assimilation setting can promote conservative production values but that these can be contrasted within performances by more questionable theatrical effects. Away from assimilation productions the use of any other setting may be regarded as a modernization, whether styled as ‘modern’, ‘period’ or ‘eclectic’ – none of Jonson’s texts currently part of the dramatic repertoire have ‘historical’ settings. When a producer considers the worth of staging Jonsonian tragedies this situation may change. However, we will now address the presentation of Jonson’s texts in what Smallwood calls ‘modern’ settings to assess the extent and impact of placing Jonson’s plots and characters in settings analogous to audiences today.

The modern setting is explained by Smallwood as the placing of characters ‘in clothes that could have been worn by his [the director’s] audience’. Only two productions documented in this thesis have used modern settings and both of these have been productions of the same play, although separated by a period of two decades.<sup>19</sup>

In 1978 the characters in Bogdanov’s *Bartholomew Fair* wore clothes that may have been worn by the audience. The similarity in appearance between the audience and dramatic characters was increased by some actors mixing with the audience in the theatre bar before the show and in the interval. The modern

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<sup>19</sup> Smallwood, p. 2.



dress aesthetic was more complicated than may first appear, however, because Bogdanov also pursued a circus theme, with strips of fabric stretched over the ceiling of the auditorium to give the impression of a circus big top.

Nevertheless, the critical reception of the production concentrated on the modern element and the reviewers paid little attention to the director's circus concept. This was probably because the production followed quickly after an assimilation production of the same play had occurred at the Round House, creating a set of expectations about how the play should be performed for an audience in 1978. Most reviewers found the update acceptable, however, although Michael Billington found the transition of the text to 1978 as having an adverse effect on character: 'it is hard to think of any modern Fair that would contain characters like Bartholomew Cokes, [...] Overdo, [...] or [...] Busy'.<sup>20</sup>

Bogdanov's use of a modern context and the circus theme presented a medley of visual references that (purposefully) dislocated any attempt at a conventional presentation of the play. Although the actors undertook circus training to learn new acrobatic skills, Bogdanov's choice of a modern, circus setting provided ornamentation for the text without really addressing the content of the play through any new approach; as Ned Chaillet remarked, 'the circus skills are only a dressing for a classic, instead of a new way of seeing it'. The circus element had no real relevance to the play, adding an unnecessary and extraneous visual frame to a *Bartholomew Fair* whose modern setting aimed at accessibility; according to an article at the time Bogdanov's main aim was to

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 23 June 1978.

“make the play clear”. But his reliance on a wealth of different scenographic devices prevented this aim from being fully realized in performance.<sup>21</sup>

In 1997 Boswell’s intended modern setting of the Notting Hill Carnival aimed to place the text within a more specific set of visual references. All the characters wore clothing that could have been worn by members of the audience but some characters were loci of exaggerated mixtures of clothing for particular effect, for example, Win wore a yellow velvet hat, orange tights, yellow trainers with platform soles and a yellow dress with an orange flower design that emphasized her pregnant stomach. This example of bringing together on one body a series of extreme contemporary fashions had the overall effect of creating a hyper-realistic modern aesthetic, translating characters to iconic status but using individually realistic elements. One reviewer noticed this design paradigm, with particular reference to Win and Mistress Overdo; Sarah Teasdale commented that the design ‘transformed’ the characters ‘into effigies of modern day folly and pomp – one enters [...] resembling a Teletubby while another rants like Margaret Thatcher complete with handbag’. However, there were problems with the production’s inexact attempts to relocate some characters into twentieth century life (for example, Busy, Purecraft and Win visited the Fair in black, ministerial gowns).<sup>22</sup>

The stocks were also a difficult remnant of the Jacobean context for a modern audience to accept in a production that utilized a modern setting. Nevertheless, the chief success of the scenography was Tom Piper’s versatile, though essentially bare, setting with a blue stage and cyclorama contrasting with a garish industrial orange cladding for the interiors of the back doors and traps.

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<sup>21</sup> Ned Chaillet, *The Times*, 23 June 1978; Michael Bogdanov quoted in Anon., ‘Lord of the ring’,



Onto this set mobile props, like plastic chairs and tables and a jukebox, were added by stage hands in blue overalls, identical to those worn by Overdo in his 'porter' disguise at the end of the play. The production simultaneously presented the practicalities of set changes whilst accounting for them with narrative devices throughout. For example, a curtain of lightbulbs could be rotated on its axis to symbolically represent a carousel, or be tied back as a decorative entry to Ursula's booth or the puppet show. Once these bulbs were released from their gathered centre point by an automated switch – a moment of pure scenic spectacle with accompanying loud dance music to introduce the Fair location after the initial eavesdropping on Trash and Leatherhead by Overdo – they were manipulated by Mooncalf into a tied-back opening to the pig booth whilst he talked to Mad Arthur/Overdo. The pig's head and most of Leatherhead's wares were flown in from above (by automated switches) in an exposure of the technical capabilities of the Swan, suppressing any assumption of realism by the audience and instead providing the scenic elements as spectacular effects 'magically' appearing as the action required. This extended to the appearance of Leatherhead himself as, reminiscent of the puppets later in the play, he spent most of the play appearing only from the waist up, standing half way down the trap and surrounded by four trap doors with displays of dolls and trinkets stuck on the inside. His stall, like the rest of the locations in the Fair, was not a permanent fixture, but existed only when his trap opened and he emerged like a jack-in-the-box.

Overall, the scenography was more radical than the rather traditional acting style in providing nothing more realistic than a symbology of the Fair and dislocating the audience's passivity through an awareness of technical effects,



unexpected bursts of amplified music and placing the characters around the audience on all levels (and sometimes talking directly to them) in a subversion of the stage-centred gaze. This was particularly evident when Quarlous and Winwife's dialogue in III.2 was exchanged in spotlights from within the auditorium whilst the stage was temporarily empty apart from Whit's brief passing over the stage from the stage left auditorium aisle to rear stage right door in the cyclorama (III.2.4-15). Ironically, the amorphous quality of Piper's setting prevented the scenography from being read as clearly evocative of the Notting Hill Carnival. This was to the benefit of the production when the modern aesthetic could be more openly interpreted by a wider section of the audience than just those familiar with the real Carnival, an important point to bear in mind considering the demography of the RSC's typical audience.

Modern settings relocate the text to an analogy of the audience's own world. In doing so directors like Bogdanov hope that the situation, the characters and their costumes are perhaps more easily read – in terms of status and role – than in assimilation settings. However, one may argue that it appears odd to hear characters that wear twentieth century dress to talk in seventeenth century language. This is not necessarily the case as both productions of *Bartholomew Fair* have produced heightened versions of modern settings: neither attempted to document twentieth century 'real life' on stage. Therefore, the delivery of Jonson's language no longer seems particularly strange coming from within such extreme visual statements. When an assimilated setting aims at realistic period detail this sense of heightened dramatic illusion may be lost, causing the

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Teasdale, 'Ben turns modern', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 12 December 1997.

audience to read an aesthetically realistic Jacobean production as potentially discordant with the varied dramatic languages that Jonson employs. We may also rehearse the simplistic arguments offered by many actors, audiences and critics that modern dress productions of classic texts make the job of the actor easier than if s/he were in assimilated costume because of differences in posture between the Renaissance and now, which stems from the constraints of dress and social status. The clear communication of both the character's place in society and the action is required through the gestural effects of costume and the placing of the actor's body. Obviously, actors would find this easier if the production used modern dress. Nevertheless, it is their job as actors, through good rehearsal techniques and the fulfilment of the director's role, to enable the transition into assimilated dress to be equally strong and communicative as modern dress in performance. The only difference in the clarity of using assimilated instead of modern dress appears to be in the extent to which actors and directors are prepared to commit to exploring the potential of the chosen setting in rehearsal: this is why Caird's productions utilized the assimilated settings so well. The prescriptive notion that assimilated settings are more difficult for audiences to read may be demolished by an acknowledgement, which can be seen from noting the increased use of theatre technology and a series of complex dramatic frameworks or distancing devices, that audiences are familiar with decoding the visual information of productions at an increasingly sophisticated level. Therefore, the argument, implicit in Bogdanov's attitude to directing *Bartholomew Fair* in modern dress, that assimilated productions are too complex for audiences to read and appreciate is as untrue as it is patronizing.



Some directors choose to historicize the Jonsonian text in a period that is different to both that of the text and the year of performance; this is what Smallwood calls 'period' settings. Period settings were used by Eyre for *Bartholomew Fair* in 1988 and by Alexander for *Volpone* in 1993. Eyre's 1978 production of *The Alchemist* may have also used a period setting – the reviewer Michael Coveney described the visual element as a 'grey Dickensian' design by Pamela Howard and he described its effect, 'at curtain up, there is an immediate sense of temporary occupation among the cobwebs, dust-covers and displaced portraits'. However, the evidence for this production is so limited that it would be unwise to include this production in a discussion of period settings with any certainty.<sup>23</sup>

Eyre's fondness for period settings was evident in his earlier version of *Bartholomew Fair* at Nottingham Playhouse in 1976. Just as he had used a nineteenth century setting for that production – with the help of real nineteenth century fairground stalls from the Wookey Hole collection – his 1988 production aimed at presenting the large-scale illusion of a Victorian fairground. This time Eyre's fairground was hyper-real, utilizing a number of free standing motorized trucks with typical fairground attractions on board. The decoration of these stalls – one of which was a working fairground organ – was in the traditional period style but elements, such as the balustrades of Ursula's booth, were obviously figurative and two-dimensional thereby preventing the performance from being read as realistic. This presentation of the dream Victorian fairground as a created fantasy was undermined by the casting of a male actor, Mark Addy, as Ursula and the employment of twentieth century stage hands seen assisting the movement of

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Coveney, 'The Alchemist' [sic], *Financial Times*, 28 January 1978.



the individual trucks and the central revolve. Whether this was an intentional alienating device or whether it was due to the shortcomings of the theatre equipment to execute the tasks correctly is debatable. One reviewer found the stage hands' intervention intrusive in the fictitious world presented: it was 'distracting that stage-hands can so often be seen assisting the revolve'.<sup>24</sup>

Characters were transposed into nineteenth century roles of 'instantly recognisable social types'; for example, Quarlous and Winwife were no longer just idle young men seeking profitable marriages but, according to Irving Wardle, 'Redcoat mashers', the watch became 'helmeted bobbies' and Win and Grace became 'giggling girls in vast floral hats'. In keeping with these transpositions Littlewit appeared like Oscar Wilde with long hair, a dandy suit and a green carnation and Puppy was a traditional fairground strongman in a satin robe, tasselled leotard, tights and sporting a handlebar moustache. Wardle was impressed by the scenographic elements, noting that, in this production, 'scenic language comes first'.<sup>25</sup>

Many critics felt that the scenography was nostalgic, evoking an image of childhood delights, but it could be read more critically as presenting a romanticized past in order to comment on the inherent values of such a portrayal. The show began with Jonson's Induction scene played in period style in front of a closed curtain, which hid the truck that supported Littlewit's 'Pooter'-style house. The placing of a stage upon a stage and the offer of a modernized contract between 'the spectators or hearers at the National Theatre on the one party; and

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<sup>24</sup> Francis King, 'A rare Ben Jonson', *Sunday Telegraph* [23 October 1988 (?)].

<sup>25</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Everyone's at the fair', *The Times*, 22 October 1988.

the author of *Bartholomew Fair* on the other party' alerted the audience to critically apperceive the devices utilized throughout the production.<sup>26</sup>

As Richard Cave has pointed out, whilst many productions cut this Induction the excision of it has the particular effect of denying an essential framework to the play and the chance for the audience and the stage to communicate in the form of an agreed relationship of *mimesis* and interpretation.<sup>27</sup>

In 1993 Alexander's *Volpone* also utilized a nineteenth-century period setting, although it retained the Venetian location for the action of the play. The scenography was dominated by a large bridge over the width of the stage, amorphously representing a Venetian bridge over a canal (the bridge of sighs?), a gallery over Volpone's chamber and an overhanging frame decked with lightbulbs for the Mountebank scene. Despite the varied symbology of the bridge – and the rendering of Volpone's gold in the form of a golden light within four trap doors – the setting aimed at pictorial realism, with twenty extras employed to populate the stage at the text's excursions to the social spaces of Venice, which were created in production as the nineteenth-century café society through the placing of tables and chairs and waiters moving around the scene. Even Volpone's three freaks were transformed into artistic flair and expensive taste in absence of the textual Volpone's more questionable motivations: Nano, Androgyno and Castrone were cut from the text and replaced by a Beardsley/Klimt-inspired drop curtain at the rear of the stage, which combined Volpone's love of gold with only an illustrated reference to distorted bodies for private viewing pleasure.

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<sup>26</sup> Cut script for *Bartholomew Fair* at the Olivier, 1988, located in the music file for the



The genteel choice of setting, the absence of any Prologue, the excision of the freakish bodies of Nano, Castrone and Androgyno, and the casting of Bernard Horsfall, a traditional classical actor, in the lead role caused an essentially conventional and refined production of a more savage play. The casting of Gerard Murphy as Mosca subverted this effect slightly because of his more heightened playing style, what one reviewer called his ‘hark-at-me mannerisms: the odd back-of-the-mouth tone formation; the unspontaneous delivery’. But the isolated example of Murphy’s more unusual style only reinforced, through its contrast, the conventional methods used throughout the staging and playing of the rest of the production.<sup>28</sup>

Period relocations can provide a new context with which to view Jonson’s texts and there is nothing wrong with changing the context of a play in principle, it being one of the familiar techniques of directors and designers who stage plays from the classical repertoire. One of the challenges for directors who aim at radical revisions of Jonson’s text through the use of a period setting is that their production may be (mis-)read as endorsing the ideology of the particular period chosen, instead of working in opposition to it. Judging by the critical reception this was one of the problems with Eyre’s *Bartholomew Fair*, even though some spectators read the visual information differently, as pursuing a more ironic take on the period, prevailing attitudes to the past and the way classical texts are presented. The other challenge of Eyre’s period relocation – and here critics like Billington were perceptive – was the inability to reconcile Jonson’s portrayal of desire and excess with the corseted atmosphere of the



Victorian period, when transgressions from the precepts of civilized society (such as those made by Dame Overdo and Win) would be irrevocable and in contrast to the all-embracing dinner promised by Quarlous at the close of Jonson's play. In this way Alexander's choice of the nineteenth century for *Volpone* was more in keeping with the harsh punishments received by the protagonists at the closure of the text.

The different uses of the eclectic setting have been itemized by Smallwood as follows: 'the production may seem mostly to belong in a single period [...] which is then dislocated by the intrusion of figures from another era'; or 'deliberately non-specific, or "timeless", [...] displaced for a scene, or a section of the play, by visual evidence that seems much more dateable'; or 'straightforward eclecticism, using costumes or other visual images from many different periods and simultaneously and anachronistically juxtaposing them'.<sup>29</sup>

Those productions documented in this thesis that have used eclectic settings have been mostly set in one period or appeared 'timeless' but with elements – although not specific figures as is the case in Smallwood's account – that suggest the influence of a more questionable or different period, for example, Jones's, Boyd's and Mendes's productions of *The Alchemist*, and Warchus's *Volpone*. Alternatively, the other eclectic productions have utilized more questionably dateable elements throughout to form a post-modern mélange aesthetic, for example, Alexander's *The Alchemist* and Luscombe's *Volpone*. It is interesting to note that all of these eclectic productions come from the 1980s and 1990s, with no eclectic productions occurring in Jonsonian performance before

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Allen Cave, *Ben Jonson, English Dramatists* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 100.

1985. The aim of the eclectic setting – in either case – is to disorient the viewer, to move away from the passive acceptance of the original context of the text and to reject any implicit trust in the visual means of production. By its very nature the eclectic setting demands the audience to apperceive the production. An eclectic setting should review the configuration of the auditorium/stage relationship, activating the spectator into a careful consideration of each scenographic element displayed at any one time. Eclecticism is the ultimate scenographic exercise in the creation of subjective meaning by each audience member as it draws attention to the prominence of signs whilst requiring the audience to autonomously provide the exegesis of those signs. The failure of Alexander's *The Alchemist* and Luscombe's *Volpone* may be due to this essential quality of the eclectic setting. The juxtaposition of so many signs was problematic for audiences who found each visual element divorced from any contextual meaning to the extent that it was impossible for them in either case to create any one (subjective) meta-sign of performance.

Alexander's 1996 version of *The Alchemist* utilized a radical-looking scenography, with a house constructed from old cars, a tin bath and other pieces of scrapyard metal. The set – whose floor was imitation concrete with double yellow lines around the perimeter – contained furniture from the twentieth century, for example, a leather office chair and a glass table, but whose predominant aesthetic was that of a building site with a large, yellow waste tube running down the back of the set and a metal dustbin as the alchemical crucible. A curtain, which was decorated with a London Underground map but with Latin words in place of station names, hid the alchemical apparatus for most of the

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<sup>28</sup> Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 4 June 1993.



play and Dol warbled into a hand-held microphone to accompany the unveiling of the laboratory.

The costumes were also from different periods to the extent that each character's body was an amalgam of periods. For example, Dol wore 1970s style, pink platform boots, a cream Elizabethan bodice, a nineteenth century petticoat, a long red wig and exaggerated make-up so that her face recalled Ellen Terry's portrayal of Lady Macbeth; Pliant wore a dark blue and jet-decorated Jacobean dress (with a structured bodice and puffed sleeves), with green wellington boots and a green waxed jacket; as the Priest of Fairy Subtle wore undateable white robes, a white beard, a white wig and a head-dress that featured a BMW car badge as its central symbol (matching Dol's Queen of Fairy who wore a Jacobean-style dress – not dissimilar to Pliant's – but whose tiara was a Silver Shadow nymph stolen from a Rolls Royce). The collected presentation of these elements was shocking because of the differing status of each of these as individual items according to their conventional use, (that is, a car badge would not conventionally be regarded as having the same value as a theatre costume as a Jacobean dress), yet here they were presented as signs of equal prominence and value within the production. The pursuit of this aesthetic thereby created a challenge to the value systems of the audience but one that rendered derisive laughter through the confusion of its intended purpose.

The scenographic elements of the production may have aimed at a radical reappraisal of our expectations of the presentation of classical texts but the means by which the production created its provocative effect was a traditional reliance on moving scenery and set changes rendered in (overlong) blackouts. The use of

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<sup>29</sup> Smallwood, p. 4.



blackout would suggest the need to maintain the dramatic illusion of each section but this was prevented by the furniture removal being undertaken by both stage hands and the actors, partially visible during the blackouts. The clumsiness of the stage machinery – the two side trucks of the ‘house’ could swing in to close off the set and form an exterior front door, used for the arrival of Mammon and Surly and the Anabaptists – meant that the long changes increased the production time, adversely slowed down the momentum of the play and prevented any delight in the accomplishment of stage spectacle on the part of the audience. The audience were disposed to reject the scenography offered by the production to the extent that the play ultimately failed to engage them in any purposeful way.

Luscombe’s *Volpone* predominantly utilized twentieth century visual devices but these ranged eclectically from a music hall style, checked suit for Scoto/Volpone, a tailed frockcoat and pinstriped trousers for Voltore, a mustard coloured suit for Corvino (which could have come from the 1940s or the 1980s), PVC fetish gear for Castrone (and two inflated balloons as simulated testicles, which he popped with a pin at the start of the performance) and a pink tutu and blond wig for the doll-like Nano. The set was comprised of metal scaffolding (a familiar scenic element in ESC productions) and striped poles to figuratively evoke both the Venetian canals and a sense of carnival. The greatest failing of the scenography was the lack of gold – Volpone’s wealth (probably intentionally) looked like cheap consumer goods, being housed in a supermarket trolley. The inadequacies of the ESC’s design budget adversely affected the dramatic presentation of the text.

Both Luscombe’s and Alexander’s productions attempted radical scenography but, whilst both made use of innovative design elements, neither

setting enabled a successful new approach to the presentation of the texts. Both designs appeared to be the result of ill-considered and self-indulgent designers' jokes at the expense of the texts.

The most successful uses of the eclectic have been mostly set within one period. Jones's *The Alchemist* was mostly set in the eighteenth century but utilized more debatable visual devices such as Dol appearing on wires as a pantomime-style (Queen of) Fairy. Jones's set relied on the audience's recognition of stereotypical Gothic horror devices. The set was a dimly-lit boiler room, which was accessed at the bottom of a winding stairway, it contained an organ with pipes that blew out steam. The final exposure of the location as a tawdry illusion occurred when full light flooded the stage on the exposure of the scam with Lovewit's appearance. The Gothic references created an eerie feel to the production, until the moment of revelation, which is absent from the play itself. However, the breaking of the Gothic illusion by eclectic devices prevented the audience from reading the scenography as a 'straight' rendering of Gothic horror. Instead, this production of *The Alchemist* could be viewed more ironically throughout as using the conventions of horror in order to contrast their immediate dramatic potency with the emptiness of their effect in hindsight, at the moment of exposure. Visually this was a knowing production to be read by a knowing audience, aware of the power of aesthetic conventions but also alerted to the enjoyment that can be had from breaking accepted forms. The horror conventions grafted onto the play were shared as an in-joke by the producers and receptors of meaning.

Boyd's *The Alchemist* was mostly Jacobean but included a pair of sunglasses for Dol, music by Tom Waits, a graffiti drop curtain in place before



the start of the performance and specific – but anachronistic – disguises for Subtle, one reviewer suggests that these were ‘Sir Thomas More’, ‘Roger Ascham’, and ‘Rasputin’.<sup>30</sup>

Boyd has spoken of his interest in using Medieval/Renaissance staging devices in his production of *The Alchemist*:

It was very much a house of the period. One door would give [the impression of] a Hell mouth in a Medieval sort of way; very rich and expensive. By the end it *was* a Hell mouth, you know, not just an imaginary one but a real one. Both the protagonists were in danger of the mouth. So, I suppose the way I did it was pseudo-Renaissance’.<sup>31</sup>

Boyd’s ‘pseudo-Renaissance’ setting was a non-illusionist context for the play; set up by the use of the graffiti drop curtain and the Waits soundtrack at the opening, devices which disrupted the predominantly Jacobean visual information that followed. The setting of the production thus established, an unconventional approach to characterization could be employed. One reviewer, Paul Taylor, found one element of the playing particularly shocking, in comparison to other productions of the play:

The production keeps signalling that the tricksters resent these performances as just burdensome means-to-an-end by having them step out of their disguises with undisguised distaste. [...] The instant Dapper is blindfolded, Face throws off his Lungs costume, and he rises with cocky relief from his crutches the split-second a client is out of the door.<sup>32</sup>

But this technique was paradigmatic of Boyd’s approach in dramatic terms. It neatly revealed the idea of illusion as merely a temporary manipulation of a willing audience. Boyd’s visual devices and approach to characterization called

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Grosvenor Myer, ‘Alchemist’ [sic], paragraph not published, but received by Cambridge Theatre Company, 19 February 1988, and supplied to me by the company, (renamed Method&Madness), paragraph excised from printed review: Michael Grosvenor Myer, ‘Alchemist’ [sic], *Guardian*, 17 February 1988.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Boyd, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 7 July 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Taylor, ‘The old house of games’, *Independent*, 15 February 1988.



for the engagement of an audience in a more actively cerebral role, questioning the value of the images placed in front of them.

Mendes's *The Alchemist* was similarly founded in the Jacobean period but included elements from the twentieth century. For example, Mammon had a red tie with white spots (a familiar item from the wardrobe of newspaper tycoon Robert Maxwell) that was worn with a slashed doublet and hose made from pinstriped material. Similarly, Surly wore a leather biker jacket with a cloak made of the same material and slashed breeches rendered in black denim. The production united the contexts of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries throughout and this was often such a subtle marriage that, as Potter has commented, Mendes's production 'played with the historical context rather than attempting to represent it': 'it was hard to tell whether they were playing in period costume or modern dress; the furniture was not really "in period" either and the set extended to the actual brick walls of the theatre'.<sup>33</sup>

Mendes's production utilized a bare set – like those used in Caird's productions at the Swan – that seamlessly merged with the architecture of the auditorium: the set actually included 'fake' brick walls that were almost indistinguishable from the real bricks of the Swan. As in Nunn's production of the play at TOP fourteen years earlier, Mendes's audience were placed in the position of watching the action from within Lovewit's house. Only when the back wall opened on its hinges during Face's closing soliloquy, revealing a panorama of London, did the production figuratively establish a wider context than the Swan theatre for its action. Even when the location switched to the exterior scene with Lovewit's neighbours, the only scenographic alteration was

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<sup>33</sup> Potter, p. 202.

the pivoting of a small panel on the front door to reveal '13' as the number of the house in the street, whilst the neighbours stood outside the other doors of the set as if they were their front doors. But essentially the scenography of the production was the contained arena of the Swan throughout, with the simple props of an overhanging lightbulb, one table, three chairs and two downstage benches being used only as required.

Warchus's *Volpone* was a more obviously Jacobean-led setting from the start, with the three dupes wearing heavy, dark velvet robes over their black doublet and hose, with Corvino and Voltore wearing hats inspired by real designs of the period. However, following Warchus's decision to stage the play as a nightmare fox chase, some elements were exaggerated for fantastic effect; for example, Corbaccio's hat had a periscope-like funnel in the centre, which acted as an ear trumpet. Other elements of the scenography were indicative of the twentieth century; for example, Androgyno wore one high-heeled court shoe and half a mohican-styled wig. Richard Hudson, the designer of this production, has commented that he would have liked to include more twentieth century references than were actually used in the final design:

For the costumes I was quite keen to have a mish-mash of periods but Matthew was quite nervous of that. By no means did I do a straight seventeenth century; there were a few contemporary things thrown in but fewer than I would have liked, especially in the comic characters. I think I could have made the costumes even funnier if he'd allowed me a bit more leeway period-wise.<sup>34</sup>

The darkness of the set allowed individual characters to be viewed in sharp relief. In this way the atmospheric set increased the strangeness of the Would-Bes, who were costumed in orange and mustard velvet, and, therefore,

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<sup>34</sup> Richard Hudson, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 18 August 1998.



the brightest characters; Celia and Bonario, rendered from head to toe in pure white, were also more noticeable for their difference to their surroundings.

The set was a series of architectural frames, rendered in a near-black, matt finish, lined up on the central revolve, allowing scenes to be played within small areas on the otherwise vast Olivier stage. An outer revolve enabled characters to travel between scenes in full view of the audience. The use of both revolves simultaneously (and turning in opposite directions), in addition to the magic box effect of the consecutive doors, created a physical manifestation of the rapid momentum of the plot whilst portraying the potentially dangerous atmosphere of Renaissance Venice because of the numerous hiding places available. The mechanized set was the prominent element in the scenographic success of the production, with high points of spectacle reached in the opening fox chase and in the vertical emergence of the court from within the magic box of the central revolve. The climax of the production was a narrative moment inserted into the play by Warchus that relied purely on the visual sense – aided by the exterior revolve, the whipped Mosca crawled (in spotlight) to see Volpone emerge (also in spotlight) behind bars on the central revolve. Breath-taking spectacle, focusing on the star performances of the two actors, and the singular sound effect of a prison door clanking shut replaced Jonson's more modest Epilogue to encourage the audience's immediate applause. The mixture of a technically impressive set and the emphasis on the actors' costumed bodies emerging from the darkness throughout meant that Warchus's production of *Volpone* simultaneously appealed to a cerebrally-engaged audience to decode the significance of the visual information whilst acknowledging the overriding power of theatrical spectacle.

What all four of these productions had in common in their use of the eclectic setting was that each presented a dominating series of visual signs evocative of a particular period that could then be subverted through a surprising intervention of references from a different period. This promoted audience awareness of the different usage of design in the staging of classical texts by actively engaging them in a challenging process of interpreting the visual information laid before them.

Through the examples of individual productions we have examined the use of the different types of setting available to producers of Jonson's texts. It is now time to consider the future use of these settings for Jonsonian production in general. The chief question that must be asked about any chosen setting, is 'is it applicable to the demands of the text?'. If the answer is yes then, probably after cutting some otherwise irreconcilable elements, a period, modern or eclectic setting may be worthy of consideration alongside the more traditional choice of an assimilated setting as a useful device in the staging of Jonson's texts in the theatre today.

While it is true that none of the types of setting discussed are an inherently good or bad choice for the production of Jonson, the assimilated setting is likely to remain the most frequently chosen option for staging Jonson's texts in the near future. This is because in establishing a Jonsonian repertoire the English theatre has relied on presenting the texts predominantly as indicative of their cultural moment at the time of composition. They are therefore engaged in a process that aims to reflect Jonson's own time. Sometimes this reflection has used realistic staging devices, echoing the literary tendency to view Jonson as a



documentary realist (typified by Caird's *Every Man in His Humour*). At other points in the staging history the place of Jonson as a social satirist has been forwarded, exaggerating character traits and appearances for stark comic effect, realized in productions like Boyle's *The Silent Woman or Epicoene* through absurd wigs, costumes and make-up. As has already been discussed, Caird's *The New Inn* reflected a more recent trend in criticism to present Jonson as capable of sentiment and nostalgia at the end of his life, viewing the play as a heartfelt revival of Elizabethan trends.

In other words, performing Jonson in assimilated settings allows us as critics and audiences to rehearse familiar attitudes to the playwright and the texts, viewing them (however ironically) as within the context of the time of their own composition. In assimilated productions the focus is not initially on divorcing the texts from their cultural moment. Each new production causes our perception of Jonson to shift – from documentary realist to satirist and so on – according to the stylistic design of the production. As long as assimilation settings are used our views of Jonson's style tend to coincide with existing criticism; literary criticism by its nature more closely examines the relationship of the text to its cultural moment. Perhaps modernized settings – modern, period or eclectic – liberate our assumptions about the playwright and the texts far more than assimilated settings, as they divorce the context of the playwright and the original staging from the production of the text today. But until there are a greater number of modernized productions it may be difficult to support this tentative idea to any degree of certainty.

At present only two productions of the same play (*Bartholomew Fair*) cannot emphatically represent the full potential of staging Jonson within a

modern context. Therefore, a greater number of productions using modern settings would be required to validate the modern setting as a viable choice for Jonsonian production. This is also the case with regard to using period or eclectic settings for Jonson. So far these modernized categories have yielded notable failures (as well as some successes) in production and the eclectic category has generated probably the most badly received productions of Jonson's most highly regarded plays, namely Luscombe's *Volpone* and Alexander's *The Alchemist*. These failures need not rule out the possibility of using eclectic settings for Jonson in the future. However, as Potter has commented, Jonson 'has suffered from the fact that each new production involves learning his language virtually from scratch', and it is very likely that audiences of his plays have, unlike audiences of Shakespeare, never previously seen a Jonsonian play on the stage before. In this context mounting a wildly eclectic production of an unfamiliar play appears to be a provoking challenge to uninitiated audiences.

Nevertheless, perhaps now that a Jonsonian repertoire has been forged within theatres like the Swan, which Potter has pointed out as 'a rare opportunity [...] to create a continuous tradition of performance', I will follow Potter's example in declaring a hope for increased – and increasingly varied – Jonsonian production, playing to an ever-growing audience in the future. I would suggest that by 'build[ing] up faith in the dramatist' through 'continuous' performance and by drawing on an audience base that re-visits productions of other Jonsonian texts a wider means of staging Jonson may be available in the future. This may cause a series of re-evaluations of the texts, both as theatre and within the literary canon. Therefore, audiences and producers will continue to negotiate the place of Jonson's texts on the English stage. It is only when directors and designers



experiment with staging devices that the audience can be alerted to the existence of the texts outside of their original cultural moment. This liberates the texts from ‘museum-like’ productions, to use Bulman’s term, and it frees audiences from blindly accepting the existing literary criticism of Jonson as incontrovertible wisdom. It also alerts the audience to the power of the cultural moment in the creation of meaning by highlighting difference and apparent inconsistencies within the texts. This call for experiment does not rule out the use of assimilated settings in the future: the individual examples of radical devices from within seemingly conservative productions has shown that it is unwise to dismiss the diversity possible from within traditional forms. The plea issued here is for experiment and plurality in all categories of setting. There is no one correct method for staging Jonson, just as there is no one correct way for staging Shakespeare’s texts. But an increased number of productions of Jonson’s texts – including those plays that are currently unfashionable – may reveal the wealth of Jonson’s dramatic legacy to a greater extent than is currently evident.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Potter, p. 207.

### CHAPTER THREE: DIRECTION

We have already partially addressed the idea of a director pursuing a 'concept' for a play. Cutting a text can be a means to remake a play according to the demands of the moment. Transferring the original context of a play to another time may also be the crucial aspect of a director's concept. The idea of a concept is a difficult and mutable one. It is sometimes only when a director is asked to discuss his/her concept for a production that the director puts into words his/her approach to the text. It is usually only the extreme concepts that register in the minds of audiences during a performance.

The idea of a directorial concept dominates theatre production in the twentieth century, as David Bradby and David Williams explain: 'The dominant creative force in today's theatre is the director [...] [who is] now considered an artist in his or her own right'. Bradby and Williams recognise the authority of the director in the preferred vocabulary by which productions are discussed, 'a distinguishing feature of director's theatre [is] that here the director claims the authorial function even though he has not written the original play'. This thesis uses terms such as 'Warchus's *Volpone*' to differentiate between different productions of the same play. Using Bradby and Williams's idea that 'where he is working with a classic text, he will rearrange, cut and rewrite to fit his production concept', I propose that no production is without a directorial concept.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Shakespeare Revolution* Styan appraises twentieth-century performances according to the means by which practitioners identified hidden clues about how Shakespeare's plays were originally performed and applied



these to their own productions: ‘the finest directors sought to interpret Shakespeare’s meaning by looking increasingly to his own stage practice. The secret of what he intended lies in how he worked’. These comments assume that there is a secret code in the texts, which when interpreted correctly through theatre practice, enables the proper ‘intended’ meaning to be transmitted to the audience. Styan, therefore, subscribes to the idea of Shakespearian (and possibly other ‘classic’) plays as texts of universal experience and wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude has been supported by Caird, director of *Every Man in His Humour* and *The New Inn*; with respect to directing Jonson he has commented:

The first duty of any director is to get inside the mind of the author. The last duty is to say “how can I put my mark on it?”. You put your mark on it if you get it right, not if you build up some crappy idea of how to do it. I reach for my axe when I hear the word “concept”. Anybody who says “my concept for this play is...”, you just think, “you pretentious bastard”. What about Jonson’s concept?<sup>3</sup>

The overriding idea shared by both Styan and Caird is to present classical texts as purely as possible according to authorial intention. In practice this idea of the director as a neutral facilitator is an idealistic (and practically impossible) portrait that denies the value of the practical processes involved in staging classical texts.

Bradby and Williams’s view is that a concept is the director’s adaptation of the playwright’s text to fulfil the director’s personal agenda. Ironically, Styan has correctly pointed to how scholarship can inform a director’s practice in this

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<sup>1</sup> David Bradby and David Williams, *Directors’ Theatre*, Macmillan Modern Dramatists (London: Macmillan, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Styan, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> John Caird, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 9 May 1999.

respect, drawing attention to Kott's influence on Brook's production of *King Lear*.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of whether a production's concept can be sourced in this way and whether radical or subtle, the very act of changing the text and choosing a particular setting as a context for the action are processes that may be classified as the pursuit of a concept by the director. However much a director suggests that in preparing the play for performance s/he seeks to put the text first or aims to make the text speak clearly s/he will always be acting according to his/her own subjective response to the text. Therefore, every production covered by this thesis (and every production of any play) may be said to rely on a director's concept. The director's concept is a wider, more pervading idea in theatre performance than the mere placing of a particular theme or design on an existing text for production. To assume that concepts only reside in radical productions is misleading in the way that only plays which challenge the dominant ideology and seek to subvert the status quo are called political. John Harrap has adroitly suggested the essence of the director's role in any production:

what a director tries to do is to integrate all this input [make up, costume, set, lighting, the actor's body, vocal inflexions] in the audience's | consciousness – to 'frame the action' [...] – in such a way that a particular meaning will be conveyed at a particular moment; and the incremental meaning of all the particular moments will be the total impression the director wishes the play to create.<sup>5</sup>

The word 'concept' may be substituted for 'total impression' here.

Caird may claim to 'reach for my axe when I hear the word "concept"' but his own Swan productions could be seen to be following a concept that favours a sentimental view of Jonson. As Potter has already commented this

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<sup>4</sup> Styan, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> John Harrop, *Acting, Theatre Concepts* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 10-1.



view of Jonson owes much to Anne Barton's monograph on the 'emotional, vulnerable side' of the playwright: 'Caird's productions of *Every Man In His Humour* and *The New Inn* were a perfect fusion of the Barton approach with the physical qualities of the theatre in which the plays were given'. It would appear that the issue of each director pursuing a concept in Jonsonian production does not rely on whether that concept was consciously undertaken or not.<sup>6</sup>

Having established this pervading idea of directorial concept perhaps it is now time to focus on what is more widely-recognised as concept direction. That is, the overt pursuit of a conscious idea throughout a production that causes a dislocation of the means by which the text communicates with an audience. This concept may be concerned with altering the presentation of a particular character, for example in 1993 Alexander cut the three freaks from Volpone's household in order to make the central character more genteel to coincide with the casting of Bernard Horsfall. Alternatively a concept may be concerned with the effect of the whole play; for example, Hytner excised the Would-Bes and Peregrine from *Volpone* in order to maintain the savage comic focus on Volpone and Mosca. Concepts often coincide with the utilization of a particular setting, for example, Alexander's 1993 *Volpone* mentioned above was set circa 1800, which further supported the decision to cut the three freaks who are a peculiarly Renaissance-style fascination for both Volpone and the audience.

Similarly, with Boswell's *Bartholomew Fair* the use of the Notting Hill Carnival as the setting for the events of the play was the overriding concept. This decision dominated the actors' choices for the portrayal of Jonson's characters because many of them were translocated to fulfil a specific role according to

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<sup>6</sup> Potter, p. 198.

Boswell's concept. For example, Cokes who is wealthy, foolish and constantly in search of new diversions in the play became in production a trustafarian who was robbed as he danced (badly) to a ska track (played and sung by Nightingale with an electric guitar and head-mike), whilst smoking the drugs on offer from the sharp-suited criminal Edgworth. It may be said that the pursuit of such a specific context as the Notting Hill Carnival in the 1990s limited the power of the actors in the rehearsal room. However, overall the use of a concept should unify the elements of a production into a coherent performance text. Unfortunately, Boswell's production was not always specific enough for the performance to be read as completely indicative of the original concept because he could not find suitable modern equivalents for all the characters. For example, Busy and Purecraft were a problematic element, entering the Fair in long, black ministerial gowns. David Henry who played Busy has talked of the similarities between Jonson's Puritans and the zeal shown by 'American TV Evangelists'. This could have been a twentieth century solution available to Boswell (of course, the references to Banbury would have to be cut) but it was not taken and instead a more vague portrayal occurred.<sup>7</sup>

The success of concept direction for Jonsonian texts resides in whether the performance can be read as presenting a complete and coherent dramatic world that may be interpreted by the audience. This complete world need not rely on a naturalistic acting style nor on a specific design period but it should be coherent according to the principles of presentation that the production utilizes from the start. Caird's nostalgic productions (although Caird did not consciously pursue a 'concept' for either) fulfilled this function in the creation of a specific

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<sup>7</sup> David Henry, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 5 February 1998.



social world in which to set the plays through the detail of the social and working roles of the characters. This element of Caird's production will be further discussed in chapter four with reference to the research undertaken by the actors.

Although the execution of Boswell's production failed to completely satisfy the director's concept the production was generally successful in communicating the play to its audience in a thought-provoking manner. Other directors' attempts to pursue particular concepts in production have failed for a variety of reasons.

For his production of *The Alchemist* Alexander had decided on the concept of 'the future' (according to the production's programme), where people scavenged the objects of the previous centuries unaware of their original use, causing a melting pot of visual references within an industrialised scrap-heap aesthetic. For example, road signs were used to instruct Kastril in the art of quarrelling, a map of the London underground – now with Latin terms instead of station names – was used as a curtain, and Lovewit's house was constructed from old cars and other metal junk. This eclecticism failed a clear presentation of the play for two reasons. Firstly, the audience (and actors) couldn't place the action because of the jumble of images. Secondly, the employment of objects for uses other than their intended purposes appeared odd rather than witty, creating audience derision for the methods of presentation. The constant jarring failed to create empathy between stage and auditorium. The result was audience apathy and dissatisfaction. The eclectic setting dislocated the play's references to the social world of the time of writing so much that the concept actively prevented textual clarity, causing the audience problems with phrases that they may have understood within a less confusing aesthetic.

Jones's production of *The Alchemist* aimed at a similar feel to Alexander's in the creation of a world that looked threatening at night and shoddy in daylight but Jones's Nosferatu-inspired boilerhouse drew on recognisable Gothic devices and clichés for an ironic effect, for example, steam issuing from pipes, candlelight, and a staircase descending to the alchemical laboratory. These elements enabled the audience a fixed point of reference from which to judge Jones's approach to the play. However, like Caird, Jones is reluctant to establish the importance of an overall concept in Jonsonian production, viewing it more in terms of aesthetics than a readable directorial approach:

I don't think an overall view is necessarily good, because that's like a "concept" that people love to talk about. But the concept as such is rather weird. The concept is, after all, to do with sets, construction and things. But you find actually if you do present a new concept, in terms of theatrical ideas, they [the critics] don't understand it.<sup>8</sup>

Eyre's production of *Bartholomew Fair* at the Olivier failed, not because his concept could not include all the play's characters (the problem with Boswell's production) nor because it promoted an indistinct world (as Alexander's had done) but because the seventeenth century references were alien in a nineteenth century setting and to a twentieth century audience. The chosen period setting was also problematic because, as Michael Billington pointed out, the setting did not suit the language: 'you hear the surging vivacity of Jacobean invective rather than the more couth tone of Victorian England'. The nineteenth century concept was also problematic for the presentation of character suggested by the text, Billington thought that 'Jonson's belief in dominating humours [...] seems alien in a society growing alert to complex psychology'. Although the



concept chosen allowed each character a particular and appropriate function within a defined setting it proved an unsuccessful tool in producing *Bartholomew Fair* because the corseted atmosphere (where the attitude of Busy would coincide with that of the moral majority, not a minority as in Jonson's play) prevented the full carnivalesque release offered by the play.<sup>9</sup>

Directors seem to particularly favour the use of an obvious concept in the production of *Bartholomew Fair*. The other two productions not yet mentioned – both produced in 1978 – also utilized overt directorial concepts. At the Round House Barnes chose to include a funfair open to theatre patrons before the performance and during the interval. This concept shaped the audience's response to the play in the terms of a larger event, rather than as a conventional theatre production. His use of the fair will be further discussed in the chapter on this production.

Bogdanov used a similar device for his production at the Young Vic where musicians and various side-shows, like an actor ripping a telephone directory in half, entertained the audience in the theatre bar before the show and during the interval. Bogdanov's concept went further in pursuing a circus theme throughout his production of the play and utilizing a modern setting. Some critics found the twentieth century focus at odds with Busy's zeal (a problem which was later repeated in Boswell's production), as well as with other characters; Billington commented: 'it is hard to think of any modern Fair that would contain characters like Bartholomew Cokes, [...] Overdo, [...] or [...] Busy'. Billington also lamented the lack of a more specific concept, suggesting that any director of a twentieth century style *Bartholomew Fair* should 'find a precise modern

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<sup>8</sup> Griff Rhys Jones, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 27 January 1998.

equivalent'. The critical reception of the production focused more on the decision to stage the play using a modern setting, rather than on the concept of the circus. Therefore, it is difficult to judge whether or not the circus concept was purposeful in intent and execution. However, it seems an inexact concept with which to approach a play set in a trade and entertainment fair with widespread theft, fraud and prostitution.<sup>10</sup>

The previous section on the modernization of the text has already dealt extensively with Barnes's treatment of *The Devil is an Ass* for Burge's production but it is worth noting again here. The restructuring of the play to begin and end in Hell and to deny the characters a chance for reform by closing their plot with the world spinning as they fight amongst themselves is a concept in itself. It presents the director's and editor's particular views of the play and promotes a certain focus that changes the reception of the text from the original ending.

Warchus's version of *The Devil is an Ass* did not overtly subscribe to a concept in its run at the Swan but in its transfer to the Pit the director altered the framing of the performance to make it more 'spooky':

Going into the Pit we lost all of the height and a lot of potential for comedy with the audience so we decided to make it more of a ghost story. That's why we introduced one of the scenes in a graveyard. So I had lots of ghost clichés in it: it was much darker, had more candlelight, spooky things. We couldn't have the city [above the stage] so we made it something that was happening in a pit. The Pit itself is quite a good place to do *The Devil is An Ass* with connections with hell and everything so we had to exploit those because we couldn't have a lot of the original concept visually.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Billington, 'Precisely, Mr Pinter', *Guardian*, 22 October 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 23 June 1978.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Warchus, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 5 August 1998.



Once again, this decision imposed the director's and designer's (re)view of the text onto the play in performance and actually destroyed – through the excessive use of new scenic devices – the charm of the Swan production, which relied on a simplicity of staging.

The other notable failure of a concept employed by productions covered in this thesis occurred in Tim Luscombe's *Volpone*. As with Alexander's *The Alchemist* the concept for Luscombe's *Volpone* failed for being too indistinct. There was not even an intended focus, like Alexander's suggestion of 'the future', to unify Luscombe's approach. Instead the eclectic setting dominated the play's presentation and Luscombe's irreverent, jokey attitude to the text brought in a variety of coarse visual effects, verbal innuendo, written-in gags and quotations from popular television advertisements. It is difficult to categorize Luscombe's precise concept because of the divergent means used and effects created. It may be loosely categorized as an exercise in the carnivalesque, with the emphasis on easy humour. *Volpone* resembled a faded, end-of-pier entertainer, like Osborne's Archie Rice; Sidney Vauincez suggested for *Scoto Volpone* wore 'lurid checks like Osborne's *Entertainer* selling cure-alls on Blackpool's Golden Mile'. But whether *Volpone*'s weariness with the humour was a directorial concept or the actor's disappointment at the humour offered is uncertain. John Woodvine who played *Volpone* has said, 'I don't think I ever did work out what the plot of *Volpone* was. Now, in that sort of situation if the actor doesn't know what he's doing how can the audience?'. The combined lack of the company's funding, an adequate setting and suitable direction meant that Woodvine was unhappy in the role, he recalled: 'Every night was a sort of minefield of waiting for the tricky moments – of climbing one hurdle and

knowing you've got another coming. And you can't give a good performance in those circumstances'.<sup>12</sup>

The general aesthetic of the production was the favoured ESC house-style of inexpensive scenery (bare except for scaffolding, the only concession to Venice was the inclusion of striped Gondolier poles) and props. Forcing Volpone's gold into a supermarket trolley limited the effects of his wealthy status and the text's reference to 'my other hoards' (I.1.7). The aim of making a classical text accessible failed through the insistence on unimaginative low humour, which ended up making the text inaccessible because it was hidden by extra jokes. The production's concept failed through being incoherent rather than eclectic, for example, the three freaks doubled up as the Avocatori, with two fake heads each added onto their robes. This did not hint at any coherent idea because at that point the audience were already baffled by too much empty visual trickery to take notice of an overriding theme. The lack of a perceptible concept beyond the pursuit of a crazy aesthetic suggested that Luscombe and his production team had no idea how to stage the text and instead apologised for the lack of method by making the show as zany as possible. The production had the effect of being an apology for, rather than an engagement with, the text.

Boyle's production of *The Silent Woman or Epicoene* was the first Jonsonian production in the Swan after Caird's nostalgic versions of *Every Man in His Humour* and *The New Inn*. The contrast of Boyle's concept of a grotesque world and its pervading savage tone to Caird's presentation of the benign Jonson shocked many critics and audiences into an extreme reaction of dislike and distrust. Even Potter, who has signalled the different effects of the conceptual

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<sup>12</sup> Sidney Vauincez, 'Seeing double at the Lyric', *The Stage*, 28 February 1991; John Woodvine,



approaches of Caird and Boyle, suggests that Boyle's approach and choice of play may have been inappropriate, *Epicoene* is 'less in tune with the late twentieth century – or, perhaps, [...] it is better suited to the large theatres and bravura acting'.<sup>13</sup>

This criticism is unfair and untrue as it negates the powerful effect of his chosen concept, which was as valid as it was different from Caird's. The concept of 'grotesque costumes and hairdos' to ensure 'no one would miss the absurdity of the characters' did not fail to work coherently.<sup>14</sup>

Actually the concept went further than Potter suggests here, showing Clerimont dressing at the start, Epicoene stripping off his dress near the end and closing with Truewit's direct address to the audience. This framing device acknowledged the play in performance was more about the creation of an illusory image by every character than the problem of whether a male could ever pass as a convincing female on stage or in the society presented. The emphasis was on dress, rather than on the human contents of the clothes, picking up on Truewit's line, 'I love a good dressing / before any beauty o' the world' (I.1.97-8) and Otter's suggestion of how women piece together their outward appearance at IV.2.82-9. A greater discussion of this framing device will be discussed in the chapter on *Epicoene*.<sup>15</sup>

The success of Boyle's concept may be measured by the way critics strongly forwarded their own opinions about how the text should be performed, R. V. Holdsworth thought the interpretation of Dauphine, Clerimont and Truewit as contrary to the text: 'far from being the dandified idlers the text demands' they

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in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 5 July 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Potter, p. 203.

<sup>14</sup> Potter, p. 201.

appeared 'sleazy, unshaven louts, who spit and scratch themselves and urinate against the stage's rear wall. They bellow and glare [...] and seem impelled by black hatred rather than an airy determination to treat life as a game'. The vehemence with which Holdsworth asserted his disagreement shows the power of Boyle's thought-provoking concept about the contrast between the civilized illusion of appearance and the underlying savagery. Boyle's concept fulfilled its effect at every point – it was coherent, definite and extremely subjective. It cannot be judged bad for that.<sup>16</sup>

Other productions show directors dabbling with concepts at certain points in the action. For example, in Hersov's *The Alchemist* Face kissed a doll and placed it on the central furnace; in Boyd's *The Alchemist* the tricksters threw off their disguises as soon as possible after each scam; in Nunn's and Boswell's productions of *The Alchemist* Face was left to address the audience as in the text but also to assess them for future scams; and Mendes's wider version of this concluding conceit brought on those already tricked at the rear of the stage in front of a London cityscape. Overriding concepts are less obvious in productions of *The Alchemist* than in many other Jonsonian plays because the play already contains conceits of illusion and metatheatre. To include further conceptual references could dislocate Jonson's own conceptual framework.

In the same way Warchus's *Volpone* did not have a predominant concept discernible throughout the course of the production but the start and end signalled conceptual moments, which could be linked together retrospectively to provide a frame for the entire action of the play. This concept was of *Volpone* as a fox chase where, at the start of the production, cloaked hunters with flaming

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<sup>15</sup> Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, ed. by L. A. Beaurline, Regents Renaissance



torches chased Volpone around the central revolve in a dark nightmare sequence whilst his three freaks appeared suspended on wires above. This segment ended with Volpone locking the door to his chamber and collapsing on the bed. The play as it is written then began. At the end of the production the excised Epilogue was replaced by Mosca being whipped then crawling on the turning revolve to see Volpone behind a locked prison door. These visual moments were highly effective in themselves in illustrating the promised punishments but when subsequently linked together they expose a previously hidden concept of the entire play as a nightmare fantasy recurring within the theatre space, which allies the audience even more closely with Volpone as the recipient of the nightmare. This concept helps to explain some of the more extreme and eclectic design decisions, for example, the overlarge ear trumpet attached to the centre of Corbaccio's hat and the cloned appearance of the court officials with their over-long scrolls of proceedings. This is an example of a concept out-living the temporal restraints of the production it framed.

Through this brief survey of productions we have seen that the pursuit of a concept is a feature of all productions. Some concepts are more obvious than others at the time of performance but all promote the director's subjective view of the text (whether consciously or not). The idea of a director's concept for Jonsonian production is, in itself, neither good nor bad. However, the means to judge productions should be based on the coherence of a director's concept, both in the validity of the idea and the full execution of that idea on the stage. Ideally, a concept should not restrict the presentation of the text although it may contain it within a specific context. However, a specific context is not vital to the success

of a production, for example, Mendes chose a combination setting of an Elizabethan world with a bare stage and characters in mostly Elizabethan-style costume but using modern fabrics and props as twentieth century references within the prevailing design aesthetic. This combination of the text's frame of reference and the audience's own time served the play well because the concept's execution through the setting remained within the strict boundaries visible from the start. Although the setting was non-specific Mendes's production was based on a specific idea of the fusion of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Other concepts have failed by employing too many complex visual devices without promoting a clear sense of purpose and visual identity.

Future directors of Jonson should be aware that their actions in cutting and setting are in the service of a particular concept. It would benefit them to thoroughly investigate and test that concept against the text at the start of the production process so that the whole production team may work in the service of a clear, common goal. This was the strength of Caird's productions – despite his rejection of the term 'concept' – his approach to the plays were made clear to the production teams early in the process of producing the texts. The other examples of successful concepts reveal other directors who have achieved this unity of purpose although their approaches may be labelled as more obvious concepts than are apparent in Caird's work.

At the moment the pursuit of concepts in direction is generally thought of as residing in Shakespearian production. Many British directors of Shakespeare have benefited from the growing intercultural exchange of techniques, which promote an audience's awareness of directorial concepts. By recognizing

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<sup>16</sup> R. V. Holdsworth, 'Wife swapping', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 July 1989.



Jonson's growing place within the British repertoire of classical theatre a cross-fertilization of approaches between Shakespearian and Jonsonian productions is beginning to occur, with varying degrees of success. As this inter-play evolves through a greater number of productions of Jonson's texts, so we may learn more about the suitability of overt directorial concepts for Jonson in performance.

In the next section on acting we will examine the effect of the director's pursuit of an overriding concept on the actor's options for portraying character, the position of the actor within the classical theatre hierarchy, the choice of acting style for Jonson's plays and the means by which audiences assess the acting of Jonson.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ACTING

Just as the speaker of the *Volpone* Epilogue points to his problematic status as character/performer, 'here he doubtful stands', so any exegesis of acting will always be subjective and indeterminate because its locus of interpretation, the actor's body, is a fundamentally unstable theatrical sign. Whilst the performer acts the audience attributes meaning to the theatrical sign that is simultaneously, as John Harrop suggests, 'the artist and the instrument'. The actor's body, then, is both a passive site for the audience's need to map meaning (using their own thoughts, emotions and physical responses) and an active agent who responds to that process.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the problematic nature of writing about acting, which is an interpretation of the audience's interpretation of the actor's interpretation of the role, this chapter aims to highlight the issue of acting Jonson's plays. The lack of previous monographs on Jonsonian performance means that there is no scholarly prescriptive method or recorded style of acting Jonson other than the oral tradition of practitioners who have worked on previous productions and the video recordings of productions used by understudies.

The critical reception of the productions documented in this thesis is one method of recording and evaluating the acting styles used for Jonson. These accounts may be supported or refuted by the evidence of archival videotapes of performances and/or actors' comments where available. Obviously, this evidence is also problematically subjective. Though fallible, reviewers' comments are the constant source of evidence available for all productions and therefore may be

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. by Brian Parker and David Bevington, Revels Student Editions (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), Epilogue, 5; Harrop, p. 2.



used to trace and classify the acting styles utilized in the three decades of Jonsonian production discussed.

The trends in acting indicated by this critical reception range from histrionic displays presenting characters as caricatures to subtly detailed performances that indicate psychologically realistic characters. Therefore, individual productions have established Jonson's characters as caricatures or realistic individuals. This dichotomy of character-drawing suggests that Jonson's texts are more open to different interpretations and acting techniques than was previously thought. This chapter will investigate how these seemingly incompatible approaches to character have been established and how they may be united in the most suitable style for Jonsonian performance.

The productions documented have utilized acting techniques from very broad comic playing to Stanislavskian methods.<sup>2</sup> The diverse techniques used to present Jonson's characters, resulting in such different effects, are the result of a lack of prescriptive techniques and the absence of an existing performance tradition. The willingness of actors and directors to experiment in the service of the texts promises continual innovation for Jonsonian production. This need for innovation comes at an important point: the British theatre has only recently rediscovered Jonson's plays as performance texts. Experiment in acting methods should be expected at this point and encouraged in order to discover the most effective means of acting Jonson today. However, the lack of a definitive acting method for Jonsonian texts may make some actors, directors and audiences

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<sup>2</sup> There is insufficient room here to treat Stanislavskian acting theory in full detail. His approaches to acting may be found in Constantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, trans. by J. J. Robbins (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967); see also Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1980), Constantin Stanislavski, *Building a Character*, trans. by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, University Paperbacks (London:

unsure of the validity of the approaches chosen because the range of available options is so diverse. It is time to assess the value of the acting styles used in productions of Jonson's plays to date to enable future practitioners and audiences to be more informed about the context of the production in which they are taking part.

As this thesis surveys the range of acting demonstrated in productions it aims to allow the reader to create their own formative impression of the possibilities for acting Jonson in the future. The relative merits and drawbacks of different acting styles will be discussed with reference to specific productions and the trends of acting will be highlighted in specific productions according to their chronological moment. Nevertheless, the ultimate judgement about the most productive style for acting Jonson will be according to the subjective preferences of the reader. Although this thesis aims to be thorough in its investigation it can never be definitive.

Before Jonson's renaissance in the British theatre repertoire in 1977 occasional productions gave practitioners and audiences some experience of Jonson's plays. In 1972 three practitioners took part in a debate about the production of Jonson. This debate in *Gambit International Theatre Review* celebrated Jonson's quartercentenary with the serious aim of initiating more productions – but with less than fulsome expectations for staging Jonson in the future: 'the art of playing Jonson is something we have still to rediscover [...] if it [the debate] does not yield some concrete theatrical result, then it will have failed in its main purpose'.<sup>3</sup>

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Methuen, 1968), and Constantin Stanislavski, *Creating a Role*, trans. by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Methuen, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Editorial', *Gambit International Theatre Review*, 6 (22) (1972), p. 3.



The hopes of the *Gambit* panel were eventually rewarded by a sustained revival of interest as documented in this thesis. Despite the resurgence being five years after the debate, the *Gambit* article established a paradigm followed by the productions in the late 1970s. The paradigmatic view of acting Jonson at this point was characteristically limited to the use of large comic techniques.

The reviewers of the early productions at the NT in 1977 use the same terms as the *Gambit* panel to describe the acting of Jonson. Milton Shulman reviewed Hall's *Volpone*, noting that Jonsonian characters operate on stage as 'bizarre caricature'. When reviewing Burge's *The Devil is an Ass*, Shulman characterized the production as 'a boisterous and sardonic romp', and singled out Christopher Ryan as Pug for praise playing, 'a devil overwhelmed by man's venality, [he] strides the stage with his legs stretched wide in a constant posture of sexual frustration. His athletic leaps at every feminine thigh in sight are wonders of physical opportunism'. Echoing Shulman's stress on the physical comedy of the actor's performance, Ned Chaillet also praised Ryan's Pug for being 'a masterful creation, zany and inventive'. Frank Marcus's opinion acquiesced with Shulman's views when he reviewed the Hall *Volpone* by categorizing Jonson as 'a creator of masks rather than a psychological investigator'. In doing such Marcus suggested that when placing Jonson's characters on stage, they 'require a broad and expansive style of acting'.<sup>4</sup>

Five years previously in *Gambit* Terry Hands suggested that to place Jonson's characters on the stage 'You've got to have size' and Peter Barnes

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<sup>4</sup> Milton Shulman, 'Schofield – miser superior [sic]', *London Evening Standard*, 27 April 1977; Milton Shulman, 'Devil without', *Evening Standard*, 3 May 1977; Ned Chaillet, 'Poor Pug, Jonson's much-abused devil', *The Times*, 3 May 1977; Frank Marcus, 'The Magic Freak Show', *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 May 1977.

concurred with Hands's call for a broad comic style by suggesting, 'it's got to be exterior'.<sup>5</sup>

The only actor on the *Gambit* panel, Colin Blakely (who had played Volpone at the Old Vic in 1968), agreed with his fellow debaters on the role of caricature in Jonsonian theatre: 'The author has told you what to think; and he's labelled the characters with certain names or humours [. . .] The actor should be content to just do it'.<sup>6</sup>

Blakely's secondary remark about the actor's attitude to playing Jonson suggests some differences between the ways directors, reviewers and actors view the use of caricature. Whilst directors and reviewers celebrate the caricature they see in Jonson's texts as his unique approach, Blakely's comment that the actor 'should be content to [. . .]' asserts the reader (and potential actors) to Blakely's propensity for situating Jonson as alien – and therefore incompatible – to most actors' experience and methods. Blakely's remarks suggest Jonson is unpalatable to actors because his writing limits their interpretative function. According to Blakely, Jonson's 'labelling' of characters prescribes a particular acting style. Despite his part in the *Gambit* debate, which aimed to inspire more Jonsonian productions, Blakely's remarks place actors as embattled against Jonson.

Just as Blakely's view suggests Jonson's 'labels' limit the role of the actor to merely delivering Jonson's words and the director's blocking; his view is also limiting to Jonson because it denies the variety in the texts. Nevertheless, the *Gambit* debate undoubtedly influenced subsequent performances: acting Jonson according to the simplistic masks of caricature dominated productions until the late 1980s.

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Hands and Peter Barnes, in Peter Barnes, Colin Blakely, Terry Hands, Irving Wardle,



In addition to Hall's *Volpone* and Barnes's *The Devil is an Ass*, other productions of the late seventies and eighties were also noted for the extravagance of their acting styles. At Nottingham in 1978 Arthur Kohn's portrayal of Epicure Mammon was created of 'all tongue and thighs', rendering the effect of 'gargantuan lasciviousness'.<sup>7</sup> In 1983 the cast of *The Alchemist* at Sheffield presented 'portraits always more ugly than funny, but thrust at you with a single-mindedness that forces you to laugh'.<sup>8</sup> At Hammersmith Lyric John Sessions's Ananias appeared 'neurotic', with his 'hair flipping from side to side like a spaniel, simpering like Olivia de Havilland'.<sup>9</sup> At Manchester, critic Eric Shorter noted 'the chief theatrical value' of the production was 'gusto'.<sup>10</sup> Barnes's *Bartholomew Fair* was characterized by broad comic clichés: 'lines are ranted; thighs are slapped, breasts, inevitably, are fondled'.<sup>11</sup> In *The Alchemist* in 1977 and *Volpone* in 1983 (both at the RSC) the focus was on the actors and not the company's usual extravagant sets and costumes because of the use of the intimate TOP auditorium. Nevertheless, the acting demonstrated in both productions was according to the broad comic paradigm established by the *Gambit* panel. The 1977 cast was praised for presenting 'finely drawn caricatures'.<sup>12</sup> In 1983 Miles Anderson's Mosca was viewed as 'transparently ugly' whilst Henry Goodman gave a 'thunderous delivery' to Voltore's court speeches and Nigel Cooke presented Bonario as a 'bookish booby'.<sup>13</sup>

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Jonathan Hammond, 'Ben Jonson and the Modern Stage', *Gambit*, pp. 5-30, p.10.

<sup>6</sup> Blakely, in *Gambit*, p.11.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Coveney, 'The Alchemist' [sic], *Financial Times*, 28 January 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Brown, 'The Alchemist' [Sheffield] *Morning Telegraph*, 9 December 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Ratcliffe, 'The sexual chemistry set', *Observer*, 15 September 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Shorter, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 February 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Ellison, *Evening Standard*, 4 August 1978.

<sup>12</sup> David Ford, 'The King's stunning Face', *Worcester Evening News*, 24 May 1977.

<sup>13</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Volpone' [sic], *The Times*, 7 October 1983.

As all of these early productions used similarly exaggerated acting styles for the four most frequently performed Jonsonian plays, we must consider how this characteristically broad style emerged as the then-definitive method for acting Jonson.

Viewing Jonson's characters as caricatures that are best served by a broad comic acting style is the apogee of scholarship that elucidates Jonson's source material. These influences differ according to each play but may be summarized altogether as: Ancient Comedy (that is, Aristophanes, Plautus and Terence); Ancient Satire (that is, Juvenal and Horace); Medieval Morality plays; *commedia dell'arte*; animal fables; the theory of humours. Obviously Jonson's texts utilize other equally important sources, for example, the Catullus lyric, the accounts of contemporary events and recent travelogues in *Volpone*. However, the literary, theatrical and theoretical influences listed above may be catalogued together as pertinent to this discussion because they all present character according to essentialist beliefs. The characters in Plautine comedy, like the individuals diagnosed according to the humours theory, are fixed. The *Pantalone* of *commedia dell'arte* does not undergo transformation, nor do the portraits of types rendered in Juvenal's *Satires* admit change. The fox in animal fable is always cunning and the Vices and Virtues of Morality plays operate only in the way their names suggest. All of these influences are alike in their use of typified characters that never alter but react to circumstances according to particular character traits. Such characters function through masks, which are either literal or nominal, and their appearance represents their social and moral status. In such literary and theatrical forms, the exterior of the character *is* the character.



These texts are undoubtedly strong influences on Jonson's plays. However, as the British theatre has received and responded to this information by playing the characters according to caricature, Jonson's texts have been misinterpreted. It is an oversimplification to view any one Jonson play as *commedia dell'arte* or a Morality play or an animal fable. And it is textually inaccurate to play Jonsonian characters according to the traditions of caricature: characters in Jonson's plays are often exposed as being other than their appearances suggest, as Cave has discussed in detail. In addition to Cave's discussion of the text as rendering caricature unsuitable, to portray fixed characters whose exteriors are the sum of uncomplicated social and moral roles would be uninspiring (even tedious) for performers and audiences for three hours (the typical length of Jonsonian performances).<sup>14</sup>

Despite the widespread use of a broad playing style when Jonson was first performed again after a gap of three hundred years, some critics did praise moments of realism in the productions of the seventies. However, these moments were concerned with details of situation rather than acting style as two reviewers' praise of Nunn's *The Alchemist* suggest. For Michael Billington, Nunn was 'planting a Jonsonian text in the firm soil of realism' when Face and Subtle presented 'his own key to the double-locked petty cash box' and J. C. Trewin noticed the insertion of "'Bring out your dead!'", which, 'neatly "places" the comedy [*sic*]' in plague-stricken London.<sup>15</sup>

It was not until 1986 that realism was considered an appropriate approach for acting Jonson. Two innovations occurred almost simultaneously to revolutionize Jonsonian acting techniques. The first shift in attitudes to Jonson on

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Cave, 'Visualising Jonson's text', in Cave, Schafer and Woolland, pp. 33-44, p. 40.

stage came from scholarship not the theatre. Anne Barton's *Ben Jonson, dramatist* encouraged a new interest in Jonson. Those plays previously regarded as Jonson's Dotages became in Barton's exegesis veritable equivalents of Shakespeare's late Romances and the whole monograph was a considered reaction to the view of Jonson as a marginal playwright whose plays were limited in effect and appeal. Barton's book was regenerative for Jonson but could be viewed as problematic as it refigures Jonson as another Shakespeare. It may promote comparisons between the two playwrights and, by definition, Shakespeare will always out-Shakespeare Jonson. Barton's view of Jonson was corroborated in theatrical terms by John Caird's contingent theatrical innovation of staging two neglected texts, *Every Man in His Humour* and *The New Inn*. But Caird's innovation went further than merely placing lesser-known Jonson texts on the English stage. His choice of texts was instrumental in redefining the history of acting Jonson.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the critical reception of Caird's *Every Man in His Humour* (and his subsequent *The New Inn*) was collective praise for the new Swan theatre. Although this focus on the space may appear frustrating for the subject of this chapter, it marks a defining moment in the history of acting Jonson. The building of the Swan and the RSC's decision to utilize the new space for the performance of work by Shakespeare's contemporaries were both crucial in enabling Caird to direct such previously-unknown Jonson texts. The choice of these plays – *Every Man in His Humour* had been directed by Joan Littlewood in 1960 and *The New Inn* had not been revived since its disastrous first performance at the Blackfriars by The King's Men in 1629 – allowed Caird and his ensemble to approach

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Billington, 'The Alchemist' [sic], *Guardian*, 16 December 1977; J. C. Trewin, 'New



Jonson free of the prevailing broad comic style used on the more famous plays. However, as Lois Potter has persuasively argued in her essay on the Swan, the auditorium itself was crucial in redefining the mode of presentation. The shape, size and materials of the space, which are discussed in greater detail in the section on space in chapter one, facilitated a more detailed, less caricatured acting style. In a newspaper interview Caird illustrated his approach to the text, based on realism. Caird was quoted by David Nokes as suggesting Jonson's "characters are totally real [...] Just because someone is called Trundle doesn't mean he has to trundle about the stage all the time." Nokes paraphrased this idea by suggesting, 'It was a mistake to see Jonson's plays as strip-cartoons of eccentrics'.<sup>17</sup>

Caird's productions elucidated the social conditions of Jonson's time as a complement to the way these conditions are implied in the texts. Early in rehearsals Caird encouraged his actors to undertake research into the working conditions of the period when the texts were written, as Henry Goodman explains, the company

spent a lot of time working on the script [...] and doing other stuff about the period: [...] I'd have to go and research that [merchants] in the Shakespeare Library [...] somebody else would do milkmaids, and somebody else lawyers and we'd all come in and do a talk [...] so we all brought in background information to give the social circumstances out of which this play was born.<sup>18</sup>

This research rooted the actors' movements in an understanding of the everyday physical demands on the Elizabethan/Caroline real life equivalents of their characters; Goodman suggested the benefits of research for the actor 'it liberates

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Plays: *The Alchemist* (Aldwych)' [sic], 29 December 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> David Nokes, 'Setting Ben against Bill: John Caird is currently leading a one-man crusade to promote the plays of Ben Jonson. He talks to David Nokes', *The Times*, 11 April 1987.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Goodman, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 15 March 1997.

your imagination. You suddenly take on board the whole nature of the lifestyle'. Such detailed research, assimilated by understanding actors in performance, gave audiences the illusion that they were watching realistic characters. The illusion of real life was aided by Blane's intricately-detailed costumes and actors remaining 'in character' when required to assist with set changes. Caird has suggested the importance of facilitating the actor's confidence with working in what may be termed as 'period costume': 'I think the real trick is to get actors wearing Elizabethan dress in a way that makes it look as if they've been wearing it all their lives, so there isn't a sense of period drama'.<sup>19</sup>

Caird was perhaps unique in being encouraged to direct the [unknown] Jonson play[s] of his own choosing; plays that other directors of Jonson have probably never read. Caird has admitted to his enjoyment of his first reading of all of Jonson's plays:

Many years ago, I read all of Jonson's plays. I couldn't believe that a man who wrote *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *Volpone* could, as I was being told, have written such a lot of garbage for the rest of his life [...] So I read the whole lot and I was utterly bowled over. I didn't read a bad play.<sup>20</sup>

In scheduling Jonsonian plays into theatre repertoires a director usually liaises with the theatre management to choose a more well-known Jonsonian text as an option from amongst other well-known (non-Jonsonian) texts of the period as my interview with Michael Boyd established:

AP: So where did the decision to direct that play [*The Alchemist*] come from?

MB: I think it was one of a list of plays that I'd said I'd be interested in doing and they chose it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Goodman; John Caird, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 9 May 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Caird, *This Golden Round*, p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Boyd, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 7 July 1997.



But in the late 1980s the management of the RSC allowed Caird to indulge his knowledge of and passion for Jonson in a way that other managements would not admit. It was the fortuitous combination of circumstances (management, venue, director, texts) that enabled Caird's revision of Jonson as potentially realistic.

The advantage of Caird's pursuit of realism was that it placed the Jonsonian text within its own cultural moment, playing the Prologues as a transitional and metatheatrical bridge between the Renaissance world shown on stage and the world of the audience. As Potter has persuasively argued, playing the Prologues – a rarity in contemporary productions – re-establishes in the present moment Jonson's desire for an apperceiving audience.<sup>22</sup>

As Goodman's comments indicated, the ensemble's research enabled them to participate in a more fulfilling process of creating characters based on what they perceived to be culturally-sound evidence than if they had simply used broad comic techniques. This is especially significant for characters that are given only a few lines. In such cases the research would lessen actors' anxieties about what their character would be doing whilst present but silent. It could therefore cut down unnecessary actorly business because the actor must focus on the character's practical function – both dramatically and in terms of their social role – and not on their thoughts/emotions whilst other characters are speaking.

Some critics may argue that the research takes actors away from examining the text itself. Caird's methods may also be criticized if we consider the research combined with the realistic acting style as presenting the characters

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<sup>22</sup> Potter, p. 201.

in a kind of living museum: 'I seemed to be back in the London of 1598', suggested one reviewer.<sup>23</sup>

The use of realism in treating the texts as if they are socio-historical documents may also be problematic because it presents Jonson's subjective version of his society as historical truth and actors utilize the realistic techniques of nineteenth century theatre as their creative methodology. It may be argued that the use of Stanislavskian methods for the production of Renaissance texts in the late-twentieth Century is irrefutably anachronistic. However, I would add that realism is integral to the British theatre today and experiments with techniques and texts could be regarded as being appropriate to productions in the postmodern era.

So, Caird's revision of the most suitable acting style for Jonson was due to a combination of factors: his unique interest in Jonson; the RSC's policy of unearthing classic texts for the new Swan theatre; the performance conditions of the Swan; the use of unknown texts with no performance traditions; the actors' use of research in rehearsal to feed performance; Blane's period costume designs.

These factors would never be combined to create such an effect in performance again after Caird's *The New Inn* failed to transfer to a London venue. Nevertheless, once Caird had signalled to critics, audiences and other directors that Jonson could be acted without resorting to vaguely-defined caricatures critics have registered their disapproval whenever broad comic techniques have been used in subsequent productions.

In 1996 Martin Spence thought the playing of 'bold caricatures' characterized in Alexander's *The Alchemist* lessened the impact of Jonson's text:

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<sup>23</sup> John Barber, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 1986.



'out goes Jonson's social reality and moral edge in favour of farcical, in yer face fun [*sic*']'.<sup>24</sup> Nick Curtis noted that on its transfer to London Warchus's *The Devil is an Ass* 'got a lot worse', by becoming 'hollowly hammy': 'with characters constantly bustling by, slamming doors or indulging in ungoverned comic business'.<sup>25</sup> In 1990 Jim Hiley complained that Ian McDiarmid's *Volpone* at the Almeida was unrealistic – 'his sexual passion is no more convincing than his lust for gold'.<sup>26</sup> Robert Hewison's review of another *Volpone* in the same year parodied the ESC's broad comic style, 'Pace, pace, pace, don't let up for a minute. Respect for the text? Characterization? Knotty problems of morality? Forget it. This is popular theatre.'<sup>27</sup> Alastair Macaulay thought the 1993 *Volpone* at Birmingham contained a 'coarse and under-refined Celia by Andrea Mason' and failed to stop Gerard Murphy as Mosca from presenting 'all his worst hark-at-me mannerisms' and 'unspontaneous delivery'.<sup>28</sup> As recently as 1999 critics have discerned the vague comic playing of Jonson as recommended by the *Gambit* panel. Anthony Holden noted that the 'one-dimensional stereotypes', of Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore in Posner's *Volpone* at the Swan, 'rant and yell as if they were still in the main theatre'.<sup>29</sup>

From the critics' remarks we may assume that Caird's use of a realistic acting style was only a temporary respite from the predominant caricatured style because these reviews document productions throughout the 1990s. However, these comments are only a partial representation of the productions they record. Some critics responded positively to the same productions. Once again, it is

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Spence, *Midweek*, 14-17 October 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Nick Curtis, 'Welcome to the pantomime from Hell', *Evening Standard*, 19 April 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Jim Hiley, *Listener*, 19 April 1990.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Hewison, 'Knocking the classics about a bit', *Sunday Times*, 10 February 1991.

<sup>28</sup> Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 4 June 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony Holden, *Observer*, 28 March 1999.

worth remembering that reviewers' comments can never be definitive but are always contingent, as may be seen from these polarities of response about the same performance and written at the same time: Michael Billington thought the performances in Warchus's *The Devil is an Ass* presented 'a savoursome picture of Jacobean London' but Sara Hurst considered the presentation to be caricatured, or, 'larger than life'.<sup>30</sup>

Although Caird's approach has never been completely emulated in later productions, his pursuit of realism has been utilized by later directors and combined with the older *Gambit* style in a synthesis of acting techniques. The dual response to Warchus's *The Devil is an Ass* may be seen as indicative of a growing trend to marry the two approaches.

The first performance of a Jonson play in the Swan after Caird's two productions was Danny Boyle's *The Silent Woman or Epicoene* in 1989. Potter has suggested the difference between Caird's and Boyle's approaches, seeing the use of 'grotesque costumes and hairdos' pointing to 'the absurdity of the characters' as a failed attempt to return to the broad *Gambit* style of playing. She considers *Epicoene* to be 'less in tune with the late twentieth century' and 'better suited to the large theatres and bravura acting recommended by the *Gambit* panel'.<sup>31</sup>

However, I would like to reconsider the approach used in Boyle's production. Immediately succeeding Caird's Jonsons in the Swan, Boyle's production would always be noted for its difference, as Potter intelligently asserts: 'much was said early on about the Swan's house style for Jonson, it was

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Billington, 'Delightful complexities in *The Devil is an Ass*', *Country Life*, 13 April 1995; Sara Hurst, 'Good to watch, better to look at', *Stratford Herald*, 6 April 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Potter, p.201; p.203.



in fact John Caird's style and differed in many ways from that of his successors'.<sup>32</sup>

The aesthetic of Boyle's production was a vivid contrast to the appearance of Caird's two shows. The extravagant wigs and occasionally parodic costumes – Sir Amorous La Foole was 'a vision in apricot [. . .] what you would get if you crossed Veronica Lake with Maureen Lipman and plonked a floral window-box on the result' – did indeed recall the *Gambit* style of focusing the audience's attention on the size and exteriors of the characters.<sup>33</sup>

However, this presentation of grotesque, typified appearances was only one element of the production. Just as the text plays with ideas of appearance and gender roles, so the production contained a critique of viewing characters according to their face value. This critique punctuated the performance throughout in the use of unexpected blocking and gestures. For example, Morose wore many caps and a cushion strapped to his head – this may perhaps be regarded as according with a broad comic style – but, as Michael Coveney suggested, this comic image was given a deeper and more effective significance by David Bradley's detailed acting: 'while you might imagine a larger scale reading of the role, Bradley's pained muttering and frozen, finical gestures are the tragic evidence of a deeply hilarious stand against the barbarities of the world outside'.<sup>34</sup>

I would suggest that the surprises of the production gave the appearance of realistic acting, which enabled the audience to view the grotesque aesthetic more critically than has previously been suggested. This realism culminated in an unexpectedly savage denouement as Taylor's review documented: 'Dauphine

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<sup>32</sup> Potter, p.201.

viciously slaps the old man's face with the signed documents [Boyle's interpolation], the audience's sense of violation was so great that for once in this noisy play you could have heard a pin drop [*sic*].<sup>35</sup>

I would suggest that Boyle's ensemble utilized a synthesis of realism and caricature. The caricature enabled immediate laughter based on appearances – like Morose's hats and cushion and La Foole's absurd costume – but if caricature had been pursued throughout the audience would have laughed and not felt uneasy about Morose's defeat. Caricature does not enable empathy; in contrast Bradley's performance as Morose encouraged it, as, when defeated, 'the audience emits an audible "Oh" of dissent and alarm'.<sup>36</sup>

In a parallel with Boyle, Michael Boyd's *The Alchemist* in 1988 used the appearance of types and broad comic techniques, for example, Philip Whitchurch's Face as Lungs 'assumes a marvellous, dwarfish disguise with a Fagin-like accent'.<sup>37</sup> But these effects were punctuated by surprising moments of realism according to Paul Taylor:

The production keeps signalling that the tricksters resent these performances as just burdensome means-to-an-end by having them step out of their disguises with undisguised distaste. [. . .] The instant Dapper is blindfolded, Face throws off his Lungs costume, and he rises with cocky relief from his crutches the split-second a client is out of the door.<sup>38</sup>

Boyd's production was equally important in redefining the acting style used for Jonson. But *The Alchemist* lacked both the overt influence of Boyle's on future productions and the critics' disapproval. The difference between Boyle and Boyd was due to theatre politics: Boyd's *The Alchemist* was a regional tour by

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Taylor, 'The noisy inheritance', *Independent*, 7 July 1989.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Coveney, 'The Silent Woman or Epicoene', *Financial Times*, 7 July 1989.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Schmidt, 'The art of noise', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 July 1989.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Hoyle, 'The Alchemist, Richmond' [*sic*], *Financial Times*, 15 February 1988.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Taylor, 'The old house of games', *Independent*, 15 February 1988.



Cambridge Theatre Company and not presented by the cultural institution of the RSC at their latest hallowed space.

Other later productions have utilized caricature and realism in a synthesis of techniques to great effect. Mendes's *The Alchemist* in 1991, Warchus's *The Devil is an Ass* and *Volpone* in 1995 and Boswell's *Bartholomew Fair* in 1997 were generally well-received by the critics, unlike Boyle's version of *The Silent Woman or Epicoene* (where the majority of the criticism concentrated on how [un]convincing John Hannah was as a woman). These later productions were sufficiently distanced in time from Caird's realistic productions to allow their approaches to be regarded as different but effective. In its own time Boyle's production suffered for being too unlike Caird's. But for me, just as Caird's productions were revolutionary in their move away from the bravura style prescribed by the *Gambit* panel, so Boyle's *The Silent Woman or Epicoene* (in addition to Boyd's *The Alchemist*) was instrumental in using a synthesis of styles.

Nevertheless, in 1991 it was Mendes's *The Alchemist* that was received by Michael Billington, amongst others, as the herald of a new fusion of production elements, combining 'verbal coinage, psychological accuracy and helter-skelter farcical momentum' with an 'overpowering sense of fantasy'.<sup>39</sup>

Since the time of Mendes's production the means of staging Jonson most often used – and most favoured by critics, practitioners (and audiences?) – has been a fusion of apparent types with surprising moments of realism.

The main advantage of playing Jonson as a synthesis of broad comedy and realism is that it is more indicative of the diverse effects suggested within the

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Billington, 'Master of illusions', *Guardian*, 29 August 1991.

texts. When characters emerge as realistic from their initial caricatured appearances the performers physically enact Jonson's concern with encouraging the audience to be aware of the way meaning is constructed: to 'understand, /Concoct, digest'.<sup>40</sup> Where caricature is used for Jonson the audience is only encouraged to 'understand' the fully formed character portrayed. The use of realism gives the audience a deeper satisfaction of the Jonsonian text because apparently realistic characters may be 'digested' as the audience considers their actions according to psychological motivations. Nevertheless, realistic characters, like caricatures, inhabit a theatrical space that has prescribed limits: both styles encourage audience observation rather than participation. In addition neither style admits characters' inconsistencies nor plausibly allows for Jonson's frequent device of revelation.

When the diverse techniques of caricature and realism are both used in performance audiences are asked to 'understand' and 'digest' the information given according to each circumstance and it is the audience's responsibility to 'concoct' the character from the diverse actions portrayed. Playing Jonson as a fusion of caricature and realism liberates the text, actors and audiences from simplistic, generalized performances in an exciting collaborative venture.

A synthesis of styles is representative only of the current trend of acting Jonson. It is one conclusion to the question of how to act Jonson that has troubled the English theatre from the 1970s to the present time. It acknowledges that all of Jonson's actors and characters like Volpone, 'doubtful stand'. But Jonsonian productions will not end with the closure of this thesis and this conclusion to finding an acting style for Jonson is provisional. Future Jonsonian productions

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<sup>40</sup> Ben Jonson, *The New Inn*, ed. by Michael Hattaway, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester:



and future written accounts of productions will undoubtedly continue to make progress in discovering the best methods for acting Jonson's texts. But, just as the *Gambit* debate was important in calling for more productions, so this thesis presents a renewed call for a greater frequency of Jonsonian productions and for continuing innovations in the acting of Jonson's texts.

All of the aspects of productions discussed above – space, modernization, directorial concept and acting – will be referred to once again in the Afterword to draw together the available evidence in recommendations for future performances.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE THEATRICAL CONTEXT FROM THE 1970S TO THE 1990S

In order to set the productions of Jonson's texts documented in this thesis into context, this chapter will present a survey of the period from the end of the 1970s to 2000. I have aimed to create a brief history of the major events and trends of the period that seemed to me to have the greatest impact on theatre production. I am aware that this chapter is not exhaustive in its selection of material. Rather, the chapter will highlight the circumstances that accompanied the theatrical revival of Jonson in the late 1970s theatre after hundreds of years of obscurity.

1968 was the year that shaped the seventies for two important reasons. The young intellectuals of the time in Paris and across the USA coalesced in an embattled display of disaffected youth. But the events of 1968 did little to alter the status quo. As Robert Hewison suggests, 'there was a sense by 1970 that whatever had been thought was going to happen in 1968 was not going to happen after all'.<sup>1</sup> The growth of pop culture in the sixties all but severed the relationship between the young and the theatre; millions of young Britons preferred to attend the gigs of the emerging pop scene than the theatre. This is precisely how the youth of Britain failed to be on the front line of the revolution that did occur in 1968. The 1968 revolution that took place was theatrical.

Joe Orton had captured the prevailing mood of change in the sixties by producing subversive plays that exploded long-held beliefs about authority and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> But even the rebellious Orton did not (and, with the existence of the censor, could not) utilize any language that would be regarded as inappropriate in

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, art and politics since 1940* (London: Methuen, 1995), p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Such as *Entertaining Mister Sloane*, (1964), *Loot*, (1966), and *What the Butler Saw*, (posthumously produced in 1969).



polite society. The plays of Edward Bond shocked critics with his interest in violence and the denigration of society. *Saved*, banned by the Lord Chamberlain in 1965, has gained notoriety for the baby-stoning scene but the banning of *Early Morning* in 1968 was swiftly followed by an even greater shock for critics and audiences.

It was the end of stage censorship in Britain in 1968 that empowered writers and producers to put subversive issues on the British stage that would previously have been inadmissible material. The inevitable immediate reaction to the demise of censorship was not the production of plays founded on socially-inflammatory debates but ventures that aimed to capitalize on the mood of sexual freedom. In this way Kenneth Tynan's revue, *Oh Calcutta!* (1969), presented the first notorious and commercial attempt to react to the new censor-free climate with its parade of male and female nudity as a parallel to the American musical *Hair* (Broadway, 1968). Into the next decade fringe theatre capitalized on the censor's absence with ever more diverse displays of sex and violence that would previously have been unthinkable during the reign of the censor. Graphic dramas like Heathcote Williams's *AC/DC* (1970) and the collaborative play *Lay By* (1971) at the Royal Court confronted the audience with nudity in less commercial, more shocking ways with bodily functions and violations simulated onstage. Since that time shock tactics have continued to be used as required throughout the eighties and nineties, for example, Howard Barker's *Victory* (1983), Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980) and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1996). It is worth noting that the end of censorship has allowed many writers a new freedom of expression that led to significant developments in theatre. The rise of gay plays over the last decades of the late twentieth century,

beginning with Martin Sherman's poignant play *Bent* in 1979, would not have occurred without the abolition of stage censorship.

Anything was possible on the British stage from 1968 onwards but the hopes for anything being possible in society were proved unreliable after the worldwide events of 1968. Although many playwrights and individuals in society were politicized by the events of the previous decade, by 1974 Brenton declared the failure of the fringe: 'the "alternative society" gets hermetically sealed, and surrounded. A ghetto-like mentality develops. It is surrounded and, in the end, strangled to death.'<sup>3</sup> Subsequent cuts by the Arts Council further threatened the existence of the fringe. Arts funding generally, from the late seventies to the late eighties, was decreasing in its value, even in the large grants received by the national companies, like the RSC and NT.

Nevertheless, some playwrights continued the call for revolution. Revolution was a key idea in Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians* (1975) whilst David Edgar's *Destiny* (1976) presented an imaginative consideration of the danger of British fascism. Brenton's *The Churchill Play* (1974) was akin to *Destiny* in its use of the fascist mindset of the Second World War as a continuing influence on the theatre of the late-twentieth century; it presented Britain as utilizing concentration camps for the confinement of objectors.

In 1978 the playwright David Hare attacked the dream of the revolution as, in Richard Eyre's words, 'a middle-class fantasy'; this attack came in two forms. Firstly, a debate on political theatre at Cambridge University saw Hare lament the lack of debate within political plays. Secondly, *Plenty* presented in dramatic form the revolution as a middle-class fantasy. The end of the play is

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<sup>3</sup> Hewison, p. 178.



deliberately optimistic, placing the heroine in bright sunshine in France looking forward to a golden future.<sup>4</sup> The promise of a golden future, however reassuringly affirmative at the end of *Plenty*, now seems ironic, being written and performed at a time of what Hewison calls ‘national decline’.<sup>5</sup> The opening date of this thesis, 1977, was the year that Elizabeth II’s Silver Jubilee was celebrated in a number of street parties – a conscious revival of community-based celebrations at the end of the Second World War. The evocation of community, patriotism and festivity during a time of almost ‘total collapse of the [British] economy’ reveals the power of the past as a panacea.<sup>6</sup>

Back in 1969 Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation: A Personal View* presented the past as an apotheosis of civility in contrast to the degraded present.<sup>7</sup> By 1975 ‘our heritage and our great past’ were putatively being undermined in the view of the leader of the Conservative Party, as Hewison records.<sup>8</sup> Hewison suggests that at this point the word heritage, ‘began to acquire a special resonance as a source of value and reassurance’.<sup>9</sup> Margaret Thatcher had been the Secretary of State for Education during Edward Heath’s government and, as such, had been responsible for Arts funding.

Whilst the right called for the supposed restoration of Britain to its former ‘great’ness and the fringe failed to provide alternatives, popular culture produced a dialectical response to the second Elizabethan age. Punk rock emerged not just as a musical form but as an ideology of Britain’s disaffected youth. Punk fashion

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Eyre and Nicholas Wright, *Changing Stages: A View of British Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 288.

<sup>5</sup> Hewison, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Hewison, p. 195.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and John Murray, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Hewison, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> Hewison, p. 190.

utilized mutilation and bondage in clothing and hairstyles for their shock value and to mark their difference from British traditions. Derek Jarman's film *Jubilee* (1977) utilized punk fashion alongside traditional mythologies of Britishness, like Britannia, as an ironic counterpoint to the new culturally degraded Elizabethan age. To coincide with the Silver Jubilee celebrations the most famous Punk group, the Sex Pistols, released the single 'God Save the Queen' with a pastiche of a familiar image of Elizabeth II overwritten by tabloid typeface on the record sleeve.

Punk was not merely an antidote to the new Elizabethan festivities but an indicator of general social malaise. The Liberal/Labour pact at the end of 1977 presented the only means by which the Labour Party could retain office after Wilson's resignation in 1976. By 1979 British voters signalled the need for change in government. Widespread strikes and severe weather combined to form the "winter of discontent" in 1978. Whilst Hare questioned the worth of political theatre in 1978, Britain was preparing itself for irreversible political change. In 1979 Thatcher became Britain's first female Prime Minister and the Tories remained the ruling party of British politics (with only one change of Prime Minister) until 1997. Since that time until the time of completion of this thesis in early 2001, only one other production of Jonson has been performed in the mainstream theatre – *Volpone* at the RSC in 1999 – suggesting perhaps that our rediscovery of Jonson accords with particular political circumstances.

Although taxpayers, sponsors and funding bodies grew increasingly wary of experimental theatre in the 1970s and 1980s, some companies managed to redefine notions of what constituted theatre. For example, fringe companies rejected presenting plays in conventional auditoria in favour of creating site-



specific pieces in a variety of spaces, for example, Eyre recalls the use of ice rinks, lecture theatres, swimming pools and the back of a motorbike for ‘turning the stage and audience areas into a single, merged performing-and-acting space’.<sup>10</sup> New (mostly touring) companies, like Foco Novo and the Ken Campbell Road Show, were founded in the 1970s to provide a variety of material and styles of theatre to communities that were ill served by the mainstream. Joint Stock experimented with means of staging and rehearsal; the company proved a fruitful relationship between playwrights like Caryl Churchill and collaborating actors before Churchill reached greater notoriety in the 1980s. Churchill’s work – *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), *Top Girls* (1982) and *Serious Money* (1987) - revealed her interest in doubling key roles and the use of historical events as an allegorical catalyst for reflecting urgent socio-political concerns.

In the 1970s other women, like Andrea Dunbar and Pam Gems (Gems’s *Queen Christina* was a success for the RSC at TOP in 1977) emerged as important playwrights, coinciding with the growth of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Britain. Before these writers emerged women’s voices were sorely underrepresented in the theatre, as Eyre points out, in 1971 Churchill was ‘the first woman to have her work produced in the main bill at the Royal Court since Ann Jellicoe [...] from 1956’.<sup>11</sup>

Special interest companies emerged in 1975, like Monstrous Regiment and Gay Sweatshop, to cater for both producers of theatre whose work was silenced by the predominantly white, middle class, heterosexual and patriarchal mainstream and for like-minded audiences who sought for their interests to be addressed through the medium of theatre (which had previously ignored their

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<sup>10</sup> Eyre, p. 284.

existence). Therefore, the audience's relationship to the material presented was re-defined by alternative theatre in the seventies, including the very timing of theatre events, which was revolutionized by lunchtime slots on the fringe. The fringe presented heterogeneity in its forms and audiences as alternatives to the prescribed culture of nationhood offered at the time of the Jubilee.

New stages were built that reflected the need to experiment with theatre space. Arenas, thrust stages and studio venues were built as annexes to major repertory theatres; these venues would allow established companies a forum to present exploratory work with less box office constraints than the traditional, large capacity venues. The RSC began experimenting with a second venue in Stratford in this way. Purposefully titled *The Other Place*, this tin shed, a former props store, was at the opposite end of the spatial scale to the RSC's large capacity proscenium arch auditorium, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and the work presented at TOP was an intentional departure from the RSC's recognizable repertoire of classics. TOP gained a reputation as an exciting space (despite the drawbacks of its facilities) because of the close contact between the actors and audiences. In 1965 the RSC created *Theatreground*, which provided small-scale productions and education opportunities following the rising trends in community theatre and the use of alternative spaces.

The growing use of small-scale productions at TOP came at a time when the RSC, like its sister institution, the NT, was flourishing. To see how this occurred we must examine the emergence of the RSC as a cultural institution in the 1960s. In 1961 Peter Hall created the RSC out of the remnants of annual Shakespeare Festivals at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. Capturing the mood

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<sup>11</sup> Eyre, p. 318.



of the early sixties, with ideals of radicalism set against apathy and a growing interest in CND amongst Britain's youth, Hall directed *Hamlet*, with the young David Warner in the title role playing the Prince as a young intellectual with a trademark red scarf. Advances in Shakespearian production with the new ensemble and its young Artistic Director were accompanied by a critical focus on theatre by scholars and practitioners alike. In 1961 Martin Esslin's monograph, *The Theatre of the Absurd* was published, the first English translation of Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* appeared in 1965, with a Preface by Peter Brook, Brook's own *The Empty Space* and his Preface for the first English translation of Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* both followed in 1969. All of these books, combined with the new working practices of the RSC helped to forge previously unthinkable advances in Shakespeare production.

Another event in the sixties meant that the RSC style altered from that of the established Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. In 1964 the Aldwych World Theatre Season meant that audiences, critics and practitioners alike witnessed visits by the Berliner Ensemble and the Moscow Arts Theatre. International theatre was opened up to British audiences at the theatre that was soon to become the London home of the RSC. Such cultural variety had an indelible effect on institutions like the RSC and the NT and audiences and practitioners expected variety and innovation in Shakespeare and other classical texts. The RSC grew from its humble beginnings during the 1960s because of the opportunities for cultural exchange with other nations. Just as the prestigious companies of Moscow and Berlin, amongst others, visited London and provided the RSC with alternative approaches, so the RSC branched out to become an international force, touring its own style of Shakespeare worldwide. This international status

meant that the RSC required more and more funding to maintain its repertoire in Stratford and London, its touring work with Theatreground and its international tours.

To make greater demands of its financiers the RSC launched new writing initiatives alongside its classical repertoire. This ambitious move proved successful. The RSC used its newly-found home-grown writers to sustain its claim on arts subsidies as an unrivalled institution for artistic excellence. To accommodate the wealth of productions the RSC took on the Aldwych as its London residence to enable Stratford shows to transfer to London – thereby utilizing the same actors and materials without the expense of launching many more new productions. Hall's creation and full-scale expansion of the RSC in the sixties meant that, as the idea of a National Theatre was debated, the RSC posited itself as a rival in terms of repertoire, iconic status and funding.

In 1976 the permanent home of the National Theatre was completed, turning it into another cultural institution. The new building would eventually house three auditoria in different shapes and on different scales, with the Olivier the largest and the Lyttelton a mid-range venue; a warehouse space was converted into the intimate Cottesloe venue when the NT realized the potential for a studio space (in a similar move to the RSC's discovery of TOP). The NT promised to present a vast repertoire of classic and contemporary drama from Britain and abroad. As the RSC and the NT both expanded at a conspicuous pace there were consequences for the rest of the mainstream in Britain. The resources that had contributed to the NT building (which housed bars, cafes and entrance halls, as well as the auditoria) and those that had fed Hall's desire to expand the RSC beyond recognition from its humble Festival beginnings were becoming



ever more slender. As the RSC and NT claimed iconic status repertory companies that had once flourished and provided Britain with a varied diet of classical and contemporary work found that arts funding resources were becoming increasingly unavailable to them. Small companies and regional theatres suffered and the repertory company system that had nourished the talent that the RSC and NT drew on in the sixties and seventies was soon to collapse, irrevocably altering the way mainstream theatres operated.

In 1991 the disparity of Arts Council funding for the ‘nationals’ – the NT, RSC and Royal Court – and regional theatres came to a head when the Arts Council retained responsibility for the nationals but its responsibility to regional theatres was, according to Hewison, ‘devolved’ into ten Regional Arts Boards.<sup>12</sup>

The new political climate of the 1980s was begun by the landslide election in 1979 of the Conservative Party led by Thatcher. The shift to the right in Britain (and America in 1980) was accompanied by social attitudes that explicitly focused on the self-aggrandizement of the individual. ‘Thatcherism’ came to describe the new mindset that replaced the collapse of ‘the old order of values’.<sup>13</sup> Hewison quotes Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer under Thatcher, to define the term Thatcherism as: ‘a mixture of free markets, financial discipline, firm control over public expenditure, tax cuts, nationalism, “Victorian values” [. . .], privatization and a dash of populism’.<sup>14</sup> The Thatcher years were dominated by a focus on economic concerns. Against a backdrop of widespread unemployment throughout Britain, the City became a place of prosperity, as Hewison recalls, ‘a new myth of economic individualism came to replace the old

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<sup>12</sup> Hewison, p. 262.

<sup>13</sup> Hewison, p. 210.

<sup>14</sup> Nigel Lawson quoted in Hewison, p. 210.

ideas of community and collectivism'.<sup>15</sup> The Boom began in 1982 and lasted until the recession and the Stock Market Crash of 1987. Hewison categorizes this period as 'a superficial culture of consumption', where at least one form of theatre flourished in 'a climate where everything [. . .] was available for display, inspection or sale': the 'blockbuster high-tech musicals' were the theatrical success of the decade.<sup>16</sup>

In 1987 Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote the theme music for the Conservative Party's election campaign and Hewison has suggested that Thatcher 'approved of the profitable musicals of Andrew Lloyd Webber'.<sup>17</sup> Lloyd Webber's *Cats* (1981), *Starlight Express* (1984) and *Aspects of Love* (1989) filled large auditoria, often with audiences who would not otherwise attend the theatre. What drew these people to this genre was the promise of lavish spectacle. Huge budgets were devoted to costumes, lighting effects and elaborate hydraulic stage machinery that enabled the settings (the real stars of the shows) to be extravagantly demonstrated. Musicals were (and still are) aggressively marketed in order to fill to capacity the vast Victorian theatres. The marketing tactics branded each musical with a familiar logo (independent of the design of the show itself) to ensure the widest possible application of the brand on souvenirs: programmes, baseball caps, soundtracks, t-shirts, jumpers, etc. Theatre entrepreneurs, like Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh (producer of Alan Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg's *Les Misérables* as well as *Cats*), profited by their manipulation of the market in the West End, just like the newly-termed 'yuppies' who made their wealth working in the City.

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<sup>15</sup> Hewison, p. 212.

<sup>16</sup> Hewison, p. 286.

<sup>17</sup> Hewison, p. 243.



Eyre has suggested that the narrative line of Lloyd Webber's musicals is 'the quest for stardom [. . .] the mirror for life is show business'.<sup>18</sup> I would go further and point to the socio-political place of musical narratives and suggest that they focus on the Thatcherist principle of the self-promotion of the individual. Musicals pursue the glorification of personal ambition whilst appealing to the emotions of the audience, most often through the music. Eyre has summarized this as 'a generalised demand to FEEL and LOVE [*sic*]'.<sup>19</sup>

This ill-defined goodness ensures that the audience is not alienated by the hero's desire to succeed. The progression of the central character from lowly to heroic status is situated as the realization of a cherished dream. *Miss Saigon* intentionally subverted this paradigm in a critique of the acquisitiveness at the heart of the American Dream, the lyrics acknowledging that such an ideology is a collective fantasy 'for sale'. Nevertheless, *Miss Saigon* criticizes fantasy for profit whilst colluding with its audience in that very process.

The hero's pursuit of a dream legitimates the audience's own desire for fantasy in watching musicals. The pursuit of fantasy within the theatre enabled audiences to escape from what Hewison calls 'social stress' in their own lives. This stress was caused by the threat of HIV/AIDS, riots in Britain's cities, unemployment and social fragmentation – 'There is no such thing as society'.<sup>20</sup>

Aside from musicals, the theatre's commercial success in the 1980s depended on its ability to entertain rather than challenge audiences. Plays like Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* (1982), Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* (1982) and Alan Ayckbourn's *A Small Family Business* (1987) recalled Terence Rattigan's plays in their focus on the personal foibles of the middle class. Eyre characterizes

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<sup>18</sup> Eyre, p. 342.

Ayckbourn's work as typical of a trend in theatre that refuses to ideologically challenge its audience; Ayckbourn writes for 'middle-England – middle class, middlebrow – the heartland of British theatre audiences'.<sup>21</sup> Such plays enable theatres to operate more profitably for two reasons. Firstly, they are commercially successful as Eyre's comments suggest: Ayckbourn was, after Shakespeare, the most produced playwright in Britain in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, such commercial successes are a cultural fusion of high and low art, the subsidy given by the Arts Council and local councils can be seen to be spent on theatre that appeals to a wide range of the public rather than an elite few.

In 1988 the NT received a Royal prefix that ideologically situated it as a conservative repository of culture. In its marketing the NT has retained the letters 'NT' as the logo but accompanied them with the fuller moniker of 'Royal National Theatre' in smaller type, showing some ambivalence to this status. Earlier in the decade the NT had provided a warning to other theatres about the limitations of free expression. The pseudo-Victorian attitude - or 'cultural philistinism', according to Wickham - emerged as early as 1980 when the NT's production of Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* was criticized for its depiction of male rape and the director, Michael Bogdanov, was due to be prosecuted for offending public decency. The court case was withdrawn before the prosecution could occur. Nevertheless, the threat of legal action was a signal to theatre producers to exercise caution: although censorship was abolished in 1968, drama did not enjoy total freedom of expression.<sup>23</sup> In 1980 the Royal Court produced *Hamlet* in a commercial move to support the new drama that had gained the

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<sup>19</sup> Eyre, p. 342.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Hewison, p. 294.

<sup>21</sup> Eyre, p. 322.

<sup>22</sup> Eyre, p. 322.



Court its reputation but which was causing problematic relations with the Arts Council. As Philip Roberts records, Dennis Andrews of the Arts Council was reported by Artistic Director Max Stafford-Clark as stating ‘that the “RC is an expensive way of subsidising new drama. Obviously it’s much cheaper to sponsor new plays in smaller theatres” [sic].’<sup>24</sup> So the Court, the former home of challenging new drama situated itself alongside the RSC and NT as a home for the classical repertoire at a time when the issues of ‘heritage’ and ‘the past’ were utilized by Thatcher to create a national identity. For example, during the Falklands War (1982) Thatcher consciously evoked Churchill in an attempt to revive what Hewison calls the ‘solidarity of wartime’.<sup>25</sup>

As the Court and the NT grew more conservative in appearance the RSC aimed at rapid and vast expansion. In 1982 the Barbican Centre was built in the City, housing two theatres as the RSC’s permanent London home. The 1981 funding figures reveal a great disparity between that received by the NT (£6m) to that received by the RSC (£2.5m)<sup>26</sup> and, by the time the RSC premiered at the Barbican, the company’s finances were suffering. Productions like *Nicholas Nickleby* (1980), which toured to Broadway, bolstered the company’s lean subsidy and were financially successful. But the RSC urgently required a commercial hit in order to raise funds. In 1985 the two directors of *Nicholas Nickleby*, John Caird and Trevor Nunn, reunited to direct another adaptation; this time Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. The adaptation by Boubil and Schönberg exceeded all previous commercial expectations although the RSC management

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<sup>23</sup> Glynne Wickham, *A History of the Theatre*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., (London: Phaidon, 1992), p. 267.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 171.

<sup>25</sup> Hewison, p. 218.

<sup>26</sup> Sally Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 348.

has been criticized by Wickham for turning to the genre of musicals to revive the fortunes of the RSC: ‘why did the Governors of the R.S.C. allow its companies to stray into a world as alien to its own Charter as that of Musicals? [sic]’.<sup>27</sup>

Despite criticisms of this sort – that the musical genre is (inappropriately low) art for the RSC to produce – the company required an immediate injection of finances, whatever the artistic cost, as Nunn’s comments suggest: “‘Surely the only thing that is not permissible these days is to lose the audience.’”<sup>28</sup> *Les Misérables* was (and still is) the most successful musical of all time, beginning its run at the Barbican and moving into the West End under the supervision of Cameron Mackintosh.

Although *Les Misérables* brought the RSC economic success the company (like so many other theatres) continued to face financial difficulties throughout the 1980s. The vast expansion of the RSC and its subsequently weak financial position mirrored the Boom and Bust economic cycle in the City. By 1990 neither the RSC nor the British government could continue to operate according to the economic extremes that came to typify the 1980s. In 1990 the RSC’s Pit and Barbican theatres closed for six months because of a massive £4m deficit. In the same year Thatcher was expelled from her position as Prime Minister. The end of Thatcherism was at least a sign that a change in ideology was possible.

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<sup>27</sup> Wickham, p. 268.

<sup>28</sup> Trevor Nunn, quoted in Eyre, p. 340.



Hewison suggests that it was 'left to' John Major 'to pick up the pieces' after the forced resignation of Thatcher.<sup>29</sup> The widespread hatred of the Poll Tax, implemented in 1990, was the prime catalyst for Thatcher's downfall. But, as Hewison has shown, the Poll Tax was not the only legacy of Thatcher:

The changes [made by Thatcher] since 1979 had produced a more unequal and poverty-stricken society. The average income of the top tenth of earners had risen by sixty-two per cent, that of the bottom tenth had fallen by fourteen per cent.<sup>30</sup>

So Thatcherism had changed society but it also altered the Arts almost beyond recognition. Hewison notes 'the rhetoric of the enterprise culture' in the Arts in the late eighties and nineties: 'productions had indeed become "product", audiences "consumers", public patronage "investment".<sup>31</sup> When the National Lottery Act was passed in 1993 a new source of funding for the Arts was created. And in 1992, after winning the General Election, Major created the Department of National Heritage; Hewison calls 'Major's conception of cultural identity', 'comfortably nostalgic'. At this point the past was back to being a social panacea but with less concern for the Thatcherite idea of 'national prestige'.<sup>32</sup> Major's idea of heritage was, according to Hewison, 'a reflection of the civilizing reassurance that Major was hoping to bring'.<sup>33</sup> That reassurance manifested itself in Major's role in encouraging funding for the Arts. As Chancellor of the Exchequer under Thatcher, in 1989 Major announced a 12.9 per cent increase for 1990-1. Norman Lamont, under Major, announced a rise of 14 per cent for 1991-2 and 8.9 per cent for 1992-3.<sup>34</sup> But in 1992 Black Wednesday caused a devaluation in sterling. This, accompanied with a general mood of anxiety at the

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<sup>29</sup> Hewison, p. 291.

<sup>30</sup> Hewison, p. 291.

<sup>31</sup> Hewison, p. 285.

<sup>32</sup> Hewison, p. 295.

<sup>33</sup> Hewison, p. 297.

*fin de siècle*, caused Major's assertion of the need to 'get back to basics'.<sup>35</sup>

However, it was not clear what the basics were and the impending millennium gave British culture the impetus to examine itself and plan how to celebrate that new millennium.

In 1997 Labour won the General Election, validating Hewison's assertion in 1995 that 'political change is imminent'.<sup>36</sup> Hewison had identified the 'post-modern anxiety' in the nineties but suggested an accompanying 'opportunity [. . .] to begin the search for new forms and new methods'.<sup>37</sup> Following the election there was a sense of optimism but, by the close of the decade, this optimism had been replaced by some discontent. In 2000 two tourist attractions, The Millennium Dome and the London Eye, opened after being planned under different governments throughout the nineties. The completion of the Dome exceeded the proposed budget and was derided in the popular press for its low attendance figures and unfocused purpose. Part educational, part theme park, part circus, the Dome was the partial fulfilment of many concerns but revealed no particular commitment to any one thing. The Dome became renowned as the government's white elephant and a serious drain on public expenditure. The other attraction, the London Eye, also known as the Millennium Wheel, was less criticized but failed to operate in time for the New Year celebrations of 2000. The Eye is a large rotating wheel with viewing platforms inside glass carriages, offering panoramic views of the capital city. The government's Millennium attractions, like the Festival of Britain in the 1950s, aimed to present Britain's future as technologically advanced and semiotically large, open and bright.

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<sup>34</sup> Hewison, p. 296.

<sup>35</sup> John Major, quoted in Hewison, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Hewison, p. 312.

<sup>37</sup> Hewison, p. 312.



In contrast the theatre in the nineties figured Britain as fragmented, dark and bleak. New writers emerged with strikingly individual visions of contemporary life. Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1997) a comedy about personal relationships was a success for the NT on the South Bank, in the West End and on Broadway. Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) was premiered by Out of Joint at the Royal Court and toured to great international acclaim, showing Britain's consumerist culture via drugs, prostitution, ready-meals and fashion. These plays deny the bright future that the government's millennium attractions aim to portray. They reveal 1990s Britain to be confused and exhausted in the aftermath of Thatcherism. There is little drive for hope or expectations of the future in these plays. The plays typify the post-eighties condition; they mourn the lack of a satisfactory present because of the legacy of the past and they refuse to offer any indications of what will happen in the future.

Similarly, classical theatre in the nineties became concerned about closure. Shakespeare's 'Problem Plays' were in vogue for most of the nineties, for example, the RSC alone produced *Troilus and Cressida* in 1990, 1996 and 1998 and *Measure for Measure* in 1994 and 1998. The textual ambiguity of these plays earned them the reputation of being 'problematic' but it is these very ambiguities that made the texts culturally applicable in the 1990s. The apparent contradictions of character, like Isabella's decision to plead for Angelo and her (unspoken) reaction to the Duke's proposal in *Measure for Measure*, did not need to be explained naturalistically but could be explored as contradictions more fully than ever before when directors began to embrace postmodern approaches to the texts. This prevailing trend of postmodernism was not just reserved for the 'Problem Plays'. It was influenced by intercultural exchanges of

production styles as foreign productions toured to Britain, for example Suzuki's *The Tale of Lear* (1984), Lepage's *Elsinore* (1996) and his NT production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1992). International directors like Lepage and Suzuki revealed to the British theatre that Shakespeare could be re-written by visual elements in the absence of the original language of the most famous texts in the world. Stripped of their linguistic meaning the plays are liberated from years of academic analysis and previous performances. Though directors of productions in English can utilize similar setting and directing techniques as their foreign counterparts, the English-spoken text will always retain its linguistic resonance to English-speaking audiences.

There have been no internationally touring foreign language productions of Jonson, though advances in Jonsonian production could be influenced in the future by innovations in Shakespearian performance.

The theatrical impact of Jonson's satires on materialism was particularly pertinent in the Thatcher years. The contingent socio-political circumstances of the eighties enabled a new understanding of Jonson's subversive approach to seventeenth century concerns. Future productions of Jonson will obviously reflect the current socio-political climate but it remains to be seen whether Jonson will gain as much popularity with producers and audiences as that achieved during the 1980s capitalist drive for acquisition – a decade when Mammon's command 'be rich' echoed once again in Jonson's native City to gull willing prospectors.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, ed. by F. H. Mares, *The Revels Plays* (London: Methuen, 1967), II.1.7.



### AFTERWORD: FUTURE JONSONS: SOME CONCLUSIONS

The Swan has been the single venue that has staged the most Jonsonian productions – seven different plays in thirteen years. All of these productions have originated at this venue. Some have found success in other auditoria but it has been rare for the transfer to gain as much acclaim in its later venue. It is not just the number of productions that has caused the Swan's success but the suitability of these productions for this particular venue. Or, conversely, it is the suitability of this particular venue to stage Jonson's comedies that has caused this success. The Swan, like all the other venues listed, has yet to produce one of Jonson's tragedies and it would be exciting to see if either *Sejanus* or *Catiline* would gain the same prestige attained by the comedies in the Swan. The reasons for the Swan's success have been discussed above but are worth restating here as they reflect the practical requirements for staging a successful production of Jonson's plays.

The (thrust) stage allows the audience to surround the action, facilitating each of the following: interaction between actors and audience, laughter, an awareness of one's own position within a larger social event and the possibilities of various acting styles, both subtle and broad. Entrance points from within the auditorium further unite auditorium and stage in a shared space. Different levels of seating (in the form of galleries) encourage an awareness of the many different audience perspectives on the action at the centre. Different playing levels enable characters to be seen in simultaneous action, dispersed around and above the stage. The medium-sized capacity and stage area enables effective management of the large *dramatis personae* but also maintains close contact with the audience. Focus is placed on the actor and his/her costume to create visual points

of reference instead of using elaborate scenic devices (an important factor of the plays as originally performed). The venue can be utilized as the setting for the play, preventing extraneous design aesthetics alienating the actors from the audience. It also reflects the needs of the plays with reference to their original pre-proscenium performances.

This assessment relies on the assumption that all of the Jonsonian productions at the Swan have been successful because of the venue. Where productions have only had limited success at the Swan it reflects a misunderstanding of the space. For example, Posner's *Volpone* filled all of the inner stage with scenic devices, such as overhanging stuffed animals on hooks and a large cupboard housing Volpone's bed, and the setting filled most of the thrust in the scenes where the bed was required. This limited the actors' options for movement and prevented free sightlines for those sitting at the sides of the stage. So, the notion that all of the Swan's Jonsons have been successful is only true to a point.

There has yet to be a Jonsonian production that does *not* work in the Swan. This alone would recommend it over other venues that have presented many Jonsons, for example, the Olivier or the Pit (which essentially only houses transfers of Stratford shows) because these venues have conceded failure in the production of some plays. The requirements also highlight the potentially good spaces for Jonson that could be used more in the future for Jonsonian productions, for example, Manchester Royal Exchange, the Young Vic and the Almeida.



The problem with large spaces like the Olivier and Birmingham Rep is that the scale overwhelms the simple relationship between the actor and the audience and that designers are too often tempted to dominate the space with elaborate stage sets. At the Barbican this temptation was successfully resisted by Mendes's *The Alchemist*. Once a production relies on spectacle for its effect it fails to address the play in question. This is what happened in *Bartholomew Fair* at the Olivier. Large sets often make actors compete with them for the attention of the audience, transforming their acting style from focusing on the character to self-indulgent displays of virtuosity, as seen in *The Alchemist* at Birmingham Rep and the Olivier. In contrast, *Volpone* at the Olivier worked because its set was purposeful and, composed of almost-black framing devices, focused the audience's attention onto the bodies of the actors whose performances were intelligent and well-considered.

Whatever the space and whatever the play it is vital that these two elements – space and play – are addressed by the director and production team as soon as possible. Just because stage machinery is available should not necessitate its inclusion. The vital elements of the production should be the first to be considered: namely, the actors, the audience and the text. Only when they have been placed should the production begin to consider its scenic and thematic elements. Hewison is right to urge caution on the worth of individual spaces when he suggests, 'however ingenious, no single space can do justice to every kind of play, and no play entirely depends on an appropriate architectural setting for its success'. In this way *The Alchemist* appears to be Jonson's most versatile play, fitting comfortably within proscenium arch theatres as well as intimate venues like the old TOP and larger auditoria like the Barbican theatre. From the

evidence of its seven productions so far, the Swan would appear to break Hewison's rule as a space that appears to perpetually do justice to Jonson's 'kind of play[s]'.<sup>1</sup>

But as this section comes to a close it is important to note with Potter that Jonsonian production at the Swan benefits audiences in more ways than it just being the venue that has housed a number of good productions. The cumulative effect of Jonson at the Swan is greater than the sum of its parts:

Like all non-Shakespearian Renaissance dramatists, Jonson has suffered from the fact that each new production involves learning his language virtually from scratch, without enough time to develop genuine linguistic competence in it. The Swan offers a rare opportunity [...] to create a continuous tradition of performance and thus build up faith in the dramatist.<sup>2</sup>

I hope that the Swan will produce more Jonsons, even if they do not amount to the one play per year that Nunn envisaged, whilst the venue's early repertory is still in the minds of its patrons and critics.

As the documented performances have shown, all productions are based on a directorial concept. Although some directors, like Caird, have denied the existence of a prevailing concept (Caird preferring to view his role as faithfully serving Jonson's text), readers should acknowledge that the director's approach governs the processes of production, from the selection and preparation of the text to the style of acting employed by the company. As such, directors and readers should be aware that there is no definitive method for directing Jonson. Each director will work according to their own preferred methods. However, the directors who have produced the most successful Jonsonian productions in my

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<sup>1</sup> Hewison, *Making Space*, p. 60.



own view are Caird, Warchus and Mendes. Their production methods and effects were idiosyncratic and it would be almost impossible to liken the successful elements in their productions to each others. But the very uniqueness of their productions revealed one important fact about producing Jonson: that there is no singular way of creating a Jonsonian text in performance. The most successful directorial concept will be like those employed by Caird, Warchus and Mendes: it will address the particular demands of the individual text, rather than attempting to adhere to preconceptions of what constitutes the term 'Jonsonian'. The variety shown in all the productions, whether ultimately successful or not, reveals that Jonson is the subject of constant reinvention through performance. This causes us to re-examine the anxiety of the *Gambit* panel, who suggested 'the art of playing Jonson is something we have still to rediscover' and feared that if their own debate did not 'yield some concrete theatrical result', 'it will have failed in its main purpose'. These fears now seem insignificant because there is no 'something [. . .] to rediscover' to make Jonsonian performance work.<sup>3</sup>

The best approaches for acting, directing and modernization will not be driven by prescriptive methods but will be products of the practitioners' own knowledge of the text and current theatrical trends. The following recommendations are themselves a product of contemporary attitudes to the Jonsonian texts and to theatre. For example, acting Jonson as a synthesis of broad comic techniques and psychological realism allows for Jonson's inherent textual variety. Therefore, the suggestions stand here as provisional recommendations for rehearsal in the absence of any other current practical guidelines. However,

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<sup>2</sup> Potter, p. 207

<sup>3</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Editorial', *Gambit*, p. 3.

they are ideals and may not be applicable to the working methods of all companies.

The director should establish his/her concept and any plans to modernize the setting at the first rehearsal. The director and designer(s) need not necessarily explain their reasons for the updating but the modernization should be based on purposeful reasoning. Rehearsals should contain – though not necessarily commence with – a detailed consideration of textual obscurities. The textual editor should be present at all rehearsals and, with the actors and director, consider the text to be a working document. The designer(s) should be present at rehearsals; the costumes and settings should be regarded as adaptable to any ideas that emerge in rehearsals. The edited text and designs should, therefore, be composites of suggestions by all practitioners involved in the production. Practical explorations of textual obscurities should be encouraged in place of cuts or rewrites at each point. Considering options of vocal tone, gesture, use of blocking, props and costume could thus facilitate a direct relationship between the actor and potential textual meaning. Scenes should be rehearsed as complete dramatic units in themselves. This enables the actor and director to find the most appropriate acting style for each point in the play. It also frees the performer from condensing all aspects of the character into simplistic caricature that becomes repetitive over the course of many scenes. Exercises should be undertaken to encourage good practice in physical skills such as use of props, comic timing, *commedia* techniques (if required).

The variety of productions documented reveal that there are infinite possibilities for future productions. The most successful productions here have



demonstrated directorial concepts that marry the contingent demands of each particular text with those of the venue, resulting in productive designs and acting styles. It remains to be seen how Jonson will be performed in the future but the combination of these elements – regardless of whether modernized settings or updated texts are used – will continue to enable audiences ‘to like or dislike at their own / charge, the author having now departed with his right’ (*Bartholomew Fair*, Induction, 87-8).

Outside the theatre Jonson’s texts will always, like the speaker of the *Volpone* Epilogue, ‘doubtful stand’ (5) but that doubtfulness remains as a challenging invitation to audiences, actors and directors to continue to negotiate contingent meanings and ‘let the play go on!’ (*Bartholomew Fair*, v. 5. 108) in the new millennium and in subsequent performances yet unknown.

## APPENDIX: SPACE

## VENUE INFORMATION

Aldwych

Jonsonian productions: London transfer of *The Alchemist* in 1977.

Opened: 1905, 'designed to pair the Strand Theatre'.<sup>1</sup>

Status: Listed Grade II, West End, London.

Seating: Capacity 1200; 1074; 1057 raked.<sup>2</sup>

Shape/Style: Proscenium arch.

Size: 'Performing area 10.5m x 12.09m – pros opening 9.68m x 6.7m – wing widths 2.13m SR, 2.99m SL. Stage raked, 1 in 24'.<sup>3</sup>

Technical: Safety curtain, 'Orchestra pit 19m x 11.8m'.<sup>4</sup>

Almeida

Jonsonian productions: *Volpone* in 1990.

Opened: 1984. 'Conversion in phases from 1981 to 1986 of 1837 lecture theatre'.<sup>5</sup>

Status: Producing theatre, listed Grade II, Islington, London.

Seating: Capacity 300, 'Raked lower level in centre and angled side blocks'.<sup>6</sup>

Shape/Style: 'Arena'; 'Open end stage theatre fixed', furthest seat 9m.<sup>7</sup>

Size: 'Performing area 14.5m x 10.5m. No rake'; 'Acting area / 9m x 9m approx'.<sup>8</sup>

Technical: 'no flying – back wall used as cyclorama'.<sup>9</sup>

Barbican

Jonsonian productions: the London transfer of *The Alchemist* in 1992.

Opened: 1982.

Status: Producing theatre, RSC residency, located within Barbican [Arts] Centre, London.

Seating: Capacity 1156; 1166; 1162 'Central single block of aisle-less seats with doors for each row. Three shallow balconies facing stage and steeply raked at sides'.<sup>10</sup>

Shape/Style: Open stage; furthest seat 21m.<sup>11</sup>

Size: 'Performing area 15m x 15m – pros opening up to 15m x 9m – wing widths 10m SR, 10m SL, 6m US – stage raked, 1 in 15 (removable)'; 'Proscenium width / 21.59m Depth of stage / 15m Width of stage / 38.2m (at front)'.<sup>12</sup>

Technical: Safety curtain. No Orchestra pit.

<sup>1</sup> Turner, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> Sheena Barbour, (ed.), *British Performing Arts Yearbook 1998/99*, 11<sup>th</sup> edn., (London: Rhinegold, 1997), p. 227; McGillivray, p. 210; Turner, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup> Barbour, p. 227.

<sup>4</sup> Barbour, p. 228.

<sup>5</sup> Mulryne and Shewring, *Making Space*, p. 178.

<sup>6</sup> Barbour, p. 228, McGillivray, p. 210, Turner, p. 184, quotation from *Making Space*, p. 178.

<sup>7</sup> Barbour, p. 228; *Making Space*, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Barbour, p. 228; *Making Space*, p. 178.

<sup>9</sup> Barbour, p. 228.



### Birmingham Repertory Theatre

Jonsonian productions: *The Alchemist* in 1996 and *Volpone* in 1993.

Opened: 1970.

Status: Producing theatre, also contains studio space, Birmingham city centre.

Seating: Capacity 900 [McGillivray], 834-99 (flexible stage) [Turner].<sup>13</sup>

### Cambridge Arts Theatre

Jonsonian productions: *The Alchemist* in 1988.

Opened: 1936.

Status: National touring house, Cambridge city centre.

Seating: Capacity 671, raked; 650.<sup>14</sup>

Shape/Style: Proscenium arch.

Size: 'Performing area 10.2m x 11m – pros opening 7.7m x 5.06m – wing widths 2.5m SR, 1.5m SL. No rake'.<sup>15</sup>

Technical: Safety curtain, 'Orchestra pit, accommodates 30'.<sup>16</sup>

### Lyric, Hammersmith

Jonsonian productions: *The Alchemist* in 1985 and the London transfer of the ESC's touring *Volpone* in 1990.

Opened: 1888.

Status: Producing theatre, 'extensively rebuilt' 1895, 'demolished' 1972, interior 'preserved and incorporated in a modern shopping precinct in 1978'; 'One of the best restored theatres in London (re-opened in 1979)', Hammersmith, London.<sup>17</sup>

Seating: Capacity 537.

Shape/Style: Proscenium arch.

Size: 'Performing area 8.3m x 9.5m – pros opening 8.2m x 6m – wing widths 1.5m SR, 5m SL. No rake [. . .] Forestage 2m x 9m'.<sup>18</sup>

Technical: Safety curtain, 'Hydraulic trap lift, CS, 2.5m from DS edge [. . .] Orchestra pit as forestage, accommodates 8'.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Barbour, p. 230; McGillivray, p. 211; Turner, p. 121; Mulryne and Shewring also suggest 1162, quotation from *Making Space*, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Making Space*, p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Barbour, p. 230; *Making Space*, p. 122.

<sup>13</sup> McGillivray, p. 230. Turner, p. 106.

<sup>14</sup> Barbour, p. 322; Turner, p. 194.

<sup>15</sup> Barbour, p. 322.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Barbour, p.246; Turner, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> Barbour, p. 246.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Lyttelton

Jonsonian productions: *The Devil is an Ass* in 1977.

Opened: 1976.

Status: Producing venue, listed Grade II, within Royal National Theatre complex, South Bank, London.

Seating: Capacity 891; 890, raked.<sup>20</sup>

Shape/Style: Proscenium arch.

Size: 'Performing area 24.5m x 15.7m – pros opening 13.6m to 10.4m x 5m to 9m. Stage can be raked from 0 to 1 in 8'.<sup>21</sup>

Technical: Safety curtain, 'Orchestra pit 13.6m x 16m'.<sup>22</sup>

Manchester Royal Exchange

Jonsonian productions: *The Alchemist* in 1987.

Opened: 1976 [Barbour].

Status: Producing theatre, 'largest theatre-in-the-round in the country', auditorium is built within the Great Hall of 'Manchester's former Cotton Exchange (present building dates from 1921)'. Re-opened in 1998 after extensive bomb damage.<sup>23</sup>

Seating: Capacity 740; 730, raked, on 3 levels.<sup>24</sup>

Shape/Style: In the round.

Size: 'Performing area 8.5 diameter. No rake [. . .] Height to underside of trusses 7.6m'.<sup>25</sup>

Materials: Steel and glass auditorium – 'futuristic'.<sup>26</sup>

Technical: 7 entrances to stage.

Mermaid

Jonsonian productions: the London transfer of *Every Man in His Humour* in 1987.

Opened: 1958, refurbished 1978-81 [Barbour], 1959 [Turner].<sup>27</sup>

Status: 'Converted blitzed warehouse', now theatre and conference centre, fronts River Thames, Puddle Dock, London.

Seating: Capacity 610, raked.<sup>28</sup>

Shape/Style: Thrust.

Size: 'Performing area 14.6m x 11.3m – wing widths 13m US. No rake.'

Technical: 'Trap and revolve, 6.1m diameter, downstage'.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Barbour, p. 252, McGillivray, p. 219; Turner, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Barbour, p. 252.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Barbour, p. 394.

<sup>24</sup> Barbour, p. 394; McGillivray, p. 258; Turner, p. 120.

<sup>25</sup> Barbour, p. 394.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Barbour, p. 247, Turner, p. 188.

<sup>28</sup> Barbour, p. 247, McGillivray, p.220.

<sup>29</sup> Barbour, p. 247.



## Nottingham Playhouse

Jonsonian productions: *The Alchemist* in 1978.

Opened: 1963 [Barbour].

Status: Producing theatre, 'A regional theatre with an international reputation', city centre, Nottingham.<sup>30</sup>

Seating: Capacity 766, reducing to 685.<sup>31</sup>

Shape/Size: Proscenium arch with 2 forestages.

Size: 'Performing area 12.3m x 9m – pros opening 9.75m x 6.71m – wing widths 10.5m SR, 5.50m SL, 6m US. No rake', 'Forestage 3.96m, 2 entrances'.

Technical: Safety curtain, 'Orchestra pit 3.96m x 10.67m, accommodates 45'.<sup>32</sup>

## Olivier

Jonsonian productions: *Bartholomew Fair* in 1988, *Volpone* in 1995, London transfer of *The Alchemist* in 1996.

Opened: 1976.

Status: Producing theatre, listed Grade II, within Royal National Theatre complex, South Bank, London.

Seating: Capacity 1169 [Barbour, McGillivray], 1160 [Turner], raked, circle and stalls. Stalls have raised side seating.<sup>33</sup>

Two seat-types: stalls front three rows have no arm rests, less seat space and are positioned nearer to the floor; all other seats have arm rests and larger, more cushioned seats. The front rows have been designed, in Brian Beardsmore's words, to 'provide a "ripple" of response for the actors instead of the more usual somnolent atmosphere of the expensive front rows'.<sup>34</sup>

Shape/Style: Seating within 'a 90° arc', furthest seat 21m from stage, according to Mulryne and Shewring. Beardsmore thinks it a 'bowl-like configuration which embraces the stage and focuses the attention of the audience'. Tim Goodwin calls the Olivier a 'fan-shaped auditorium,| carefully designed to match an actor's effective span of vision, so that the whole audience can be held within the compass of his eyes'.<sup>35</sup>

Size: 'Performing area 18m x 19m – pros opening 17.5m x 8.7m – wing widths 5m SR, 5m SL, 3 areas US, each 9m x 10m. No rake'.<sup>36</sup>

Materials: Concrete walls, brown carpet, lilac seats.

Technical: 'no orchestra pit';<sup>37</sup> 'drum revolve, diameter 11.5m', 'large fly-tower'.

Beardsmore:

The back of the stage can be opened up or closed off to suit the scale of various productions. The front edge of the stage can be varied in shape [. . .] Behind the stage [. . .] are scene assembly spaces from which scenery can be moved on motorized wagons.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Barbour, p. 412.

<sup>31</sup> Barbour, p. 413, Turner, p. 117, only McGillivray gives '766', p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> Barbour, p. 413.

<sup>33</sup> Barbour, p. 252, McGillivray, p. 220, Turner, p. 116.

<sup>34</sup> Beardsmore, p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> *Making Space*, p. 120; Beardsmore, p. 36; Goodwin, pp. 97-8.

<sup>36</sup> Barbour, p. 252.

<sup>37</sup> *Making Space*, p. 120.

Pit

Jonsonian productions: the London transfers of *The Devil is an Ass* in 1996, *Volpone* in 1984 and *Volpone* in 1999.

Opened: 1982.

Status: Producing theatre, RSC residency, located within Barbican [Arts] Centre, London.

Seating: Capacity 200 [Barbour, Turner], 230 [McGillivray].<sup>39</sup>

Shape/Style: Open stage.

Size: 'Performing area 8m x 10m (7.5m with 4<sup>th</sup> side auditorium) – offstage areas limited. No rake [. . .] crossover to SR at rear normally created by scenery or masking'.<sup>40</sup>

Technical: No safety curtain, no trap.

Round House

Jonsonian productions: *Bartholomew Fair* in 1978.

Status: Venue located in Chalk Farm Road, London.

Seating: Capacity 1450 seated; 2100 standing.<sup>41</sup>

Sheffield Crucible Studio

Jonsonian productions: *The Alchemist* in 1983.

Opened: 1971.

Status: Producing theatre, off Crucible main stage area, central Sheffield next to Lyceum Theatre.

Seating: Capacity 400, in the round, blocks on 3 levels [Barbour], 200 'flexible' [McGillivray], 150-200 [Turner].<sup>42</sup>

Shape/Style: Arena.

Size: 'Performing area 5.5m x 5.5m. No rake'.<sup>43</sup>

Technical: No trap, no crossover.

Swan

Jonsonian productions: *The Alchemist* in 1991, *Bartholomew Fair* in 1997, *The Devil is an Ass* in 1995, *The Silent Woman or Epicoene* in 1989, *Every Man in His Humour*

<sup>38</sup> Beardsmore, p. 36.

<sup>39</sup> Barbour, p. 230, Turner, p. 121, McGillivray, p. 210.

<sup>40</sup> Barbour, p. 230.

<sup>41</sup> Spencer Block, (ed.), *The Original British Theatre Directory 2000* (London: Richmond House, 2000), pp. 68-9.

<sup>42</sup> Barbour, p. 440, McGillivray, p. 270, Turner, p. 108.

<sup>43</sup> Barbour, p. 440.



in 1986, *The New Inn* in 1987 and *Volpone* in 1999.

Opened: 1986.

Status: Producing theatre, 'built inside shell of original Shakespeare Memorial Theatre', ('destroyed by fire in 1926'), 1 of 3 RSC venues at Stratford-upon-Avon.

Seating: Capacity 464, 2 galleries and ground level [Barbour], 468 [McGillivray], 400 [Turner], limited standing room.<sup>44</sup>

Shape/Style: 'Jacobean style playhouse – thrust stage, galleries on 3 sides'.

Size: 'Performing area 5.8m x 13.09m – pros opening 7.04m x 5.24m. No rake'.<sup>45</sup>

Technical: 'back wall used as cyclorama [. . .] Lift, centre stage, 2 entrances DS'.<sup>46</sup>

### The Other Place

Jonsonian productions: *The Alchemist* in 1977 and *Volpone* in 1983.

Opened: 1974, replaced by brick-built studio of same name in 1991.

Status: Producing theatre, 1 of 3 RSC venues at Stratford-upon-Avon.

Seating: Capacity 160 'at the most' (original building), newer brick-built version seats '240, or up to 270 if all four sides were used'.<sup>47</sup>

Shape/Style: Studio.

Size: No figures available for the old TOP. Pringle states the dimensions of the performing area of the current building as '9 metres by 13 metres' which is 'slightly larger than that of the first studio'.<sup>48</sup>

Technical: No trap or flying facilities in the original TOP.

### Young Vic

Jonsonian productions: *Bartholomew Fair* in 1978 and the London transfer of *Bartholomew Fair* in 1999.

Opened: 1970, 'Originally part of the National Theatre', [Barbour], 'broke away from the National in 1974' [Turner], also contains studio theatre.

Status: Producing theatre, London SE1.

Seating: Capacity 484 in the round, 398 thrust, both raked [Barbour], 930 [McGillivray], 500 in the round, 430 thrust [Turner].<sup>49</sup>

Size: 'Performing area 9m x 9.72m. No rake'.<sup>50</sup>

Technical: No safety curtain, back wall used as cyclorama.

<sup>44</sup> Barbour, p. 457, McGillivray, p. 274, Turner, p. 121.

<sup>45</sup> Barbour, p. 457.

<sup>46</sup> Barbour, p. 458.

<sup>47</sup> Marian J. Pringle, *The Theatres of Stratford-upon-Avon 1875-1992* (Stratford-upon-Avon: Stratford-upon-Avon Society, 1994), p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Barbour, p. 263, McGillivray, p. 224, Turner, p. 152.

<sup>50</sup> Barbour, p. 263.

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**‘A little easy and modern for the times’:  
A Documentary of Productions of Ben Jonson’s Plays by Major  
Professional Theatre Companies in England,  
1977-2000**

**Two Volumes: Volume Two**

**by**

**Amanda Jane Penlington**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy in Renaissance Studies**

**University of Warwick, Centre for the Study of the Renaissance**

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# **PART II**

## PROCESS OF DOCUMENTATION

### DEFENCE OF THE CHOSEN METHODOLOGY

In aiming to document the productions available the following methods were undertaken. I used theatre programmes and editions of the plays to obtain an outline of the stage history of the plays. A list of productions was compiled using each annual index of the journal *Theatre Record* and *London Theatre Record*, the journal's predecessor that focused only on performances in the capital. The journal, in its earliest form, dates only from the early 1980s and, therefore, the indexed information only covers the period 1983 to the present. I also consulted the indexes available at the RSC, NT and Theatre Museum archives for lists of productions from the 1970s onwards.

To ensure that no productions had been omitted from the list I made a series of phone calls to regional producing theatres and touring companies and asked them to check their archives for productions of any plays by Ben Jonson. For those that found productions I asked them to provide copies of any available information; I especially requested programmes, reviews and photographs. Manchester Royal Exchange, Sheffield Crucible and Method&Madness (formerly Cambridge Theatre Company) provided helpful responses despite limited archival resources, which are otherwise not accessible to researchers.

The validity of the information on the production list was confirmed by consulting relevant editions of *Theatre Record*, *Plays and Players* and available theatre and journal yearbooks, for example, *The Royal Shakespeare Company 1984/85 – a complete record of the year's work* and *The 1993 Plays and Players*



*Theatre Yearbook*. Sources like these also provided initial leads on the productions in terms of photographic information and (heavily edited) reviewers' comments.<sup>1</sup>

More detailed information was sought at various performance archives. The minimum information I required for each production was a programme or a list of production details and copies of critics' reviews. Photographs of productions were also sought but not always available. Detailed documents relating to productions by the RSC and the NT were available at their own archives. These resources include more extensive photographic information, sometimes with full contact sheets of the production and/or setting changes included; prompt books, detailing blocking and textual changes; occasionally, musical scores and video performances are available. The individual resources consulted are detailed in the production details of specific performances in the chapters on individual plays.

Information about productions by the RSC was easily accessed through the performance archives of the company kept at the Shakespeare Centre Library, part of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, in Stratford-upon-Avon. Appointments do not need to be made to access documents at this library. However, appointments to view production videos do need to be made in advance. Researchers may apply for a reader's ticket, validated annually. The Theatre Museum's and the NT's own archives in London may be consulted by appointment although no reader's ticket is required at either library. The RSC, NT and Theatre Museum archives allow photocopying of some materials for personal use. Videos are available for reference within the archives only and photographs may be obtained from the photographers and not the archives.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Trussler, (ed.), *The Royal Shakespeare Company 1984/5 – a complete record of the year's work* (Stratford upon Avon: RSC Publications, 1985), other annual editions are available in this series; Gwyn Morgan, (ed.), *The 1993 Plays and Players Theatre Yearbook* (London: Multimedia, 1992); see also David Lemmon, *The Benson & Hedges British Theatre Yearbook 1992* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1992).

Archival resources for productions in the capital, other than those by the RSC and, NT were accessed through the Theatre Museum, Covent Garden. This resource holds reviews and programmes for all London theatre productions but no visual information, excluding the newspaper photographs that sometimes accompany reviews. The Theatre Museum does hold some performance videos but no productions of Jonson's plays to date. Materials at the Theatre Museum were consulted and copied for personal use.

The archival resources used are listed within the production details of performances in Part Two of the thesis.

Monographs were consulted for further evidence of the performances. These included monographs on specific theatres and companies as well as those concerned with theatre design. Editions of the texts also provided some staging information.

In order to gain insight into the productions' working methods I aimed to trace and interview the practitioners involved in each production. These interviews were useful in uncovering previously inaccessible information and, in addition, confirming the details already available. I aimed to consult the directors of all the productions discussed. I sought to contact the designers, composers and major actors of each production. These aims were not fully fulfilled, as it was not always possible to contact the individuals concerned. Those who were traceable (through theatre companies and details given by other interviewees) were not all willing to be consulted. Some directors, like Sam Mendes and Trevor Nunn, were unable to take part because of work commitments and/or because the productions occurred many years ago. Nevertheless, they acknowledged their interest in the research. Other directors were willing to take part and assisted the thesis with factual information (for



example, casting details) as well as personal insights into the productions, namely, Michael Boyd, John Caird, Griff Rhys Jones, Matthew Warchus.

Due to the nature and quantity of the work done by designers and composers it has been more difficult to contact these practitioners. Designers proved difficult to consult, with only Richard Hudson able to contribute. Nevertheless, when composers were contacted for this research (via theatre companies) with reference to the most recent and/or current productions a full success rate was achieved with Simon Bass, Matthew Scott and Gary Yershon.

The practitioner interviews were fully transcribed and the most relevant comments were isolated for inclusion as quotations at relevant points. Full copies of each interview were to be included as an Appendix but the space available prevented this. Many of the interviews contained anecdotal and vague recollections, which were too indistinct to be of particular application. Archival prompt books and videos were viewed to gain access to the text as performed in each production. Videos also provided helpful access to the sonic value of the commissioned music as performed.

Photographs are included at appropriate moments within the performance subdivisions to facilitate greater discussion of their content within the thesis. The photographs used were electronically scanned into the document from original prints, postcards, programmes and monographs.

Although located at the end of Part One, the Afterword should be read as following the chapters on the plays given in Part Two. This closing chapter was written to draw together the previous material in a discussion of the four major performance issues considered throughout the thesis. The conclusion was written after the completion of Parts One and Two in order to reflect the potential of the research undertaken for future readers.

The Bibliography was compiled throughout the research period on the thesis and entries reflect all the sources used; they are not necessarily indicators of directly related secondary reading on the topics discussed. The Bibliography is intended to reveal the reading that aided this thesis by providing a wider context of theory and performance.



## PARTICULAR USEFULNESS OF EPHEMERA DOCUMENTED

The thesis draws heavily on theatrical ephemera, that is, newspaper reviews, theatre programmes, prompt books, production photographs and extracts of conversations with practitioners. The only pieces of evidence used which cannot be labelled as ephemera are the monographs and the archival videos as both of these items are intended for posterity and designed to be consulted more than once.

Newspaper reviews are written as an immediate response to a production.

Reviews are rapidly prepared for publication after a single viewing of a show, usually on a pre-arranged 'press night'. This situation almost ensures that all reviewers have witnessed exactly the same performance and, therefore, their comments can profitably be compared and contrasted for discrepancies and differing opinions. The reviewers are primary witnesses of the same event and their individual pieces of evidence are valuable as they are all considered and written in the same way. Because they are quickly written – some have been dictated down telephone lines to copy writers, sent via fax machines and, more recently, despatched to head office via email – reviewers are forced to make immediate conclusions about a performance. Theatre critics have to consider the performance as the evidence is before them and they must reach a swift judgement. Some critics remember past productions of the same play and can make helpful connections between productions and provide new clues to otherwise forgotten performances. Theatre reviews can influence audience figures for and responses to a run, long after the reviews were written. Their effect on a production should not be dismissed lightly as companies may alter a production according to a reviewer's comments.

Theatre Programmes give casting and stage crew information and can provide a lead on past productions. They often provide biographical details on the company

and, therefore, can suggest an actor's prestige when given a certain role at that stage in his/her career and give information as to other roles played simultaneously within a repertory system. They can provide photographic information of a production. Essays on the play or playwright within a programme can suggest the considered theatrical value of the place of a particular play on the stage. Theatre programmes, therefore, relate to an audience's expectations of a production. They are part of the process of how each production is received.

Prompt books exist originally as cue-scripts for the Deputy Stage Manager to call during performances. It is only after a run has been completed that researchers may consult them to discover blocking and editorial decisions.

Production photographs are a rare source of visual information about a production. They can document costumes, wigs, make-up, settings and blocking all within one frame. Each frame can reveal a particular moment of a production in action, therefore capturing in a still image an otherwise ephemeral (and moving) moment. Photographs can also suggest the focus of a production if a series of them concentrate on one particular actor or use a certain series of shots. For example, some production photographs concentrate on close-ups of star performers and consequentially reflect the attraction of the production as focusing on the particular actor, rather than the design or the production as a whole. Production photographs (unless taken for archival purposes) are originally purposed to solicit audiences: they are generated to the potential audience through publicity material. Therefore, they reflect the intended appeal of that production. The theatrical historian can thereby understand the focus of a production using this information.

The conversations with theatre practitioners, like the performances discussed, occurred only within a certain place and time. They were recorded for research



purposes but the discussions themselves provided practitioners' attitudes to the productions at a particular time. Without recording, the views and information provided by the practitioners would be an inaccessible source. Interviews provide a voice for the working methods of a production. The conversations are especially pertinent if the interviewee is still working on a current production. Nevertheless, conversations conducted with practitioners after a production has finished are still useful as the interviewee can often view their contribution more objectively and can provide information about the changes, which occurred during the run.

Whilst the relevance of such ephemera is short-lived – they are perhaps most relevant whilst productions are still running – they can still provide important information to the theatrical historian. The category of 'ephemera' is an ironic indicator of the importance of this type of evidence: it is transient and if no one documents it then it may become lost or devalued as a source of information. Therefore, it is important to investigate the ephemera that exists. The short-lived currency of such information allows it to capture the ideas behind a particular moment in time. A piece of ephemera can suggest the theatrical and political associations of the Jonsonian text in performance at that particular time. Ephemera may open up studies into performance in this way and provide new leads into past productions.

## LIMITATIONS OF THIS EPHEMERA FOR THEATRICAL HISTORIANS

Studying ephemera has limitations as well as uses for the theatrical historian.

The rapid writing process of reviews can mean that reviewers make mistakes, especially if the account is dictated. The technological advances in writing and publishing quickly have an effect on the quality of the review. If sent via email or through a fax machine or dictated through a telephone the written review never exists for the reviewer: it disappears from the reviewer's mind through his/her voice or fingers almost immediately. Once the newspaper receives the review the job of the reviewer has been completed. Newspaper reporting is the ultimate in disposable writing. Apart from on the day of sale the review within the newspaper has no commercial life. It is relevant for one day and must then be consulted through archives. Reviews written for newspapers are not intended for posterity – standards of proof and copy reading, and especially the use of language, vary between a newspaper and a monograph. Standards also differ between newspapers: broadsheets and tabloids are written for different audiences; similarly, local and national papers have differing methods of review writing. Reviews can be edited according to the available space for publication and regional variations within national newspapers can occur.

The nature of reviewing a three-hour production in one viewing within 400 words can force reviewers to generalize. They can also spend many words giving the plot (especially if the play is unfamiliar) or they may be ignorant of the text before viewing the performance. If a text is unknown to the reviewer the production's peculiar treatment of the play may go unnoticed. Certain production elements may be judged according to the pre-conceived ideas of the reviewer if a certain element was particularly admired or disliked in previous work. These could include the play, the playwright, the company, the theatre, the actors, the director, the designer and the



composer. If previous productions of the same play are mentioned reviewers can make unhelpful associations, for example, 'x was a better Mosca than y', without substantiating the comment. The press night performance is an artificial atmosphere as the actors and audience are aware of the peculiar occasion. The audience is made up of a number of official reviewers in addition to the theatre-goers and a performance can be played to gain a particular response, perhaps in a way that it was never performed again. Companies can also reserve seats for supporters, usually other actors and directors, to influence the reviewers' decisions. A hospitality suite can also influence reviewers' decisions by presenting an evening's entertainment that the public would never normally experience.

Programmes are sometimes no more than simple cast and crew lists accompanied by advertising space. As such they tell the theatre historian little about a certain production. The photographs that are included by some companies may be taken in rehearsal clothes and in a rehearsal room, rather than in a performance and can offer limited production information. The essays that some programmes include often have little impact on a production and are used to fill space. These essays are either existing ones and are taken from introductions to plays or critical collections or they are commissioned. Commissioned essays should also be carefully judged for their relevance to a production as they are written away from the rehearsal room, usually by a scholar or theatrical historian.

Prompt books have no standardized format. Therefore, the theatre historian is dependent upon the DSM's decisions whether or not to accurately record blocking, props, sets and textual alterations. Prompt books vary in their quality and usefulness and even an aspect as basic as the ease of reading the DSM's handwriting can alter the value of the prompt book as a source of evidence. Because the DSM intends the

prompt book for its original use – as a cue-script to be read by them – the necessity of clear documentation is often ignored in favour of self-invented shorthand.

Photographs do not always reflect production information. They can be taken on arranged photo shoots (sometimes away from the performance's location) which do not refer to actual performance conditions. Productions can also change after the photographs have been taken. In this sense the costumes, wigs, make up, settings and blocking are not necessarily to be trusted as elements of the final production. The posed photographs of star performers (or even whole companies) do not give access to performance conditions. Unless a video is available there is no existing evidence to support or refute the information given in photographs.

Conversations with practitioners can be affected by bias from both participants. Practitioners may be secretive of their working methods and, therefore, only provide vague information. They may also be inaccurate or fail to remember information (especially if discussing a past production). Interviewees may also use a different vocabulary to the interviewer and create some confusion. For example, the practitioner may refer to a character as if s/he was a real person whilst this idea may be alien to the researcher. Interviewees are usually, although not always, biased in favour of the production they have worked on. Conversations with practitioners quoted in newspaper reviews present only selective elements of interviews undertaken. Therefore, they are unreliable in their focus and selectivity.

The limitations of ephemera suggest that all evidence should be used in conjunction. In addition, as much evidence as possible should be gathered in order to establish as full an account of a performance as possible.



***THE ALCHEMIST IN PERFORMANCE*****PRODUCTION DETAILS*****THE ALCHEMIST: RSC, TOP AND ALDWYCH***

Edited by Peter Barnes

Subtle	John Woodvine
Face	Ian McKellen
Dol Common	Susan Dury
Dapper	Alan Cody
Abel Drugger	Nickolas Grace
Sir Epicure Mammon	Paul Brooke
Surly	Mike Gwilym (TOP)/ Richard Durden (Aldwych)
Tribulation Wholesome	Jacob Witkin
Ananias	Roger Rees
Kastril	Hilton McRae
Dame Pliant	Bobbie Brown
Lovewit	Ivan Beavis
Neighbour, Officer, Parson	John Bown (TOP)
First Neighbour	Leon Tanner (Aldwych)
Neighbours: Denyse Alexander, Kim Begley, Ruby	Head, Ruby Wax (Aldwych)
A Parson	Paul Wagar (Aldwych)
An Officer	Leon Tanner (Aldwych)
Director	Trevor Nunn
Designer	Chris Dyer
Lighting	Leo Leibovici
Assistant Director	Bill Alexander
Sound	Roland Morrow
First performance: TOP, 23 May 1977, Aldwych, 29 November 1977.	

**Archive resources for this production**

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews  
 Production photographs and contact sheets  
 Prompt book  
 Stage Manager's reports  
 Theatre programme

*THE ALCHEMIST*: NOTTINGHAM PLAYHOUSE

Subtle	Ken Campbell
Face	Nicholas le Prevost
Dol Common	Anita Dobson
Dapper	Jack Galloway
Sir Epicure Mammon	Arthur Kohn
Surly	Bill Stewart
Director	Richard Eyre
Designer	Pamela Howard
First performance: ?January 1978.	

Archive resources for this production

None currently available



**THE ALCHEMIST: SHEFFIELD CRUCIBLE STUDIO**

Subtle	Sean Scanlan
Face	Hilton McRae
Dol Common	Mary Jo Randle
Dapper	Richard McCabe
Drugger	Matthew Scurfield
Ananias	Jenny Farnon
Tribulation Wholesome	Niven Boyd
Sir Epicure Mammon	Jack Elliott
Surly	Andrew Wilde
Kastril	Colum Convey
Dame Pliant	Jenny Farnon
Lovewit	Niven Boyd
First Neighbour	Matthew Scurfield
Second Neighbour	Mary Jo Randle
Constable	Richard McCabe
Director	Laurence Boswell
Set Designer	Louise Belson
Costume Designer	Perry Hall
Lighting	Geoff Mersereau
Sound	John Greenough
First performance: 8 December 1983.	

**Archive resources for this production**

The Sheffield Crucible archive, not accessible to readers, contains the following material.

1 Newspaper review  
 Production photographs and contact sheets  
 Theatre programme

*THE ALCHEMIST: LYRIC, HAMMERSMITH*

Subtle	Stephen Moore
Face	Gavin Richards
Dol Common	Sylvestra le Touzel
Dapper	Daniel Peacock
Drugger	Paul Bown
Lovewit	Terence Longdon
Sir Epicure Mammon	Griff Rhys Jones
Surly	James Faulkner
Tribulation Wholesome	Raymond Mason
Ananias	John Sessions
Kastril	Perry Benson
Dame Pliant	Hetta Charnley
Neighbours and Officers: Bobby Bernard, David Clemes, Paul Haley, Katie Spencer, Michael Ward-Allen	

Director	Griff Rhys Jones
Set Designer	Roger Glossop
Costume Designer	Elaine Garrard
Lighting	Dave Horn
Sound	Paul Highfield
First performance: 5 September 1985.	

Archive resources for this production

The Theatre Museum archive, London contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews  
Theatre programme



*THE ALCHEMIST: ROYAL EXCHANGE, MANCHESTER*

Subtle	Michael Feast
Face	Jonathan Hackett
Dol Common	Alyson Spiro
Abel Drugger	Ian Hastings
Sir Epicure Mammon	Nick Stringer
Surly	Rory Edwards
Tribulation Wholesome	Roy Sampson
Ananias	Matthew Zajac
Kastril	Louis Hilyer

Director	Gregory Hersov
Costume Designer	David Short
Set Designer	Laurie Dennett
Lighting	Michael Calf

First performance: 19 February 1987.

Archive resources for this production

None currently available.

*THE ALCHEMIST*: CAMBRIDGE THEATRE COMPANY, UK TOUR

Subtle	Stephen Boxer
Face	Philip Whitchurch
Dol Common	Laura Davenport
Dapper	James Durrell
Drugger	Bill Murdoch
Lovewit	Alec Linstead
Sir Epicure Mammon	John Levitt
Surly	Toby Salaman
Tribulation Wholesome	Richard Henry
Ananias	Alistair Cording
Kastril	Paul Samson
Dame Pliant	Louise Beattie

Director	Michael Boyd
Designer	Peter Ling
Lighting	Gerry Jenkinson

First performance: Richmond Theatre, 8 February 1988.

Archive resources for this production

The Method&Madness archive, not accessible to readers, contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews

*THE ALCHEMIST: RSC, SWAN AND BARBICAN*

Face	Jonathan Hyde
Subtle	David Bradley
Dol Common	Joanne Pearce
Dapper	Christopher Luscombe
Drugger	Albie Woodington
Sir Epicure Mammon	Philip Voss
Surly	Barry Lynch (Swan)/ Richard Bonneville (Barbican)
Ananias	Guy Henry
Tribulation Wholesome	Bill Wallis (Swan)/ Robert Langdon Lloyd (Barbican)
Kastril	Richard Bonneville (Swan)/ Alexis Daniel (Barbican)
Dame Pliant	Jane Gurnett
Lovewit	Bernard Gallagher
A Parson	Alan Partington
A Constable	Adrian Hardwicke (Swan)/ Andrew McDonald (Barbican)
Neighbours: Alexis Daniel (Swan), Tim Hudson (Swan), Adrian Hardwicke (Swan), Richard Clothier (Barbican), Oliver Darley (Barbican), Stephen Webber (Barbican), Joanne Howarth, Andrew McDonald, Alan Partington	
Saxophone/Bass Clarinet	Edward Watson (Swan)/Victor Slaymark (Barbican)
Bassoon/Contrabassoon	Roger Hellyer (Swan)/Chris Jones (Barbican)
Percussion	Nigel Garvey (Swan)/Tony McVey (Barbican)
Keyboards/Cor Anglais	John Woolf (Swan)
Keyboards	Tony Stenson/Richard Brown(Barbican)
Director	Sam Mendes
Designer	Anthony Ward
Lighting	Wayne Dowdeswell (Swan) Rick Fisher (Barbican)
Music	Paddy Cunneen
Sound	Tim Oliver
Assistant Director	Colin Ellwood
First performance: Swan, 21 August 1991, Barbican, 9 April 1992.	

Archive resources for this production

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material.



**Music**

**Newspaper reviews**

**Performance video (Barbican only)**

**Production photographs and contact sheets**

**Prompt book**

**Stage Manager's reports**

**Theatre programme**

***THE ALCHEMIST*: NT AND BIRMINGHAM REP CO-PRODUCTION,  
BIRMINGHAM REP AND OLIVIER**

Place: London                      Time: The Future

Face	Simon Callow
Subtle	Tim Pigott-Smith
Dol Common	Josie Lawrence
Dapper	Adam Smethurst
Drugger	Jamie Newall
Sir Epicure Mammon	Geoffrey Freshwater
Surly	David Phelan
Ananias	Paul Connolly
Tribulation Wholesome	Andrew Jarvis
Kastril	Pal Aron
Dame Pliant	Annie Farr
Lovewit	Paul Webster
Neighbours: Jeff Alexander, Richard Bates, Natasha Little, Fred Ridgeway, Jeremy Spriggs, Tony Turner	

Keyboards	Simon Murray
Horn	Stephen Flower
Guitars/Mandolin	Steven Smith
Double Bass	Mark Blackwell (Rep)/Andrew Platt (NT)

Director	Bill Alexander
Designer	William Dudley
Lighting	Tim Mitchell
Music	Jonathan Goldstein
Fights	Malcolm Ranson
Sound	David Tinson(Rep)/ Colin Pink (NT)

First performance: Birmingham Rep, 6 September 1996,  
Olivier, 9 October 1996.

Archive resources for this production

The NT archive, London contains the following material.

- Lighting file
- Newspaper reviews
- Performance video (Olivier only)
- Production photographs and contact sheets
- Prompt book
- Theatre programme

INTRODUCTION: *THE ALCHEMIST*

*The Alchemist* and *Volpone* have dominated Jonsonian criticism. English theatre practice over the last three decades has reflected their popularity. Of these two, *The Alchemist* is most often presented in the English professional theatre. It is probably Jonson's most perfectly plotted play and – as Coleridge recognised – alongside Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, it is one of the most perfectly plotted of all plays. In it Jonson reaches the pinnacle of his experiments with the 'needful [dramatic] rules' or unities of classical scholarship. The audience are privy to the alchemical scams that fool successive gulls; they are, themselves, willingly duped into accepting the role-playing fictions paraded before them and invited to marvel at the confidence trick of making theatre out of mere time, space and persons. In the minimalist RSC productions of Nunn and Mendes the alchemy could take place on their audiences in the laboratory of a bare room. And this possibility for minimalism within the play's aesthetic has been proved a virtue for the touring demands of small-scale and fringe theatre companies not covered by the limits of this thesis, like Compass Theatre Company's national and international tour of the play in 1989-90.

Between 1977 and 2000 there have been eight new productions of the play by major English companies. However, an examination of these productions reveals that containing Jonson's comedy in a small environment can often be more dramatically effective than grander-scale settings (which may negate one of the play's thematic concerns). Innovation and the creation of fantasies from little means (for a cross-section of society) are the essential alchemy of the play in production and would have been evident in the original 1610 production by the King's Men at their relatively small auditorium, the Blackfriars.



The chief challenges to the play in production today are the alchemical language, the Anabaptists, the art of quarrelling, and the plague, which prevent the setting from being easily transposed.

*THE ALCHEMIST*: RSC, TOP AND ALDWYCH, DIR. TREVOR NUNN, 1977

In 1977 TOP was little more than a tin shed: a temporary space which actually housed productions for over twenty years, until it was replaced by the brick-built auditorium in 1991 which bears the same name. The original existed as the RSC's second auditorium to the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. TOP became the home of the RSC's non-Shakespearean, often experimental work; some of it was by twentieth century playwrights, some by classical playwrights. As such it was the only RSC space available to Nunn in which to stage *The Alchemist*.

Nevertheless, his choice of text for that space was well reasoned. The majority of the play dramatizes the action of one room with other important events happening offstage, indicating a larger unseen life to the drama. The few exterior scenes that take place at the door may be easily staged if the scenic design throughout is minimal. This was the discovery that Nunn's production exposed. John Woodvine who played Subtle recalled the thematic resonance of the setting and its effect on the performance:

These guys actually started with nothing, they'd squatted in an empty house, had no money – this was how they set about getting it. There was the bare minimum of wooden furniture and props. It was changed for each gull and it was a nightmare – the actual physicality of just getting things on and off the set but that was part of the excitement.<sup>1</sup>

The production was also important in establishing the potential theatrical success of the text. Although some reviewers felt that the production at TOP was too small for the play (and Bernard Levin took particular exception to Barnes's textual intervention), most agreed on the effectiveness of the textual editing, the direction, the design for the space and the acting.

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<sup>1</sup> John Woodvine, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 5 July 1996.

Nunn was unavailable for some of the rehearsal period and considered using another director for the whole production. However, a compromise was reached as the actors requested him to remain as the director of the production.

Woodvine recalled what happened:

Trevor had to go off in the middle of rehearsals and had said before we started, "Look I have a commitment, I'll get somebody else to direct". McKellen and myself said "No, we'd rather have you and muddle through". We had a very stimulating first couple of weeks, then we marked time when Trevor wasn't there and then got on with it again.<sup>2</sup>

This haphazard rehearsal situation may explain the production's focus on the personality of the two lead actors, who may have invented comic business when Nunn was absent. Woodvine recalled an idea suggested by Ian McKellen which typified the actorly-focus of the production:

For all the curtain calls we went on wearing the other's costume, a final con on the audience, it was only on the final one we took off the hat or glasses and revealed who we really were, that was fun.<sup>3</sup>

Irving Wardle suggested that Jonson's texts were enjoying 'the kind of revival with which we failed to honour his birthday year'. He praised Peter Barnes's textual editing, 'every situation, joke and word is instantly comprehensible' and Wardle described the setting as a 'trick set by Chris Dyer mined with traps, galleries, stairways, and spy-holes. Part frowsty thieves' kitchen, part theatrical changing-room'. In such a set the focus was diverted to the actors' portrayal of the characters, who, to begin with 'slouch about the premises in grubby deshabelle'. In a decade conscious of women's liberation the character of Dol was a site of increased responsibility in the play; Susan Dury played a 'spitfire' Dol, who 'won hands down' in the opening argument (see PLATE 1). From their 'grubby' start (where a woman could govern) them Face

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<sup>2</sup> Woodvine.



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and Subtle underwent an ‘electrifying’ change when they assumed their first disguises. McKellen as Face became the ‘dashing Captain, brandishing posh vowels and a duellist’s eye patch’, whilst Woodvine’s Subtle was ‘an impressive sage in skullcap and mittens’, then ‘a cloaked authoritarian mage’ for the Anabaptists, and also a ‘loin-clothed Scots flagellant’ for Sir Epicure. Wardle found further exuberant playing in the gulls; Paul Brooke as Mammon had ‘crescendos of sensual fantasy [which] repeatedly threaten to carry him off with a heart attack’. To emphasize the theme of greed amongst the cheaters and the sense of their thriving business Nunn inserted a moment that would later be repeated in Mendes’s 1991 production, as Wardle stated: ‘Periodically, in an atmosphere of tensely suspicious concentration, the gang add up their current winnings’. Another visual conceit, echoed later in Boswell’s 1983 production, as well as Mendes’s, originated in Nunn’s version: ‘at the end, McKellen, as the solo winner, is left grinning balefully at the house, coins trickling through his fingers as the lights fade’.<sup>4</sup>

John Barber’s review was one of the first to place the focus on the actor, in this case McKellen, rather than the character presented, he was ‘a quick change artist of brilliance’. And he gave an indication that the production may have failed in its attitude to Jonson’s language, ‘Stratford gives us most of the excitement but not the poetic exuberance of the play’.<sup>5</sup>

David Ford thought the production ‘another valuable contribution to the current Jonson craze’. His review indicated that the style of acting was broad, rather than Naturalistic, as he appreciated ‘finely drawn caricatures’ by Brooke as Mammon, Nickolas Grace as Drugger and Hilton McRae as Kastril. The

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<sup>3</sup> Woodvine.

defining moments for him were actor-based: Woodvine possessed ‘the smell of inevitable doom’ and McKellen impressed in ‘the final visionary scene of *Face the Miser*’.<sup>6</sup>

Desmond Pratt’s view was in contrast to most, claiming Nunn’s ‘mild treatment [...] is never as nasty as it should be’. This was due to what he thought was an ‘under-rehearsed production’ and an ‘unwise’ choice of venue. Pratt suggested that the play ‘demands a vast space [...] for its people to run breathlessly to unattainable goals and which would make the much manoeuvring about of furniture to suit each new client [...] totally uproarious, while increasing the tensions of deception’. He did not consider that such a space might have actually slowed down the whole momentum of the play, an element later proved by Bill Alexander’s 1996 production for Birmingham Rep and the NT. Once again his view contrasted with the others, this time with regard to character, suggesting Jonson’s characters are grotesque to the point of caricature – ‘every character demands the utmost eccentricity but only three have them fully’: Brooke, Roger Rees as Ananias and McRae. He added that ‘these are true figures of fun’. This suggests that ‘fun’ or the need for humour is allied to inflated and broad playing, whilst a Naturalistic style would perhaps be more ‘real’ but that the humour would be lost. According to the view displayed by Pratt it is not mere coincidence that the Jonsonian idea of ‘humour’ – or one dominating characteristic – and ‘humour’ in its amusing sense are the same word. However, one must be aware of the necessity for variety in a performance that lasts three

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<sup>4</sup> Irving Wardle, ‘*The Alchemist*’ [sic], *The Times*, 25 May 1977.

<sup>5</sup> John Barber, ‘*The Alchemist*’ [sic], *Daily Telegraph*, 25 May 1977.

<sup>6</sup> David Ford, ‘The king’s stunning Face’, *Worcester Evening News*, 24 May 1977.



hours or more. Pratt also missed any full expression of the play as farce; it was ‘too cramped for any foreseeable complete satirical-farcical fulfilment’.<sup>7</sup>

Nunn’s production of *The Alchemist* was successful because, despite Pratt’s ideas, it made a virtue of the limited resources of TOP and promoted the essential theme of the play: to gull a willing audience through illusions created from limited means.

As Woodvine recalled, the transfer to London affected the scale of the production as it transferred from the small TOP to the Aldwych, which usually housed the RSC’s main house productions in London:

We were about to take it to the Warehouse, something happened in the scheduling and we were transferred to the Aldwych. So this thing devised for two hundred was suddenly playing to a thousand. But it was rather fitting because the Aldwych was the famous home of farces in the 1930s, and that’s very much what this production was. It was a set with about ten doors in it, in which people whizzed in and out and that worked very well on the bigger stage with a bigger audience. So it was a bonus that we went into the main house there.<sup>8</sup>

The transfer to the Aldwych enabled more reviewers to indicate the changes that the production had gone through on the way to London. John Barber noted the increased virtuosity of McKellen, he, ‘tears off his bellow-minder’s Balaclava to don the eye-patch, the sword and the off-colour accent of the swaggering captain, [...] now in even greater panic’.<sup>9</sup>

Nunn’s innovation was to expose *The Alchemist* as essentially an actors’, rather than a director’s, play; as Ned Chaillet put it, Nunn, ‘lets the play appear as the actors’ delight it is’. As well as focusing on the transformations of the trio and the setting, Chaillet mentioned the sophisticated acting of the gulls based on

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<sup>7</sup> Desmond Pratt, ‘The Arts: Theatres: Stratford on Avon: The Other Place: Royal Shakespeare Company, “*The Alchemist*” (Ben Jonson, edited by Peter Barnes)’ [sic], *Yorkshire Post*, 25 May 1977.

<sup>8</sup> Woodvine.

<sup>9</sup> John Barber, ‘RSC’s ‘*Alchemist*’ is crackerjack’ [sic], *Daily Telegraph*, 16 December 1977.

truthful variety and not caricature as Pratt had indicated: 'bent and coloured like a nicotine-stained finger', Grace's Druggier was 'repellent and ludicrous, but believable' and Brooke's Mammon was 'both desirable and repulsive'.<sup>10</sup>

Michael Billington shared Pratt's view that at its original venue *The Alchemist* 'looked physically cramped and lacked any sense of escalating panic'. At London Billington thought the new 'sense of danger unlocks the audience's laughter'. However, this frenetic pace was not merely beneficial to the comedy, the 'farical momentum is now allied to human truth'. Unlike Barber who had felt that the disguises were enjoyable because of the actors' virtuosity, Billington thought that the criminal characters had a 'delight in role-playing'. This enjoyment in disguise, which Billington saw as character, (not actor) based, made him view the presentation as realistic. Billington saw Nunn's innovation as 'planting a Jonsonian text in the firm soil of realism' as 'each carries his own key to the double-locked petty cash box' placed under the floorboards. However, the gulls were inflated for comic effect, for example, the Anabaptists 'turn up to collect their coin in a huge cart'. He concluded that 'it makes you long for the RSC to go adventuring into some of Jonson's lesser-known works'.<sup>11</sup>

On the same theme Frank Marcus suggested the RSC had 'an obligation' to produce Jonson's plays. The 'opening' was 'daringly slow' to establish the 'precise relationships'. This also allowed for the greater sense of acceleration noticed by many. Therefore, the audience's perception of the crimes would be invariably comic and amoral: 'as the pace accelerates, we lose sight of the deeper implications and follow breathlessly the frenzied activities'. Like others, he noted the verisimilitude of the dupes, who were 'not fantastically or caricatured': 'they

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<sup>10</sup> Ned Chaillet, 'For anyone who cares about theatre', *The Times*, 15 December 1977.



are pathetic creatures'. He felt that the play has 'been given an unexpected third dimension by attention to detail and the actors' belief in the truthfulness of Jonson's message'. In other words, Marcus read the production as a psychologically truthful slice of Jacobean life.<sup>12</sup>

B. A. Young disagreed with Billington and Pratt about the venue size, the transfer exposed one failure: 'the only loss is the feeling of intimacy [...] where one might almost have been living in Lovewit's house' at TOP (see PLATE 2). This had inherently implicated the audience into the cons perpetrated by the trio. Unlike Barber, Young thought that Brooke spoke Mammon's lines 'with the beauty they deserve', he obviously felt that Barnes's editing had not adversely affected the poetry. Young also pointed to Dol's role-playing of monstrous female stereotypes in his praise for Dury, she, 'transfers herself in a moment from a slut to a crazy intellectual or a Fairy Queen'.<sup>13</sup>

Michael Coveney admitted that 'the true greatness' centred on 'the breathtaking virtuosity' of McKellen and Woodvine.<sup>14</sup>

However, J. C. Trewin suggested that, despite this focus on the personalities and skills of the performers, Nunn attempted documentary realism: 'the first sound, beyond a darkened stage, of the cry, "Bring out your dead!" [...] neatly "places" the comedy' [*sic*] within the world of the plague – a fact that productions can easily lose in the farcical proceedings. Once again, Trewin saw the adoption of personae as convincing character choices, 'we almost believe in the nonsense': Trewin saw the audience as willing to be gulled. This meant that, for Trewin, the trio did not point to their own cleverness at gulling; they

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Billington, 'The Alchemist' [*sic*], *Guardian*, 16 December 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Marcus, 'Ben Jonson con amore' [*sic*], *Sunday Telegraph*, 18 December 1977.

<sup>13</sup> B. A. Young, 'The Alchemist' [*sic*], *Financial Times*, 16 December 1977.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Coveney, 'The Alchemist' [*sic*], *Financial Times*, 28 January 1978.



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concentrated, instead, on presenting their many personae as truthful. This sophisticated way of playing the cheats resists the easier option of playing to a knowing audience in the middle of a disguise. If the disguises are broken down then the gulls cannot be played in any other way than stupid caricatures, making for a simplistic series of repetitive moments. If the disguises are believable the audience shares the joke only when the particular gull has left and the disguise is taken off, making for a more complex enjoyment. However, it is in contrast to most critics' views of these performances as virtuosi. Trewin suggested that McKellen's performance was so well executed that it had a particular effect on his reading of the trio and his own moral judgement: 'we are aware that this "Face" will win in the end, and [...] our hearts are with him when he sits to count his gains'.<sup>15</sup>

Peter Hepple did not see 'Jonson's malevolent scorn', as Jack Tinker had, but thought instead, 'the director wisely steers it along the path of pure comedy'.<sup>16</sup>

Benedict Nightingale thought Nunn 'rejects those loud, lumpish effects so often (and so wrongly) dignified as Jonsonian "humours" in favour of nuance and detail, precision of characterization and a plausible sense of place'. He suggested that critics (like Hepple) have perpetrated a misleading view of the play in production as pure farce. Nunn had rightly shifted the play away from 'a theatrical tradition, which has long tended to see *The Alchemist* as a yeomanly frolic in which Norman Wisdom and Frankie Howerd join forces to outwit an all-star cast led by Kenneth Williams and Kenneth Connor'. Instead the comedy was rooted in truth, this was more satisfying for Nightingale as the comedy was

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<sup>15</sup> J. C. Trewin, 'New Plays: *The Alchemist* (Aldwych)' [sic], 29 December 1977.

believable and lasting: ‘there’s always something greasy and mean about [...] McKellen’s Face, something grim and misanthropic about [...] Woodvine’s Subtle’. For example, it was ‘possible to believe in Mr Woodvine’s last-ditch vindictiveness, his bared and snarling promise to hang himself and return to haunt the primly triumphant McKellen’. He ended by prophetically suggesting that ‘Nunn has not scuttled the comedy. He has deepened it; and production of Ben Jonson will, I suspect, never be quite the same again’.<sup>17</sup>

The *Spectator* critic took exception to the virtuosi focus, calling the performances ‘immensely self-assured’. McKellen was particularly criticized for ‘obviously relishing the opportunity to display his skill as a quick-change artist’ (see PLATE 3). The reviewer added, ‘if I resisted it was because I felt I was being invited to laugh along with McKellen. You may, I didn’t’. And the critic had a point: to see actors smugly revelling in their own skill at comedy is almost a sure-fire way to kill any attempt to build psychological truth in the performance and to stifle humour. In such circumstances the player and not the words or the action is in the foreground – it is distracting and ultimately self-serving.<sup>18</sup>

The validity of Barnes’s version was a subject that Bernard Levin responded to.<sup>19</sup> One year previously he had vehemently criticized Barnes and Stuart Burge for their treatment of *The Devil is an Ass*.<sup>20</sup> That had provoked

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<sup>16</sup> Jack Tinker, ‘Savage...but really funny’ [sic], *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1977; Peter Hepple, ‘*The Alchemist*’ [sic], *Stage*, 22 December 1977.

<sup>17</sup> Benedict Nightingale, ‘Critic’s Castle’, *New Statesman*, 23 December 1977.

<sup>18</sup> Anon., ‘*The Alchemist* (Aldwych)’, *Spectator*, 31 December 1978.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Levin, ‘How to devalue the philosopher’s stone’, *Sunday Times*, 18 December 1978.

<sup>20</sup> Bernard Levin, ‘doctoring Jonson’ [sic], *Sunday Times*, 8 May 1977; see *THE DEVIL IS AN ASS IN PERFORMANCE*.



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responses from Barnes, Nunn and Charles Marowitz, berating Levin's single-minded idea of the sacred nature of the text.<sup>21</sup>

Nunn's production gave Levin another chance to rework this theme; he thought Barnes had done 'the same horrid execution' on *The Alchemist*. He thought Barnes and Nunn 'have apparently convinced each other that Jonson did not know his business'. He foolishly forgot that Jonson's 'business' was writing plays for a theatre almost four hundred years before Nunn's production, reflecting the interests of his own time and location, when theatre was a popular event. Nunn and Barnes's theatre attracted clients interested in an elite pastime that presented classical plays to audiences in the late twentieth-century. Such audiences would (rightly) not be expected to understand all of the language Jonson used and so the decision to edit the play was justified. Levin ignored that this was (and is) the textual practice of most producers of classical plays.<sup>22</sup>

However, his dismay at Barnes and Nunn for assuming that each audience member will have the same knowledge (or lack of knowledge) as them is a useful point. Levin wrote: 'when they are faced with a word or phrase they do not understand [...] [they] replace the offending expression by one which they have [...] on the assumption that their audiences need as much help as they do'.

And producers need to address the point of how far one should go with the text and the validity of textual changes. When asked about textual changes most directors answer that they only cut words that appear 'obscure' but here Levin is right, they assume what is 'obscure' to them must be to everyone.

Although this is their job, the director, cast and/or adapter can make wrongful

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<sup>21</sup> Trevor Nunn, 'Plays in aspic: the way to kill the classical theatre', Stuart Burge, 'Graceless ingratitude to the man who helps the audience', Charles Marowitz, 'I publicly withdraw his invitation to our show', all in 'Lambasting Levin', *Sunday Times*, 15 May 1977.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Levin, 'How to devalue the philosopher's stone', *Sunday Times*, 18 December 1978.

assumptions if there are gaps in their own knowledge. For example, in Alexander's production of *The Alchemist* he changed the word 'seraglio' to 'harem' in Mammon's II.2.33 speech because he had not understood the word, and indeed some of the audience did not either; but the actor, Tim Pigott-Smith, suggested it was 'an indication of deteriorating standards of language in society'.<sup>23</sup>

Levin thought 'Jonson's work is butchered on the altar of Mr Barnes's vanity with the blunt knife of Mr Nunn's misunderstanding of his function'. Levin was wrong in this respect: ultimately, the changes in language are the job of the director, the editor (if there is one), and the actors. However, more thought about the process of editing may be required before merely considering which words to change or cut. In an ironic textual lapse (whether by Levin or not) the picture of McKellen that accompanied Levin's article was labelled: 'Ian McKellen plays Face in Jonson's "Volpone"' [sic].<sup>24</sup>

The *Hampstead and Highgate Express* critic suggested that the dialogue between Levin and the theatre producers did not affect the production for most theatre goers; they thought the text 'may be the subject of much scholarly debate, but for the bulk of the audience they are irrelevant'. This implied that for most theatregoers such concerns are unimportant, and should be considered only by those in authority – either in the press or in the theatre. This negated the power of the audience's views entirely. It also ignored the fact that without such debate the 'bulk of the audience' may not be informed that whenever they watch a classical play in production it has no claim to being authentic nor only written by the named playwright. Despite Levin's often childish tone, shown in him calling

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<sup>23</sup> Tim Pigott-Smith, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 27 September 1996.



Barnes and Nunn 'Bun' instead of their own respective names, and his opinion (which I do not whole-heartedly agree with), any criticism of theatrical practices, like Levin's article, open up a worthwhile debate between producers of theatre and its recipients. The remarks from this critic denied the 'bulk of the audience' a voice in such debates.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bernard Levin, 'How to devalue the philosopher's stone', *Sunday Times*, 18 December 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Anon., *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, [ December 1977 (?)].

*THE ALCHEMIST*: NOTTINGHAM PLAYHOUSE, DIR. RICHARD EYRE,  
1977

Eyre was responsible for reviving two of Jonson's texts at Nottingham around this time: *Bartholomew Fair*, which was a precursor to his 1988 production for the NT, and this production of *The Alchemist*. In John Bailey's, *A Theatre for All Seasons: Nottingham Playhouse, the First Thirty Years, 1948-1978*, *The Alchemist* is only mentioned in his Appendix of productions, with no indication of the production details or the running period of the show. There is certainly a dearth of archive material available for this production from the Playhouse's records; hence the incomplete production details, which have been gleaned from reviewers' comments. Bailey merely lists Eyre's *The Alchemist* amongst seven other plays for the period '1977-8'.<sup>26</sup>

A review by Michael Coveney compared Eyre's production to Nunn's simultaneous RSC production that had transferred to the Aldwych. He suggested that theatre in the Midlands was 'admirably served' by Eyre's production. Ken Campbell played Subtle as 'a confidence trickster rather than an alchemist'. This was *The Alchemist* as an anarchic comic event, typified by Subtle's character being 'ruled more by fun than by avarice'. The effect of this was to place the sometime moral arbiter in the play into interesting relief: 'Surly missed out on the sensual widow because, unlike even the householder Lovewit, he has no time for japes'. As Subtle had been seen as taking enjoyment in the tricks, so Face was revealed to be consciously playing various roles: Nicholas le Prevost, 'makes much of the fact that Jeremy the butler is yet another carefully observed role'. Although the comedy was paramount this had a firm basis in the verse,

with ‘fine and appropriate relish for language displayed throughout’. This exuberance was seen in ‘the gargantuan lasciviousness’ of Arthur Kohn’s Mammon (‘all tongue and thighs’): ‘at one point he achieves the nearest to hilarious on-stage orgasm in my experience [...] as he collapses in an ecstatic heap at a touch of her [Dol’s] pink fan’. Coveney continued to praise this resulting ‘joyous physical response to the text’, picking out two moments: ‘Anita Dobson [as Dol] lifts her skirt so that he [Dapper] may more easily “kiss her departing part”’; and ‘when Mammon leaves, crestfallen and defeated, Subtle and Face are indeed as light as balls, and bound and hit their heads against the roof for joy’. He suggested that the setting was neither Jacobean nor contemporary but a ‘grey Dickensian’ design by Pamela Howard and he described its effect, ‘at curtain up, there is an immediate sense of temporary occupation among the cobwebs, dust-covers and displaced portraits’.<sup>27</sup>

Ken Campbell has spoken of the problems created when the actor and the role can be separated on stage. He talked about why he stopped acting in plays – despite being willing to direct or watch them – ‘I’ve lost the trance that’s required [...] to take on a role would be impossible, really’. Asked whether this is ‘to do with the character rather than inhibiting the world of the play’, he responded about Eyre’s production:

I’ve lost attachment to it. It all looks like a set.  
It happened on the last night of *The Alchemist* [...] suddenly it was like: taken off the list. You can see how the set’s constructed, you can see the audience, you can see what they think. [...]  
What is Nicholas le Prevost doing? Game’s up.

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<sup>26</sup> John Bailey, *A Theatre for All Seasons: Nottingham Playhouse, the First Thirty Years, 1948-1978* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1994), pp. 175-6 for *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 198 for relevant page in the Appendix of productions.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Coveney, ‘*The Alchemist*’ [sic], *Financial Times*, 28 January 1978.



I don't mind filming and I don't mind appearing, I don't mind being in front of an audience. It's not stage fright but **play** fright [*sic*].<sup>28</sup>

When Campbell became a performer aware of himself and his surroundings in *The Alchemist* he could not justify his role in the play. This may be an isolated case of one performer and it could have happened to Campbell at any point in his career: *The Alchemist* was not necessarily crucial in his increased awareness. However, it is interesting to note Campbell's experience when some critics have been aware of the virtuosity of performers in *The Alchemist* (which depends on the separation of the actor and the role). It is interesting to recall the comments about Nunn's *Subtle and Face*, where the parts may have provoked the actors into successful but self-aware and self-satisfied performances. When Campbell was so self aware that he could not inhabit the fiction of the play he felt that his performance was lost; when McKellen was accused of doing the same thing the reviewers thought that his performance excelled. The self-awareness of the trio is a recurring feature of *The Alchemist* in performance.

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<sup>28</sup> Ken Campbell, 'Quotient X', in *Live 2: Not what I am: The Experience of Performing*, ed. by David Tushingham, (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 35-43, p. 38.

*THE ALCHEMIST*: SHEFFIELD CRUCIBLE STUDIO, DIR. LAURENCE BOSWELL, 1983

Sheffield Crucible has some record of this production, preserving the programme and some photographs, but they only have one local review to indicate the reception of the production. Further reviews of the production remain at present untraceable or were not produced at the time of the production. Therefore, reliable evidence of this production is severely limited.

This was Boswell's first professional production of Jonson, although he had won an award for a student production of *Epicoene*.

Tim Brown suggested that Boswell concentrated on 'the play's savage exposure of greed', rather than 'its endless milking of laughs or its pandemonium of slamming doors'. This was *The Alchemist* played as satire, rather than farce, beginning with 'a threateningly sombre first act': 'ten minutes of almost unintelligible physical and verbal violence' with a 'brawl in heavily regional accents'. Despite this unpromising start, Brown suggested that 'it is a risk that pays off'. This was never a highly comic production and the characters were played for detailed grotesque effect, rather than for individual moments of comedy; they were 'portraits always more ugly than funny, but thrust at you with a single-mindedness that forces you to laugh'.<sup>29</sup>

For example, Jack Elliott's Mammon, 'sweat-glistening and ghastly white, is the most dislikeable and most pitiable'. Brown read Hilton McRae's Face as a psychologically complex individual – 'a nervous man with a flickering tongue, a ready dagger and a mind like a steel trap, riding a permanent high as the lies get more outrageous, more exhilarating and more dangerous' (see

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<sup>29</sup> Tim Brown, 'The Alchemist', [*Sheffield ?*] *Morning Telegraph*, 9 December 1983.

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PLATE 4). The effect of the closure of the production echoed that of Nunn's production, where McKellen as Face had interrogated the audience as potential victims, 'when Face is left with his hands on the loot, Mr McRae closes the proceedings with a murderous grin round the audience that causes you to hurry through the night streets on the way home'. Whilst recalling Nunn's production, this was a moment echoed in later productions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Brown.

*THE ALCHEMIST*: LYRIC, HAMMERSMITH, DIR. GRIFF RHYS JONES,  
1985

Whilst Nunn had attempted documentary realism, Eyre had revealed the anarchy of the play and Boswell was most interested in the savage satire, Jones presented *The Alchemist* as a fantasy world, influenced by horror film cliché, farce and pantomime. As Jones has said:

I wanted something of a *Nosferatu* Expressionist feel. We got something late Victorian without being too period. We built a scaffolding pit so that people had to descend via stairs to come down into this pit, which had the two heroes at the bottom waiting for their victims.<sup>31</sup>

He went on to suggest how this setting tied in with the themes of the play:

It was very visually striking and fantastic. We had elaborate pieces of stage machinery. There was a sense of the set just being bare scaffolding. But you didn't understand that until the end when Lovewit pulled up the blinds and let in the light. So there was a sense in which this was an illusion. I felt the play was about illusion done in a cheapskate way, it's about gullibility: the notion that people's dreams are going to be brought down.<sup>32</sup>

His production – the first in London since the RSC transfer – was spectacular where Nunn's had been sparse. He had compiled a company of comedians and classical actors for his professional debut as a director. This inaugural production and his own status as a television comedian gave the production a high profile but probably influenced the critics' readings. They actually commented more on the setting than anything else – perhaps because of the contrast to Nunn's production – but the reviews were generally laudatory.

Jones has spoken of his approach to the text and indicated his rehearsal method of approaching the language with the actors:

We didn't cut very much – it's not an enormously long play. We didn't change the language, I was against that. I was quite interested in it being

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<sup>31</sup> Griff Rhys Jones, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 27 January 1998.

<sup>32</sup> Jones.

prose, rather than a poetic piece. It helps actors to try and get to grips with the corresponding rhythms of slang in our own society, like rhyming slang. I got in trouble for not being RSC-enough about it: it wasn't fruity enough. That was deliberately what I wanted – the language had to be used, swearing and attacking people with the words, rather than merely celebrating the poetry.<sup>33</sup>

Jones's reaction to the critics was strong but grounded in a belief in the play. Unlike Warchus, who regarded *The Devil is an Ass* as a pantomime-style entertainment when he directed it in 1995, Jones was quick to point out this as a misconception:

He never wrote anything that was like a pantomime farce – you often see it done– but it decidedly is not. I was anxious to avoid that but I was interested in the semi-Naturalism in it. The same critics have dominated for so long that the critical orthodoxy is to do with the presentation of plays in a way which is rather shockingly overacted, and especially under the influence of the RSC, [with] a great deal of rather strong posturing.<sup>34</sup>

Irving Wardle described Roger Glossop's set as 'a flimsy stairway leading to two upper levels, full of dark hidey-holes, and looking down on a much-curtained thieves' kitchen crammed with Subtle's tools'. Although this was effective for the conning scenes it had a negative effect on the overall structure of the play: 'You cannot imagine Lovewit living in such a place, and it is not until the last act that a small iron gate is identified as his front door'. However, the set did function comically as 'steam comes hissing out of unexpected vents in the bannisters'. Elaine Garrard's costumes were 'roughly mid-Victorian'. The accompanying score was parodic and the performance began with 'a mock-menacing arrangement of Bach's best-known *toccat*a'. This 'virile and spectacular' production included many *coup de théâtre* moments for visual comic effect: Dol 'sat on' Face and Subtle's heads to subdue them, to reach his sister Kastril climbed 'over heaps of bodies on the stairs', and Epicure 'tries to

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<sup>33</sup> Jones.



disrobe' Dol 'as if wrestling with a recalcitrant sardine can'. However, this physical focus was not accompanied by an energetic attitude to the language. Gavin Richards as Face was criticised for depending 'on action and a repertory of joke voices, rather than on making the language work for him'; and Jones was an 'anachronistically costumed' Mammon – in 'Regency pantaloons' – 'while suppressing the surging excess of the lines'. However, Stephen Moore as Subtle was praised for 'making every word count'.<sup>35</sup>

Michael Ratcliffe admitted the problems of the play in performance, he thought that 'most' companies, 'smother it with gross overacting and noisy direction'. However, in Jones's production he found 'one of the coolest, funniest and most intelligent productions of a Jonson play'. This was because Jonson's 'text can be heard; the players are believable' and 'the comedians can act'. The production's success was due to 'an affinity of interest between Jonson and contemporary comedy'. For example, Richards's Face was 'an anchor of insidiously vicious normality', whilst John Sessions as Ananias was 'neurotic', 'hair flipping from side to side like a spaniel, simpering like Olivia de Havilland when his boss makes a joke'. Ratcliffe thought the setting was 'a gigantic boiler-house cellar cum artist's studio, full of service pipes, two galleries and a steam organ'. This was a fantasy setting for the play 'on to which the cold reckoning of London daylight is only allowed at the very end'.<sup>36</sup>

Michael Billington thought that the set was 'the best thing about the evening', giving a 'loony credibility' to the con tricks. As in other productions, Subtle was read as enjoying the disguises, he 'clearly delights' in 'a chance to don fresh drag: sandy wig and alchemist's gown for the serious customers, full

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<sup>34</sup> Jones.

archiepiscopal robes' for Dapper to meet the Queen of Fairy, who in Sylvestra le Touzel's performance as Dol, 'descends on wires as if in some dilapidated panto'. Billington enjoyed it when Subtle 'emits a surprised astonishment at the continuing success of his imposture [...] to reel back when he realises he has hit the button', suggesting that Subtle may be open to the idea of mysticism; but he found Face 'strangely under-characterized [...] the master of too few disguises'. Billington felt that the gulls were disappointing as they did not have 'a particular life-history' but were a 'set of generalized caricatures', apart from Sessions's Ananias. He felt in a comparison to Nunn's it was 'lacking in farcical delirium'.<sup>37</sup>

John Barber made a distinction between 'vitality' and 'gusto'; whilst the former was 'spring-heeled, many-faceted and joyous', the latter was 'noisy, self-indulgent and bluff'. Jones's production was noted for its 'gusto'. The 'emphasis' was 'on jabber, rough and tumble, terrific explosions and visual effects'. But despite this Jones's credentials as a director were questionable: 'the pace fails to quicken' and the final act was 'awkwardly staged on a gallery'. For him, 'greed is soft-pedalled and denied the rampant vitality at the heart of the play'. Nevertheless, Barber gave a different view of the conmen. Moore, 'shedding all vocal mannerisms, makes a scurvy, dilapidated, panicky' Subtle, 'snapping his cashbox viciously shut' whilst Richards, 'with his barrow-boy mateyness and caddish moustache' made 'the more dangerous villain of the two'; this gave logic to Face's ultimate betrayal.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Irving Wardle, 'The Alchemist' [sic], *The Times*, 10 September 1985.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Ratcliffe, 'The sexual chemistry set', *Observer*, 15 September 1985.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Billington, 'Host in a house of illusions', *Guardian*, 11 September 1985.

<sup>38</sup> John Barber, 'Soft on naked greed', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1985.

Peter Barnes began by stating that ‘the main quality needed in a Jonsonian actor is energy; energy is allied to strict comic discipline. His characters enter at full blast’. However, he felt that the ‘quarrel is so subdued’ but ‘it is almost impossible to understand what is being said. Lines are garbled and snatched at, instead of being relished’. He felt that this had a debilitating effect on audiences, who were ‘totally baffled, guilty at being baffled, and too overawed at watching a “classic” to protest’. The real problem for Barnes was that ‘it is not funny’: ‘not a genuine laugh for over one hour’. He felt that the costumes were ‘no help’ and the set was ‘impressive but overbearing’. But the chief visual problem was the lighting – ‘lethal’ – ‘if you cannot see the actors’ faces, you cannot hear the jokes’.<sup>39</sup>

Jones was cast as Mammon because two actors both pulled out of the part before the opening and he has admitted that he was inappropriate casting and did not have enough time to prepare the role: ‘I don’t think I’m an Epicure Mammon sort of person. I wouldn’t have been my first choice to play the part. I didn’t get to grips with it very much, although, it is fantastic stuff, I mean fantastical’.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, Michael Coveney thought Jones was ‘most original’ as Mammon, delivering ‘his lush encomiums to self-indulgent philanthropy with a dry, barbed vocal tang’. Coveney mentioned the command of Tribulation over Ananias, ‘kept in place [...] with a stabbing umbrella’, and Dol as ‘a reluctant whore with off-duty contempt for the operation’ – a feature to be repeated in Boyd’s version – this time ‘expressed in hunched shoulders and a delightfully dilatory Fairy Queen’.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Barnes, ‘Classic confusions’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 September 1985.

<sup>40</sup> Jones.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Coveney, ‘*The Alchemist/Hammersmith*’ [sic], *Financial Times*, 10 September 1985.



The *Sunday Telegraph* reviewer also noted Dol's lack of interest, 'made up to look wan and hard faced, [she] seems far too intent [...] to have any inclination for high jinks'.<sup>42</sup>

Jones's approach to the material may be glimpsed in two articles that preceded the opening. He suggested that Jonson "shows us a much more earthy, venal society, full of con-men, tricksters and whores, than [...] Shakespeare." Describing *The Alchemist* he went on "it's very surface orientated, all about style [...] In the 1980s we are style conscious". Even at the stage that this article was written he had not been rehearsing Mammon himself – 'Ronald Fraser as an 11<sup>th</sup> hour replacement for Christopher Biggins' was listed. Obviously, the necessity of casting himself came very late. Of his directorial approach he said "I think my approach is probably unusual. I like to work at speed, picking things up on an intuitive level". This was reflected in the eclectic references and styles.<sup>43</sup>

The decision to stage the play was his own, as the *Sunday Telegraph* preview stated: 'The Lyric asked him; Jonson was his idea'. This decision came from the potential popularity of the material and the similitude between Jonson's time and the 1980s: "There's something surreal and wacky about Jonson. And he's dirty of course. He's got a taste for the low life which keeps the whole thing bubbling along. If Shakespeare was the fifties with his ennobling elements, and all that stuff about a new Elizabethan age, Jonson is much more eighties'.<sup>44</sup>

Considering the energy required for his last minute assumption of Mammon, Jones made a valiant effort at reintroducing the play into the repertoire. His task was made harder by being a debut director with a public

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<sup>42</sup> Anon., *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 September 1985.

profile and the first to follow Nunn's extremely successful production in the capital.

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<sup>43</sup> Anon., 'From High Jinks to Low Life', *London Evening Standard*, 23 August 1985.

<sup>44</sup> Anon., 'Jones alone', *Sunday Telegraph*, 18 August 1985.

*THE ALCHEMIST: ROYAL EXCHANGE, MANCHESTER, DIR. GREGORY HERSOV, 1987*

As with the incomplete records of the Nottingham archives for Eyre's production, so the archives of the Royal Exchange hold little material for this production (due to the loss of many holdings in the IRA bomb explosion in the early nineties). Reviews for this production do exist in other sources but, as with the Nottingham production, the cast list remains incomplete. The production details have been gleaned from reviewers' comments.

Where Jones had used impressive spectacle allied to farce, Hersov captured a sinister aspect, which had only been glimpsed in the Gothic horror parody of Jones's version. Whilst Jones presented a fantasy boiler room, Hersov's focus was a cauldron that echoed the Marlovian Hell cauldrons of *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus*.

Nevertheless, according to Eric Shorter, like Jones's production, the 'chief theatrical value' of Hersov's production was 'gusto'. As in Nunn's and Eyre's productions, the central trio was viewed as dedicated to 'the fun they get from fooling'. Shorter complained about the lack of clarity but added that 'much of it is bound to blur', effectively claiming a lack of faith in the material. Nevertheless he added that the production kept 'verging on monotony (especially when the company keeps shouting)'. He revealed in this comment that the company suffered from a similar lack of faith or understanding.<sup>45</sup>

Michael Schmidt suggested that *The Alchemist* 'is sinister because it is not contained'. He thought that the casting of 'an anthology of vivid performances, [...] registers, accents and manner' was particularly appropriate as

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<sup>45</sup> Eric Shorter, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 February 1987.



‘Jonson is a dramatist of surfaces, categories and types’. Mammon was compared to a ‘Marlovian’ character: ‘we relish his hubris and his disappointment in Nick Stringer’s beautifully spoken performance’. The comparison to Marlowe is surprising and perhaps occurred due to Marlowe being the only other Renaissance playwright known to many people, barring Shakespeare. Michael Feast as Subtle was ‘very unsettling’ and ‘a Proteus in his role changes’, suggesting convincing changes. Perhaps because of this Face was ‘a salesman, a secondary figure, who yet out-manoeuvres and survives Subtle because he can stand apart from his roles like a Machiavel’. Schmidt thought that Spiro’s Dol ‘takes shape – or shapes – after an uncertain start’, adding ‘she changes character and gown for each client, playing Fairy Queen, mad scholar-girl, plain strumpet and bawd’. So here was a difference in the trio – only Subtle believed his own alchemy in this production and was therefore set apart, once again, as a character. He suggested that the setting helped to create an unsettling atmosphere ‘a furnace and bellows in the centre and smoke on demand, makes it clear that we are not far from Hell’.<sup>46</sup>

Martin Hoyle stressed the vocal skills of the company: ‘for once the verbiage is clearly navigated’. He praised the design decision to remain in period, contrasting it to Jones’s Lyric production – ‘unlike London’s last eclectic *Alchemist* [...] Laurie Dennett’s set and David Short’s costumes remain roughly in period’. He gave some details of Short’s costume designs: Subtle ‘sports the ragged shreds of a Jacobean puff-breeched suit’ and Mammon ‘is a ringer for Charles Laughton as Henry VIII’. Hoyle described the effect of Michael Calf’s lighting, which he felt had, ‘the mellow tones of a Rembrandt night scene’ on the

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Schmidt, *Independent*, 23 February 1987.

set 'over-hung by a flickeringly candled chandelier from which dangle cabbalistic signs'. He suggested that the tone of the production was refreshingly different to others, as it was both 'acceptably knockabout' and unsettling:

Yet a sinister streak remains. The melting on the furnace of a naked female doll, kissed by Subtle, provides an impressive end to the first half [...] And characters too often treated as caricatures [...] suddenly echo the soaring arrogance and tragic audacity of Marlovian over-reachers.<sup>47</sup>

Again, Marlowe was invoked as a comparison to show both the period and the difference to Shakespeare. However, the Hellish implications of the production make the comparison to Marlowe particularly appropriate here. This emergence of character-playing rather than the presentation of caricatures, was featured in more detail by Hoyle:

[Subtle] assumes nasal tones together with the doctor's gown to receive Dapper, staggers in a visionary fit at the scent of a victim. Dodders as a bespectacled pedant for Surly and Mammon [...] [strips] to a loincloth to join the Dutch puritans [...]. All this he does with unflagging attack, vigour and intelligence.<sup>48</sup>

Again, the focus seemed to be on the assumption of character through physical means, not on the self-conscious presentation of a persona separate from the character. In contrast, Hackett as Face 'displays a neatly deflationary gift for undercutting the rhetoric, as useful as the hump-backed Breughel persona he adopts' as Lungs. Hackett's disguise was grotesque – very much a presented role – Feast's Subtle was psychologically subsumed into the verisimilitude of his disguises. So again, there was the tension of the tricksters being played in different styles and with varying degrees of self-awareness. It is interesting that Feast was the focus of the complementary criticism, Hackett's self-aware

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<sup>47</sup> Martin Hoyle, *Financial Times*, 23 February 1987.

<sup>48</sup> Hoyle.

approach suffered in relation to Feast's sophisticated playing, or as Hoyle called it, 'intelligence'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Hoyle.



*THE ALCHEMIST*: CTC, UK TOUR, DIR. MICHAEL BOYD, 1988

Once again, there is only limited material available for this production. CTC supplied the reviews and the press release documented but they hold no programme, only a list of actors in the ensemble. The cast list was again pieced together from the reviews but has been authenticated and completed by Boyd, the director.

Billed as ‘written by Shakespeare’s friend and rival’, Boyd’s production toured to Richmond Theatre, Cambridge Arts Theatre, Poole’s Towngate Theatre and Warwick Arts Centre in February and March 1988.<sup>50</sup>

A newspaper preview stated that the ‘young, dynamic actors’ were ‘determined the production [...] will not be heavy going’. This revealed a lack of confidence in the material by the local press, and perhaps by the company in promising that the audience would enjoy the production despite the text. In the same way the mention of Shakespeare in the press release suggested that the company was offering *The Alchemist* as something different from Shakespeare but allied to his reputation as a proof of quality. It reflected the problems of marketing Jonson. The reasons for presenting *The Alchemist* were perhaps due to a desire to produce non-Shakespearian work from the period and to lure the Shakespeare-going audiences. *The Alchemist* seems a perfect play to do this and CTC had obviously thought the play a suitable classic choice without impinging on the Shakespeare canon. The article also revealed that the play was ‘the company’s first production 19 years ago’.<sup>51</sup>

Boyd has suggested that the decision to direct the play originally came from him but only after the company’s approach to him as a potential director ‘I

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<sup>50</sup> CTC press release for *The Alchemist*, 1988.

think it was one of a list of plays that I'd said I'd be interested in doing and they chose it'.<sup>52</sup>

Boyd has also described the setting for the production, 'It was Renaissance but a sort of odd Renaissance. It was done with a Tom Waits soundtrack. I suppose a violent juxtaposition of modern and Jonsonian'.<sup>53</sup>

Stephen Boxer, who played Subtle, recalled some of the design features of the production, some of which had an effect on the presentation of character:

I remember a vaguely half-timbered set, so that was fairly contemporary. We gave Face stunt legs and he was on a trolley [as Lungs]. The costumes were largely period – the Puritans wore tall hats and Mammon looked very spangly in puffy sleeves. I pretended to be blind for Drugger and I had a stick. I wore a long straggly wig and a slightly enlarged nose and very red eyes. I decided to turn him into a Christ-like figure and I had a crown of thorns at one point, with the Puritans, and I had blood streaming down my face.<sup>54</sup>

This suggestion of comic excess in the designs, coupled with Boxer's following comments on Boyd's production and Warchus's *Volpone*, challenge the notion of appropriating Jonson within a Naturalistic formula: 'Jonson is the only time, in *The Alchemist* and *Volpone*, when I've worn huge amounts of make-up and false noses. Now everything is so Naturalistic and the lighting is so white that you just don't bother'. Boxer went on to explain his expectations of Jonson for the production after he had already played Edgworth in Bogdanov's *Bartholomew Fair* and had appeared in a radio production of *The Devil is an Ass*:

I knew it would be fiendishly difficult to unravel the language, because it's so riddled with terminology from chemistry. But once you demystify those for yourself, you realise that what Jonson was doing was using it deliberately. If you did it quickly and with a degree of knowing – and wit – it actually paid dividends. This obscurity could become humorous. That

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<sup>51</sup> Anon., 'TV stars provide spark for explosive production', *Cambridge Evening News*, 12 February 1988.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Boyd, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 7 July 1997.

<sup>53</sup> Boyd.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Boxer, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 31 July 1996.

is the thing I enjoy most about acting really and classical texts: I like the linguistic exploring.<sup>55</sup>

Boxer's enjoyment of 'linguistic exploring' may help to theorize an approach to acting Jonson, based primarily on language.

Jeremy Kingston drew attention to Peter Ling's design: 'the front curtain [...] shows a timber-framed house super-imposed upon a crowded map of Jacobean London, but the Blackfriars room disclosed beyond it is surprisingly bare. A chest holds most of the alchemical props'. His surprise at the bareness of the set appears strange now as this play has become known for two productions whose success was largely due to the sparseness of the rooms presented in the designs - namely Nunn's 1977 and Mendes's 1991 RSC productions. However, Boyd's production pre-dated Mendes's production and was produced over ten years after Nunn's, so it is perhaps not surprising that at the time critics like Kingston were struck by the scarcity of designer flourish within it. Perhaps Kingston was influenced by Jones's more spectacularly set production. The effect was that although 'isolated incidents are pleasant to watch', 'the evening takes a long time to get going and longer to end'. However, Kingston praised Boxer's 'cooing, sighing voice that is lovely to hear, like the aural equivalent of a spider spinning its web' as Subtle and Bill Murdoch's Druggier, 'an ambitious Scot come south in the train of King James', as Pliant and Kastril had. Despite registering his approval for such touches, Kingston concluded that the production was 'generally short of insights'.<sup>56</sup>

Martin Hoyle claimed that Boyd 'has a way of clarifying and clearing the decks in classics'. He commented on the mildly eclectic setting, 'despite the

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<sup>55</sup> Boxer.

<sup>56</sup> Jeremy Kingston, 'Jonson's bravado short of insights', *The Times*, 13 February 1988.



opening thump of rock music and a drop curtain whose Jacobean house-front is sprayed with modern graffiti, the production is straightforwardly in period for 1610'. For him the set had 'the brown murk of Jacobean panelled interiors shuttered against the sunlight [...] of a plague-stricken city'. As in Nunn's production, the social backdrop of the plague was seized on, 'sobs and wails, later mad laughter, are wafted in every time the street door opens'. Hoyle suggested that it had 'a naturalistic way with the words', which 'makes Jonson [...] sound astonishingly modern'. The three central performances were discussed, Boxer's Subtle was, 'a Machiavellian schemer who occasionally takes the audience into his confidence and speaks his lines with a pointed casualness as if new-minted'. Philip Whitchurch as Face 'assumes a marvellous, dwarfish disguise with a Fagin-like accent' for Lungs. Praise was reserved at length for Laura Davenport's performance as Dol, which exposed the consequences of the production's 'cheerfully amoral' atmosphere:

The drawn, brusque business-girl [...]. Hard-faced and blasé, she can scarcely hide her weary contempt of the punters, anxious to get the job over and not conceding even the flicker of a smile more than she is paid for [...]. Her silent, crumbling collapse into bowed and bitter resignation at being double-crossed [...] conjures up a whole life of betrayals: a tough, haunting and totally real portrait.<sup>57</sup>

This 'real' effect came from Boyd's rehearsal approach to the characters. Having trained at the Malaya Bronnaya Theatre in Moscow, his technique is rooted in Stanislavskian Naturalism and is based on individual characters, rather than the whole of the play. He described his rehearsal technique for *The Alchemist*:

There are these vast farcical plot structures and that comes out of character, once you resolve what someone says – what they're up to and why they're up to it. This underpoint in turn makes the characters play a

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<sup>57</sup> Martin Hoyle, 'The Alchemist/Richmond' [sic], *Financial Times*, 15 February 1988.

game of acting and covering up their character. Once you get their relationship and what they're trying to achieve, from working on truths, then you reach the sort of product.<sup>58</sup>

Eric Braun wrote 'a capacity house seemed delighted', testimony to the growing popularity of Jonson perhaps and an indication that companies smaller than the RSC and NT can mount successful Jonson productions.<sup>59</sup>

Paul Taylor thought the focus was on imposed comedy, not Jonson's text: 'some of the funny business seems to work against the grain of the text'. This was due to his idea – perhaps influenced by Nunn's or Eyre's productions – that 'Jonson intimates that these disguises themselves are a form of alchemy, are psychologically [*sic*] as well as tactically important to the characters'. He suggested that Boyd's production 'misses this dimension' and 'robs the ending – when the amoral, realistic Lovewit returns [...] of any sense that an improbable, iridescent bubble has regrettably burst'. Perhaps because of these productions the characters' enjoyment of disguise has been accepted as a natural part of the text in performance. But Boyd's production drew something totally different from this area which startled Taylor:

The production keeps signalling that the tricksters resent these performances as just burdensome means-to-an-end by having them step out of their disguises with undisguised distaste. [...] The instant Dapper is blindfolded, Face throws off his Lungs costume, and he rises with cocky relief from his crutches the split-second a client is out of the door.<sup>60</sup>

What Taylor's opinion missed was that this dispensing of disguises with speed is of necessity to both character and performer in preparation for the next scene or disguise. The psychological reasoning that Boyd's actors gave for these undressed moments was an explanation of this logistical need to take off the disguises within a framework of stage Naturalism. Other productions chose not

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<sup>58</sup> Boyd.

to psychologize the characters' choices for taking off their disguises and so have not drawn attention to the reasons for disrobing at speed. Instead they pointed to a need in the characters to assume disguises, the frantic atmosphere and the technical skill of the characters and/or the performers as quick-change artists.

Michael Grosvenor Myer thought Boyd 'treated the text with absolute fidelity and respect which underlines the play's profundity'. In other words, he too, had noticed the serious treatment and the need to 'round' the characters through a Naturalistic approach to the personae outside of their disguises. However, he suggested that 'the effect of all this' was that 'the important element of grotesquery, of manic nuttiness, is muted'. He thought this made 'one forget' that the play 'is one of the funniest comedies in the repertoire'. A psychological approach to characterization can be beneficial for specific actors but perhaps not always as a blanket approach. Myer exposed the tension between the play's demands as a comedy and the twentieth-century theatre's need for psychological truth. He felt that the setting was effective: 'There is a strong feeling of the Jacobean [...], which occasional odd anachronisms (an incongruous pair of shades, a cigarillo-smoking female, jazz scat-singing for the incidental music) serve only to emphasize.'<sup>61</sup>

In a final paragraph cut from the review Myer shed some light on Subtle's disguises, pointing to the eclecticism of period in his transformations, Boxer was 'a master of deceit and disguise, now Sir Thomas More, now Roger Ascham, now Rasputin'. These were interpretations of the disguises by the reviewer, not necessarily impersonations chosen by the actor, director or

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<sup>59</sup> Eric Braun, '24 carat gold setting', *The Stage*, 10 March 1988.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Taylor, 'The old house of games', *Independent*, 15 February 1988.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Grosvenor Myer, 'Alchemist' [sic], *Guardian*, 17 February 1988.



designer. Nevertheless, they reveal the extent of quasi-historical evocation evinced by the aesthetics of the production.<sup>62</sup>

Unlike Myer, Peter McGarry suggested that Boyd ‘feasts us on sharp, visual, crash-bang comedy’ and the effect is ‘boisterous, bawdy and energetic [...] delivered at a bone-shaking pace’. McGarry missed the Naturalistic approach and wrote about actors using more traditional comic playing styles, ‘players who, with a wink or a nod or a crisp aside, are ever poised to communicate with the audience’. In other words, as McGarry saw it, the comedy was based on self-conscious playing. He complained that there was ‘a tendency to rush lines’ but that ‘some nifty acceleration is really rather welcome’. Once again, a reviewer showed a lack of commitment to the play.<sup>63</sup>

Richard Edmonds saw ‘enormous relish’ in the playing, suggesting self-conscious enjoyment. He revealed his exclusive taste for historicized settings for period texts: ‘Happily, no modern dress convolutions to damage the shape of things either. Under Michael Boyd’s thoughtful direction we are firmly Jacobean and I for one gave a silent cheer for it.’ Subtle was viewed separately, Edmonds thought him ‘essentially a loner here, whose whole being becomes incandescent when he manipulates others in one outrageous con-trick after another’. This suggested that Subtle as a character enjoyed the disguises – they were not read as just a means to an end for him. This contrasts with Myer’s opinion that the characters were aware of their own playing techniques and commented on them by showing their contempt. Edmonds’s comment suggested instead that Subtle’s own character was changed as he assumed each disguise, that Subtle’s character was created by the series of roles. Myer’s opinion on the Naturalistic style may

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Grosvenor Myer, ‘Alchemist’ [*sic*], not published, but received by Cambridge Theatre

be questioned by considering Edmonds's remarks on John Levitt as Mammon, he, 'lifts self-conscious vanity to the level of parody yet kept his credibility and spoke well'. It would seem that Edmonds saw verisimilitude but perhaps not the complete psychological approach that Myer hinted at, especially as Edmonds set Subtle apart, suggesting perhaps that he only saw Subtle as a fully psychologically-realized character.<sup>64</sup>

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Company, 19 February 1988, and supplied to me by the company, renamed Method&Madness.

<sup>63</sup> Peter McGarry, 'Pared-down classic is golden', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 8 March 1988.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Edmonds, '*The Alchemist*' [sic], *Birmingham Post*, 9 March 1988.

*THE ALCHEMIST*: RSC, SWAN AND BARBICAN, DIR. SAM MENDES,  
1991

Mendes's production opened in the Swan just as TOP re-opened after re-building. Whilst TOP – traditionally the RSC's experimental space – hosted the more unfamiliar period choice of Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, *The Alchemist* was a more popular choice hosted by the larger capacity Swan. This confidence in the Jonson text was especially promising for Jonsonian production after the company's *Epicoene* in 1989 and *The New Inn* in 1987 both failed to transfer to London. The confidence was grounded in *The Alchemist* being one of Jonson's most famous plays but also in the reputation of the young Mendes, whose effective and innovative *Troilus and Cressida* in 1990 had been incredibly successful in the Swan. He had been proved as a director who could give the company critical and financial results.

Perhaps there was an intention to invoke the excitement and success of the Nunn production – the last time the RSC tackled the play – and Mendes used many of the same cuts and additions as Barnes. Therefore, he was aware of his RSC predecessor before he began rehearsals. However, it remains unknown whether the play was suggested to Mendes by the management or whether he chose the play and then researched previous productions. Nevertheless, as already observed, some similarities between productions were evident.

Mendes has praised Jonson's ability for writing for the theatre – 'He bears the audience in mind a lot of the time' – this was a feature that would later be denied by Tim Pigott-Smith when he played Subtle in 1996. Mendes wanted to suggest 'the alchemy of making something out of nothing in an empty room' and in rehearsal felt it important to 'decode it as a series of moves', rather than



attempt Naturalistic techniques: 'With Jonson it's much less appropriate to discuss "motivation"'.<sup>65</sup>

This did not mean that the characters in Mendes's production lacked subtlety. In fact, Mendes and some of his actors have recalled moments of pathos in the production: 'That's why we had Drugger (who absolutely worships Face) gradually look more and more like him [...] That's his desire to belong somewhere [...] The portraits aren't heartless, they're not condescending and they're not patronizing'; 'it ceases to become two-dimensional [...] they start to become lovable human beings'. The scene with Mammon and Dol was 'a sad and desolate scene. It was difficult because they wanted to make it funny'.<sup>66</sup>

Philip Voss, Mammon in the production, said:

I saw him as quite a tragic figure. It's terribly sad that he'd allowed himself to be hoodwinked by these people having gone so far, particularly Dol, that was awful. That was very three dimensional and human: I loved playing him.<sup>67</sup>

Voss also disliked the tendency for making the scene with Dol obviously comic, relying on imposed properties, he explained:

We went into previews and someone thought it was not showy enough. Comedy business was applied and that I didn't like at all. We got rather stuck with that and I didn't think it needed it. I thought the language and the desperation was more important than putting in funny business. I had a black money bag which got used as a scrotum and I wish that had never happened. That was never sound, that should have been played straight.<sup>68</sup>

The comic business may have been included to make Joanne Pearce feel more comfortable as Dol, Mendes revealed that 'she felt frustrated' because 'she doesn't have any gags', 'she's not funny'.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Sam Mendes, 'Interlude I: Sam Mendes talks to Brian Woolland', in Cave, Schafer and Woolland, pp. 79-85, pp. 79-80.

<sup>66</sup> Mendes, p. 81, p. 83.

<sup>67</sup> Philip Voss, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 31 July 1996.

<sup>68</sup> Voss.

<sup>69</sup> Mendes, p. 83.

Christopher Luscombe who played Dapper, like Voss, enjoyed the pathos inherent in the character and felt that it actually related to the comedy:

A lot of the comedy was very painful. Dapper was appallingly treated and it was funny but it was also rather tragic. He brings it all on himself, a sort of hubris but it is very cruel. I got stuck in the loo but I was able to escape because it was at the side of the stage. I was worried the audience would have guessed and it took away from the gag that he'd been in there for hours. In fact we revealed me several times. Maybe it took away from when he's revealed at the end. It's quite nice if you haven't seen him for a long time and you forget he's in there. People were quite appalled by the treatment meted out to Dapper; it was very ruthless.<sup>70</sup>

The actors also remembered the rehearsal period, Luscombe suggested, 'we were always working at the pace of it. Sam did say on the first day that if it wasn't funny we'd have failed. I think we had to view it as a farce'.<sup>71</sup>

Jonathan Hyde, who played Face, remembered the effect on rehearsals of the typical farce setting of a room with doors: 'the first thing that we started to do was work out how we could make the play work logistically. What door leads where, how do we literally service the scenarios?'. The latter half of the period was spent removing some of the excessive business,

We had evolved a huge amount of business: each gull had a different setting. For example, Mammon had a bunch of flowers and a luxurious cloth over the table, various paintings would spin round. This is eleventh hour stuff, which is the thing I most admire about Sam, and he said "we need to strike 60% of the business". The whole thing went and we're not literally playing the furniture removalists. The relief was substantial because we were able just to concentrate on playing the play, not hung up with a million different side gags. It would've made the audience terribly tired.<sup>72</sup>

Luscombe remembered this change, too, 'It seemed to put a lot of emphasis on the actor. It wasn't really a director's show, it was an actor's show'. And Guy Henry who played Ananias also appreciated the gesture, 'I've never heard a director say before or since, "I've done too much directorial stuff and I'm

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<sup>70</sup> Christopher Luscombe, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 15 April 1997.



going to cut it all out”, a flurry of activity or a door slam, anything extraneous, which I admire him for’.<sup>73</sup>

Mendes has described the setting decisions, ‘it should be possible to create a world that is somehow an amalgam of the 1990s and 1610’. Hyde called this style ‘Theatre of the Approximate’ but found it ‘very clever and very serviceable’; Voss said ‘in general I don’t like it, I like to have it set in period but it was quite witty’. Luscombe said,

It worked for me. I know some people thought it was a bit gimmicky. I think it’s very witty but maybe a bit self-consciously witty. Some audiences want to believe in a world and it continually throws that because they’re conscious it’s a designer’s trick but I thought it was a fantasy world rooted in reality.<sup>74</sup>

The actors talked about their decisions for their characters’ appearances, this led to compromises between the designer Anthony Ward and the actors involved. Hyde was ‘very keen on the torn T-shirt, braces and trousers which could double up’. He wanted ‘the Captain to be in black with a few decorations’ and Lungs to emerge ‘with that silly helmet and the apron to be full of holes and smouldering’. Voss had been allocated padding which was made ‘quite early on’, it was ‘terribly high so I had the padding changed so it was a little more natural and rounded at the waist’. His make-up – a Cupid’s Bow of lipstick and blusher on the cheeks – ‘was Sam’s idea and I rather regret it. It vulgarized him, you had to do something because you had to match the costume’. Luscombe’s costume underwent the most change:

The original design was quite grotty. The idea was that our shoes and tights would be very muddy, and then that would become smarter as it went up the costume. But in fact my costume was going to be quite broken down and I thought that went against the name Dapper. I wanted,

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<sup>71</sup> Luscombe.

<sup>72</sup> Jonathan Hyde, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 26 June 1999.

<sup>73</sup> Luscombe; Guy Henry, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 19 July 1997.

<sup>74</sup> Mendes, p.85; Hyde; Voss; Luscombe.



at least from the knees upwards, to be very unusually immaculate. I thought that he was very particular. And then as he gets bundled around he gets shabbier and shabbier. So that was taken on board and changed.<sup>75</sup>

Benedict Nightingale called Jonson 'a 17<sup>th</sup> century David Mamet' and gave a history of productions. He suggested Nunn 'gave it a documentary feel' but Mendes resisted this, revealing a hint 'only at the very end when the walls at the back [...] open to reveal a panoramic print of Jonson's much-loved London'. Nightingale thought 'other directors have seen a certain cruelty [...] to fan the dreams and steal the money', again, Mendes's opening quarrel suggested this when Face emerged 'brandishing a dagger' and Subtle 'a pristine Molotov cocktail [...] from which smoke inexplicably pours' but 'this hint of harshness is a false trail, too'. The key to Mendes's approach was the 'bravura laughter' generated between David Bradley's Subtle, 'the sour, grumpy one', and Hyde's Face, 'slyer, slimier, more secretive'. Nightingale suggested that the pair 'are great fun' and listed their disguises (see PLATE 5):

Bradley spends no more than a moment in his grimy vest and dangling braces. Then he is a black-gowned pedagogue, then a turbaned magus chanting mantras inside a ring of American Indian stones, then a beefy gym instructor, then a stringy hermit raging incoherently from inside a sackcloth dressing gown.<sup>76</sup>

Hyde's Face also began in a grubby vest and black trousers, from this he 'dwindles into a cringing alchemist's apprentice, then struts onstage with eye-patch and military medals, half-buccaneer, half colonel in the Black and Tans, before reverting to the role his master knows, an ingratiating Jeeves in a green baize apron'. The gulls, too, were part of this 'fun', particularly, the 'spectacularly greedy' Mammon of Voss who 'transforms' him into 'a spoiled clown, all rouged cheeks, depraved grins and mincing fastidiousness'. Final

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<sup>75</sup> Hyde; Voss; Luscombe.

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praise was for the portrayal of the Fairy Queen as 'an Elizabeth II clone dressed in an eight-foot-tall bridal gown'.<sup>77</sup>

Michael Billington liked the 'verbal coinage, psychological accuracy and helter-skelter farcical momentum' and 'an overpowering sense of fantasy'. However, he had 'two minor reservations'. Firstly, 'the modern fashion of jumbling periods: pictures of Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and perspectives of Jacobean London mingle with bow ties, brollies and cut-away coats [...] if ever there were a play anchored in its period, it is this.' Secondly, the trio 'are a shade too-laid back so that one misses the sense, strongly present in [...] Nunn's [...], that each knock [...] is a threat to their precarious fantasy'. He praised Bradley and thought that Joanne Pearce as Dol showed a 'blend of sexuality and rapacity', this was 'beautifully caught' when 'she ardently fondles' Mammon's 'dangling leather pouch'. However, he felt that Hyde had 'yet to discover the character's exuberantly actorish delight'. Perhaps Hyde's decision not to point to his own virtuosity was misread here as Billington was probably influenced by the self-conscious Nunn production. There was also praise for Albie Woodington as a 'humble' Druggier who 'touchingly imitates the action of the angry Kastril by daringly placing his foot on the table'.<sup>78</sup>

Malcolm Rutherford complained about the size of the Swan for the play, 'the company is too good to be reduced to this space for such a big play [...] they tend to crowd each other out'. This resulted in 'diminishing' Mammon as Voss 'tends to strut on a postage stamp'. He suggested that Mendes was 'less interested in the dupes than the people who set them up'. But this had strengths:

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<sup>76</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'A golden dome of rogues', *The Times*, 29 August 1991.

<sup>77</sup> Nightingale.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Billington, 'Master of illusions', *Guardian*, 29 August 1991.



There is a wonderful scene, prefaced by a Latin grace, where they sit at a table and solemnly count their loot. Coming at the end of the first half and resuming at the start of the second, it is the best vignette of the production (see PLATE 6).<sup>79</sup>

However, Rutherford felt the gulls 'are the play's real characters' and that the playing diminished them. He also noted that the 'team-work' of the trio 'tends to belittle' Dol: Pearce was 'a little too disciplined: too much the team player, not enough of an individual'. Rutherford's tastes advocated more self-conscious playing, as he thought Henry 'superbly played' Ananias, 'the only dupe fully to realize what a good part he has'. In other words, like previous performers he indicated to the audience his enjoyment at playing the part. He ended by expressing that the performers 'should let themselves go a bit more'.<sup>80</sup>

Paul Taylor thought the production – 'zestful, shrewd and often extremely funny' – 'does handsome justice both to the play's broad comic effects and to its thematic subtleties'. He described the set, which was sympathetic to the décor of the auditorium: 'dominated by a brick wall with a large central door and further doors off to the side'. He noted that the house 'turns out to be No 13 when we eventually see it from the street', this was achieved using a pivoting numbered panel within the central door. He, too, liked the interval break as the trio 'sit silently [...] making little heaps of coins [...] This unaccustomed lull is stretched to the point of absurdity when suddenly, just before the blackout, a jolting knock makes their eyes light up with smiling anticipation'. And again the presentation of the Queen of Fairy was praised as Dol sat on Face's shoulders, making her impossibly tall and 'caressing him [Dapper] [...] with all four of her hands'. Taylor noted, like Nightingale, that Face's appearance as Jeremy is

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<sup>79</sup> Malcolm Rutherford, 'The Alchemist' [sic], *Financial Times*, 29 August 1991.

<sup>80</sup> Rutherford.

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another 'role', it seemed, 'in its creepy mock-meekness, no more authentic than [...] Lungs'. He felt that while Face's 'real' personality could not ultimately be determined, Subtle was a psychological creation; Bradley 'offers clever, involuntary hints of the character's destitute background'. However, the closure was 'a striking image' to illustrate 'the attractive delusions' offered by the trio:

Face tries to bribe the audience to acquit him, hinting at our complicity in what has gone on. Here he throws what looks like a heavy handful of sovereigns into the stalls. Only instead of landing with the crash of coins, they float and flutter in the air, sparkling, weightless confetti.<sup>81</sup>

Therefore, the final joke was on the audience who had been gulled even after the play's characters had been exposed.

In an interview which appeared after the opening Mendes explained his attitude to classical drama: "You have to pick up a great classic by the scruff of its neck, blow the dust off it"; he remembered that he had "an attack of the over-reverentials" for his production of *The Plough and the Stars* and that consequently, "the production was too small". He expressed his intentions for

*The Alchemist*:

"I'm certainly determined to give it as much clarity as I can. On the first day of rehearsals, you'd think the actors were reading an ancient Sanskrit text. It is a rich, dense play and its energy and exuberance comes from Jonson's bitterness about the corrupt society around him. I like to think of it as a rap, all jagged and epigrammatic."<sup>82</sup>

Mendes has spoken of the change the production underwent when it transferred to the Barbican: 'It wasn't as good' because 'it was a bit cold in the Barbican'. However, Mendes and Ward resisted the temptation to scale up the set to any great extent, as Mendes said, 'The desire to fill the stage with scenic

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Gulls just wanna have fun', *Independent*, 29 August 1991.

<sup>82</sup> Sam Mendes, in Nick Smurthwaite, 'A new stage in the remarkable rise of Sam Mendes', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 August 1991.



devices is the enemy of Jonson. [...] You've got to ask the audience to use their imagination'.<sup>83</sup>

In London Hyde thought 'the production held up' but warned:

It could've got bombastic and slovenly. The RSC have a tendency to play the bravura of things rather than the specifics and so when the company starts getting tired they over-indulge and everything ends up being shouted. But I thought it kept its tightness and integrity I think one of the reasons it went to the main house was because it was very popular at Stratford, one of the critical successes in a season where a lot of the main stage productions had been heavily criticized.<sup>84</sup>

Voss thought 'it didn't work so well in London' as at Stratford, 'because it hasn't been rehearsed for that space but in the Swan it was a great success'. He suggested that the scaffolding around the top of the stage 'was peculiar in London because it looked like a builder's yard'. Luscombe admitted 'I didn't really enjoy it as much in the Barbican. I felt it should have been redesigned more radically'. He went on, 'we missed the intimacy of the Swan. The Barbican is difficult for comedy because it's very wide so you can't turn to the side, only half the audience will hear'. In contrast Henry thought 'it went down a storm the first night' in London 'because of course you get bigger laughs, it was quite a popular show. I preferred it because it was more exciting'.<sup>85</sup>

After the transfer Peter Hepple suggested that 'it has lost something in the translation', namely the Swan's 'intimacy'. Hepple was unimpressed by the design: 'One is not quite certain why there is some inconsistency about the costuming', with 'the three main characters' and 'some of their victims dressed in the Elizabethan fashion', whilst, 'Dapper and Surly look like Edwardian gentlemen about to go on a cycling holiday'. Although Dapper's costume had not changed since Stratford Surly had been altered due to a change in the casting.

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<sup>83</sup> Mendes, in Cave, Schafer and Woolland, p. 84.

However, these anachronisms did not affect Hepple's enjoyment, Hyde's Face 'played with malicious glee' was 'the leader of the conspirators' and Pearce was 'cleverly suggesting [...] increasing delight as each new victim is lured'.

Amongst the gulls, he was 'greatly taken with the pathos' which Voss 'manages to impart' as Mammon.<sup>86</sup>

Christopher Edwards thought it would 'surely whet the public's appetite for more' Jonson. He noted that the set was arranged for each gull, Mammon had 'candles and a crucifix stand on the table to guarantee the sanctity of the exercise'. This was particularly funny as the irony would immediately strike the audience. Jonson was credited with the emergence of English comedy 'from Congreve through Fielding to Dickens', which 'owes more to Jonson' than Shakespeare.<sup>87</sup>

In contrast to most, Clare Bayley thought Mendes's production was 'all surface dazzle and broad comedy' played at 'breakneck speed'. However, 'the unrelenting pace is at the cost of clear speaking'. Noting a self-awareness that others did not mention, Bayley wrote, 'the cast clearly enjoyed every moment' and she commended the 'theatre magic': 'a virtuosic transformation [...] from outside to inside the house, various bits of business with liquids in glass jars changing colour dramatically, hair-breadth comic timing with slamming doors and costume changes'. She especially praised Henry's Ananias, 'with black habit and very, very long hair, gets more hilarious as the story gets more improbable'. She noted 'comic bits of anachronism', for example, the trio 'snap on the electric light when their victims have left', these 'point vaguely perhaps to modern

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<sup>84</sup> Hyde.

<sup>85</sup> Voss; Luscombe; Henry.

<sup>86</sup> Peter Hepple, 'Alchemist is in need of a little doctoring', *The Stage*, 7 May 1992.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher Edwards, *Spectator*, 25 April 1992.



parallels' but 'a confusion of dress styles places the play, rather irritatingly, anywhere between the 17<sup>th</sup> century and now'.<sup>88</sup>

Steve Grant thought that *The Alchemist* had 'always presented problems for modern audiences' because 'the text is stuffed with contemporary detail, learned references to alchemy and archaic religious satire'. But the production, 'painlessly transferred from Stratford', was 'by far the most effective' because it was 'speedy, not afraid to cut [...], visually and verbally funny, and beautifully acted'. Pointing to the lack of revivals Grant suggested that the 'meticulously drawn' parts 'need actors of this calibre to serve them'. He thought that 'an impressive clash of old and new, the plain and the vaudevillian' made Mendes's production 'utterly engrossing'.<sup>89</sup>

In an interview with Mendes, published before the London run, Irving Wardle praised his style as 'extremely well composed pictorially' but the 'trademark' was 'a powerful single narrative line that encounters the maximum tonal variety and the maximum resistance of individual response'. Mendes characterized his own approach as using "simple organic properties that can have a hundred meanings", he went on: "Some people, like Trevor Nunn, can use domestic detail brilliantly. It's not so convincing when I do it. I like to be a foot above reality". He detailed his approach to *The Alchemist*:

"In *The Alchemist* I began with the idea that it was about criminality; and it was only half-way through rehearsals that I realized it was about gullibility. [...] The gulls believe what they want to believe [...] I love plays with huge variety in them, but which head towards a miniaturist conclusion. Say, *The Alchemist* with Face left alone on stage after that kaleidoscope vision of London".<sup>90</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Clare Bayley, 'Fool's gold', *What's On*, 22 April 1992.

<sup>89</sup> Steve Grant, '*The Alchemist*' [sic], *Time Out*, 22 April 1992.

<sup>90</sup> Sam Mendes, in Irving Wardle, 'Beyond his Years', *Independent on Sunday*, 12 April 1992.



Mendes's comments showed that, although he changed his mind about the theme, he underwent a process of understanding before finding the most effective means of translating this for performance. In other words, his production grew organically and did not impose a restricting concept on the play.

*THE ALCHEMIST: BIRMINGHAM REP AND OLIVIER, DIR. BILL*

ALEXANDER, 1996

Alexander placed the play within a concept of the future. It used eclectic costumes and props from the past and present, without any sense of logical equivalents, for example, Pliant wore a richly decorated seventeenth-century dress with green wellington boots and a waxed jacket. The intention was to suggest a scavenging society but for the most part the design choices were impenetrable. Despite this focus on an elaborate (but impractical) design, Alexander has suggested that large and distracting settings are ineffectual for the Rep theatre: 'You do not want the set to compete with the actors [...] The key is to use as little set as possible' (see PLATE 7).<sup>91</sup>

Tim Pigott-Smith, who played Subtle, has talked of his initial reaction to the new setting for the play: 'I was extremely apprehensive about setting it in the future. Although, in the event, I think it's been much more liberating than damaging'. However, as he went on, the limitations of the actual set were revealed:

The design is so clumsy: the front door should not give onto the main room. So Lovewit goes in, why doesn't he know what's going on in his house? And it's almost criminal to have designed a set down the bannisters of which you can't slide. It's craftsmanship of that nature that's missing. It's not easy to run up and down at all but it does look wonderful.<sup>92</sup>

As well as revealing his disenchantment with the set, Pigott-Smith also showed that he did not enjoy the production: 'It's not hugely pleasurable to play. There are all sorts of things that might make it more pleasurable but I suspect you wouldn't sustain an audience for the whole evening if Face and Subtle had

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<sup>91</sup> Bill Alexander, in Bill Alexander, Anthony Clark and Gwenda Hughes, 'The Birmingham Repertory Theatre: Directing at the Birmingham Rep', in *Making Space*, pp. 80-2, p. 80.

<sup>92</sup> Tim Pigott-Smith, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 27 September 1996.

more in-jokes together'. This would suggest the temptation for self-indulgence that this production has been criticized for by some. Nevertheless, Pigott-Smith suggested that the problem why the play was unpleasurable to play was due to the audience's lack of understanding of the language. Talking of a post-show discussion that had occurred he said:

It was revealing how little people knew: didn't know what an alchemist was, cozening or gulling. It's almost impossible to release the central joke. One of the only laughs is "lead and other metals would be gold if they had time". It's an absolutely clear laugh, the audience always understands. So you get a laugh on something which is actually integral to alchemy. As a result of that discussion we [he and Callow] began to wonder why we were doing it. What is the point of doing something when the audience clearly hasn't got a clue? No point at all.<sup>93</sup>

Pigott-Smith also suggested that the quality of Jonson's theatre craft was poor because of 'intellectual' jokes. In total contrast to Luscombe, who had suggested the effectiveness of Dapper in the privy, Pigott-Smith thought:

Dapper's wasted in the loo. Typically intellectual joke – put him in the loo, forget about him, and they'll really laugh when he comes out. It would be wonderful if he came out of the loo and I had to push him back. There would be more potential in that.<sup>94</sup>

Pantomimic farce was the general style, something that Jones had dismissed as unhelpful to the play. Nevertheless, Pigott-Smith felt that 'the farce works, running up and down stairs, catching and kissing people. It's the satire that's the problem'. He had problems in rehearsal trying to prepare the character of Subtle – 'the most difficult part' – and ended up creating a persona outside of the play to assist him: 'a kind of slightly superior class person with ideas'. Despite an invented history for the character outside the play, Pigott-Smith suggested that 'You can't develop the internal mechanisms of the character. The last thing you would bother doing is a Stanislavski exercise'. His idea for the

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<sup>93</sup> Pigott-Smith.



history came from ‘a sense of grandeur without any property or any money. He believes in his own alchemy, is very frightened of the officers, doesn’t retaliate against Face at all, just goes to pieces’. So, ‘I got this picture of a man who had been an alchemist and really believed in its potential and had been in prison for alchemy’.<sup>95</sup>

The leading actors’ disillusionment with the production, whilst still in Birmingham, led to the half-hearted execution of the production. This was particularly disappointing as the publicity had relied on the involvement of the three leads, who had all enjoyed theatre and television successes before.

A newspaper advertisement revealed the lure of the actors as the chief draw for an audience: ‘Jonson’s brilliant, bawdy comedy with Simon Callow, Josie Lawrence and Tim Pigott-Smith’.<sup>96</sup>

John Peter praised ‘four fire-breathing performances of authentic Jonsonian sulphurousness’: namely, Pigott-Smith as Subtle, ‘grandiloquent and reptilian [...] an unctuous priestly conman’; Callow as Face; Lawrence as Dol, ‘statuesque and unscrupulous, who acts out her seduction scenes with ruthless erotic duplicity’; and Geoffrey Freshwater as Mammon, ‘panting at her like a frog on heat and delivering his great tirade [...] as if it were by Marlowe or [...] Webster’ but he suggested that the ‘supporting cast’ was ‘iffy’.<sup>97</sup>

Richard Edmonds thought it ‘shoots across its three-and-a-half hour span mainly like a rocket’. However, he suggested problems with the textual decisions: ‘you begin to wonder how a modern, poorly-educated audience can cope’. He went on to describe the effect of the first act on the audience, it ‘left

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<sup>94</sup> Pigott-Smith.

<sup>95</sup> Pigott-Smith.

<sup>96</sup> Advertisement for Birmingham Rep’s ‘Autumn Season’, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 5 July 1996.

the audience without any reaction at all, and try as the actors might the words fell like lead as incomprehensible textual punning and elusive references presented a drawback to enjoyment'. However, he suggested William Dudley's set was 'a science fiction underworld'.<sup>98</sup>

Fred Norris thought it 'true theatrical gold'. Callow presented 'several brilliant performances in one', with many disguises, 'ranging from a butler who looks like George Formby, a metal worker with a friendly echoing Black Country accent, and a captain who looks every inch a Mad Major'. He suggested that Bill Alexander 'has problems with Jonson' and thought it 'overlong and sometimes baffling'. The maestro performance of one actor overshadowed an ineffective and misguided production.<sup>99</sup>

Ann FitzGerald suggested Alexander had treated the text 'with wonderful clarity'. However, she thought 'it is the finesse of the acting which really gets the text across'. She suggested that the evening was too long – 'one would sacrifice clarity for pace'. She suggested Callow's Face 'holds on to a kind of gravitas, a belief in each incarnation', whilst Lawrence's Dol was 'a woman desperate to crawl out of poverty's humiliations and willing to go to any lengths to do so'. Pigott-Smith 'takes a rather laconic look at Subtle', he had a 'resentment of Face throughout' and was 'only half-interested in the deception', and 'perhaps half-persuaded of his magical powers'. Once again, Subtle was the outsider, based on Pigott-Smith's idea of the character's belief in alchemy: 'I got this picture in my mind of this man who [...] really believed in its potential'.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> John Peter, 'The Alchemist'[sic], *Sunday Times*, 22 September 1996.

<sup>98</sup> Richard Edmonds, 'Blank verse meets the chainsaw in classic', *Birmingham Post*, 11 September 1996.

<sup>99</sup> Fred Norris, 'Stunning classic is solid gold', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 11 September 1996.

<sup>100</sup> Ann FitzGerald, 'Sharp remedy of a dense text', *The Stage*, 26 September 1996; Pigott-Smith.



On its London transfer Jeremy Kingston called it ‘not a likeable show, nor even a comic one’. He suggested Jonson ‘always defies the efforts of director and cast’ and he particularly criticized the opening: ‘there is no vocal excitement of a quality to make one listen to what is being said’. Kingston felt that the setting – ‘some post-apocalyptic future’ – worked against the text, ‘language roots the escapades so firmly in the past’ that the aesthetics were ‘too far-fetched to be taken seriously’. The production was ‘a disappointment’.<sup>101</sup>

Martin Spence thought it ‘yobby but controlled’: ‘out goes Jonson’s social reality and moral edge in favour of farcical, in yer face fun’ [*sic*]. He thought the characters ‘bold caricatures’, with Callow giving ‘a show-stopping performance’.<sup>102</sup>

Sarah Hemming thought the comedy ‘curiously muffled’ by the ‘lack of relish’. Nevertheless she suggested Callow did ‘relish’ the part and was ‘hugely entertaining’. She thought there were ‘some delightful moments of slapstick’, however, ‘you never feel the mounting panic as all looks set to be revealed’.<sup>103</sup>

Remembering Mendes’s production Jane Edwardes thought Alexander’s ‘suffers by comparison [...] it’s only passingly funny and certainly never reaches a grand climax’. She thought the much-praised plot ‘now seems over-repetitive’. She criticized inconsistent playing, with Pigott-Smith ‘the biggest disappointment; the beggar that explodes on to the stage [...] is carelessly never seen nor heard of again. Nor does he appear to enjoy the mystification’. Callow, however, ‘rolls the knotty language around his tongue and [...] relishes the

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<sup>101</sup> Jeremy Kingston, ‘Fool’s gold from debased metal’, *The Times*, 15 October 1996.

<sup>102</sup> Martin Spence, *Midweek*, 14-17 October, 1996.

<sup>103</sup> Sarah Hemming, ‘This alchemy fails to work’, *Financial Times*, 11 October 1996.



switches' of disguise. She thought the set 'created out of old cars' did 'slow down the action'.<sup>104</sup>

Juliet Rieden thought the 'vast array of different periods and styles' – 'fitted corsets with padded bomber jackets, army fatigues and Arthurian robes' – 'only serves to confuse'. She thought the 'emphasis on laughs [...] detracts from the play's serious message', changing Jonson's 'dark satire' to 'an impressive farce', Alexander had 'been too clever for his own good'.<sup>105</sup>

Peter Holland acknowledged the Epilogue's focus was on Callow's 'virtuosic vocal display' and not on 'anything the character is actually saying'; for this his accent ranged through those used throughout – 'the cockney Face, the upper-class captain, Northern Lungs [actually Black Country] and Scottish Jeremy'. As Holland concluded, 'the meaning of the language is lost in the focus on the actor's performance which becomes self-regarding, inviting our applause for its superb technique rather than for anything in the play's concerns with role-playing'. He suggested that the attempts at farce did not successfully work and were imposed on the play: the trio 'run around the stage at high speed [...] but their energy is unavailing as the play disappears in the welter of stage business'. The setting was ineffective for Holland, as the actors were 'permanently dwarfed by the scale' and 'the slow movement [...] halts the flow [...] which no amount of actorly energy can overcome'. He recognized the merits of the Swan's smaller stage for Jonson as Mendes's production kept 'threatening to break the bounds of the compact stage'. In contrast the Rep and Olivier stages had 'too big a floor-area [...] for the actors to dominate'. The size killed the comedy: 'the faster the actors run, the less the audience cares'. The other problem was the inappropriate

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<sup>104</sup> Jane Edwardes, 'The Alchemist' [sic], *Time Out*, 16 October 1996.

set – ‘neither a whole house [...] nor one credibly the property of Face’s master’.

Holland did not find the mixture of periods a problem but the production was ‘self-defeating’ in its ‘steadfast refusal to offer any sort of exact social reality’.

He felt that Freshwater had the greed and lust of Mammon but not the epic quality: ‘creating a character of such sleazy grotesqueness that the visionary Mammon never appears’. Lawrence was effective as ‘an Irish Queen of the Fairies, showering the stage and her nephew Dapper with glitter’ but she did not reveal the ‘harsh reality as a prostitute’. Holland reserved praise for the touching and detailed performance of Jamie Newall as Drugger, ‘with his innocent’s open face’ and ‘unruly mop of hair’ he was ‘adorably honest’. His later appearance featured his new sign on his apron and he was ‘endearingly bewildered and unendingly eager to please’. However, the ‘care’ with which Newall had embellished Drugger was undercut by ‘a coarse obviousness’ typical of the production: his last exit was ‘to the sound of a cataclysmic fart’. Holland suggested the play should be ‘both powerful and funny’, nevertheless, ‘this one is, disappointingly, neither’.<sup>106</sup>

One year later Callow admitted “‘I did not particularly enjoy the play. Jonson drains you. He is a very hard taskmaster.’” This perhaps explained Callow’s highly energetic and self-indulgent performance – a lack of enjoyment led to a deliberate show of enjoyment and energy as the performer tried to convince the audience and himself how much fun the production should be.<sup>107</sup> As one reviewer who was won over by Callow’s technique testified: ‘If the actor

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<sup>105</sup> Juliet Rieden, *MS London*, 28 October 1996.

<sup>106</sup> Peter Holland, ‘A cheater and his punk brought low’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 October 1996.

<sup>107</sup> Simon Callow, quoted in Fred Norris, ‘The importance of being Callow’, *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 12 September 1997.



enjoys himself, as our Si does in full measure, it's pretty hard for the audience not to join in' [*sic*].<sup>108</sup>

Ultimately Alexander's production failed because the director failed to understand the play – neither he nor the actors discovered how it worked on stage. It imposed a concept of the future on the play without any real justification. The text was half-heartedly edited, which resulted in an overlong playing time. They were hampered by a setting that was an indistinct mixture and an actual set that was too large for the play, impractically slow in its operation and confusing for the plot, as Pigott-Smith asked, 'why doesn't [Lovewit] know what's going on in his house?'.<sup>109</sup>

The production relied on attempts at low farcical humour – like the Druggier fart and Dol replacing the hair over Mammon's exposed bald patch – to convince the audience into laughing. It operated on the lowest possible level and only sold out because of the star names involved – a ploy which convinced the audience into awed submission for a badly-conceived three-and-a-half hour production. This was a surprising length for a play Jones has described as being 'not an enormously long play' and when Mendes's production cut 'twenty minutes' it played at 'two hours twenty three minutes'.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ben Dowell, 'Play of the Week: *The Alchemist*', *West End Extra*, 11 October 1996.

<sup>109</sup> Pigott-Smith.

<sup>110</sup> Jones; Mendes, in Cave, Schafer and Woolland, pp. 82-3.



**BARTHOLOMEW FAIR IN PERFORMANCE****PRODUCTION DETAILS*****BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: YOUNG VIC***

John Littlewit  
 Win Littlewit  
 Dame Purecraft  
 Zeal-of-the-Land Busy  
 Justice Adam Overdo  
 Dame Alice Overdo  
 Grace Wellborn  
 Bartholomew Cokes  
 Humphrey Wasp  
 Ned Winwife  
 Tom Quarlous  
 Ursula  
 Mooncalf  
 Lantern Leatherhead  
 Jordan Knockem  
 Captain Whit  
 Nightingale  
 Ezekial Edgworth  
 Joan Trash  
 Trouble-all  
 Bristle

Director  
 Assistants

Designer  
 Lighting  
 Music  
 Puppets

First performance: 22 June 1978.

Michael Attwell  
 Penelope Nice  
 Kate Versey  
 Malcolm Rennie  
 Bill Wallis  
 Tina Jones  
 Fiona Victory  
 Philip Bowen  
 Tim Thomas  
 Frederick Warder  
 John Labanowski  
 Laura Cox  
 Chris Barnes  
 James Carter  
 Micky O'Donoughue  
 Terry Mortimer  
 Joss Buckley  
 Stephen Boxer  
 Heather Baskerville  
 Bev Willis  
 Christopher Ashley

Michael Bogdanov  
 Jeremy James Taylor,  
 Mel Smith  
 Paul Bannister  
 Michael Alvey  
 The Company  
 Richard Dean, Stefan Barab

**Archive resources for this production**

The Theatre Museum archive, London contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews  
 Theatre programme

*BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: ROUND HOUSE*

Fair opens 7.15 p.m., Play starts at 8 p.m.

John Littlewit  
 Win Littlewit  
 Dame Purecraft  
 Zeal-of-the-Land Busy  
 Ned Winwife  
 Tom Quarlous  
 Bartholomew Cokes  
 Humphrey Wasp  
 Justice Adam Overdo  
 Dame Alice Overdo  
 Grace Wellborn  
 Lantern Leatherhead  
 Joan Trash  
 Ezekial Edgworth  
 Nightingale  
 Ursula  
 Mooncalf  
 Jordan Knockem  
 Captain Whit  
 Punk Alice  
 Trouble-all  
 Haggis  
 Bristle  
 Filcher  
 Sharkwell

Jonathan Cecil  
 Victoria Plucknett  
 Sheila Burrell  
 Rowland Davies  
 Maurice Colbourne  
 Donald Gee  
 John Wells  
 Henry Woolf  
 Peter Bayliss  
 Iona Banks  
 Jennie Stoller  
 Antony Milner  
 Patricia Ford  
 Steven Beard  
 David Foxxe  
 Fanny Carby  
 Peter Craze  
 David Bailie  
 Peter Craze  
 Patricia Ford  
 David Claridge  
 David Foxxe  
 Marcus Bell  
 Patricia Ford  
 Marcus Bell

Director  
 Designers  
 Music  
 Costumes  
 Lighting  
 Animals  
 Puppet Designer and Director  
 First performance: 2 August 1978.

Peter Barnes  
 Robin Don, Tanya McCallin  
 John Riley  
 Lindy Hemming  
 Leonard Tucker  
 Michael Hirst  
 David Claridge

Archive resources for this production

The Theatre Museum archive, London contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews  
 Theatre programme

*BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: NT, OLIVIER*

Stage Keeper	Peter-Hugo Daly
Bookholder	Mark Long
Scrivener	Jim Barclay
John Littlewit	David Bamber
Win Littlewit	Kate Spiro
Ned Winwife	Patrick Drury
Tom Quarlous	Stephen Moore
Humphrey Wasp	Anthony O'Donnell
Bartholomew Cokes	Guy Henry
Dame Alice Overdo	Geraldine Fitzgerald
Grace Wellborn	Katharine Schlesinger
Dame Purecraft	Barbara Leigh-Hunt
Zeal-of-the-Land Busy	David Burke
Justice Adam Overdo	John Wells
Lantern Leatherhead	Peter-Hugo Daly
Joan Trash	Maggie McCarthy
Costermonger	Harry Waters
Nightingale	Jim Barclay
Ursla	Mark Addy
Mooncalf	Paul J Medford
Jordan Knockem	Mark Long
Ezekiel Edgworth	Jonathan Cullen
Corn-cutter	Dean Hollingsworth
Mousetrap man	Glyn Pritchard
Captain Whit	Fintan McKeown
Haggis	Tam Dean Burn
Bristle	Ged McKenna
Trouble-all	Michael Bryant
Northern	Nicholas Blane
Puppy	Dan Hildebrand
Punk Alice	Marian McLoughlin
Filcher	Mark Lockyer
Sharkwell	Douglas McFerran
Puppeteer	Ged McKenna
The Watch	Glyn Pritchard
	Harry Waters
	Judith Coke
Whore	
Customers: Tam Dean Burn, Judith Coke, Jennifer Hill, Dean Hollingsworth, Ged McKenna, Alan White	
Children: Stuart Ayre, Carrie Baker, Diane Edwards, Jacob Edwards, Lisa Hall, Gary Jones, Gemma Patricia Jones, Rachel Lane, Richard Lawrence, Nicola Vann	
Music Director/Percussion	David Tosh
Clarinet	Rory Allam
Trumpet	Howard Hawkes
Trombone	Eddie Thompson
Violin	Christopher Tombling



Director  
Designer  
Lighting  
Music  
Puppet Master  
Fights

Richard Eyre  
William Dudley  
David Hersey  
Ilona Sekacz  
Geoff Felix  
Johnny Hutch

First performance: 20 October 1988.

Archive resources for this production

The NT archive, London contains the following material.

Costume file  
Music  
Newspaper reviews  
Production drawings  
Production photographs and contact sheets  
Prompt book  
Theatre programme

*BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: RSC, SWAN AND YOUNG VIC*

John Littlewit	Stephen Boxer
Win Littlewit	Poppy Miller
Dame Purecraft	Susan Tracy
Zeal-of-the-Land Busy	David Henry
Ned Winwife	Zubin Varla
Tom Quarlous	Rob Edwards
Bartholomew Cokes	Tom Goodman-Hill
Humphrey Wasp	Gavin Muir
Justice Adam Overdo	John Quayle
Dame Alice Overdo	Caroline Harris
Grace Wellborn	Katy Odey
Lantern Leatherhead	Mark Hadfield
Joan Trash	Maureen Purkis
Ezekial Edgworth	Owen Sharpe
Nightingale	Jon Clairmonte
Ursla	Carol Macready
Mooncalf	James Tucker
Jordan Knockem	Steve Swinscoe
Puppy	Jon Clairmonte
Northern	David Henry (Swan)/ Christopher Birch (Y Vic)
Captain Whit	John Straiton
Trouble-all	Kevork Malikyan
Haggis	Archie Lal
Bristle	Jake Nightingale
Pocher	John Straiton
Sharkwell	Paul Popplewell
Filcher	James Tucker
Punk Alice	Tina Gambe
Saxophone	Leslie Cawdrey (Swan)/Gareth Brady (Young Vic)
Trumpet	Peter Fisher (Swan)/Christopher Storr (Young Vic)
Trombone	Kevin Pitt (Swan)/Winston Rollins (Young Vic)
Drums	John Gibson (Swan)/Philip Crabbe (Young Vic)
Bass guitar/Double bass	Roger Inniss (Swan)
Bass guitar	Alyn Ross (Young Vic)
Keyboards	John Woolf (Swan)/Peter Pontzen (Young Vic)
Guitar/Percussion	David Carrol (Swan)/Ben Grove (Young Vic)
Director	Laurence Boswell
Designer	Tom Piper
Lighting	Adam Silverman
Music	Simon Bass
Music Arranger	Paul Mottram
Movement	Toby Sedgwick
Fights	Terry King
Puppetry Consultant	Sue Buckmaster
Sound	Bobby Aitken

Assistant Director

Rebecca Gatward

First performance: Swan, 4 December 1997,  
Young Vic, 18 February 1999.

Archive resources for this production

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews

Performance video (Swan only)

Production photographs and contact sheets

Prompt book

Stage Manager's reports

Theatre programme



INTRODUCTION: *BARTHOLOMEW FAIR*

In the Prologue to *Volpone* Jonson proudly proclaimed his allegiance to the neo-classical dramatic unities of space, time and action, 'The laws of time, place, persons he observeth, / From no needful rule he swerveth'.<sup>1</sup> *Bartholomew Fair* takes place over the time span of one day in a concentrated location: this time in the annual Fair at Smithfield. But there appears to be a contradiction in *Bartholomew Fair*: the play seems more disparate in its action than Jonson's other comedies and yet Jonson is precise in distinguishing an exact moment for the action to occur: 'The four-and-twentieth of August! Bartholomew day!' (I.1.7).<sup>2</sup>

*Bartholomew Fair* is Jonson's most sprawling play remaining in the repertoire of the English theatre. Rivalled only by the extensive *dramatis personae* of the theatrically neglected *Sejanus*, *Bartholomew Fair* boasts a cast of thirty-three characters, aside from 'Puppets' and 'Passengers'.<sup>3</sup> There is no single focus of 'persons', as Jonson boasted of in *Volpone*, but an array of individuals involved in many layered and connected plot lines, presenting a challenge to the potential director. In *Bartholomew Fair* it seems as if Jonson 'swerveth' in his allegiance to the rules of the neo-classical tradition. However, as Alexander Leggatt has pointed out, Jonson's supreme comic achievement was in abiding by these rules in *The Alchemist*; in *Bartholomew Fair* the rules of neo-

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. by R. B. Parker, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), Prologue, 31-2.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. by E. A. Horsman, *The Revels Plays* (London: Methuen, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Horsman, p. 5.

classicism are not 'needful' to his dramatic purpose, which in Leggatt's opinion is to present a 'comedy of chaos'.<sup>4</sup>

Jonson's loosening of the neo-classical rules by which he wrote allowed him in *Bartholomew Fair* to present a seemingly unstructured pageant of life. Each character assumes the status of the main character because we are apparently observing real life as it happens and the status of characters fluctuates, as in life, according to events beyond their control. The precise time location in the play, 'The four-and-twentieth of August!' is there to underline the impression that this is one moment in the life of the Bartholomew Fair and that another play could be written about any one of the other two days. Jonson is presenting an almost literal slice of life, filtered through his comic imagination.

It is usually difficult to pick out the main character in any Jonson play but in the case of *Bartholomew Fair* the task seems even harder. This change in Jonson's writing lends a clue to the potential director of the play as to where to place the focus of the production. In the vast work of *Bartholomew Fair* it is the Fair and not Cokes, Overdo, Ursula nor Quarlous which should take centre stage. The play's constant main character is undoubtedly the action of the Fair.

It is the representation of the Fair that defines the success or failure of any production. The annual three day Bartholomew Fair in Smithfield was an immediately recognisable image to the first audience of the play, and even up until the mid-nineteenth century it would be an image current to most

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Leggatt, 'Bartholomew Fair: Jonson's Comedy of Chaos', a paper given at 'Bartholomew upon Bartholomew: there's the device!', a one-day conference organised by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, 24 August 1998, subsequently revised and printed in Alexander Leggatt, *Introduction to English Renaissance Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).



theatregoers. However, neither the trade Fair nor the resulting celebrations exist for the audiences of the late twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

The Induction scene to Jonson's play sets up a contract between 'the author of *Bartholomew Fair*' and 'the spectators or hearers, at the Hope on the Bankside [...] the one and thirtieth day of October 1614' (Induction 64-8). However, John Littlewit tells us within Jonson's fiction that 'Today!' is 'The four and twentieth of August! Bartholomew day!' (I.1.6-7). Obviously, in the writing Jonson was aware that it would be extremely unlikely that the play would be premiered on the real Bartholomew Day (24 August 1614). And so the central conceit of Jonson's subject matter – the Bartholomew day Fair – is presented to the original audience as an acknowledged anachronism in the difference between the two dates that are repeatedly, and rather painstakingly, offered to the audience in the Induction and the first scene of the play proper. Jonson's decision, like Littlewit's later in the play, requires the audience to fill in the gaps of the play using a combination of their imagination and an acceptance of what the playwright discloses in his chosen format.

Littlewit says of his puppet play *Hero and Leander* that he has:

only made it a little  
easy, and modern for the times, sir, that's all; as for the  
Hellespont, I imagine our Thames here; and then  
Leander I make a dyer's son, about Puddle-wharf; and  
Hero a wench o'the Bank-side (V.3.113-7).

And he goes on to provide other elements more familiar to his contemporaries in London, circa 1614, to stand in for the original locations and characters of the myth. It is in the capacity of playwright that Littlewit has amended the original story but he has done it on the advice of Lantern Leatherhead, the master of the

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. by G. R. Hibbard, New Mermaids (London: Ernest Benn,



puppets and the performer of Littlewit's lines as he gives voice to all the characters. Bartholomew Cokes asks Leatherhead 'do you play it according to the printed book?' and Leatherhead responds: 'By no means, sir. [...] A better way, sir; that is too learned and poetical for our / audience; what do they know what Hellespont is?' (V.3.102-5). This is the question which prompts Littlewit's explanation of the choice of his substitution of newer devices for the stage for the ancient ones of the original. In other words, Jonson has written two characters in Littlewit and Leatherhead that express the need for the producers of meaning in the theatre (in their case the playwright and the puppet master, in our late-twentieth century case, the combination of director and designer) to decide on the most appropriate way of telling the classic but distanced story to a specific audience. Or, in order for theatre to work it has to communicate to its particular audience in a language that audience – and probably no other outside of that space and time – will understand precisely. In addition to the differences between the dates of the setting and the original performance, *Bartholomew Fair* followed its premiere at the Hope with a next-day performance at Court for King James on 1 November 1614, for which Jonson wrote an additional Prologue.

In the tradition of the two play-makers in *Bartholomew Fair*, over the last three decades directors and designers of Jonson's play have obviously been concerned with assimilating a 400 year old text into the current styles of performance. Just as Leatherhead's audience do not 'know what Hellespont is', so the central location and character of Jonson's play – the Bartholomew Fair – no longer exists for the audiences of Jonson's plays today. Each twentieth century production must seek its own suitable equivalent. The placing of the Fair

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1977), Hibbard states: 'From 1120 till 1855 a great fair was held annually in Smithfield on 24

in productions today is the single most important decision directors must make.

Once the analogous Fair has been found then the associated character equivalents can follow.

In contrast to their reviews of most other Jonsonian texts, theatre critics have expressed particular views about the difficulties of staging this play.

Michael Coveney has commented: 'the stage action rarely matches the relish and expectation aroused by the text'; he went further in highlighting the problems of production: 'if you go for one tumultuous side show, you lose the texture and detail of the characters'. Michael Ratcliffe wrote that it is 'a cheerful but impossible assignment, stuffed full of a handful of jokes and London life, but theatrically inert'. And Irving Wardle also aired misgivings about *Bartholomew Fair* on stage: 'everyone loves the idea [...] all too often, what you get is the spectacle'. When the central character of the play is the Fair itself, that is a very real challenge to directors and designers.<sup>6</sup>

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August, the feast of St Bartholomew', p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Blood brothers of the English theatre', [*Financial Times* (?)], [(?) 1988]; Michael Ratcliffe, 'Over the peak', *Observer*, 23 October 1988; Irving Wardle, 'Everyone's at the fair', *The Times*, 22 October 1988.



*BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: YOUNG VIC, DIR. MICHAEL BOGDANOV, 1978*

In 1978 there were two, almost simultaneous, productions of the play in London.

In that year Bogdanov became the Artistic Director of the Young Vic.

Assembling a new resident company of over twenty actors, he sought to launch his new venture with a production of *Bartholomew Fair*. He seized upon the circus skills of this newly formed ensemble and this inevitably influenced his choice of *Fair*. Bogdanov clothed the play's fairground setting in the aesthetic of the contemporary circus. Designer Paul Bannister stretched strips of cloth from the sides of the house to the ceiling to create the atmosphere of a circus tent. The evening's entertainment actually began before the audience entered the auditorium and continued in the interval, with buskers, jugglers, and a cast-member ripping a telephone directory in half. The *Fair* in the play itself was filled with stilt-walkers, unicyclists, rock music, policemen wielding batons, punks – a self-conscious bridge built between Jonson's Punk Alice, the violent prostitute, and the contemporary anti-fashion of punk rock – and characters wearing 'King's Road gear'. Stephen Boxer, who played Edgworth remembered his costume, 'it was modern dress so I wore a sharky fifties suit and glasses, rather than being an urchin, which I thought he would have been in the original'.<sup>7</sup>

One report, printed before the show opened, also suggested the inclusion of a tightrope act: 'they have a new permanent company which includes an acrobat and a high wire artist as well as some musicians - all people whose skills will be put to use in the performance'.<sup>8</sup> Another suggested that the ensemble had amongst them artists skilled in 'fire-eating, wire-walking'.<sup>9</sup> And one month

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<sup>7</sup> Anon., [n.p.], [n.pub], [June 1978 (?)]; Stephen Boxer, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 31 July 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Anon., 'All the fun of two Fairs', in *The Times*, 2 June 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., 'Lord of the ring', in *Guardian*, 16 June 1978.



before the show opened a short preview of the production states: 'the high wire has just gone up at the Young Vic'.<sup>10</sup> It remains uncertain whether these acts were presented in the finished production, although as no later review mentions them it seems unlikely that they were included.

Many critics reacted against Bogdanov's chosen style. They felt that the exterior dressing was a ploy to divert the audience into enjoying themselves because they felt the actual play was not working at all. Michael Billington suggested the need for transposed settings to 'find a precise modern equivalent'. He also noted the disparity between the circus analogy and some of the characters in Jonson's text: 'it is hard to think of any modern Fair that would contain characters like Bartholomew Cokes, [...] Overdo, [...] or [...] Busy'.<sup>11</sup>

Milton Shulman added that: '[the] language, the quaint morals and manners, the damnation of such sins as eating pork and the presence of the stocks [...] stubbornly refuse to match the setting'. Whilst mentioning the circus element these critics did not focus on it; instead it was the modernity, or perhaps more correctly, the contemporaneity that they objected to.<sup>12</sup>

Ned Chaillet, however, considered the use of the circus in Bogdanov's production, suggesting it was entertaining but ultimately empty, 'the circus skills are only a dressing for a classic, instead of a new way of seeing it'.<sup>13</sup>

The covert analogy here is perhaps to Peter Brook's landmark production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the RSC in 1970. Bogdanov worked as an assistant director on the production, which used circus skills, amongst other elements, to re-establish the energy and magic of the text. Perhaps Bogdanov was

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<sup>10</sup> Anon., *Evening Standard*, 19 May 1978.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 23 June 1978.

<sup>12</sup> Milton Shulman, 'Fairly good fun', *Evening Standard*, 23 June 1978.

<sup>13</sup> Ned Chaillet, *The Times*, 23 June 1978.

using his experiences from the *Dream* to motivate his *Bartholomew Fair* company. However, the mere use of a circus analogy is not enough evidence to form a working link between the two productions, either by Chaillet or later commentators on this production.

Indeed, Bogdanov's decision to use the skills of his company also remains a confused matter. In an interview printed before the show opened the skills of the company were mentioned as key elements of the production: 'For Bogdanov it's an ideal show to pull his new 21-strong company of actors together (he's aiming at 25-strong) "in one experience of music and rough theatre and circus skills and whatever"' [sic]. However, later in the same article these skills are discarded as being crucial to *Bartholomew Fair*:

Bogdanov promises that he's not going to rush to display the "tremendous number of upfront people" in his company who are used to "street work, fire-eating, wire-walking, juggling, unicycles, gymnastics" because he's got two years to show off those skills.<sup>14</sup>

This article was written whilst the production was still in rehearsals. Therefore, it seems that the skills were still being perfected and inserted into the performance at the time of writing. This may explain Bogdanov's reluctance to commit to details in terms of the skills to be employed in *Bartholomew Fair*. Bogdanov's comment of 'whatever' suggested that the production was, as one would expect, still the subject of experiment in the rehearsal room.

However, in another interview, also conducted before the opening night, Bogdanov was paraphrased as having stronger reasons for the inclusion of circus skills: 'The major companies are too similar in style, he says, too unadventurous [...] In this country a predominantly cerebral approach has been the theatre's downfall; he firmly advocates that the physical and intellectual should go hand in



hand'. This determination to pair the physical and the intellectual or in practice, to draw on the abilities of his actors' bodies as well as their minds prompted his choice of *Bartholomew Fair* to begin his directorship of the Young Vic:

Why *Bartholomew Fair* for the first production? "I wanted something that would bring all the skills of the company together to begin with." This includes the two associate directors: Jeremy James Taylor has jurisdiction over the music and Mel Smith is putting the cast through their circus paces.<sup>15</sup>

As well as appointing an associate director to oversee the circus skills it seems that specific acts were learnt especially for the production, 'considerable energy has gone into acquiring circus skills like unicycling and tightrope-walking'. Bogdanov's vision of *Bartholomew Fair* as circus would actually appear to be no happy accident of the rehearsal room.<sup>16</sup>

One positive element to come out of the production was the idea that, as the critic in *The Observer* suggested, 'at least you can tell the characters apart'. And this is still one of the chief arguments for contemporizing Renaissance texts. However, Milton Shulman suggested that this was no real help because the play remained complicated: 'Jonson's plot is so complex and busy that it takes almost a quarter of the play to sort out the victims from the sharks'.<sup>17</sup>

The modernity of the production style inevitably extended to the presentation of the characters. Coveney adroitly summarized the contemporary analogous guises of the characters from the play: Nightingale, 'the balladeer becomes a guitar-toting pop star in bangles and satin'; Edgworth was 'a fey mock-innocent in a three-piece suit'; Grace became 'a scheming intruder with a modern sexual appetite'; Leatherhead was turned into 'a Petticoat Lane spiv with

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<sup>14</sup> Anon., 'Lord of the ring'.

<sup>15</sup> Anon., 'Lord of the ring'.

<sup>16</sup> Heather Neill, 'The new Victorians', in *Times Educational Supplement*, 23 June 1978.

<sup>17</sup> Shulman.



a colourful tray of flying birds, spinning tops and cuddly toys'. All of these new identities were successful, according to Coveney, but he felt that, 'other characters will not yield to this sort of random trickery.' For example, he thought that Ursula 'cannot really be presented as anything other than a sweating loudmouth in voluminous rags, and nor is she'. This created a contradiction in the aesthetic of the production, as did the clash of contemporary style and the Puritanical intent of *Busy*, who, 'descends on the scene with evangelical fury in regulation black trilby and frock coat'. Coveney reserved praise for James Carter as Leatherhead and Philip Bowen as 'the chinless Cokes,' who, 'each emerge with much credit.' As for the rest of the 'uneven' cast, they 'operate in fits and starts between the gags'.<sup>18</sup>

Bogdanov's attitude to cutting was most clearly revealed in both of the pre-show interviews. Writing that the text had been 'minutely discussed', Heather Neill went on: 'Bogdanov does not scruple to change the odd word or to cut where necessary to make a text as complicated as Jonson's accessible to a modern audience, especially one that will consist mainly of young people'.<sup>19</sup>

Bogdanov's approach to the text was also mentioned in the *Guardian* article; whilst '80 per cent of his time' was taken up on the re-organisation of the building, Bogdanov admitted that his aim was to "'make the play clear, because it's quite a complex piece. I don't think it's going to be the most exciting thing I've ever done'".<sup>20</sup>

John Barber thought this attitude to editing was partially responsible for the failure of the production, 'ruthlessly cut, the text could not seize the attention

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Bartholomew Fair' [sic], *Financial Times*, 23 June 1978.

<sup>19</sup> Neill.

<sup>20</sup> Anon., 'Lord of the ring'.

because it had not been put first'.<sup>21</sup> It was the inconsistency of the cuts that worried Billington, 'not even the constant re-writing and adaptation of the text has any clear-headed consistency'. Billington strengthened his argument by stressing the benefits of cutting:

I am not against the kind of discreet, judicious tinkering that Peter Barnes [...] did on [...] *The Alchemist*. I see no point, however, in leaving in many of the more obscure references while inaccurately re-phrasing many lines whose sense we could guess from the context.<sup>22</sup>

Some reviewers appreciated the lively closing section with: 'a sexually explicit puppet show brought appreciative guffaws'. One critic found it provided the moment of synthesis of the multiple plots, 'the converging stories [...] all manage to come together during the performance of a sexy puppet show'. In fact, it was the inclusion of the puppets in the play that provided the production with its closure, 'a puppet's derisive laugh closes the proceedings: a good ending'.<sup>23</sup>

Bogdanov's lack of commitment to really investigating the text using a carefully considered updating was perhaps responsible for the failure of the production. Chaillet's mixed feelings are typical of the reviewers' conclusions: 'for all the richness of individual moments, there is still a frenetic incoherence to the production'.<sup>24</sup>

For Bogdanov *Bartholomew Fair* served the needs of his new acrobatic company, rather than the other way round. Considering the play as the inaugural production of the new Young Vic company, the *Observer* critic proclaimed it, 'for the new regime a good beginning'.<sup>25</sup> Barber thought it, '1960s directors' [*sic*] theatre, galloping slapstick and wild invention which leaves the significance

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<sup>21</sup> John Barber, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 1978.

<sup>22</sup> Billington.

<sup>23</sup> Shulman; Chaillet; Anon., *Observer*, 25 June 1978.

<sup>24</sup> Chaillet.

<sup>25</sup> Anon., *Observer*.

of the play untouched'.<sup>26</sup> Coveney captured the opinion of many critics when he wrote, 'his high-spirited version [...] is happy-go-lucky, come as you are, bright around the edges, but weak at the centre'.<sup>27</sup>

All in all, Bogdanov's production entertained but it left critics wondering what other productions may have drawn from the play.

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<sup>26</sup> Barber.

<sup>27</sup> Coveney.



*BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: ROUND HOUSE, DIR. PETER BARNES, 1978*

The critics' desire to discover more about the play after Bogdanov's production was soon fulfilled as Barnes's production opened at the Round House less than two months later. Barnes and designers Robin Don and Tanya McCallin (who left the production before the opening), chose the setting of an Elizabethan-style Fair: a market of trade where chickens, pigs and donkeys roamed and the audience was encouraged to participate in fairground side-shows. Audiences could stand 'face to face with two large and pungent pigs who told [...] fortunes with hoarse mantic grunts in reply to questions', they were 'formerly part of a Pig Act at Blackpool Tower Circus'.<sup>28</sup>

Most of the animals used possessed individual talents as another report suggested that the Shetland stallion 'does a Liberty act', and that there were racing mice. The animals' role, as well as other 'sideshow and amusements and spectacles' promoted the fact that 'children of all ages are welcome at the Fair'; like the traders in Jonson's play, these devices were employed to draw not just children but a variety of Cokeses – 'children of all ages'.<sup>29</sup>

The Fair opened forty-five minutes before the play began. This twentieth century audience participation, however, changed the period focus from the English Renaissance to a self-conscious twentieth-century evocation of the Renaissance – a view of the seventeenth century characterized by movement, noise and bartering, one step away from the Tudor cliché of orange-selling wenches and tumbling jesters. This, once again, ensured that the play took second place to the event of a real Fair, which presented the whole evening's entertainment in the style of a living museum. If there had been no sense of

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<sup>28</sup> Anon., 'An ass is born', *Evening Standard*, 4 August 1978.

event, no interaction between audience and characters in a pre-show setting a less-confused evocation of the Renaissance may have been presented. But Barnes's Fair was an anachronism because of the stalls of commodities available: food by Jacksons of Piccadilly, Caxton the chocolate purveyors, and London Palladium T-shirts. Another anachronism was in the fairground stalls used, loaned from Wookey Hole, which actually originate from the nineteenth, not the seventeenth century.

Converted from a disused railway engine shed near Euston station in 1968, the Round House used *Bartholomew Fair* as its first in-house production. Used previously by touring shows, the *Financial Times* critic called it, 'a theatre desperately in search of a show' before condemning its inaugural presentation with 'Barnes's direction' being 'sadly incompetent'.<sup>30</sup>

The choice of producing *Bartholomew Fair* in the Round House was an obvious one for Thelma Holt, the show's producer:

"There hasn't been anywhere to do *Bartholomew Fair* until now," Ms Holt said today, "unless you do it on Hampstead Heath." Failing that, the interior of the theatre will be covered in grass on which the audience will sit, and booths selling herbs, drinks, gingerbread men, will spread around the enormous gallery.<sup>31</sup>

It seems that sand and wooden benches, rather than grass, were used in the final production. The initial plan was for the auditorium to be open 'several hours before the play'. In the same interview, Holt admitted the enormity of producing the play, "We could do with a cast of 100 but we can't afford them."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Anon., 'Fun at the fair', *Evening Standard*, 2 August 1978.

<sup>30</sup> Anon., *Financial Times*, 28 December 1978.

<sup>31</sup> Anon., 'Fair round', *Evening Standard*, 16 May 1978.

<sup>32</sup> Anon., 'Fair round'.



It seems that the level of pre-show publicity was at a constant high because Barnes's *Bartholomew Fair* immediately followed Bogdanov's production. This was an extremely unusual situation for such a rarely performed play. The *Evening Standard* critic was first to point out the advance publicity for both shows: 'the Round House and the Young Vic are now outbidding each other in promises of acrobats, jugglers, trick cyclists and dancing bears'. *The Times* thought Barnes's version was likely to come out the victor, 'offering even greater high jinks' than Bogdanov.<sup>33</sup>

Once the show opened there were surprisingly few comparisons between the productions. Nevertheless, it seems that the quantities of scorn and praise were about the same for both.

Again, critics suggested that 'the play itself has not had quite the same care and attention lavished upon it', there was 'plenty of brawling and scampering about in Peter Barnes' boisterous version, though none of it is conveyed with any great conviction'.<sup>34</sup>

Here too, critics noticed the necessity for more than just surface glitter, the effects needed to assist the narrative, not work in spite of it. With so many diversions, the play was hard to follow and after the audience involvement in the *Fair*, the play was an anti-climax. Billington suggested that it was like 'watching good actors working away behind plate glass [...] not enough was coming across'.<sup>35</sup>

The quasi-seventeenth century setting did not help character identification and encouraged a simplistic, broad playing style, Jane Ellison found the play a

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<sup>33</sup> Anon., 'Fair's fair', *Evening Standard*, 31 May 1978; Anon., 'All the fun of two Fairs', *The Times*, 2 June 1978.

<sup>34</sup> K. N. ?, *Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 1978.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 4 August 1978.



disappointment in performance: 'the hypocrite, the widow-hunter and the simpleton blur beneath a surfeit of comic mannerism which Barnes clearly supposes to be the essence of Jacobean bawdy'.<sup>36</sup>

Billington offered one solution, not taken by Barnes, to invigorate the play in performance: 'Perhaps if a director, like Peter Stein with *As You Like It*, had the courage to take the audience, as well as the actors, on a physical journey through the Fair, it might actually work'.<sup>37</sup>

The playing company received mixed reviews, with some performers being singled out for comment. Michael Coveney thought the 'two major performances' were by Peter Bayliss as Overdo and Rowland Davies as Busy but 'there is plenty of good close-contact work', by John Wells, 'a ginger-footed Fauntleroy in brown velvet with a splendid array of half-hearted gestures and toothy grins'; Stoller, 'blossoms effectively into a lascivious opportunist'; Sheila Burrell as Purecraft 'is a lusty widow, forsaking her Puritan black as the holiday spirit moves her'; Woolf, 'gives a sharply edged portrait of Bartholomew's hot-tempered man'. However, 'the gallery of fairground habitués are not played with comparable relish or eccentricity'.<sup>38</sup>

Ellison, too, found the general playing not only distanced but annoyingly clichéd due to the misdirection: 'lines are ranted; thighs are slapped, breasts, inevitably, are fondled. Johnson's [*sic*] wit falls emptily on the air'; 'lines were gabbled and inaudible'.<sup>39</sup>

The puppet show was mentioned by three critics – but in little detail. Again, those who mentioned it found it mixed in its entertainment value:

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<sup>36</sup> Jane Ellison, *Evening Standard*, 4 August 1978.

<sup>37</sup> Billington.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, 4 August 1978.

<sup>39</sup> Ellison.

although severely cut, [it] at least works as a genuinely theatrical way of unravelling the plot, Busy beaten to the ground by the arguments of a blue-nosed, Muppet-like representation of Dionysus, and Overdo revealing himself in magisterial scarlet on Littlewit's stage.<sup>40</sup>

But the 'Muppet-like' quality, mentioned by Coveney, did not please Ellison:

'what led Barnes to conceive of Jonson's puppet-show as an anachronistic muddle which seemed to come straight out of *The Muppet Show* and make a nasty muddle of Jonson's argument?'.<sup>41</sup>

It was not just the puppet show that provided anachronisms, however, they ran straight through the production from the T-shirts on sale to the nineteenth-century fairground stalls. Barnes presented neither a 'gigantic 17<sup>th</sup> century Fair' nor 'a carefully reconstructed medieval fairground', as the *Guardian* critics anticipated, nor even 'Ben Jonson's Smithfield' as the *Evening Standard* critic said, but a twentieth-century evocation of the seventeenth-century trading Fair through the employment of disparate entities. If the intention was to be authentic it failed. However, if the intention was to assimilate Cokes's experience of being seduced into believing visual tricks to be worthy and truthful whilst surrendering one's more sophisticated judgement then this was probably achieved.<sup>42</sup>

Both of the productions in the 1970s were mounted at the end of a period of theatrical innovation, where experiments with space and an increasingly social relationship between actors and audiences characterized the theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. However, in 1978 these ideas were in transition and had become an idealistic, ineffective cliché.

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<sup>40</sup> Coveney.

<sup>41</sup> Ellison.

<sup>42</sup> Anon., 'Fair warning', *Guardian*, 28 July 1978; Anon., 'All the fun of the fair', *Guardian*, 26 June 1978; Anon., 'An ass is born'.

Although Barnes and Bogdanov's productions offered very different aesthetic experiences, their inconsistent, rather half-hearted, commitments to allowing the audience to play in the surface glitter of the Fair came too late in the decade to be revolutionary, either in theatrical terms, or for the discovery of the play.

By 1978 the ideas of rehearsal techniques for an ensemble group and the theatre set as an organic playground were passé. Apart from a limited run directed by Barnes at the Regent's Park Open Air Festival in 1987, which was essentially a repeat of his Round House version, it was ten years before another theatre director tackled Jonson's play.



*BARTHOLOMEW FAIR*: OLIVIER, DIR. RICHARD EYRE, 1988

In 1988 Richard Eyre's production of the play focused on a realistic representation of a Victorian fairground, complete with moving carousels and full scale fairground booths. The working set dominated the vast stage of the NT's Olivier. This production was based on a much less lavish production Eyre had directed at Nottingham back in 1976.

John Bailey called Eyre's 1976 production, 'the Playhouse's main contribution to the Nottingham Festival of 1976'. It is outside the chronology and mainstream dictates of this thesis to discuss this festival production at length. However, it is important to note the influence of Eyre's 1976 production on his later version of the play. As with some other productions of the play, for Eyre's Nottingham production, the evening's entertainment started in the foyer of the theatre, on this occasion with an exhibition of fairground setting items from the Lady Bangor Fairground Collection of Wookey Hole, Somerset. These items were also utilized two years later for Barnes's production at the Round House. Bailey listed a collection of items that made up the scenic and performance elements of the production:

A roundabout cockerel and horses, authentic carvings, gold cherubs and pillars incorporated into the scenery, steam organ music from the loudspeakers, strings of coloured lights, sand on the stage, a puppet show, a company of thirty-eight.<sup>43</sup>

Members of the Fringe group the Ken Campbell Road Show were cast to make up the amount of Fair people, including Sylveste McCoy, Arthur Kohn, Andy Andrews, Pat Keen, Caroline Pickles and Ralph Nossek. Campbell would later play Subtle and Arthur Kohn was Mammon in Eyre's version of *The Alchemist* at

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<sup>43</sup> John Bailey, *A Theatre for all Seasons: Nottingham Playhouse the First Thirty Years, 1948-1978* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1994), p. 165.

Nottingham in 1978. It seems that the large acting company and their anarchic and popular style facilitated the piece presented,

Richard [Eyre] had access to ideally suited actors without whom it would not have been possible to contemplate doing the piece. During the interval they mingled with the audience in foyers and on the forecourt where Sylveste as the 'cut-purse' did a little make-believe pocket picking and Whit the pimp 'offered' his ladies of easy virtue [*sic*].<sup>44</sup>

However, such effects were not utilized in his 1988 production as Eyre then focused on a different technique for representing the Fair. At the NT the budget far exceeded what Eyre had to work with at Nottingham and his desire for an idealized and huge fairground was indulged, with the help of William Dudley's large, animated design.

There were two major problems with this production. Firstly, the set, although as sumptuously gorgeous as the indulgent 1980s design aesthetic could manage, failed to function. The stagehands could be seen to assist the revolve and the room for the actors was limited to the forestage. Reviewer Francis King complained that it was 'distracting that stage-hands [*sic*] can so often be seen assisting the revolve'.<sup>45</sup>

This meant that, in the words of Michael Ratcliffe, 'the Fair goes dead the moment' the scenes commenced. Peter Porter detailed the set as containing a 'steam carousel, ferris wheels, and booths'. He also mentioned Ursula's 'tented domain' and thought that 'there is space enough [...] for Eyre to move his actors about in dashing balletic formations'. But at no point did Eyre attempt to arrange his actors in a silent but moving formation near the back to indicate that the Fair continued when the audience's focus was pulled to the front. As Ratcliffe suggested, 'there is no room for the actors except at the front of the stage. This

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<sup>44</sup> Bailey, p. 165.



would not matter if the large spaces between and behind the roundabouts were animated to some muted, busy purpose but they are not' (see PLATE 8).

Ironically, Ratcliffe thought that the stage 'springs to life' only 'in the final knees-up', when 'the large company take[s] possession of the great arena stage for the first time'.<sup>46</sup>

Michael Coveney gave detail of the indulgence of design for this production: 'Against an infernal burnished silhouette of the Fair and beyond, Dudley has provided a logical topography with three revolving stalls, one of which billows with the pig-woman's smoke all evening'.<sup>47</sup>

The other problem was the transposition of the setting to the Victorian. It prevented the audience from fully engaging with the text as they were at a three-fold remove from the action: firstly, this was a text from 1614, secondly, the setting was Victorian, but thirdly, the audience inhabited the world of 1988.

Irvine Wardle described the setting as 'a Victorian whirligig of revolving lights, colourful stalls, puppet shows, lions' cages and booths'. Despite his suggestion that the play had taken 'an unhistorical leap from Jacobean to a late Victorian London' he found that the setting paid off in relation to the characters, who were, 'instantly recognisable social types: Redcoat mashers, helmeted bobbies, giggling girls in vast floral hats, callow youths'. Commenting on Littlewit's house, the setting for the first act, it was 'a living-room taken straight from *The Diary of a Nobody*'. After this initial design, 'the full apparatus of William Dudley's Fair engulfs the stage with sparkling big wheels, a giant steam

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<sup>45</sup> Francis King, 'A rare Ben Jonson', *Sunday Telegraph* [23 October 1988 (?)].

<sup>46</sup> Michael Ratcliffe, 'Over the peak', *Observer*, 23 October 1988; Peter Porter, 'Setting up the swindlers', *Times Literary Supplement*, [(?)1988].

<sup>47</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Blood brothers of the English theatre', [*Financial Times* (?)], [(?) 1988].



organ, and booths overflowing with shiny trinkets'. The effect was impressive and Wardle noted that, in this production, 'scenic language comes first'.<sup>48</sup>

Porter saw the period represented as 'the Late Victorian era'. He thought this choice was predictable according to current fashions in the theatre but ultimately purposeful: 'an era top of the pops with directors today but here a justified choice [...] [because the] same colourful bustle of orgy and abstinence exemplifies both periods, with the Victorian far easier to respond to for a modern audience'.<sup>49</sup>

However, Michael Billington thought the production seemed 'heavy-handed' because the play's 'great virtue' is 'a pungently vivid picture of Jacobean London' told with 'documentary vivacity'. In divorcing the satire from its original targets Billington felt that the essence of the comedy was lost: 'laughter is slow to come because the fun seems rootless [...] you hear the surging vivacity of Jacobean invective rather than the more couth tone of Victorian England'. The juxtaposition of the Victorian and the Jacobean was even stranger to him because, 'Jonson's belief in dominating humours [...] seems alien in a society growing alert to complex psychology'. Billington regarded the transposition intrusive: 'a change of period can sometimes liberate a play: it can also, as in this case of this Victorianized *Bartholomew Fair*, corset it'.<sup>50</sup>

Like Billington, Kenneth Hurren found the transposition unwise. Speaking in general terms, he wrote that 'satire is rarely universal and almost never timeless'. He applied this thought to Jonson's play, which he thought, 'survives [...] as a vivaciously vivid portrait [...] of the low-life of London in Jacobean times'. For Hurren, if productions 'take that away [...] all that is left is a

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<sup>48</sup> Irvine Wardle, 'Everyone's at the fair', *The Times*, 22 October 1988.

selection of low-comedy parts which the players can fill out in any extravagant fashion that takes their fancy'. Hurren felt this happened in Eyre's 'rather fatiguing' production. He added, 'why Eyre decided to jettison the play's Jacobean terms of reference [...] is certainly a mistake and a half'.<sup>51</sup>

The setting was troubled by anachronisms – Busy, dressed as a dour Victorian, spoke in the style of Ian Paisley, a figure very much from the audience's own time, yet, the seventeenth-century stocks remained as a punishment. Perhaps these elements were intended to act as a bridge between the audience and the text. However, they provided more bemusement than understanding.

The playing and the direction were generally appreciated. But the chosen setting had a definite effect on character, it displaced each character from the original into a Victorian equivalent, and where none could be found, (for example, Busy), twentieth-century analogies were pointed to. Busy was the figure that dominated the climactic points of the production throughout.

Porter commented on the effect of the transposition on the portrayal of characters, 'the prevailing anachronism extends to a wide range of accents and costumes'. For example, David Burke as Busy 'moves in and out of the apocalyptic tones of Ian Paisley', and Haggis and Bristle 'are Keystone cops with Scots [*sic*] and Welsh accents'. He praised David Bamber for 'a wonderful account of Littlewit [...] finally adorned with Wilde's green carnation and Bunthorne jacket' [as the author of the puppet play]. And he also liked John Wells as Overdo, who, 'is first placarded like the man at Oxford Circus who warns of the dangers of lust from too much animal protein, and second as a

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<sup>49</sup> Porter.



flower-porter with a dozen boxes balanced on his head'. But for Porter 'Best of all [...] is Michael Bryant's Troubleall, a Beckettian nut-case'.<sup>52</sup>

Writing about the puppet show Wardle suggested: 'Busy's invasion of the lewd spectacle reaches a climax when he loses his religious breeches, disclosing a frilly salmon-pink foundation garment'. He also praised Bamber as 'the complaisantly uxorious Littlewit [...] a Jacobean Pooter' when Quarlous and Winwife, 'two wife-hunting Redcoats [...] promptly set about fondling his wife'. He also liked the fairground characters, 'each establishing himself in a few seconds: Mark Long's horse-coursing spiv; Jonathan Cullen's Chaplinesque pick-pocket; Mark Addy's pig-woman Ursula, wedged with difficulty into her throne before descending on two brawlers with a pan of sizzling fat' [*sic*]. He praised Wells's Overdo, who, 'becomes increasingly solemn as his head-gear and false noses become more ridiculous, [he] defines the ruling comic pattern'.<sup>53</sup>

In the Victorian setting, Billington also recognised the Littlewits as 'pure Pooter', and 'the nouveau riche Bartholomew Cokes is a boatered, blazered silly-ass', and 'Overdo becomes a Sherlockian investigator in a deer-stalker'.<sup>54</sup>

Burke's 'blustering Ian Paisley' surprised Hurren: 'The proceedings leave mere anachronism behind and soar off into [...] total fatuity when this character is clapped into the stocks (!) [*sic*], by a posse of Keystone Cops'. Dismissing the production wholeheartedly he wrote, 'I found the capers relentlessly fatiguing despite the almost panic-stricken activity of everyone'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Billington, 'Precisely, Mr Pinter', *Guardian*, 22 October 1988.

<sup>51</sup> Kenneth Hurren, *Plays and Players*, January 1989.

<sup>52</sup> Porter.

<sup>53</sup> Wardle.

<sup>54</sup> Billington.

<sup>55</sup> Hurren.



In an interview with Heather Neill, Wells revealed his attitude to the production. Speaking about his own character Wells was quoted, ““This judge goes to the equivalent of the Notting Hill Carnival disguised as an orator [...] I thought I should come on doing the loony voice of a mad orator, but then it became obvious that Jonson was attacking the gratuitous remarks that any judge makes; dress him in rags and they seem lunatic. So no funny voices.”” Speaking of Jonson’s moral stance in the play, Wells praised Jonson because, ““He doesn’t take a line””, showing the interesting challenge to audiences today to attribute their own moral conclusions. Wells went on to talk of the difficult relationship between the play and an audience of the 1980s: ‘It is, admits Wells, a difficult play “unless you shake hands with the audience early on”’. And he admitted that, instead of the Victorian setting, he would have preferred ‘setting it “bang in 1614” [...] but he wholeheartedly supports Richard Eyre’s decision to place it in “a late Victorian/Edwardian limbo”’. His support came from the need for audience recognition of the status and roles of individuals in society: ““you have to know instantly who the police are”’. However, the reviewers’ comments suggested that more confusion than understanding was caused by the transposition.<sup>56</sup>

As for the often reported difficulties of Jonson’s language, Neill presented Wells’s viewpoint: ‘He believes that Jonson’s learning – the Latin tags, classical and topical references – need not be a barrier for a modern audience, as long as the actor understands what he is trying to communicate’. Wells also stressed the importance of a close reading of the text for the actor and gave an indication of the way the texts indicate their theatrical status to the

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<sup>56</sup> John Wells, quoted in Heather Neill, ‘Overdoing the modesty’, [*Times Educational Supplement*

reader: “If he stipulates a prop, you just can’t play the scene without it”. Wells also exposed his feelings to Jonson in general:

“I began by thinking he was pretty good, but now I believe he was really a genius. He was a more educated man than Shakespeare and his language has lasted better. He had the uncanny ability to put together an inspired political cartoon – including types who are still recognisable – and a marvellous ear for dialogue. He writes the dialect speeches phonetically and it’s clear he must have been a very good mimic. The result – cartoon plus hyper-realism – is very intelligent comedy.”<sup>57</sup>

Eyre’s production did contain moments of intelligent comedy but the spectacle of the Victorian machines commanded the attention. Guy Henry, who played Cokes, remembered the difficulty of making the comedy work in the transposed setting:

Unfortunately it wasn’t a great success. It’s such a strange play to do because it’s like a revue of its time. So all the jokes aren’t funny any more. We used to think it was very funny in rehearsals – which is often a bad sign – and I remember going out on the first preview and, the Olivier theatre – a huge, terrifying theatre – and nothing from the audience. We spent the rest of the run trying to make it accessible, trying to re-think it. Richard had done a strange thing, he’d set it in the Victorian time, because of the difference in the societies, all that uptight Victorian hypocrisy didn’t really suit the more outlandish Bacchanalians of Elizabethany time.<sup>58</sup>

This displacement led to the actors being self-indulgent, as Henry’s recollections unintentionally revealed,

When we became irreverent and just pissed about it started to work. We put in a few cheap gags, that sense of *joie de vivre* was missing when we opened – it was banal. It became naughty and rude and we used to laugh because, assuming in Jonson’s day, it would have been a hell of a romp. I wouldn’t want to do it again. It’s not a very well constructed play.<sup>59</sup>

Placed in the NT’s repertoire during the Christmas period, this *Bartholomew Fair* was a romantic festive treat. It offered family audiences an alternative, nostalgic pantomime steeped in learning but it never really exposed

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(?), [1988 (?)].

<sup>57</sup> Wells.

<sup>58</sup> Guy Henry, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 19 July 1997.

the satiric heart of Jonson's play because of the audience's three-fold remove from the text. In the decade of the lavish sets of West End musicals it echoed the taste for excess and luxury in the boom years, exposing a movement away from the rough theatre of the previous decades. And a commitment, however ironic, to return to the nostalgic idealization of Victorian values in Thatcher's Britain.

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<sup>59</sup> Henry.



*BARTHOLOMEW FAIR: SWAN AND YOUNG VIC, DIR. LAURENCE*

BOSWELL, 1997-9

In 1997 Boswell staged the play for the RSC in the Swan as a response to popular culture in the 1990s. It was the antithesis of Eyre's nostalgic production, concentrating on the fractured, episodic nature of the play. The set, by Tom Piper, was minimalist with a blue cyclorama and matching blue doors and floor. The insides of the trap and of the back doors were in contrasting orange. Large props were brought on to suggest different locations in the Fair and a curtain, comprised of lightbulbs on long strands, could be manipulated to change the perimeter of the acting area. Leatherhead's trinkets (dolls, hobby horses, windchimes) were lowered from above to add to the unsettling atmosphere.

Fantasy lighting in pinks, oranges, greens, blues and brights, designed by Adam Silverman, also created the almost nightmarish setting. And a big beat, reggae and ska score, by Simon Bass, also increased the eclectic contemporary references. The plain garishness of the Fair setting was multi-functional and evoked the Notting Hill Carnival, a contemporary funfair, the Glastonbury Festival, and a beer garden. Stephen Boxer, who played Littlewit, recalled the set 'it's the sort of tacky end of the fairground, the motorway caff [*sic*] colours. It's harder edged than Bogdanov's production'. Owen Sharpe, who played Edgworth, had mixed feelings towards the transposition to the 1990s:

I don't know if we've fully gone the whole hog with the modern setting. I think if he was going to go straight for Notting Hill he should have pushed it further. Put more black actors in it than just Tina and Jon. And it's terrible to typecast the two black people. Actually I think, well, his idea was right, but it would have been interesting to have everyone at the Fair black and these white people coming in; it would be very interesting to see.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Stephen Boxer, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 6 January 1998; Owen Sharpe in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 9 March 1998.

Rob Edwards, who played Quarlous, was in favour of the design:

Personally speaking, any classical play set in modern dress you just breathe a huge sigh of relief: it just solves umpteen problems in one stroke. It makes it far more easy to do and particularly in a comedy you're just liberated, you have lots of modern methods that you can just immediately use – accents, topical things you can make of it. If you're lumbered with seventeenth century you can't do any of that; it's much harder. So I think the Notting Hill idea was always a very good one and everyone reacted very positively.<sup>61</sup>

Tom Goodman-Hill, Cokes in Boswell's production, suggested that 'placing it in a modern context meant that you got to the heart of the play, rather than worrying too much about the context'. And he discussed the reasons for the aesthetic used: 'Jonson didn't want to present an idealized vision of what you might imagine *Bartholomew Fair* to be like' and so the design created was a 'kind of industrial face – the crew in boiler suits, strings of light bulbs and industrial blue. You rarely see blue in the theatre and covering up the existing stage in that industrial cloak was satirical'.<sup>62</sup>

Bass explained his general idea for the musical score:

Given that they were being quite accurate about the Notting Hill Carnival, I didn't want a stereotypical black man jumping around playing calypso. What I thought would be good was real street music mixed with the standard sort of Carnival music people expect. Now Notting Hill is full of the bourgeois and they listen to what they think of as Carnival music – Bob Marley. The street kids think that's incredibly boring, they listen to drum and bass and jungle. I wanted very aggressive, unpleasant, upsetting music. Which is the reality of the Carnival. There's very little interplay between the groups of music. Normally when I write a score there would be running devices throughout that would refer to each other. We didn't want that with *Bartholomew Fair*, we wanted it to be very violent and separate and ugly and brash.<sup>63</sup>

However, there was cross-referencing in the styles used. For example,

Bass suggested that the opening music 'had an element of the old and an element

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<sup>61</sup> Rob Edwards, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 8 January 1998.

<sup>62</sup> Tom Goodman-Hill, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 6 January 1998.

<sup>63</sup> Simon Bass, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 10 February 1998.



of the new: it's calypso with a drum and bass beat'. A mixture of devices achieved this as 'the band played live to a pre-recorded beat'. The cliché of the Fair was suggested in the scenes with Trash and Leatherhead by a piece using a synthesized fairground organ but made 'a little bit mad', for this Bass was influenced by the film *Dumbo*: 'We wanted it to seem very dream-like, very surreal, trance-like, rather than a traditional Victorian carousel fairground organ'. Other music at the Fair, used when Grace was alone with Quarlous and Winwife had traditional roots: '*She Walks Through The Fair* is a traditional Irish song. I took that theme on and did variations on it to make it slightly surreal'. And the music also achieved comic effects, as Overdo was given inappropriate music to emphasise his stupidity – 'Laurence wanted Overdo to look even sillier, so we did very traditional reggae; it makes him look awkward and out of place'.<sup>64</sup>

This was an anti-romantic treatment of the play, consciously jettisoning the image of orange-sellers and doublet and hose that the play sometimes evokes. The darker side of the Fair was presented to the audience, and they noticed its tangible effect on Dame Overdo when she collapsed, disguised as a prostitute, and vomited, due to excessive alcohol (and possibly drug) consumption. The Firkin Brewery sponsored the production and product placement was evident in beer and alcopop bottles, swigged by the characters. However, the inclusion of brand names helped to emphasize the idea of commodity and indulgent consumption within the Fair; and various characters, including the sometime moral arbiter Quarlous, were seen to snort cocaine. In fact, one of Edgworth's tricks to pick Cokes's purse was to pass him a joint to smoke.

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<sup>64</sup> Bass.



Goodman-Hill remembered the rehearsal period was taken up by logistical concerns: 'it was the sheer technical nightmare of getting tables off and working out how to get that many people on stage, particularly in the first pick-pocketing scene. We had to take the Overdo family onto the balcony'. Edwards recalled that rehearsals 'got bogged down in the difficulties of staging a play in the Swan': 'when you've got twenty people there's only one place you can act and that's the middle, you have to keep engineering ways of getting people out to corners or up the back'. Sharpe noticed that this focus on practicalities of staging had an effect on the approach to language: 'it's amazing when you rehearse something, you sometimes don't see and you rehearse everything the same – you never really, really look at the language specifically'. Nevertheless, he had strong ideas with the issue of language:

This is my biggest belief, especially with *Bartholomew Fair*, is that it has to be done at pace. Because you will just lose the audience. As soon as you slow it down you lose the audience because the text is so dense and you can't do a page-long speech and pause after every line. That's what's happening, that's the danger for all actors. You use your character too much, rather than letting the language develop your character. If there's not a solid grounding about who everyone is – I don't think everyone, in the short rehearsal period we had, has discovered exactly who they are, how important they are in the Fair – that's when you get into confusing an audience. And I do I genuinely think that even the nights where the audience love it, I'd say only about 60 % really get it. There's a big 40-45% going, "Er no, but it's a good night". But I think the difference is that it's a good show but it could be a very good show.<sup>65</sup>

Viv Thomas warned potential audiences that this was 'not a rip-roaring romanticized period piece' but had strong evocations, like 'its capacity to produce moments of anguished realism such as the drink/drug induced collapse

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<sup>65</sup> Goodman-Hill; Edwards; Sharpe.

of Dame Overdo' and its presentation of an 'image of a frantic, fractured society', which revealed *Bartholomew Fair* as 'a play for today'.<sup>66</sup>

Michael Coveney pioneered a renewed campaign for the company to present more Jonsonian texts: 'The RSC has done well by some of the rarer Ben Jonsons [...] but not really well enough. It should be excavating more assiduously'. He suggested the 'attentive and appreciative audiences' for this particular production as an indicator of Jonson's growing audience.<sup>67</sup>

Sarah Teasdale thought the setting was 'deftly translated with energy and verve'. She appreciated this energy and daring in the production, 'the result is a rollercoaster of a ride through the folly of humankind'.<sup>68</sup>

However, Ann FitzGerald thought that Boswell 'does not entirely pull off Ben Jonson's sprawling play'; but presented instead 'a razzmatazz event, very successfully staged by Boswell and his designer Tom Piper, with suitably brassy music from Simon Bass'. In a rare mention the work of the lighting designer was praised alongside his colleagues 'Adam Silverman's lighting gives a wonderful sense of the glitter and movement of the fairground'.<sup>69</sup>

John Peter acknowledged that it 'seemed to go down a treat with much of the audience' but felt that he had to suggest 'this is not quite Ben Jonson'. His complaint was that 'there is no sense of rumbustious life, only people loitering or strutting about'.<sup>70</sup>

Stewart McGill praised the RSC at the Swan, which, 'has reinvented some unsuspecting classics into massive popular hits'. But a vitriolic jibe quickly followed the praise: 'This isn't one of them'. His dislike of the production came

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<sup>66</sup> Viv Thomas, 'All the world's a fair', *Stratford upon Avon Herald*, 11 December 1997.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Cruel streak laid bare', *Daily Mail*, 23 January 1998.

<sup>68</sup> Sarah Teasdale, 'Ben turns modern', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 12 December 1997.

<sup>69</sup> Ann FitzGerald, *Stage*, 24 December 1997.



from Boswell's decision to contemporize the play, he, 'tries to make it a play for the 90's'. McGill thought this was 'a disaster and a show that made me question what on earth the RSC is trying to do'. He suggested reasons for Boswell's approach and directorial decisions: 'Boswell clearly sees links with *Trainspotting*, setting the play in a totally in yer face contemporary Fair of cocaine sniffers, pill poppers vomiting drunks and designer thugs' [*sic*]. He particularly disliked the soundtrack, as 'the techno, drum'n' bass [*sic*] soundtrack pounds away [...] the play is lost'. In a barbed response to 'these low levels', McGill asked: 'Does someone at the RSC believe young audiences only want trendy classics?'. Levelling another jibe at the company and the production he ended: 'The show's sponsored by The Firkin Brewery, and product placement is more upfront than the hoardings at a football match as characters drink and swill their way through this shameful evening (see PLATE 9).'<sup>71</sup>

Paul Taylor, who placed the audience in sympathy with Cokes, best described the effect of the set on the audience:

A curtain made up of long strings of light bulbs that sashays back and forth over the stage can also swing on its axis - a knack that comes in handy when the production wants to show us, filmically, the dizzy, strobing way the world looks from inside the skull of an innocent who is going out of his skull on the party atmosphere created, as a diversion, by pickpockets.<sup>72</sup>

Coveney saw the setting as 'a modern carnival, like William Hague's shindig at Notting Hill', complete 'with excellent rap and reggae sounds,

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<sup>70</sup> John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 21 December 1997.

<sup>71</sup> Stewart McGill, *What's On for Birmingham and Central England*, 10-23 January 1998.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Welcome, people, one and all, to *Bartholomew Fair*', *Independent*, 13 December 1997.



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colourful costumes and a magical, seductive array of fairground prizes, mobiles and trinkets that descends from the high Swan roof like an enchanted forest'.<sup>73</sup>

In terms of costume, Goodman-Hill remembered his decision for the appearance of Cokes: 'My initial thought was that he should look like Mick Jagger going to a wedding. He's basically dressed very smartly but insisted on having a tie-dyed shirt'. Sharpe thought Edgworth should wear 'a snorkel jacket and trainers – somebody that you wouldn't notice in the background. But Laurence wanted to go very flash', he ended up in a pinstripe suit. Edwards saw Quarlous 'as a sort of Bob Geldof – scruffy, dissolute. The leather coat was from *Withnail and I* and the waistcoat was Laurence's idea, like a bird of prey'.<sup>74</sup>

Peter attacked the costume designs, which were 'modern, which would be all right if they made sense, but they don't'. He found the style of clothing a 'wild mix'n'match [*sic*], ranging from mock-genteel through working-class butch to high punk, which suggests, as with some fashion designers, that it has no organizing idea behind it'. His dislike of the design dominated his view of the production: 'The vivid, grimy social texture of Jonson's play is dissipated in self-indulgent designer-tableaux.'<sup>75</sup>

Teasdale had an interesting viewpoint on the portrayal of the women in accordance with this contemporary world, 'through the use of costumes the women are transformed into effigies of modern day folly and pomp – one enters [...] resembling a Teletubby while another rants like Margaret Thatcher complete with handbag'.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Coveney.

<sup>74</sup> Goodman-Hill, Sharpe, Edwards.

<sup>75</sup> Peter.

<sup>76</sup> Teasdale.

Peter had some justification in his complaint about the lack of organization between the costumes, which eclectically ranged from suits to leather coats, combat trousers, bowler hats and ministerial black gowns. However, the aesthetic typified by the late 1990s is eclecticism (see PLATE 10). Each costume was tailored to the personality, appearance and status of the wearer, as in life, and not part of a homogeneous grand scheme. And as Teasdale pointed out, individual figures could be seen to be stylistically representative of certain icons of contemporary life. This eclectic appearance was matched by Boswell's casting, featuring a range of accents and physical types. Sharpe (himself an Irish actor) has suggested that the range of accents suited Jonson's writing:

I actually think the Irish accent suits Jonson's writing, because it's colourful. I think it's a play for accents, I know he's obviously written some in. But I like what Kevork does with Trouble-all; I just think he makes it so more exciting that he has his [Armenian-Turkish] accent.<sup>77</sup>

However, Boswell's original inspiration of Notting Hill for the production was undercut by only casting two black actors – and in racially stereotypical roles – one as a reggae singer, the other as a prostitute. Unsurprisingly, McGill wrote that 'characters in a variety of regional accents including forced patois come and go in an overlong confusion'. However, he praised the 'clarity and character' playing of Quarlous, Winwife and Littlewit.<sup>78</sup> Other critics were laudatory about the playing, despite the spectacular setting. FitzGerald complimented the growing sophistication of the acting, suggesting 'characters emerge from caricature'.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Sharpe.

<sup>78</sup> McGill.

<sup>79</sup> FitzGerald.



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Thomas praised Stephen Boxer who ‘creates a John Littlewit of tender innocence’. Knockem and Whit were singled out, too, as ‘smiling sinister acolytes, masters in the arts of perversion, [...] not acted but lived by Steve Swinscoe and John Straiton. They positively reek of amoral nastiness’.

According to Thomas, this ‘amoral nastiness’ was ‘a smell that clings, too, to the cut-purse, Owen Sharpe’. Thomas also enjoyed John Quayle’s ‘deliciously bewildered would-be see-all, know-all’. And Thomas praised the presentation of Trouble-all in Kevork Malikyan’s ‘stunning portrayal of madness. Here is a refugee from the theatre of the absurd.’ But it was Tom Goodman-Hill as Cokes that Thomas reserved for the highest praise, he ‘provides a portrait of a pathetic creature beguiled by the trivia of the Fair. This orange suited, naïve nit-wit is no mere comic butt’. Seeing a complex portrayal not usually associated with the role, Thomas likened him to ‘a child playing on the lip of a crocodile, he attracts audience sympathy and occasions great delight with his gyrating modern dance’.<sup>80</sup>

Taylor wrote in detail about the acting styles of the individual cast members, beginning with Goodman-Hill’s dance in the second purse-stealing scene:

Imagine the young Alec Guinness trying to do a funky Marvin Gaye impression and you’ll get some idea of the blissfully funny incongruity of the sequence where, to a live reggae number, Tom Goodman-Hill’s terminally guileless young heir [...] tries to dance up a storm like the cool Jamaican dude he so egregiously isn’t. Dream casting brings Jonson’s vast canvas of eccentrics and hypocrites to life with rollicking recognizability, from Rob Edwards’ splendid Quarlous, a superior-acting dropout on the make who is like a frowstily hung-over refugee from *Withnail and I*, to David Henry’s spherically well-fed Zeal of the Land Busy, the kind of born-again “visionary” who these days would be raking it in on a Christian cable channel.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas.

<sup>81</sup> Taylor.

Taylor also mentioned Quayle as Overdo, who was 'first seen emerging from hiding in a skip. Best place for this idiot in a play full of potential but disqualified moral arbiters'.<sup>82</sup>

The production completed the RSC residencies in Newcastle, Plymouth and London. The 1999 London transfer to the Young Vic effected little change to the production, except minor clarifications to costumes and entrances and exits. Audiences enjoyed the production, as the actors recalled. Goodman-Hill thought some nights the audience 'absolutely went wild. They've gone completely mad for it'. However, this was unexpected as he felt that the booked-up tickets were bought by 'Friends of the RSC, locals, most of whom are a certain age, who booked six months in advance and didn't know it was modern dress and were expecting to see a roast pig'. Nevertheless, he felt 'those older people' had 'to their credit [...] stuck with it and on the whole loved it'. Boxer was 'pleasantly surprised how responsive they are' as 'most of the audience are with you at the end and they're rather pleased they've understood it and that they've had a good time'.<sup>83</sup>

Boswell's production may be remembered for its striking contemporaneity, encapsulated in a vivid plastic aesthetic and loud dance music. However, its real contribution to Jonson's text in performance was in the surprisingly highly-detailed quality of individual performances. The characters really did emerge from caricature in this setting because the actors were not fighting against seventeenth-century costuming. There was less anxiety for the actors because the audience could easily identify and relate to them through their

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<sup>82</sup> Taylor.



dress. Once the clear statements were made by their dress they pieced out their performances in fine detail. As Goodman-Hill has suggested, he was pleased about the audience response because 'it bears out the strength of the performances' and Jonson's writing: 'if we'd tried to make it any more contemporary I think there would have been less sympathy'. This was a spectacular event but the audience could look beyond the spectacle and discover Jonson as a writer of exuberant and defective human life.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Goodman-Hill; Boxer.

<sup>84</sup> Goodman-Hill.

***THE DEVIL IS AN ASS IN PERFORMANCE*****PRODUCTION DETAILS*****THE DEVIL IS AN ASS: BIRMINGHAM REP AT THE NT, LYTTTELTON*****By Ben Jonson, adapted by Peter Barnes**

Satan	Bernard Lloyd
Pug	Chris Ryan
Wrath	Roy Finn
Lady Vanity	David Gant
Covetousness	Michael Menaugh
Iniquity	Richard Butler
Fabian Fitzdottrel	Peter Vaughan
Engine	David Burke
Wittipol	Alan Rickman
Eustace Manly	William Lindsay
Frances Fitzdottrel	Anna Calder-Marshall
Merecraft	Derek Godfrey
Trains	David Foxxe
Thomas Gilthead	David Suchet
Plutarchus	Allan Corduner
Everill	Roger Kemp
Lady Tailbush	Elizabeth Power
Pitfall	Janet Maw
Lady Eitherside	Ursula Smith
Sir Paul Eitherside	Roger Sloman
Ambler	Earl Robinson
Whore	Sheila Ferris
Sledge	Michael Hughes
Shackles	Danny Schiller
Attendant	James Saxon

**Musicians: John Leach, Anthea Cox, Graeme Scott, George Fenton**

Director	Stuart Burge
Associate Director	Peter Barnes
Designer	Robin Archer
Lighting	Robert Ormbo
Music	John Leach

**First performance: 30 April 1977.****Archive resources for this production****The NT archive, London contains the following material.**

**Newspaper reviews**  
**Theatre programme**

The Birmingham Rep archive, Central Library, Birmingham contains the following material.

Production photographs

Prompt book

Theatre programme



*THE DEVIL IS AN ASS: RSC, SWAN AND PIT*

Satan	Michael Gardiner
Pug	John Dougall
Iniquity	Nick Cavaliere
Fabian Fitzdottrel	David Troughton
Engine	Siobhan Fogarty
Wittipol	Douglas Henshall (Swan)/ Damian Lewis (Pit)
Eustace Manly	Mark Bazeley (Swan)/ Dickon Tyrrell (Pit)
Frances Fitzdottrel	Joanna Roth (Swan)/ Jules Melvin
Merecraft	John Nettles
Trains	Nick Cavaliere
Thomas Gilthead	Robin Nedwell
Plutarchus	Anthony Hannan
Everill	Christopher Godwin
Pitfall	Tracy Sweetinburgh
Lady Tailbush	Sheila Steafel
Lady Eitherside	Siobhan Fogarty
Ambler	Paul Chahidi
Sledge	Leon Tanner
Shackles	Robin Nedwell
Sir Paul Eitherside	Michael Gardiner

Trumpets	Robert Pritchard, Peter Fisher (Swan)/ Roderick Tearle, Peter Wright (Pit)
Trombones	Kevin Pitt, Simon Hogg (Swan)/ David Hissey, Paul Barrett (Pit)
Bass Trombone	Robert Burgess (Swan)/ Roger Williams (Pit)
Percussion	James Jones (Swan)/Bernard Shaw (Pit)
Organ	Michael Tubbs, Roger Hellyer (Swan)/ Jonathan Rutherford (Pit)

Director	Matthew Warchus
Set designer	Bunnie Christie
Costume designer	Laura Hopkins
Lighting	Wayne Dowdeswell
Music	Gary Yershon
Fights	Terry King
Sound	Andrea J Cox
Assistant Director	Jenny Eastop/ Paul Garrington

First performance: Swan, 29 March 1995,  
Pit, 17 April 1996.

Archive resources for this production

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material.

Music

Newspaper reviews

Performance video (Swan only)

Production photographs and contact sheets

Prompt book

Stage Manager's reports

Theatre programme

INTRODUCTION: *THE DEVIL IS AN ASS*

In 1614 *Bartholomew Fair* was another popular success for Jonson. After a gap of two years – during which he wrote court masques and prepared his plays for publication – Jonson returned to the popular theatre with *The Devil is an Ass* in 1616, the same year as the Folio's publication. After its initial failure by the King's Men at the Blackfriars, Jonson, then in receipt of an annual pension from King James, retired from writing for the public theatre until his financial situation necessitated the production of *The Staple of News* in 1626.

Although *The Devil is an Ass* is not amongst Jonson's most well-known plays it retains a special place in the repertoire of the English theatre. Since 1977 there have only been two productions. However, on both occasions the play has prompted a renewal of interest in the staging of Jonson's texts. As one reviewer in 1977 noted, in performance the play is 'rescued from the academic oblivion in which it has rested for three centuries'.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, even 'academic oblivion' has unworthily ignored the dramatic potency of the play and it remains one of Jonson's greatest achievements to rank alongside *Volpone* for its plotting and character drawing.

With its warnings against foolishness, covetousness, greed, lust, vanity and its dependence upon the existence of devils, Hell and worldly temptation *The Devil is an Ass* is the closest text Jonson wrote to a Medieval Morality play. The seven deadly sins are examples of how London is infected by evils worse than those of Hell. Pug's lust is only associated with his earthly casing, he does 'so long to have a little venery,/ While I am in this body!'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Ben Jonson's play has been beautifully rescued from academic oblivion', *Guardian*, 3 May 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass*, ed. by Peter Happé, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), III.6.7-8.





scenes, the depiction of the devils, and the continuation of a medieval culture founded on religious belief and superstition.

*THE DEVIL IS AN ASS*: BIRMINGHAM REP AT NT, LYTTTELTON, DIR.

STUART BURGE, 1977

*The Devil is an Ass* was first produced by Peter Barnes and Stuart Burge over twenty years before the RSC's 1995 production, in 1972 at Nottingham Playhouse, (the production led to the collaboration between Birmingham Rep and the NT at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1976, touring to the NT's Lyttelton in 1977). Burge seized the Medieval Morality style as the motivating force in his production.

Barnes altered the text considerably in the name of accessibility, giving rise to a debate between theatre critics and practitioners about the treatment of classical texts. Barnes simplified the plot with the ring and replaced many words and phrases but his biggest change was to alter the ending of the play as Pug was not sent back to Hell but to other planets: Jupiter, Neptune and Saturn to carry on his displaced Hellish missionary work there. In his Introduction to the text Peter Happé noted that the change of destination for Pug, explained by the line, 'Earth we leave to the damned/ And the pain of living', was 'partly as a recognition of Pug's extraordinary power over the audience who responded warmly and sympathetically towards him'.<sup>3</sup>

Barnes has suggested that he re-wrote the ending as 'one felt the need to see the resolution of the play's framing device – Pug's abortive mission on Earth'.<sup>4</sup>

The success of the production relied on the farcical skills of Chris Ryan as Pug, added to by the comedy gleaned from Wittipol's drag act in the second half. Pug wore a curly wig with horns poking through and a long tail attached to



his padded body suit, making him a human-devil hybrid even before his earthly transformation (see PLATE 11). The rest of the design was in period and utilized extravagant, spectacular costumes. In contrast to the farce of *Pug*, Peter Vaughan played Fitzdottrel with sobriety. Vaughan was usually cast in serious classical roles and he did not point up the character's stupidity. As Happé recalled, he played 'with complete seriousness and from within'. This provided a dramatic contrast between his behaviour throughout the play and his feigned possession in the final act. The effect of the whole production was 'reality mixed with fantasy', in the first production since 1616.<sup>5</sup>

The general reception was favourable. Nicholas de Jongh thought Barnes's treatment included 'subversive additions and adapting touches' but he praised 'a true Jonsonian production'. It is surprising that an attractive actor played Tailbush, the 'georgeous [*sic*] Elizabeth Power', when the appearance of Jonsonian characters are usually presented as indicative of their inner moral status. He thought that Anna Calder-Marshall as Frances Fitzdottrel was 'an antidote' to 'society's vileness', a 'sad girl imprisoned in the house'. By contrast, Wittipol, the play's female impersonator was a crude parody of female behaviour, 'simpering in ringlets with a voice combining Fenella Fielding and Lindsay Kemp'. Aside from this portrayal de Jongh's chief interest was in Barnes's textual work:

Barnes's constant emendations distort the play's purpose by inventing a final scene in which the minor devil begs for release from this hell on earth, while the play asserts the triumph of honesty and love without lust ending in reconciling humanism.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Line quotation and comment by Peter Barnes, quoted in Peter Happé, 'Introduction', in Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass*, ed. by Peter Happé, pp. 1-50, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> Barnes, 'Staging Jonson', p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Happé, 'Introduction', p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Ben Jonson's play has been beautifully rescued from academic oblivion', *Guardian*, 3 May 1977.

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However, this 'final scene' was not an invention but is placed at V.2.1-20, 'O call me home again, dear chief', before Pug is dragged back to Hell from Newgate. If Barnes placed this speech at the end of the production then the play would end on a more satirical note but the narrative of Pug would not be completed as it is in the play (that is, he was not returned to Hell in Barnes's version but to other planets); as a consequence Ambler's story must have been shortened or totally absent. But he suggested that 'the laughter is swift and sweet', belying the pessimistic tone inferred above.<sup>7</sup>

John Barber also thought it 'gloriously funny', Barnes 'adds speeches to the original, removes obscurities and underlines – sometimes crudely – the parallels with modern shysters and suckers'. He thought this was worthwhile, although he noticed that, 'pedants may object, but the result has theatrical life and preserves most of Jonson's joyous bustle and his ferocious delight in human iniquity'. He praised the performance of Chris Ryan as Pug, 'a comical rubber-ball of sub-human energy and lust'; but he generally found that the production, 'comes off less well than it did at last year's Edinburgh Festival'. Barber thought the reason for this was the auditorium, the 'platform stage thrusts its vicious simplicities into the heart of the audience. It should, of course, be at the Olivier'. This implied Jonson requires a larger space, distanced from the audience, despite the more recent successes of Jonson in the RSC's intimate Swan.<sup>8</sup>

Ned Chaillet thought the production rescued the play from obscurity: 'in Peter Barnes's adaptation it should be safe to wish it a long and active life'. He felt Barnes had 'brought out the play's richness from an exceedingly convoluted

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<sup>7</sup> De Jongh.

<sup>8</sup> John Barber, 'Flash of jaws in Jonson revival', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1977.



text; it is now so spirited and vital'. Chaillet praised the 'boundless energy' of Pug and went on to examine Ryan's performance in detail:

He never reaches for the women he lusts after, but throws himself across tables and the length of a room to get them. He stutters in his anxiety to lay plots, but is knocked over by the rush of human conspirators. It is a masterful creation, zany and inventive.<sup>9</sup>

He suggested that Peter Vaughan as Fitzdottrel was 'a masterpiece of foolishness [...] because everything, from faked madness to his anxiety to wear his new cloak [...] is played with fixed dignity'. He praised Calder-Marshall as 'the most delicate creation, fainting with the thought of infidelity and marvellously embarrassed when her suitor, disguised as the "Spanish Lady", [*sic*] throws suggestive glances her way' (see PLATE 12). Chaillet liked Rickman's 'dedicately [*sic*] lecherous' Wittipol. Chaillet suggested that 'work of this calibre lies in the regional theatres it is lucky we have a National Theatre that can bring it to London'. He felt the production was, 'a joyous work, so fully realized', and because it was the 'first production to do [this]' he felt 'doubly fortunate'. He saw that its success marked a revival of interest in Jonson's plays: 'at once so virtuous and bawdy, [they] are happily back in the theatre's repertoire'.<sup>10</sup>

The *Observer* reviewer found Barnes's 'alteration of the ending of a genuine Jacobean comedy [...] questionable'. The critic suggests that the closure indicated by the text, which has 'characters coming to their senses, and others behaving with positive decency', 'seems to have disappointed' Barnes. Instead, the reviewer thought Barnes 'puts the whole cast literally at one another's throats and brings on Satan, who should know, to tell us how awful they are'. In their dislike the critic suggested, 'Jonson wrote only one water-tight malevolent

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<sup>9</sup> Ned Chaillet, 'Poor Pug, Jonson's much-abused devil', *The Times*, 3 May 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Chaillet.

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morality' – *Volpone* – 'set in Venice. His London plays are looser and, if only by default, more genial'.<sup>11</sup>

J. C. Trewin preferred 'texts unadulterated' but felt Barnes edited 'for modern audiences' in a 'carefully-judged [...] version', which 'no one is likely to moan about'. He praised Derek Godfrey as a 'smoothly talkative' Mercraft, 'we can almost see him inventing while he speaks', and 'we are surprised when anyone resists for a moment Mr Godfrey's storms of invention', he was, 'a dangerous fellow with a gleaming sense of humour'. Highlighting Ryan's skills for farce Trewin suggested Pug was 'furiously athletic and always unlucky'. He subscribed to the need for other Jonsonian revivals by asking, 'Now who is going to revive *The Staple of News*?'.<sup>12</sup>

Milton Shulman suggested the text had been 'adapted with some liberty'. Issuing mixed praise he wrote, 'this adaptation is a boisterous and sardonic romp that makes us wonder why it has been kept under historical wraps for so long'. However, he thought the closure was disappointing: 'the final scenes sag into mere repetitious foolery as every complicated twist of a frantic plot has to be unravelled and explained'. Shulman singled out Ryan for praise, 'as a devil overwhelmed by man's venality, [he] strides the stage with his legs stretched wide in a constant posture of sexual frustration. His athletic leaps at every feminine thigh in sight are wonders of physical opportunism'.<sup>13</sup>

Michael Coveney thought it an 'ebullient adaptation' but found the direction, 'a little pedantic and short on extravagant relish'. And he had mixed feelings for Vaughan, he 'does not break into full energetic stride until the last-

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<sup>11</sup> Anon., *Observer*, 8 May 1977.

<sup>12</sup> J. C. Trewin, *Lady*, 26 May 1977.

<sup>13</sup> Milton Shulman, 'Devil without', *Evening Standard*, 3 May 1977.



act pretence of being diabolically possessed'. Like others, Coveney, heralded Jonson's plays as a potential new repertoire for the English stage:

It is good news for London that Jonson is currently so strongly represented at the National and one hopes the revival continues; perhaps we shall soon have a chance to assess the current stage-worthiness of *Sejanus* and the *Everyman* plays [sic].<sup>14</sup>

Whilst he did not review the production, Bernard Levin saw the production as an opportunity to berate Barnes, Burge and any other theatrical practitioners with intentions to adapt classical texts. His lengthy tirade was a response to what he wrote as the NT's 'Ben Jonson Bugger-the-Text Week', after 'the NT's own magnificent *Volpone* [was] marred by feeble concessions to the groundlings, modern words being substituted for many of Jonson's ancient ones in case somebody in the audience might otherwise be obliged to think'. *The Devil is an Ass* as adapted by Barnes, 'fares a good deal worse' and he provided many examples of the changes, for example, "a moonling" becomes "a looney". Levin added that Barnes had 're-cast entire speeches, inserted scenes of his own, including a jarring epilogue which badly distorts Jonson's conclusion'. He suggested that Barnes 'justified all this with a programme-note of sufficiently significant fatuousness' that he proceeded to quote. In it Barnes suggested:

Adapting an old play is much like restoring an old painting [...] obsolete words have to be replaced by others of equal precision, beauty and force, but whose meaning is clear. The opaque areas have to be cut or re-touched. I have added certain speeches and scenes in the interest of clarity [...] The only question to ask is, is it true to the original, and is it theatrically alive?<sup>15</sup>

Levin responded that 'the opaque areas may be in his own brain, and the obsolescence in his belief that audiences are no better educated than he'. He asked:

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Coveney, 'The Devil is an Ass', *Financial Times*, 3 May 1977.

Does he not realize that the patina of an old painting is itself part of its beauty? Or that writing pastiche is not the same as being “true to the original,” [...] Or that “is it theatrically alive?” is not the only question, for there is the matter of integrity to be considered?<sup>16</sup>

Levin’s article prompted responses from the Artistic Director of the RSC, Trevor Nunn, who was due to stage *The Alchemist* soon afterwards; Burge, the director of *The Devil is an Ass* and Artistic Director of the Royal Court; and Charles Marowitz, the Artistic Director of the Open Space Theatre. Nunn was quick to point to the necessity of textual adaptation: ‘the RSC will not be performing a full text of *The Alchemist*’. His reasoning was that the published text is intrinsically different from the performance text, ‘Jacobean dramatists (rewriters and plagiarists all) cut their plays for the theatre, or expanded them for the printer [...] we have an exact record of what Jonson wanted us to read [*sic*]’. Nunn pronounced against the type of theatre advocated by Levin’s attitude: ‘I have no interest in working in the literary/theatre museum which Mr Levin appears to be defining when he suggests that anything short of his fundamentalism will please only those who know no better’. He concluded: ‘a theatre concerned with textual fidelity and integrity at the expense of understanding is dead. The theatre caught in a lively tension between responsibility to texts and responsibility to please an audience will not die of suffocation or boredom’.<sup>17</sup>

Burge pointed to inaccuracies in Levin’s report: ‘He even got some of his quotes wrong’. However, he redirected his pique in an evocation of praise to his adapter:

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Barnes, programme-note for *The Devil is an Ass*, in Bernard Levin, ‘doctoring Jonson’ [*sic*], *Sunday Times*, 8 May 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Levin, ‘doctoring Jonson’.

<sup>17</sup> Trevor Nunn, ‘Plays in aspic: the way to kill the classical theatre’, in ‘Lambasting Levin’, *Sunday Times*, 15 May 1977.



his graceless ingratitude to Peter Barnes, through whose labours he was able to see a stage performance accessible to a modern audience after centuries of neglect, can only lead me to believe that he no longer has the interests of the theatre at heart.<sup>18</sup>

He suggested an unedited version 'would condemn the play to oblivion possibly for another three centuries' and cited a selective playing history as evidence of its difficult status in the theatre:

There has been one professional performance (in 1663) and none since, until its revival in 1973 at Nottingham, from which time audiences at Edinburgh, Birmingham and the National have found in this play a fresh evocation of Jacobean life, and an opportunity to savour the rare theatrical language of an unknown work by Jonson.<sup>19</sup>

In his reply Marowitz, like Nunn, saw the chance to promote his forthcoming show. At the end he tantalizingly promised that: 'If Barnes' "liberties" made him apoplectic, he will, when *Variations On The Merchant of Venice* opens at The Open Space, have heart seizure. Therefore, I would like publicly to withdraw his invitation' [*sic*]. This self-advertisement did make Nunn's and Marowitz's motives more questionable replies than mere defences of the editing process. Marowitz began strongly, 'pedantry reached new heights in Bernard Levin's supercilious put-down', he suggested Barnes performed a service in making 'a largely archaic, second-rate Jonson comedy comprehensible to a modern audience'. In doing so he drew attention to his low opinion of the play, which covertly questioned Burge's and Barnes's decision to revive it. Marowitz suggested that Levin would,

bore the pants off people with three-and-one-quarter hours of original text full of dated language and convoluted plot-lines rather than allow a contemporary playwright the privilege of refashioning a classic so that it makes sense and conveys a theatrical point.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Stuart Burge, 'Graceless ingratitude to the man who helps the audience', in 'Lambasting Levin'.

<sup>19</sup> Burge.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Marowitz, 'I publicly withdraw his invitation to our show', in 'Lambasting Levin'.



Responding to Levin's point about 'patina' Marowitz asked, 'Should one admire [...] the dust it has accumulated [...]?' Surely blowing the dust away is the prerogative of the contemporary artist'. He 'thankfully' acknowledged that the audience 'is not made up of persons as scholarly' as the critic. Responding to Levin's point that the NT's *Volpone* had been 'marred by feeble concessions [...] in case somebody [...] might otherwise be obliged to think', Marowitz wrote:

If a member of an audience hears a word he doesn't recognize, there is nothing to think about. The quick sense of theatrical dialogue comes to a dead halt while the meaningless sound prevents the appropriate image from being conveyed. Hence the need for textual clarifications - particularly in Jonson.<sup>21</sup>

Marowitz suggested the consequences if the English theatre had heeded Levin's attitude: 'the best productions of the past 20 years (including Brook's *Dream* and the Scofield *Lear*) would never have come about'.<sup>22</sup>

Marowitz had a valid point here but his remarks suggested that the audience were ignorant and had no opinion in the debate, which was instead the prerogative of theatre practitioners and the press. It was an assumption that was replayed in a repeated debate featuring Levin's opinion on Nunn's and Barnes's *The Alchemist* for the RSC later in the same year.

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<sup>21</sup> Marowitz.

<sup>22</sup> Marowitz.

*THE DEVIL IS AN ASS: RSC, SWAN AND PIT, DIR. MATTHEW*

WARCHUS, 1995-6

When Warchus's production launched the RSC's 1995 season it opened to generally favourable reviews. Although he thought the play 'apparently undoable on the page' Warchus liked the challenge of the play and intended his production to appear as a mixture of 'high art and pantomime'.<sup>23</sup>

It did appear as a classical farce in period costume that mixed high and low comic elements, as Jules Melvin (who played Frances after Joanna Roth left the Stratford company) suggested, 'it feels like stepping on a rollercoaster, it goes very quickly and you just have to go with it'.<sup>24</sup>

Warchus's great contribution was to reveal the Hell scenes as genuinely unsettling, using a combination of ultraviolet lighting, an eerie subterranean soundtrack and phosphorous paint splattered onto the black cloth set. He has suggested his interest in creating a 'supernatural experience' for Hell so that 'the audience didn't feel that they were watching illusions that they completely understood how they were done.' Instead they were 'surprising illusions', even for Fitzdottrel's feigned possession, 'so there was always a disturbance about whether there is present in the theatre an unnatural force'. He felt the play had 'a mixture of inane low comedy with the supernatural presence of real evil' as 'it's a very eerie thing for someone to stand on stage and do an act of devil worship'.<sup>25</sup>

The effects began as the audience entered (almost in blackout) and were increased by an unexpected blast of horns and a drum roll as the devils in luminous paint entered and the hanging of the cutpurse was seen through black

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew Warchus, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 5 August 1998.



gauze. As Pug was granted his earthly body the limp figure dangling from the noose began to twitch and released itself, waving its arms aloft in triumph. It was this mixture of theatrical special effects executed with panache and the varying degrees of comedy that ensured the success of the production. Gary Yershon has described his choice of music for this beginning: ‘I decided the organ was a good idea and I’d have a brass quintet – three trumpets, two trombones and a percussionist. They were all loud and odd, the organ was very melodramatic and the brass was very powerful’.<sup>26</sup>

For the rest of the score Yershon suggested he was ‘interested in fugue writing’:

I was influenced by Berlioz’s *Symphony Fantastique* and *The Damnation of Faust*. They kind of have that breathless energy that I tried to get into some of the changes of location. One piece was a fugue to underscore the ring changeover between the two houses. In the chase scene after Pug was taken back to Hell, the brass were very loud and the organ was played ridiculously fast with big low pedal notes, a very noisy fugue.<sup>27</sup>

However, the most obvious musical moment in the play is Wittipol’s song, one of Jonson’s most celebrated lyrics, Yershon explained:

We had Doug [Henshall] sing it unaccompanied and Matthew wanted a romantic effect – towards the end, as if from nowhere – to have music come in played in the right key. So that was quite problematic as you don’t know what key the guy’s going to start in. So the organist had a chart of four or five different keys. That was a very nice effect. It was rather a Victorian setting.<sup>28</sup>

Warchus has suggested that his rehearsals concentrated on language, ‘speed’ and action: ‘the most obvious was the concentration on consonants rather than vowels’, which made the characters ‘very savage animals’, and ‘we talked

<sup>24</sup> Jules Melvin, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 2 July 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Warchus.

<sup>26</sup> Gary Yershon, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 4 July 1998.

<sup>27</sup> Yershon.

<sup>28</sup> Yershon.



about animals in rehearsals – the physical language of performances has to be more extreme [in Jonson] than for other plays'.<sup>29</sup>

Just as Warchus identified the 'decadence and squalor and lushness' in Jonson's writing, he felt that aesthetically, 'it feels very decadent to be in period but in a squalid take on the period rather than a beautiful costumed thing'.<sup>30</sup>

Although it initially appeared to be visually sumptuous once on Earth, the costume designs by Laura Hopkins and the set by Bunnie Christie utilized frayed materials and muddy patches as realistic details to the rich colours and fabrics. The basic setting used a golden city on stilts set high above the stage, from which only Eitherside emerged; most of the action took place beneath, between the stilts that held up this area and the clods of mud in which the stilts were planted (see PLATE 13). The inner stage could be curtained off to hide wooden structures, which were used for the gallows and the two windows (for Wittipol and Frances's meeting). For Fitzdottrel's interior chairs and a chest were brought on and these purple back curtains closed; for Tailbush's house more lavish red curtains were hung and a boudoir was set using pink *chaise longues* and a central pink dais with gilt edges.

Melvin felt that her costume would have been different if she had been with the production from its inception: 'I feel my costumes, beautiful as they are, are not tarty enough'. Her reasoning was 'she should be like a farmer's wife and Wittipol says she is kept "very Brazen". I think Matthew wanted a little bird character'.<sup>31</sup>

Pug was not quite as central a figure as he had been in Burge's version but he appeared as a satisfying comic role for John Dougall alongside John

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<sup>29</sup> Warchus.

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Nettles as Merecraft, David Troughton as Fitzdottrel and Douglas Henshall as Wittipol. Wittipol's drag scene in the second half was the comic climax in Warchus's production and most of the reviewers found Henshall's portrayal comically satisfying (see PLATE 14). However, the production did not please all the reviewers.

The *Sunday Telegraph* reviewer thought the play 'isn't in the same class as *Volpone* or *The Alchemist*' but admitted that audiences would be 'full of enthusiasm for your new discovery'. After a plot synopsis they commented that it 'might be tedious, a rehash of old Ben Jonson themes, if it weren't executed with such skill and exhilaration'. They felt the production went 'flying off in all directions' but that it had 'energy and pace'. As Wittipol Henshall was 'especially funny [in drag] [...] touting fancy cosmetics in a Spanish accent [...]there were waves of laughter'. The metatheatre – Fitzdottrel is on his way to see *The Devil is an Ass* – led to the satire extending to the audience: 'We, the audience, are implicated'. However, there was an admission that 'there is something more in the play than satire', explaining that Frances Fitzdottrel – 'touchingly played' by Joanna Roth – was 'the recipient of one of Jonson's most beautiful lyrics', Wittipol's song: 'Amid the bedlam, she is still a centre of dignity and endurance'.<sup>32</sup>

Charles Spencer thought Jonson 'seems much funnier than Shakespeare'. He thought the play 'works a treat' in Warchus's 'fast-paced production', and 'the first thing you notice is the sheer richness of its invention'. He found the plot 'satisfyingly complex' and 'the comic routines delightfully over the top', suggesting the importance of farcical comedy in this production. He appreciated

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<sup>30</sup> Warchus.



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Christie's 'wittily' designed set, 'with a gold-encrusted panorama of the Jacobean city propped up on rickety giblets'. 'The excellent' Henshall appeared 'like Charley's Aunt in Gary Glitter platform shoes'. Spencer thought Troughton 'superb': 'his bleary eyes are anxiously watchful, his grin complacently cunning, [...] he somehow combines [...] psychopathic violence with a wonderful impression of terminal dimness'. He added further praise for Troughton - 'More remarkably [...] [he] almost succeeds in making you feel sorry for this repulsive fall-guy when he finally realises how comprehensively he has been gulled'. He added that the 'biggest surprise' was 'that it [was] also genuinely touching'. He thought Roth suggested 'a world of bravely borne misery [...] and when Wittipol honourably agrees to become her friend [...] Jonson poignantly establishes an alternative set of values to the grasping dog-eat-dog mentality of the rest of the play'.<sup>33</sup>

Paul Taylor thought Warchus's production, 'skilfully negotiates the difficulty of combining high energy farce with a romantic plot that moves not towards the release of adultery but to high-minded renunciation and to re-entering the prison of marriage on slightly better terms'. He thought John Nettles as Merecraft was 'wreathed in insincere smiles and driven by desperate improvisatory energy', these comments referring to the character, not the actor's technique. For Wittipol's transformation Taylor saw Henshall's accent as combining 'prim Morningside and lisping snake-like Hispanic S's' but the critic thought him 'equally effective in those prolonged moments of silent inner wrestling' at Frances's request. Taylor also interpreted the link between the set and the play's themes: 'the dinky cityscape of Jacobean London [is] glitter-

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<sup>31</sup> Melvin.

sprinkled with prosperity' but 'in the foreground [...] you notice that the city is sliding inexorably over the edge of some infernal pit'.<sup>34</sup>

Benedict Nightingale described the opening: 'Satan [...] stands high in a black-blue haze [...] his metallic boom echoes impressively enough for us to see why the creatures below wince and cringe'. These creatures were 'terrific: bloated green-grey reptiles [...] [with] cow-heads and webbed wings'. However, Pug emerged as 'a wan, hapless figure [...] the poor hick is even manacled and abused by sex-mad harpies with whips [Tailbush and Lady Eitherside]'. He felt that Nettles and Troughton gave 'an authentically Jonsonian feel', although, paradoxically, he thought Merecraft was 'a recognisably modern figure beneath the Jacobean robes'. He acknowledged that the part of Fitzdottrel is less credible for a modern audience but added: 'that is forgivable [*sic*] when the role provides the RSC's latest high-flyer with so many comic opportunities. Looking like a cross between Jimmy Hill and Stonehenge, Troughton half-struts, half-clomps about the stage, eyes agog'. He conceded that 'the evening mainly belongs to Troughton'. He enjoyed it so much that he complained Troughton's 'face was sometimes hidden from me by bad blocking'. However, Nightingale felt 'Warchus's revival could probably have more bite, but it is not lacking in energy and momentum'.<sup>35</sup>

John Peter enjoyed Troughton's performance – 'in which agility and mulishness, Neanderthal cunning and stupidity are brilliantly combined' – and Nettles as, 'a man about town who is elegant, self-possessed, plausible and alert'. However, he thought Warchus had directed a 'hyperactive, hugely entertaining

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<sup>32</sup> Anon., *Sunday Telegraph*, 9 April 1995.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Funnier than Shakespeare', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 April 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Taylor, 'Sympathy for the Devil', *Independent*, 6 April 1995.

<sup>35</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Sympathy for the devil', *The Times*, 6 April 1995.



production, but one that misses part of Jonson's point'. This was 'because Warchus has got into a muddle about the play's style. He directs it as if it were *The Alchemist* or *Volpone*: savagely satirical plays, each with a single demonic plot line and [...] figures from a bestiary'. He thought *The Devil is an Ass* was 'much more complex' because of the characters: 'they have their places and functions in a recognizable Jacobean London'; he added, without justification, that thus 'it is quite pointless [...] to play Engine, Mercraft's broker, as a woman'. He felt 'the dialogue is precisely [...] crafted: it needs to be carefully, indeed lethally articulated. Some of it is badly gabbled here [...] If Warchus had allowed another [...] 20 minutes' playing time he would not have had to cut so much nor hurry along so frantically'. Peter complained that the 'combined result' was that 'you miss some of the hard core of the play'. In other words, the play 'takes place against a precise social-background some of which Warchus has not grasped'. He noticed the effect on the characterization of Tailbush, who Peter saw as 'an outwardly respectful business associate of Mercraft's who can be relied upon to raise money from genuinely respectable people' in Jonson's text. But in production Warchus had made her 'a disreputable grotesque'. Peter's argument ignores the possibility that her association with Mercraft may make her morally questionable. However, Peter ended his review with a more general comment about Jonson and the current interest in staging his work: 'we recognize Jonson because we can so easily imagine him dramatizing the 1990s' but concludes that 'it might be wickedly entertaining, like this production, but it would not quite be Jonson'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> John Peter, 'Greed was never good', *Sunday Times*, 9 April 1995.

Michael Beddow thought the play ‘not quite a lost masterpiece’ but a text which ‘has a performance history much sparser than it merits’. He provided interesting detail on the presentation of characters, beginning with Pug’s ‘accent of a youthful visitor from northern parts’, ‘even before he borrows an earthly body’. And his physical appearance ‘once on earth’ was characterized by ‘gapes in fresh-faced bemusement’. He suggested that ‘what Troughton does’ with Fitzdottrel was ‘in itself enough to make the play worth seeing’: ‘Troughton does not play him as a passive dullard: he radiates inane energy [...] [he] darts gawkily to and fro, eyes popping with overweening imbecility’. Troughton also revealed to Beddow ‘Fitzdottrel’s obsession with the cloak’ as he ‘cavorts with this tawdry acquisition’. In contrast, Nettles ‘strides downstage to stand broad-shouldered and square on to the audience in the posture of Holbein’s *Henry VIII*’.<sup>37</sup>

However, Beddow suggested that not all of the humour attempted met with a positive response. He wrote that Fitzdottrel’s desire to see *The Devil is an Ass* was ‘one of several self-referential jokes that the Stratford audience did not find very funny’.<sup>38</sup>

He devoted considerable time to Wittipol and Frances, like many others he found this interplay a surprising element in performance. Beddow thought that ‘Warchus and his players’ ‘bravely [...] follow’ Frances’s request ‘with a silence that trespasses perilously on the zone where less perceptive members of the audience begin to assume the prompter has nodded off’. This silence was broken by ‘an intervention which, on the printed page, looks distinctly awkward’, where Manly emerges to urge Wittipol to ‘keep you innocent’. Beddow testified to the

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Beddow, ‘Redrawing nature’s bounds’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 April 1995.



strength of this in production: 'Here, however, it is handled brilliantly, in a way made possible by the biggest risk the production takes: a portrayal of Wittipol rather against the grain of Jonson's text'. Beddow explained: 'it is a bold venture indeed to play him [...] as a hyperactive and unkempt Lowlander, who begins his first attempt at seduction by addressing [...] [her] as if she were a Glaswegian public meeting' (see PLATE 15). Although this sounded like adverse criticism, Beddow added that 'the risk pays off by making room for a contrast with Manly that allows the difficult scene of Wittipol's sudden abandonment of his seductive intentions to make theatrical sense'. Wittipol's relative brusqueness allowed Manly 'to be the one who is urbane and softly spoken'. His entrance into the scene after the silence came 'almost apologetically' and Mark Bazeley 'speaks in hushed and hesitant tones, as though uncomfortably aware of the gap between the easy injunction he mouths and the personal anguish from which the beleaguered woman has just spoken'. For Beddow the effect was that when Wittipol acquiesced, 'his change of heart seems to stem very much from the force of that woman's plea, with his friend's high-mindedness carrying little weight'. However, Beddow acknowledged the problem of portraying Wittipol and Manly as Warchus and his actors had chosen: 'if the interpretation of Wittipol as a rough-hewn Caledonian gem gives a credible shape to Manly's role, it makes the part of Mistress Fitzdottrel harder to play'. Beddow admitted that 'there is a great deal to convey in desperately few lines' and suggested that Roth 'does what she can by gesture, stance and facial expression whenever she has the audience's eye'. Nevertheless, this was difficult, according to Beddow, as Henshall, 'with his manic delivery and flailing blond locks, inevitably gets more

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<sup>38</sup> Beddow.



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than his fair share of attention'. This made him conclude that 'their interaction falls tantalizingly just short of an essentially ingenious and plausible conception'.<sup>39</sup>

It was not just in this key relationship that Beddow found the problems of execution failing intention. He suggested that when Everill demands a share of Merecraft's takings the relationship between them 'does not quite work' because 'Christopher Godwin's Everill, grey-bearded and gaunt, fails to embody a sufficient physical threat to Nettles, who remains leonine even when he is supposedly [...] the underdog'. Nevertheless, he enjoyed it when 'Warchus nicely contrives to get both players down on all fours and head-to-head for this animalistic stand-off'. In conclusion, Beddow's long review presented fulsome praise:

But even the things that do not quite come off stem from intelligent theatrical engagement with a rich text: this fine production ought to secure *The Devil is an Ass* a belated place among Jonson's major plays and a permanent place in the performing repertoire.<sup>40</sup>

Michael Coveney thought the production 'beautifully combines Jonsonian city comedy with elements of the less familiar medieval devil play'. He praised the special effects: "'Vice" prances as a rubbery pterodactyl, Satan booms in triplicate and when Fitzdottrel [is apparently possessed] [...] his four-poster levitates, his face froths in foam and he spits fire into the auditorium'. Coveney, too, drew attention to Wittipol, who, after 'two sinuous scenes of arrant seduction', becomes the Spanish Lady who 'suffers the lecherous Fitzdottrel's paw on his knee while exposing himself to the silly old fool's wife on the other side of the room'. He ended with his interpretation of the setting: 'a glittering

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<sup>39</sup> Beddow.

<sup>40</sup> Beddow.

miniature townscape propped up on rotting stanchions is a visual metaphor both of Henshall's outstanding Wittipol in drag, and of the mercantile city and its theatres'.<sup>41</sup>

Irving Wardle thought the production 'a feast of language, integrated with a mock-heroic score (Gary Yershon) and astounding visual effects in a combined assault on the comic senses'. He felt Wittipol's change of character was a 'cancelling out of Pug's conclusions on the wicked city'. He stated that 'successful performance needs actors who can make heavyweight verse seem light as a feather', and he added with much praise, 'Warchus's production offers the best Jonsonian team since Sam Mendes's *The Alchemist* five years ago'. He gave an extended example of the playing, the actors showed 'the power to follow their desires in clear, long-limbed actions that incorporate a mass of incidental detail'. He evaluated the pace: 'once the comic machine is in motion, it develops an unstoppable momentum' until it 'finally slumps back to earth'. He suggested that this closure was 'a fittingly spectacular ending for a show in which stage magic and physical invention support every turn of the plot'.<sup>42</sup>

However, Nicholas de Jongh thought it 'almost as fast, flashy and misguided as the people whom Jonson mocks'. He felt Warchus's 'spectacular, knock-about production [...] goes for winsome razzle-dazzle [rather] than any governing malevolence [...] no character causes a shudder or very much laughter'. He thought that much of this was due to the 'fancy set of little model houses [...] lurid devils, explosions, farcical outbursts and scenic *coup de théâtre*'. He complained that Troughton had 'precious little suggestion of the squire's pervasive greed'; and that Nettles was not 'seriously wicked'. His

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<sup>41</sup> Michael Coveney, 'The vice squad', *Observer*, 9 April 1995.



concluding complaint was that the ‘sense of decadence’ was ‘not strongly developed’. De Jongh thought the fault of the production lay with Wittipol, who, in drag was ‘sexually pursued by the unknowing squire, but the scene is predictably done in *Carry On* style’. De Jongh also found fault with Henshall’s ‘irritating vocal tricks’, perhaps because the actor used his own accent and not the more usual RSC device of received pronunciation.<sup>43</sup>

Michael Billington wished Warchus, ‘like Sam Mendes in his *Swan Alchemist*’, ‘had found a way of combining Jacobean authenticity with hints of modernity’. Nevertheless, Billington felt that Warchus ‘does full justice to Jonson’s linguistic zaniness’, for example, ‘the comic high-point’ was when Wittipol spoke about ‘Spanish fucuses’. He suggested that ‘the double-edged nature of the satire also comes across’ and this was dependent on character presentation, for example, Fitzdottrel ‘is both a lantern-jawed gull, essaying Spanish dance-steps when overcome by love, and a figure of manic greed’. And Mercraft, too was ‘a tacky conman who [...] produces his elaborate maps of the Fens and plans for turning dogskin into fashionable wear out of a battered suitcase’.<sup>44</sup>

In a review for *Country Life* Billington suggested that ‘Warchus also reminds us that this is unusual among Jonson’s plays in that virtue is pitted against vice’. For Billington, this had a certain effect on characters – ‘Wittipol is no mere heartless seducer but a man who uses his sexual wiles to ensure that Mistress Fitzdottrel keeps what is left of her husband’s depleted fortune’. He suggested that Henshall, ‘gives him a Scottish accent and a genuine integrity’. For Billington, Roth ‘unforgettably shoots nervous glances at her husband as he

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<sup>42</sup> Irving Wardle, *Independent on Sunday*, 9 April 1995.

times her public conversation' with Wittipol. In conclusion Billington thought 'with its dense language and spiralling plot, it is a taxing play for a modern audience'. However, he ended by suggesting that: 'It is also a deeply rewarding one [...] it gives us a savoursome picture of Jacobean London'.<sup>45</sup>

Alastair Macaulay gave an account of the plot and posed the question, 'sounds like fun?'; he answered on behalf of the reader: 'Not a whole bunch [...] the spirit of the play is so narrow, [...] [it] proves disagreeable company much of the time'. He followed with muted praise for Warchus, who, 'concentrated on telling the story clearly'. However, there was an inconsistency in the playing, for Macaulay, the 'large cast are all performing in different ways, and there is so little rapport between them that the world onstage never becomes real'. Furthering his dislike of Warchus's methods he suggested that, 'even Warchus's use of stage space is off; the action is seldom well placed either for dramatic focus or maximum legibility'. Macaulay thought Troughton played with 'such unrelentingly laboured intensity that he exhausts us almost as much as he must himself'; Dougall 'does more than anyone else to bring the world onstage to life by his sheer charm and address, but he is often upstaged [...] and the woolly Northern accent [...] is unimpressive'; Nettles 'delivers a great deal of precise and robust Acting [*sic*]: very jolly and stageworthy and not for a minute persuasive'; Henshall 'shouts in a hoarse Scottish staccato', and:

To help the ninnies in the audience, he keeps up the Scottish accent when he slips into drag [...] (until after five minutes he lurches into Spanish after all), and then keeps half his Spanish-lady make-up on when he has reverted to male attire.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Carry on mocking', *Evening Standard*, 5 April 1995.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Billington, 'Firm friends', *Guardian*, 6 April 1995.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Billington, 'Delightful complexities in *The Devil is an Ass*', *Country Life*, 13 April 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Alastair Macaulay, 'Devil's' [*sic*] spirit too narrow', *Financial Times*, 6 April 1995.



Despite this general condemnation he praised other elements: ‘Gary Yershon has provided some good “hurry” [*sic*] music, Laura Hopkins’s Jacobean costumes are handsome, and Wayne Dowdeswell’s fluorescent lighting of the scenes in hell is entertaining’. He admitted that ‘parts of the audience have a good chortle [...] but yawns are also widespread’. He concluded that the play was ‘just the kind of “minor” [*sic*] period play that we expect to see revived at the Swan’. As if this comment was misconstrued as laudatory, he added, ‘It is not, however, strong enough to make much headway against an unintegrated staging’.<sup>47</sup>

Ian Hughes thought it ‘hilarious’ and ‘the hit of the season’. He described Satan as ‘a nine foot Beelzebub – complete with a perfect master of darkness voice (the result of some clever electronic trickery)’. He thought that the ‘dramatic hanging’ of Pug set up ‘a roller-coaster of a production with splendid performances’. He thought Troughton feigned possession ‘in wonderful slapstick fashion’, and Henshall as a, ‘dashing silver-tongued Scot Wittipol’, ‘brings the house down’ when disguised.<sup>48</sup>

Sara Hurst thought the production ‘frantic and action-packed [...] some of the chase scenes [...] can sometimes spill over into confusion’. She admitted the acting was ‘almost [...] outdone by the stunning scenery and amazing special effects’. She thought that ‘mood changes are handled well’ and gave the example of Fitzdottrel’s feigned possession being taken over by the existence of ‘real devilry’. She wrote that the characters were ‘portrayed as larger than life’, suggesting a dependence on caricature over character.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Macaulay.

<sup>48</sup> Ian Hughes, ‘A real Devil of a good production’, *Stratford Observer*, 13 April 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Sara Hurst, ‘Good to watch, better to look at’, *Stratford Herald*, 6 April 1995.



Richard Edmonds mentioned the 'terrific pace' and added that 'there is not a weak performance'. He added that it was 'a haunting moment at the end of the play' which 'leaves Mrs Fitzdottrel alone on stage [with Fitzdottrel] as the noise and characters die away'. There was also praise for both the choice of setting - 'there is no foraging for contemporary bridging links; no Doc Marten boots or dreadlocks' - and the 'superb' set design - 'rarely has a production looked so handsome'.<sup>50</sup>

When Warchus's production transferred to London the reviewers took the chance to reassess its success. The actors also found that they were re-evaluating the production. Melvin thought that 'the Pit, with this particular play, and with the design, is very difficult to work on'. The increase in the design element was best described by Warchus: 'we lost all the height and a lot of the potential for comedy so we decided to make it more of a ghost story. That's why we introduced the graveyard. It was much darker, more candlelight, spooky things'. But Melvin's reaction was typical of the company 'we found it ludicrous. I'm sure his major concern was to make the plot clearer', she continued: 'directing-wise and designer-wise, we just wanted them to bugger off and let us get on with it, get the pace back up and react to each other, rather than it just be all about the design'.<sup>51</sup>

Troughton, too, thought the additions in the Pit were unnecessary, 'the Pit absorbs energy and the great mistake is to take it down and make it real. And he's put in lines that over-explain the plot. You do not need it'.<sup>52</sup>

Because of her experiences, Melvin had strong ideas about how Jonson should be staged:

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Edmonds, 'Riotous night of devilish delight', *Birmingham Post*, 6 April 1995.

I think he was a great showman. I really believe you don't have to have big sets and lots of costumes, which I would coin as the twentieth-century disease of British theatre. He creates so much within his writing that if you play the language then you have everything you need to make it entertaining. He's not frightened of making it funny and then black the next minute, and he's not frightened of real people.<sup>53</sup>

Sarah Hemming suggested that whilst it was 'hailed as one of the highlights' in Stratford, she found Warchus's *The Devil is an Ass* 'not in the same class' as his *Volpone* for the NT in 1995. Her reasons were: 'the plotting is muddier, the characters are less interesting and there is less of the verbal wit and poetry'. It was because of these comparative defects in the play that she suggested that, 'Warchus's spitfire, energetic style and Bunnie Christie's wildly inventive design keep us fitfully entertained' they, 'cannot really pull us into the world of the play'. Commenting on the portrayal of character, Hemming felt the cast, 'plays it all with a virulent, cartoon quality and [...] works overtime'. She appreciated the portrayal of Pug played with 'charm and appeal' and 'some nice details' by John Dougall, 'such as swallowing words like "truth" as if they were particularly large gobstoppers'; and Sheila Steafel, 'enjoyable' as Tailbush, 'bobbing and nodding like a beady little bird in her caked white make up and ridiculous red wig'. However, it was the portrayal of the 'stealthy force of good' in the production that was most appreciated by Hemming. She suggested that the new casting of Melvin as Frances Fitzdottrel (who had already played more Stratford performances than Joanna Roth), Damian Lewis as Wittipol and Dickon Tyrrell as Manly 'are all quietly strong'. She thought Warchus had recognized the strength of these characters and illuminated their contribution to the thrust of the play:

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<sup>51</sup> Melvin; Warchus.

<sup>52</sup> David Troughton, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 15 May 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Melvin.



Warchus adroitly threads the line of moderation and decency up through the play until it gains the upper hand in the last scene. His change of pace and mood in the last scene is so impressive that you really feel that some lesson has been learned.<sup>54</sup>

Kate Stratton felt that it lacked 'subtlety', as 'Warchus keeps the mood up-beat, but his no-holds-barred direction only occasionally signals the moral urgency that lurks behind Jonson's comic capers'. Of the director's input she wrote: 'Without a sharp enough dramatic focus, many scenes lose their shape in the general swaggering and door-slamming that often passes for comedy'. Stratton concluded that the performance, although entertaining, was not outstanding in its contribution to Jonsonian production: 'this revival is notable rather than revelatory, and it takes devilish determination to follow the tangle of plot-ends [...] to their increasingly contrived conclusions'.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast, Robert Gore-Langton thought it 'a true find: Jonson's comedy is as scourging as ever, but with a mellower vein beneath the satire'. He saw the production as 'part of the RSC's ongoing exploration of Ben Jonson's neglected late career', despite the fact that the company's last staging of a 'late' Jonson was of *The New Inn* in 1987. He began by stating that, 'Warchus's bustling revival looks strictly Jacobean' but ended it with the conclusion, 'it is the vivid portrait of city sleaze that one takes home - Jonson and the 1990s go hand-in-glove'. For Gore-Langton it seemed as though the set design and the production's contemporary relevance were divisible.<sup>56</sup>

Neil Smith stressed the visual impact of the opening image of the set, redesigned for the Pit: 'This is really rather spooky, with ultra-violet light, lightning and thunder used to focus all our attention on the devil's pentacle that

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<sup>54</sup> Sarah Hemming, 'Low cunning runs riot in Jacobean London', *Financial Times*, 30 April 1996.

<sup>55</sup> Kate Stratton, 'The Devil is an Ass', *Time Out*, 1 May 1996.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Gore-Langton, 'Lovers and losers', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 April 1996.



forms the centre of Bunny Christie's ever-changing set'. Smith admitted that the rest was an anti-climax - 'what follows, however, is a pretty mundane burlesque'.

The reasons were integral to Jonson's comic invention:

Try as they might, the players can't make the text seem more substantial than a hotchpotch of convoluted scams involving [...] outrageous disguises, hastily improvised fabrications and the like. And while the larger-than-life characters allow for plenty of novelty and comic ingenuity, the plot twists aren't worth the effort.<sup>57</sup>

However, he did not appreciate the 'comic ingenuity' of all the actors, for example, Nettles and Troughton 'seem less concerned with the text than with the numerous scraps of silly business they have created for themselves [...] to stave off the same boredom that afflicts the audience [...] half-way through'. He concluded that, in comparison to Warchus's *Volpone*, it 'lacks both pace and finesse'.<sup>58</sup>

The *Times* critic suggested that the play 'sounds more fun than it proves to be'. They wrote about the new visual landscape inspired by black magic, 'fluorescent demons, church-yards and a secret study hung with black magical bones' but they suggested 'it is difficult to care what happens to anyone'. This was a response to the playing, for example, Troughton's 'plodding gait and fatuously trusting scowl are good value' but 'the inevitable sameness of the character from start to finish brings diminishing returns'. Wittipol was welcomed as a character 'who changes direction'. Praising the 'Spanish scene' as 'the high spot', the reviewer enjoyed Lewis as 'a young Margaret Rutherford playing Charley's Aunt'.<sup>59</sup>

Nick Curtis began by calling the play 'Jonson's rickety comedy' and the production 'a rowdy mess'. He claimed that the play was 'justly neglected'. To

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<sup>57</sup> Neil Smith, 'The Devil is an Ass', *What's On*, 1 May 1996.

stage this 'carelessly complex plot' Warchus had employed an 'emptily madcap staging'. Comparing it with the Stratford run, he claimed that 'partially recast, it seems to have got a lot worse'. He added that it 'has verve but no focus, which is the one thing this play needs'. He went on to call the staging 'hollowly hammy' and thought that Warchus 'stages this flawed comedy as a farce in a frantic bid to make it funny'. In this farcical sense, 'Christie's bland set becomes a hive of activity, with characters constantly bustling by, slamming doors or indulging in ungoverned comic business'. For Curtis there was a lack of consistency: 'Acting styles clash and grate, unified only by inaudibility, and the satanic scenes look like they come from a particularly tacky panto'. However, 'incidental pleasures can be wrung from the swaggering, braggardly performances of Nettles and Troughton'. However, he thought Dougall was 'bland' and the character's 'desperation echoes that of Warchus'. His chief complaint was that the play 'has a mushy moral centre [...] [and] the villainy that surrounds it lacks an evil edge'.<sup>60</sup>

Whilst both Burge's and Warchus's productions saw the vision of London evinced in the play as particular to the seventeenth century, the depictions of Hell were very different and peculiar to the theatrical technology of their time. Burge's production had more of a Morality Play style, with Pug appearing as a human figure but topped with horns. Warchus's depiction of Hell depended on stage effects: ultraviolet lighting, luminescent paint, pyrotechnics and amplification sound effects.

Burge's 1977 production marked the revival of interest in Jonson's works in the contemporary English professional theatre. In the 1990s it was the play that revived interest in Jonson once again. Not since 1991 had the RSC staged a

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<sup>58</sup> Smith.

play by Jonson and not since 1989 had they staged a less well known play by the author. But both revivals of the play – by Burge in 1977 and Warchus in 1995 – sparked a renewed interest by critics and audiences in the staging of the unknown Jonson texts. However, neither moment of renewed interest promoted the production of other less well known Jonsonian texts. Instead, in both cases after the London run *The Alchemist* was the next play by Jonson to be produced on the professional stage.

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<sup>59</sup> Anon., 'Diabolical liberty', *The Times*, 1 May 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Nick Curtis, 'Welcome to the pantomime from Hell', *Evening Standard*, 19 April 1996.



***EPICOENE OR THE SILENT WOMAN IN PERFORMANCE*****PRODUCTION DETAILS*****THE SILENT WOMAN OR EPICOENE: RSC, SWAN***

Ned Clerimont	Jared Harris
A Boy	Liza Hayden
Truewit	Richard McCabe
Sir Dauphine Eugenie	Peter Hamilton Dyer
Sir Amorous La Foole	Michael Mears
Morose	David Bradley
Mute	Graham Turner
Cutbeard	William Chubb
Sir John Daw	John Ramm
Epicoene	Hannah John [John Hannah]
Master Otter	David Shaw-Parker
Mistress Otter	Jennie Heslewood
A Parson	Paul Lacoux
Madame Haughty	Amanda Bellamy
Madame Centaur	Rebecca Saire
Mistress Dol Mavis	Sarah Crowden
Mistress Trusty	Polly Kemp
Pages and servants: Richard Doubleday, Michael Howell, Jacqueline Leonard, William Oxborrow, Neil Richardson, Georgia Slowe, Hilary Tones	

Director	Danny Boyle
Designer	Kandis Cook
Lighting	Rory Dempster
Music	Barrington Pheloung
Sound	Andrea J Cox
Assistant Director	Matthew Richardson
First performance: 28 June 1989.	

**Archive resources for this production**

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material.

- Music
- Newspaper reviews
- Performance video
- Production photographs and contact sheets
- Prompt book
- Stage Manager's reports
- Theatre programme

INTRODUCTION: *EPICOENE*

*Epicoene* is regarded as having equal literary status as *Bartholomew Fair* and *Volpone* – the play appears in anthologies alongside these as representative of Jonson's comic output. But despite this regard *Epicoene* has not found a regular place in the performance repertoire of the professional English theatre. Danny Boyle's RSC production in 1989 was the first for many years. In the programme Simon Trussler noted the original production as 1609 at the Whitefriars, the new home of the Children of His Majesty's Revels. The original production can only be assumed to have been a success until halted by a complaint from Lady Arbella Stuart about a purported reference made to her and the Prince of Moldavia.

*Epicoene* held a place on the Restoration stage, despite the casting of successive female performers as Epicoene. Nevertheless, Trussler suggested that 'since the Covent Garden production of 1784, the only professional revival in London has been that by the Phoenix Society at the Regent in 1924'. However, one reviewer in 1989 commented on a more recent production: 'a York Festival revival five years ago'.<sup>1</sup>

Festival productions are beyond the scope of this thesis but *Epicoene* remains the surprising omission from the recently renewed repertoire of Jonson's plays. Its plot is well integrated in comparison to other Jonsonian texts, like *Bartholomew Fair*, or even *Volpone*. The cast size makes no greater demands than either of these. And there is a unity of dramatic action rare in Jonson's texts as all the characters are involved in the central plot. The potential of Morose as a

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Silent Woman or Epicoene: a programme/text*, commentary by Simon Trussler, Swan Theatre Plays (London: Methuen, 1989), See p. IX for productions of the play and p. XVI for Stuart's complaint; Michael Coveney, 'The Silent Woman or Epicoene', *Financial Times*, 7 July 1989.

popular role for character actors, as suggested by J. C. Trewin in a review of the production, would also recommend the play to the repertoire.<sup>2</sup>

However, it is perhaps the difficulty of casting the title role that has prevented other productions. John Hannah's performance as Epicoene in Boyle's production drew mixed reviews and the casting of a male actor will inevitably draw the reviewers' attentions towards questions of gender verisimilitude, rather than criticizing the individual's presentation of the role. In single sex productions, that is, all female or all male casts, the presentation of gender is more open to question and less dependent on a realistic depiction of the play. Nevertheless, such productions are unlikely to be presented by mainstream commercial theatres, which are the focus of this thesis, and are more usually presented by non-professional companies, at drama festivals, or by fringe companies, for example, Sam Shammass's all male casting of the play in 1997 at the Actors Centre.<sup>3</sup>

In 1989 the unfamiliarity of the play to theatre audiences prompted the RSC to reverse the original title to *The Silent Woman or Epicoene*. To an audience of the 1980s the unfamiliarity of the word 'Epicoene' exposed a key difference between the presentation of the play on the Jacobean stage by an all-male boy company and its twentieth-century presentation. The original audience would understand the trick played on Morose before the character of Epicoene had been introduced. However, a twentieth-century audience would remain unaware of Epicoene's gender until a particular moment in the play.

According to the actor's appearance and physical type an audience today would remain unaware that Epicoene is a young man either until the actor

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<sup>2</sup> J. C. Trewin, 'The Silent Woman', *Birmingham Post*, 7 July 1989.



playing the role first appeared or until the actual moment of revelation to Morose in the play. From the reaction of the reviewers to Boyle's production the willingness to suspend disbelief at the plausibility of John Hannah as a woman was mixed. Therefore, the moment of revelation was clouded – those who felt Hannah was miscast found his initial appearance absurd and this negated their response to the play's revelation.

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<sup>3</sup> *Epicoene – The Silent Woman*, produced and directed by Sam Shamma, ran as part of the London Fringe at the Actors Centre, Tristan Bates Theatre, 8-26 July 1997.

*THE SILENT WOMAN OR EPICOENE*: RSC, SWAN, DIR. DANNY BOYLE, 1989

Boyle's production promoted the idea of creating illusion through costume and used a bare stage in front of a coloured backdrop of Hollar's *London*. The play began with Clerimont, in a long blond wig, being dressed by the boy (significantly, played by a woman). The boy dressed Clerimont from the level of underwear – white breeches – to an elaborate cavalier-styled costume, including floppy ruff and cuffs. The effect was to visually complement Otter's bravado remarks about his wife's beauty built from component parts, 'All her teeth were made i' the/ Blackfriars, both her eyebrows i' the Strand, and her hair/ in Silver Street' (IV.2.82-4) and dismantled every day, 'She takes herself asunder [...] into/ some twenty boxes, and about next day noon is put together/ again', (IV.2.87-9). It revealed the comment to be hypocritically misogynist on the part of the character as the audience had seen men to be built in a similar way, displacing the charge of misogyny from the playwright. Clerimont's putting on of costume was mirrored when Epicoene's identity was revealed as Clerimont and Dauphine undressed Epicoene after he had removed his own wig. This unmasking became a literal moment of revelation as Epicoene was left bare-chested and in his underwear (like Clerimont at the start) and the audience and characters saw Epicoene as undoubtedly male for the first time. Other characters, like the Collegiate ladies, Mistress Otter, Daw and La Foole, were obviously wearing make-up, had elaborate costumes, and wore, often artificially-coloured, wigs (see PLATE 16). Every character had undergone an extensive process of dressing up before their arrival on stage, even Morose, who wore many layers of bonnets to protect himself from noise. In other words, it was not merely

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Epicoene who appeared in drag. When in the final speech Truewit, 'Coming forward', said 'Spectators, if you like this/ comedy,' (V.4.229-30), the cast turned from their final positions within the dramatic fiction to face the audience and the lights snapped brightly to illuminate the stage and auditorium for the direct address. The effect was that the play was framed by an acknowledgement that the play in production was more about the creation of an illusory image by every character than whether a male could ever pass as a convincing female on stage or in the society presented. The emphasis was on dress, rather than on the human contents of the clothes, as Truewit says, 'I love a good dressing/ before any beauty o' the world' (I.1.97-8).<sup>4</sup>

Irving Wardle noticed that the play had 'vanished from the repertory' from the RSC's use of a compliments slip asking reviewers 'not to disclose the fundamental secret' of the plot. He found the 'brutality' surprising, viewing 'the relish of the story' as 'the handing out of punishment for its own sake'. He admitted Boyle's production was 'unfaltering' in its 'rampant virility and grotesque comedy, with no appeals for sympathy whatsoever'. Wardle enjoyed that lack of sympathy in the exposure of Otter, La Foole and Daw: 'the successive humiliations [...] are dispatched with blood-sport gusto.' However, he disliked the effect of speed on comprehension, 'the trio [Dauphine, Truewit and Clerimont] play with such speed, energy and running exits [...] that you are left wondering what the hell is going on'. Wardle relinquished this disapproval 'with the arrival of David Bradley's Morose', when 'the comedy relaxes into a sure stride for the rest of the evening'. He singled out the marriage as humorous and spectacular: 'where the silent bride (Hannah John) finds her tongue, and

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Jonson, *Epicoene or The Silent Woman*, ed. by L. A. Beaurline, Regents Renaissance

releases a flood of wedding guests completed with a brass band, brings the most delirious comic climax I have seen at this address'. Apart from the boy's gentle and simply arranged song at the beginning, the production had remained free of music until this moment at the wedding, reinforcing both the surprise of the noise for the audience and Morose's reaction to it.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Schmidt agreed with Wardle's statement on the speed losing the intricacies of the play. He offered advice for potential producers of Jonson:

Each of his comic characters has a distinct way of speaking, a pace, an idiom, a choice of images and verbal gestures. You cannot rush at Jonson's comedies: the actors must know what they are saying and how to say it.<sup>6</sup>

Like Wardle, he saw the entrance of Morose as pivotal, he 'slows the pace of the dialogue without slowing up the action', viewing Morose and Mute – 'a hilarious Graham Turner' – as 'the heart' of the production. Bradley's Morose inspired sympathy in the reviewer and audience, as Schmidt suggested: he was 'almost too excellent' because, 'though he begins an outrageous, tyrannical and silly old man', he 'retains innocence of a sort'. This was because he was 'monstrously preyed upon, [...] he retires like an even worse-handled Malvolio, the audience emits an audible "Oh" of dissent and alarm'.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas Wardle found the high point in the wedding scene, Schmidt saw Cutbeard and Otter, 'conducting a dialogue in Latin tags in which they bait Morose', as 'the comic climax to the second half'. This is an interesting point as it revealed that Latin could be funny in performance, regardless of whether the audience actually understood the language or not. The progressive cruelty

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Drama (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Brutal comedy reigns supreme', *The Times*, 6 July 1989; the same review appeared as 'Brutal comedy is irresistible', *The Times*, 8 July 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Schmidt, 'The art of noise', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 July 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Schmidt.



provided an interesting discovery of the play in production: that Morose is the most empathetic character. Morose was the ‘ultimately helpless miser of silence’; likening the events to ‘a bear-baiting in period dress’, Schmidt though Morose was ‘the bear, [...] the most human creature in the pit.’ The set was functional according to this idea: ‘the great map of Jonson’s London is rent to reveal the inner courtyard of a house with balconies and clangorous bells, [it] accommodates all the instruments of his punishment’.<sup>8</sup>

The *Observer* critic began by praising Kandis Cook’s ‘wonderful design’, and enjoyed the visual beauty of the opening, ‘against a beautiful painting of London with a seagreen horizon, a tiny, artless boy played by a girl (Liza Hayden) [...] stems the flow of their talk with song’. The ‘talk’ refers to Clerimont and Truewit and the critic notes, ‘there is much joy in the torrent of talk, the surprising undated richness of the language, the concrete curses that you want to commit to memory’. In a world where ‘words are stronger than events’ and ‘galloping lies make men believe life is other than it is’, it was fitting that Morose ‘wears several bonnets and earplugs to secure calm midnights’. Taking the transvestite casting of the boy and the trick played on Morose as starting points - ‘the dividing line between the sexes is thin’ - the critic tried to explain the confusion of gender roles within the play and the production:

La Foole [...] is almost a woman, barely in control of his quivering height and so liberal with his lavender atomizer that the air of the Swan is thick with it. He has a hysterical laugh, loudest when he hasn’t understood the joke.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst the production explored the transvestite theme, interrogating the play’s title, the terms this critic used were misinformed. The laugh and stage

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<sup>8</sup> Schmidt.

<sup>9</sup> Anon., *Observer*, 9 July 1989.



business would not make La Foole appear 'almost a woman', as a woman would not necessarily behave in this way any more than a man. Instead, the behaviour questioned the assumed natural correlation between gender and behaviour that the critic actually enforced (see PLATE 17).

When Morose was 'tricked and robbed [...] by his scheming nephew' Ann FitzGerald found the production alarming:

The sudden flash of pure vindictiveness with which Peter Hamilton Dyer reveals [...] his plot and the painful recoil from such long-nurtured hatred with which [...] Morose responds, creates a moment of high dramatic tension in which a sour little tragedy is born. The unlovesome Morose, like Shylock [...], limps away a broken man, and the triumph of his victors shames them as they laugh.<sup>10</sup>

Rod Dungate thought the play, 'seems still to bemuse more than amuse', judging that, 'the problem' is that, 'the characters in it are all so nasty'. However, he thought that Boyle's production 'is a welcome opportunity to see this great play'. He singled out Truewit as 'the motor of the play', as played by Richard McCabe – 'suitably manic [...] though he lacks, at present, the verbal skill to get full comic value from his wonderful speeches'. And for Dungate, Bradley was, 'wonderfully comic as the misanthropic Morose, though he misses out on the darker side of the character'.<sup>11</sup>

Noting the change in the audience's comprehension of the title, J. C. Trewin suggested that, 'Jonson might have been amused by an official request not to give away the secret of *The Silent Woman*'. He pointed to the absurdity of *Epicoene* remaining absent from the repertoire as Morose was, 'at least one part [that] ought to have tempted character actors for a longer period than it did'. The critic thought the way Morose communicates with Mute, 'only by leg signs' was

<sup>10</sup> Ann FitzGerald, 'A grand delusion', *Stage*, 27 July 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Rod Dungate, 'Renaissance revivals', *Tribune*, 26 July 1989.

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funny in performance and noted, 'the Swan audience applauded [this] as much as anything'. Trewin concluded that 'I cannot say [...] its persistent noise and involved complexities are always fun for the house'.<sup>12</sup>

Paul Taylor judged Boyle's production 'of this unjustly neglected and brilliant comedy' 'as thoughtful as it is hilarious': 'it brings to the surface its underlying negativity'. Morose's 'multi-layered bonnet' was, 'less clothing than cladding, a crash helmet against the least sonic incursion'. And he detailed individual performances: 'a vision in apricot, [La Foole] looks (in Michael Mears's dizzily affected performance) like what you would get if you crossed Veronica Lake with Maureen Lipman and plonked a floral window-box on the result' and Daw was 'equipped with a slackly gaping idiot-face by John Ramm'. The production reminded him 'that the action takes place against the backdrop of the plague, selected minor characters sport worrying running sores on their pasty faces [...] discreetly sketched in'. This make up existed not merely for comic revulsion but Taylor saw them as 'oozing badges of mortality' that reminded audience and characters that 'comedy's traditional battle between young and old is more than usually a race against time'. He felt the production highlighted 'friendship-groupings', like the College of Ladies, the 'pedigree-obsessed' La Foole and Daw, and 'the trio of young, proto-Restoration cads-about-town', groups which, 'parade a show of solidarity, but are in fact riven with dissensions'. The women are 'an ad hoc bunch of quivering competitive nymphomaniacs'. The young men, 'played with a designer-stubbled, heartless cynicism', 'for all their front of friendliness, lolling pally legs over one and other or indulging in synchronised nose picking, [...] are at variance'. Taylor saw this

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<sup>12</sup> J. C. Trewin, 'The Silent Woman', *Birmingham Post*, 7 July 1989.



'sourness' as part of the 'main plot', too: 'when Dauphine viciously slaps the old man's face with the signed documents (Boyle's interpolation), the audience's sense of violation was so great that for once in this noisy play you could have heard a pin drop'. Taylor admitted that he could not discuss *Epicoene*'s central performance for fear of exposing 'the play's "fundamental secret"', it 'leaves one a bit stumped as to how to praise an excellently unsettling performance'.<sup>13</sup>

However, the identity of *Epicoene* was revealed by other critics who found the casting of John Hannah unconvincing and expressed discontent that 'the governing concern with sexual topsyturviness [*sic*] receives scant attention':

The gallants [are] insufficiently effeminate; the Collegiates, far from being hermaphroditical monsters, are elegant [...] court ladies, [...] If they had seemed more mannish, the real mannishness of John Hannah's *Epicoene*, the boy bride, would have been less apparent. The cast-list does its best [...], but the actor's physique is undisguisably male.<sup>14</sup>

R.V. Holdsworth also saw the interpretation of Dauphine, Clerimont and Truewit as contrary to the text: 'far from being the dandified idlers the text demands' they appeared 'sleazy, unshaven louts, who spit and scratch themselves and urinate against the stage's rear wall. They bellow and glare [...] and seem impelled by black hatred rather than an airy determination to treat life as a game'. Indeed, Holdsworth felt that Morose, 'despite ear-muffs, layers of nightcaps and woollen pumps at the end of spidery legs, appears merely grumpy rather than mad, and distressed rather than tormented'. The critic's only praise for the production was in the portrayal of Daw and La Foole, who 'achieve the authentic Jonsonian blend of lunacy, mania and curious innocence, and bring a reminder that the play is funny as well as bitter'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Taylor, 'The noisy inheritance', *Independent*, 7 July 1989.

<sup>14</sup> R. V. Holdsworth, 'Wife swapping', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 July 1989.

<sup>15</sup> Holdsworth.

In contrast, Michael Billington saw the play as ‘a hard, cruel comedy that lacks any real moral centre’; and felt that, ‘to its credit’, the production ‘shirks none of the play’s militant harshness’. Instead, Boyle, ‘intensifies it by having the triumphant Dauphine at the last slap his deceived uncle across the chops’. He also appreciated the questioning of the sexual and gender boundaries, ‘it [...] plays up Jonson’s fascination with sexual ambiguity by having the three aristos [*sic*] claw and fondle each other like lugubrious pickpockets’. But he did not care about revealing the gender identity of Epicoene:

He would have to be a pretty myopic spectator who didn’t realise that Hannah John as the bride is not all she seems: suspiciously tall, blue-chinned and with shoulders that would not disgrace a front-row forward, she is certainly the kind of woman one would look twice at. I just wish she were more plausibly feminine since the play has some of the sexual quirkiness of a Jacobean *M. Butterfly*.<sup>16</sup>

For him Jonson was a ‘cartoonist of contemporary abnormality’ but the cast ‘lack the security of outline and savage gusto that this memorably unpleasant play requires’, except for Bradley, Turner and Mears, ‘who looks like Aguecheek with a flowerpot on his head’.<sup>17</sup>

Michael Coveney suggested, with regard to the compliments slip, that the production:

Renders this impertinent request superfluous by casting as the dumb dame an actor, John Hannah, into whom you would not care to bump on a dark night: the white bridal gown is no disguiser of a two-day stubble, a deep Glaswegian voice, hands like hams and docker’s shoulders [*sic*].<sup>18</sup>

Taking the costuming as a motif he wrote, ‘this is also a comedy of false beards, hair-pieces, and wigs: the rakes wear long, lank curls, the collegiate an array of stiff pastel perruques’ [*sic*]. He suggested that the production was ‘not really good enough to set beside John Caird’s Jonson revivals in this address’.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Billington, ‘The myopic misogynist’, *Guardian*, 7 July 1989.



However, he only singled out McCabe's Truewit for particular adverse criticism, he, 'unfortunately blew the great manifesto against marriage'; he described him as 'scurrilous and rat-like', missing an 'air of spirit and ingenuity'. Nevertheless, Morose was 'another delightful slow-burning performance, appearing among the campanologists' ropes in a padded helmet, later exchanged for a cushion strapped on with a leather belt'. And he suggested the effectiveness of Bradley's style, 'while you might imagine a larger scale reading of the role, Bradley's pained muttering and frozen, finical gestures are the tragic evidence of a deeply hilarious stand against the modern barbarities of the world outside'. This was an unexpected highlight for Coveney, who found little else to praise.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst many reviewers concentrated on how convincing Hannah was as a woman, the real value of the production was that this attitude was largely irrelevant. The play, aided by the production's techniques, pointed to the hypocrisy of the men in judging the women for their obsessions with appearance. Not only did the production reveal the male characters to be as vainly self-obsessed as the women but the creation of identity and image was a vital part of the society depicted. Image was shown, therefore, as the value system in an acquisitive society, complementing the mainspring of the plot – Dauphine's plan to obtain Morose's money. As every character was depicted with an excess of costumes, make-up and wigs, it was acceptable to the audience that Morose (and others) could be fooled by the appearance of his bride. The cross-gender casting of a woman as the boy prepared the audience for the cross-gender casting of Epicoene. As the boy was not revealed within the fiction to be a woman, the

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<sup>17</sup> Billington.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Coveney, 'The Silent Woman or Epicoene', *Financial Times*, 7 July 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Coveney.



audience may have been more willing to accept Epicoene's identity until the moment of revelation.

After Stratford Boyle's production did not complete the RSC's transfers to Newcastle and London. This failure on the part of the production may be misleading. As with Caird's Swan productions, Boyle's *The Silent Woman* gained a number of favourable reviews and some audience appreciation. The absence of a transfer revealed the lack of faith in the production of Jonson's texts by the RSC management. After *The Silent Woman* the RSC did not produce another play by Jonson until the relatively safe commercial choices of *The Alchemist* in 1991 and *Bartholomew Fair* in 1997; although the more unfamiliar choice of *The Devil is an Ass* featured in 1995. These three productions in six years showed a contrasting attitude to the early years of experiment in the Swan where the three productions of the almost unknown Jonsons – *Every Man in His Humour*, *The New Inn*, and *Epicoene* – were presented within a period of only three years. The removing of *Epicoene* from the RSC's repertoire effectively ended the company's interest in producing almost one Jonson play per season in the Swan, preferring a more casual attitude to the playwright's work in more recent times.

***EVERY MAN IN HIS HUMOUR IN PERFORMANCE*****PRODUCTION DETAILS*****EVERY MAN IN HIS HUMOUR: RSC, SWAN AND MERMAID***

Old Kno'well	Tony Church (Swan)/ Stuart Richman (Mermaid)
Brainworm	David Haig
Master Stephen	Paul Greenwood
Servant	Roger Moss
Ed Kno'well	Simon Russell Beale
Master Matthew	Philip Franks
Cob	David Troughton
Tib	Susie Fairfax
Captain Bobadill	Pete Postlethwaite
Thomas Kitley	Henry Goodman
Thomas Cash	Gary Love
George Downwright	Jeremy Pearce
Dame Kitley	Jane Galloway
Bridget	Joely Richardson (Swan)/ Jane Lancaster (Mermaid)
Wellbred	Nathanial Parker
Justice Clement	Raymond Bowers
Roger Formal	Mark Lindley
Clement's Servant	Roger Moss
Director	John Caird
Designer	Sue Blane
Lighting	Wayne Dowdeswell
Sound	John Leonard/Mo Weinstock
Fights	Malcolm Ranson
First performance: Swan, 15 May 1986, Mermaid, 8 April 1987.	

**Archive resources for this production**

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews  
 Performance video (Swan only)  
 Production photographs and contact sheets  
 Prompt book  
 Stage Manager's reports  
 Theatre programme

INTRODUCTION: *EVERY MAN IN HIS HUMOUR*

*Every Man in His Humour* was Jonson's earliest independent stage success. As Robert N. Watson has suggested, the Quarto's title page notes that it was 'a hit, performed "Sundry times"', after its premiere in 1598 at the Curtain by the Chamberlain's Men.<sup>1</sup> As the title suggests, it relates to Jonson's early interest in exploiting the dramatic possibilities of the theory of 'humours' or obsessive behaviour based on quasi-medical imbalances.

The interest in humours is one of the reasons why Jonson's plays are not performed with regularity: it can be mistakenly viewed as the key to understanding all Jonsonian texts and has the negative implication of inferring a broad acting style for one-dimensional, fixed characters. Caird's production went some way in negating the validity of this misconception. More rarely produced than *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* or *Bartholomew Fair*, *Every Man in His Humour* has suffered from being considered as an 'early Jonson', the assumption being that it was written before he reached comic maturity with these other texts.

Nevertheless, the play may prove exciting for an audience because it is unfamiliar – they can watch the play with suspense, not knowing what will happen. It also presents a subtlety in Jonson, often missed in the later plays because of assumptions made about large playing. In *Every Man in His Humour* characters undergo change when they consider their own follies and their circumstances. This necessitates flexibility in performances and a need to ground the changes of character within truthful motivations for behaviour. This was the great success of Caird's production and many were pleasantly surprised to find characters were not the simple types they had presumed.



*Every Man in His Humour* really marked the beginning of Jonson's interest in dramatizing the characteristics and modes of behaviour of ordinary people in London. Although it is not wholly set in the city it may be classed as one of his first attempts at city comedy, the genre for which he is renowned. It is certainly a conscious decision to dramatize his native locale – the original setting was Italy and it used names and characters inspired by Roman comedies. His act of revision, in order to make the content more pertinent to his own age, enabled him to inflate the everyday actions of London to comic proportions.

In the City Comedies Jonson captured many realistic elements of Elizabethan London life but he is not a documentarist. Instead he fused his working knowledge of the city with an element of absurd fantasy, based on the humours principle. Comedy works by exaggeration and therefore, whilst it is useful to see many elements of real life incorporated in the drama it would be wrong to assume that the play presents a slice of Elizabethan life. It creates an illusion of real life by its contemporary setting and through employing exaggerated and sometimes improbable behaviour – Brainworm's increasing use of disguise being highly unlikely amongst servants in Elizabethan London. Its intricate plot prevents it from being mistaken for a documentary as the end of the drama resolves all of the plots. However, many critics of both the play and the production have concentrated on the idea of 'realism' in the play as if Jonson is a sort of dramatizing journalist of the age. This is surely a misreading. Although all plays reflect and contribute to the time in which they were written, all plays are also pieces of entertainment to be performed in a theatre: by definition they define their own structure and content. *Every Man in His Humour* is a play that

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<sup>1</sup> Robert N. Watson, 'Introduction: the Play on the Stage', in Ben Jonson, *Every Man in His*

translates Jonson's original Roman-style characters and plot into Elizabethan London to speak more directly to his audience and comedy needs a familiarity between its audience and the material for it to reach its specific target.

*EVERY MAN IN HIS HUMOUR*: RSC, SWAN AND MERMAID, DIR. JOHN CAIRD, 1986-7

Caird's production formed part of the opening season of the recently built Swan auditorium. Jonson's early success in this theatre was primarily dependent on Caird's successful production of this early Jonsonian text. Caird wisely used Jonson's revised English version from the 1616 Folio with which to begin his own revival of the playwright's lesser-known texts. He did borrow some elements from the Quarto text, including much from the final scene with Ed Knowell's defence of poetry. This facilitated a change to the character of Knowell as Caird has explained, 'I developed this character further than is clear in the text by making it an obvious portrait of the young Ben Jonson', because he felt this speech was 'an obviously subjective authorial statement'. It was the zeal of reviving lost texts of the Renaissance when the Swan first opened that facilitated much of the interest in the revival of Jonson in general, as Caird followed *Every Man in His Humour* with *The New Inn* in 1987.<sup>2</sup>

Reviews concentrated on the 'neglected' status of both Jonson and the play and most commended the finding of an 'original' period setting. The other main feature of the reviews was the amount of comments praising the 'beautiful new Swan Theatre'.<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis was on the novelty value of an unknown play in a new space, leaving little room for other comments on the actual production. One interesting feature of the reviews was that Jonson presented in period was seen as an antidote to the Shakespearian 'concept' productions played at the time in the RST: Shakespeare played in updated settings and with a more casual vocal style

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<sup>2</sup> Caird, *This Golden Round*, p. 68.



reached its zenith in the 1980s. In fact, Caird has suggested that the designs for both *Every Man in His Humour* and *The New Inn* were not 'period drama' because 'I hate those productions as much as anyone else'. In fact, 'the costumes were not anything anybody would have ever worn – Elizabethan or Jacobean – they were a fantastic imagined version'.<sup>4</sup>

The designer Sue Blane thought the play 'needed the sign-posts of real life' so she hung props on pulleys around the set and resisted the clichés of 'period plays' – 'people in funny costumes'. Instead, 'we desperately wanted to make Elizabethan costumes understandable – clothes, rather than costumes'. She continued: 'I wanted to keep the social distinctions between the characters, and to make them distinctive, without making them too fantasticated' (see PLATE 18). Blane made changes to her set during the preview period because of actor requests. Originally her design was 'surrounding the edges of the stage with all sorts of objects' but this became a 'psychological barrier' between the actors and the audience. It was removed and Blane responded to the request as being crucial to the production's success: 'The stage needs to be totally accessible. It's such a warm space'.<sup>5</sup>

Ronnie Mulryne and Margaret Shewring have noted the effectiveness of Blane's work on the play in production. Blane's costumes were interpreted as 'not chronologically precise period-costumes but [...] clothes appropriate to the individual actors, as well as evocative, rather than pictorially representative, of their roles'. They thought the script, 'dense with references to properties', contained a 'multiplicity of characters and locations'. Because of this, Blane's decision to suspend 'specially crafted, solid furniture and props which felt real

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<sup>3</sup> Francis King, 'Every play in its place', *Sunday Telegraph*, 25 May 1986.

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but were not in any antiquarian way authentic' revealed the 'solid reality of a busy, merchant and working-class | London without hampering the essential fluidity of the action'.<sup>6</sup>

Just as Blane was receptive to actors' comments about changing the set, she also altered some costumes. Paul Greenwood, who played Stephen, has talked of how his costume was adapted after some performances due to audience accessibility, as well as practical reasons:

The costumes slightly changed. I originally had two ruffs and I ended up with one because it didn't look right. Although, the reason I had the two was he's such a wally – the size of the ruff shows the importance – so he'd probably have two. Which is quite a good character point but people would not have got the point. And I remember I had mittens on a string, which just got in the way a lot. They went, too.<sup>7</sup>

Greenwood also talked about Caird's rehearsal methods, which encouraged the actors to think of the literal realities of where the play is set – 'We had to work out where we were coming from. I mean like the geography of where I was walking to and how to get there and when to enter'.<sup>8</sup>

Henry Goodman, Caird's Kitely, has spoken of the rehearsal period for the production, the company:

spent a lot of time working on the script, on the text, around tables, just discussing it. And doing other stuff about the period: I'd go off and do a thing about industry and merchants of the day. So I'd have to go and research that in the Shakespeare Library in Stratford and Birmingham University's facilities. And somebody else would do milkmaids, and somebody else lawyers and we'd all come in and do a talk. People did what they could and so we all brought in background information to give the social circumstances out of which this play was born, meaning, and that made a lot of difference. It liberates your imagination. You suddenly take on board the whole nature of the lifestyle.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Caird, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 9 May 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Blane, *This Golden Round*, pp. 87-9.

<sup>6</sup> Ronnie Mulryne and Margaret Shewring, 'The Repertoire of the Swan', in *This Golden Round*, pp. 23-40, p. 25-6.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Greenwood, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 1 July 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Greenwood.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Goodman, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 15 March 1997.



Goodman read widely for his research, including social histories and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. However, Caird has suggested that his rehearsals did not rely on research:

It's not so much research, it's much more to do with just understanding the language, understanding what's present underneath it, that there's a reason for them actually speaking so complex. It's getting across a set of thoughts that were actually very lucid under the surface. I think the real trick is to get actors wearing Elizabethan dress in a way that makes it look as if they've been wearing it all their lives, so there isn't a sense of period drama. The first duty of any director is to get inside the mind of the author. The last duty is to say how can I put my mark on it? I reach for my axe when I hear the word 'concept'. Anybody who says 'my concept for this play is...', you just think, you pretentious bastard. What about Jonson's concept?<sup>10</sup>

As Francis King wrote, in a place 'dedicated to the production of little known plays', 'directors are far less likely to feel the necessity [...] constantly to shake up the audience with novelties of interpretation or setting'. Just as Caird described above, for King the play was the antithesis of directors' theatre as 'one is hardly aware of his [Caird's] strong, capable hands at the puppet-strings'. King's opinion disproved the limiting quality of humours for the characters in performance, as Pete Postlethwaite's Bobadill was 'brilliantly presented [...] as a figure at once tragic and comic'.<sup>11</sup>

Mary Harron thought 'this seemingly-leaden text' worked 'so brilliantly on stage'. She appreciated Caird's 'crisp, energetic direction' of 'concise images – a single shaft of light transforms one corner [...] into a garret', and 'silent tableaux behind the main action'. Harron found the period design no hindrance to accessibility, the characters might be 'found on any London bus'. She praised Paul Greenwood's 'exquisitely fatuous [...] fop' Stephen but found

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<sup>10</sup> Caird.

<sup>11</sup> King.

Postlethwaite's 'twitches and grimaces' excessive. The 'tour de force' was Henry Goodman as Kitley, who 'seems an oasis of reason until you realize that he is very logically and methodically driving himself frothing mad'. She thought this believable portrayal was indicative of Jonson: 'this is heroic paranoia: the crazier their delusions, the more ferociously and complacently Johnson's [*sic*] characters pursue them, and the funnier they become'.<sup>12</sup>

Michael Billington thought the play a 'living portrait-gallery of Elizabethan London' in an 'affectionate' production. His view of Jonson as a 'beady-eyed observer' recalled the view of Jonson as a 'documentary realist', typified by L. C. Knights and Brian Gibbons. He pointed to the 'brilliantly played' Kitley as a 'reformable' character who 'sees his folly exposed and accepts the mutual trust of marriage'. For Billington 'judgement' was associated with 'forgiveness', and "'friendship, love and laughter" are benignly toasted'. The designs were 'a success in evoking the frantic bustle' of London: 'Tables, tavern-bars, ladders are lowered from the flies on a mesh of weights and pulleys; Moorfields is suggested through a signpost encrusted with pigeon-droppings'. He appreciated this 'precise context' and enjoyed the sympathetic acting: 'the cast also fully inhabit the characters'. He singled out Goodman, 'whose head jerks like a manic marionette'; Postlethwaite, who has 'a strange, twilit pathos [...] not merely a fool but the dreamer inside all of us'; and mentions Greenwood, Philip Franks as Matthew and David Haig as Brainworm, who 'likewise give us characters, not caricatures: they work from within rather than without'. He complained that 'the women are thinly-drawn'. He pointed to the place of

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Harron, 'Prowse turns the tableaux: revivals of Otway, Jonson and Strindberg', *Observer*, 25 May 1986.



Caird's production in contemporary theatre, it 'does something revolutionary in the current RSC: it plays a period comedy in its original historic setting'.<sup>13</sup>

Irving Wardle began by condemning the play as 'dated beyond recovery' and complained about the 'absence of a direct plot-line'. However, the production was a 'brilliant revival' and Wardle wrote in detail on the use of the new Swan:

The depth of the stage lends itself to highly detailed simultaneous action, the galleries allow a sense of busy London life going on in the background, while the forestage permits the greatest intimacy and speed of direct address – with characters singling out individual cronies and shooting off nervous enquiries to the house in the midst of highly-charged dramatic business.<sup>14</sup>

Goodman was 'the master of this technique' who used 'desperate appeals to the house'. Postlethwaite gave 'another towering performance' who 'converts Bobadill from a stereotyped Pistol roarer into a decayed, pathetically self-righteous poseur'. He also thought that Greenwood's Stephen, 'steadily accumulating martial characteristics [...] gives the lie to the notion that Jonson's characters remain fixed'.<sup>15</sup>

John Peter acknowledged that as 'we have no tradition of playing' Jonson, it was advantageous to production: 'it allows directors and actors to confront him uninhibited'. However, he felt that 'some of the supporting cast don't yet know how to handle this imaginative and adventurous acting space'. Nevertheless, he concluded that 'the ensemble playing is first rate'.<sup>16</sup>

Michael Coveney approved of the 'realistic glow' of 'real people going about their business' 'in period costume' inside a design which 'offers a floating

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Billington, 'Illustrated London views', *Guardian*, 23 May 1986; repeated as 'Rare Ben Jonson', *Guardian Weekly*, 1 June 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Sporting with human folly', *The Times*, 23 May 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Wardle.

<sup>16</sup> John Peter, 'Crusaders in the unholy land', *The Sunday Times*, 25 May 1986.



townscape of furniture, barrels, beams and pulleys'. He singled out Postlethwaite's first moment as Bobadill as indicative of the psychologically truthful approach of the production:

He is discovered with a most appalling hangover, trembling and slobbering his platitudes while trying to stick a monocle in his eye and his feet in his boots. He twitches and bumbles in yet another attempt to pull himself together, say something sensible, propagate his image.<sup>17</sup>

John Barber praised the 'magical' theatre. He explained the use of the auditorium in creating the 'real life' effect – 'the long platform stage is thrust deep into the midst of the spectators, so that actors can buttonhole you at one moment and mount a spectacle seconds later'. The production was 'a delight' because 'You are among them, life-size people of another age'. Amongst these individuals Postlethwaite was once again mentioned:

When faced with a bully he crumples, knees knocking. His charm, like his monocle, lends a dash to his shabby exterior [...] although the actor creates a monstrous braggart, he never exceeds nature. You end with a lump in your throat on his final woebegone admission after being thrashed: "I never sustained a like disgrace, by heaven."<sup>18</sup>

Ann FitzGerald began by suggesting 'it takes the acting calibre of the RSC to make this play enjoyable for a modern audience', due to the 'wordy complexities of the dialogue'. Nevertheless she felt 'the clutter of props and furniture hanging from the wooden beams to be lowered at a moment's notice' and the Swan itself were key elements in the production's success, as 'the style of the theatre itself allows the director to make full use of the three gallery levels' (see PLATE 19). She illustrated this use by pointing to the scenes in Kately's house, 'with the women seated at a lighted window high up above the stage,

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Every Man in His Humour / The Swan, Stratford'[sic], *Financial Times*, 23 May 1986.

<sup>18</sup> John Barber, 'Every Man in His Humour' [sic], *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 1986.

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while the men roister in the room below, [...] one almost gets a glimpse of life in one of those tall, timbered, merchants' houses of Elizabethan England.<sup>19</sup>

It was this impression of Elizabethan life that pleased most critics. They appreciated the production more as a documentary on the past, rather than of the verisimilitude of the production in evoking the text.

Margaret Ingram suggested the performers 'seemed not to be acting at all but simply living out their destinies before us'. This idea of the production as a living environment, was seen as typically Jonsonian: 'no romantic fantasies for Jonson: [but] realism and human folly'. Ingram appreciated the 'realism', especially in the complex detail of the performances, for example, Bobadill, 'a boasting, swaggering Falstaffian figure, was given a most endearing quality'. She felt 'one of the pleasures [...] was to have the players garbed in Elizabethan costume as they would have been in 1598'. She did not think the setting a barrier to twentieth-century understanding: 'we were able to get the message while being pleasantly carried out of ourselves by the Elizabethan scene'. She ended by mentioning the production's closure: 'a defence of poetry and the sweet singing of a madrigal by the entire cast'.<sup>20</sup>

Peter Rhodes enjoyed the fact that it was 'refreshingly free of the RSC's latest gimmicks' and also appreciated the closing music – 'an unaccompanied Elizabethan round' – as 'one more surprise in a novel and exciting show'.<sup>21</sup>

This music was a madrigal called *In Going To My Naked Bed* by Richard Edwards – 'a very simple fable about love' – and it was the only music used in the entire production as Caird worked on a play 'without any music in it at all'.

<sup>19</sup> Ann FitzGerald, 'Glimpses of the Elizabethan age', *Stage*, 12 June 1986.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Ingram, 'O rare Ben Jonson!', *Stratford-upon-Avon Herald*, 30 May 1986.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Rhodes, 'Complex plot is rich in comedy', *Birmingham Express and Star*, 22 May 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Caird, *This Golden Round*, p. 72.



He suggested that the speed of the playing necessitated prompt scene-changes, so, 'you can't have music in the scene changes' and instead rounded off the evening with the song. Caird's justification was that 'after all the reconciliations it would be wonderful, magical, if we flooded the theatre with harmony, suddenly making the audience aware that they'd heard no music all evening'.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the lack of music throughout, the audience did have an aural landscape in which to place the production as Guy Woolfenden has explained, 'Caird did use the sounds of London life, which were skilfully integrated into the production'. After this Woolfenden thought the offering of the madrigal appeared 'as a sort of present to the audience'.<sup>23</sup>

Richard Edmonds suggested that the 'cracking production' was so good that 'one wonders why it did not open the Swan season', adding that 'the audience loved it'. He acknowledged the pathos of the performance of Bobadill, when 'exposed as a coward': 'it is a sad moment'.<sup>24</sup>

When the RSC season transferred to London the production opened at the Mermaid to reviews that were not as favourable as those in Stratford. Caird has spoken of his reasons for being unsatisfied with the Mermaid run of the play:

It was a horrible space. The difficulty was that when we invented a third theatre in Stratford you had to have a third auditorium in London. The Mermaid was the only place we could find that was available. It's a miserably poor stage; it's a very, very long theatre with the audience shoved up one end of the room and no possibility of playing in the round. We actually managed to ease a group of people round the outside of the stage so it looked like a building that was trying to be democratic, like the Swan in fact, but it was a cheat really. So the people sitting round the edge of the stage, unlike in the Swan, were always feeling that they'd been singled out, for embarrassment really. All of the RSC London spaces are ghastly.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Guy Woolfenden, 'The Music of the Swan', in *This Golden Round*, pp. 143-9, p. 146.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Edmonds, 'Justice is done in style', *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 22 May 1986.

Simon Russell Beale has also spoken of the production's transfer, it was 'frankly appalling at the Mermaid because the Swan had provided 50% of the warmth' and some performances 'fell victim to the sheer hard work of trying to get to the back of that very very deep Mermaid auditorium'.<sup>26</sup>

Nicholas de Jongh recognized the problem of trying to accommodate the original aesthetic within another auditorium: 'To opt for Jacobean purity in Swan style, rather than to rethink the production, suggests that the RSC is possessed by notions of purity and austerity'. He admitted that the production 'makes a frail, intermittent attempt to suggest a sense of bustling, bell-ringing, freshly metropolitan London', which suggests only a 'vague backdrop' for 'low, broad playing as if cast and director alike had realized that desperation was the best way of accommodating Jonson'. Nevertheless he felt that Goodman 'recognizes the character's excess, without burlesquing it' and he praised Franks's 'beautifully comic impersonation of a phoney poetaster'. He dismissed the company's technique: 'Jonson's world of poseurs is spoiled by grossly posing actors; and there is a dismaying, frequent tendency to slur and swallow words, revelling in the emotion of the speech rather than the sense'.<sup>27</sup>

Charles Osborne, however, regarded the production in the same light as at Stratford. He thought the set was 'wittily non-existent [...] on pulleys above the Elizabethan inner stage until required, thus giving the cast a generous performing space'. It was 'respectful to Jonson', who Osborne regarded as 'the leading

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<sup>25</sup> Caird, in an interview with Amanda Penlington.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Russell Beale, 'Acting in the Swan', *This Golden Round*, pp. 135-6, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Failing the Swan's way: Nicholas de Jongh on the problems of bringing Jonson to the Mermaid', *Guardian*, 15 April 1987.



dramatist of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, albeit one to whom we pay more lip service than attention'.<sup>28</sup>

Milton Shulman warned that it 'needs an audience's tolerance because it takes some time to sort out and feel comfortable with the mêlée of types on his crowded canvas'. He felt misgivings at the cast's tendency 'to rush at the lines with exuberant speed, some of the fun is lost in the clashes of dialogue'. But he felt that the individual performances – Goodman's 'deliberate pauses and worried twitchings', Postlethwaite, 'earning some sympathy', and Haig's 'busy plottings', 'eventually win us over'.<sup>29</sup>

Jeremy Kingston felt, like de Jongh, that 'the fizz has gone from the bottle'. He wrote about the newly-refurbished Mermaid and pointed to desperate actors' attempts to make the material work on 'the Mermaid's new gallery and staircases, from which the cast stride on at top speed, quarrelling at the pitch of their voices as if to give a forward thrust to the occasion by noise if nothing else'. However, Kingston expressed admiration for some 'valiant playing': it was 'joyous to see Henry Goodman express this anxiety, his voice trembling and eyes bulging in panic'. He added that Young Kno'well 'could be played as an insufferable prig' but performance transformed him, 'by giving him courtesy, even a hint of regret that fools should be so crazy, Simon Russell Beale has presented him as a respectable anchor'. Postlethwaite was also praised, he has 'a scruffy earthiness that is his own and [...] a fine ear for judging a pause to build a laugh'. But Kingston suggested that 'often the heart sinks when a character sits

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Osborne, 'Humours of the other Elizabethan', *Daily Telegraph*, 15 April 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Milton Shulman, 'Fun with Jonson, weird but winning', *London Evening Standard*, 14 April 1987.

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Kingston, 'Every Man in His Humour' [sic], *The Times*, 14 April 1987.



down because it will further delay the end of another unexciting scene', proving the need for pace and slick direction.<sup>30</sup>

Martin Hoyle felt no failure – 'it proves an impeccably-performed company effort without a weakness anywhere'. He wrote that 'Caird's production does the work proud [...] adding an unexpected dimension'. This additional element was typified in the presentation of Bobadill, after he, 'has been thoroughly trounced and lies, humiliated on the ground. His admirers hang their heads in embarrassment and disillusionment, and a Jonsonian caricature fleetingly acquires painful humanity'. Hoyle added, 'feel the characterization': 'beautifully acted the production throws up such gems', like Goodman, 'twitching with paranoia and throwing quick glances over his shoulder between utterance of staccato lines'. He found the cast a 'uniformly accomplished ensemble' and singled out Greenwood's 'irresistible', 'self-important mooncalf, pulling up his stockings and aping, wide-eyed, the Captain's military oaths'; Franks's 'plagiaristic poetaster' was 'unexpectedly touching' and Nathaniel Parker was a 'practical joker' as Wellbred, 'his humour barely concealing a soured impatience'.<sup>31</sup>

Thomas Sutcliffe mentioned the 'slightly muted reception' of Caird's 'intelligent and often very funny production'. He suggested that although, 'it is just possible to come up with modern equivalents for Master Stephen's infatuation with the accessories [...] a Filofax and a Burberry instead of the Toledo sword and a stolen cloak perhaps', he felt that this 'is a slightly pointless exercise and Caird sensibly avoids it'. This expressed succinctly the problems of updating Jonsonian plays to exact equivalents within the contemporary world of

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the audience. He found the production a 'studious, slightly sober account [...] reinstating the eulogy to poetry in the final act'. Jonson had cut this element for the Folio edition and by mentioning it Sutcliffe revealed Caird's scholarly approach. He felt this approach removed the 'pace and slapstick' and 'reclaims Jonson from the scholars by the odd strategy of paying a scholarly attention to the dialogue'. He singled out a number of performances for praise, for example, Goodman's Kately:

Makes one of the best displays with a jerky, anxious monologue [...] in which a consolation is no sooner invented than it engenders two fresh doubts. Whimpering and darting across the stage, he perfectly embodies Jonson's wonderful image of a man with a turning hourglass for a brain. He has to work himself into folly but the other gulls [...] are born to it. Paul Greenwood minces about the stage with a sulky stamp.<sup>32</sup>

Robin Ray thought it a 'thoroughly worthy effort' but felt that Caird's scholarly approach was 'more concerned with academic fussing [...] than applying himself to some surely needed surgery' because 'this not very good play' appeared a 'relic'. He concluded by stating 'we have done our duty to posterity, when we should have been enjoying ourselves'.<sup>33</sup>

The *What's On* critic suggested that *Every Man in His Humour* is 'the kind of play pedants would like to see at a national theatre – a living library'. Although they identified 'the immaculately crafted characters', the reviewer found the females disappointing: 'the women aren't given much of a look in'. Nevertheless, the critic had to admit that 'some members of the audience liked it a lot', and 'I'm glad to see that we are able to have a viewing of Jonson's works which don't get seen too often'.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Hoyle, 'Every Man in His Humour' [sic], *Financial Times*, 14 April 1987.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Sutcliffe, 'Elizabethan figure-skating', *Independent*, 15 April 1987.

<sup>33</sup> Robin Ray, 'Bored the Pants Off Me', *Punch*, 29 April 1987.

<sup>34</sup> M. L., 'The players, not the plot', *What's On and Where to Go in London*, 23-9 April 1987.



Giles Gordon admitted to have been ‘sadly unamused’, as, ‘there isn’t a driving plot’. As with other critics’ comments, Gordon interpreted the energy as a sign of desperation amongst the performers: ‘The frenetic attempts to inject humour into an arid intellectualised text suggest panic’ [*sic*]. The general praise for Kitley was not repeated here: ‘Goodman’s knowing confiding in the audience as he recites interminable monologues is tedious’.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, Lyn Gardner gave fulsome praise, suggesting that the Mermaid’s ‘dull and characterless auditorium has been magicked into a thrilling and sympathetic pace’. She thought the ‘well-balanced cast’ ‘play the comedy to the hilt’ and suggested that Jonson ‘might have been the first farceur’, concluding it was ‘a jolly night out’.<sup>36</sup>

When *Every Man in His Humour* played in London David Nokes interviewed Caird for *The Times*. Nokes suggested that Caird ‘promises plenty more Jonson to come’, naming *A Tale of a Tub*, *The Magnetic Lady* and *Poetaster* – ‘all magnificent plays’. He continued by quoting Caird: “‘I mean to go on doing Jonson until people are forced to recognize that [*sic*] a genius he is.’” Nokes suggested that ‘Jonson has become his very own special cause’ and that Caird intended to work with Jonson in ‘a mission to transform our view of Jacobean theatre’. This was because he reported Caird’s comments on the critics of the production, who had over-emphasized the humours theory: “‘They just came to have their prejudices reinforced [...] The characters are totally real.’” This could be interpreted as Caird believing that Jonson’s text offers a documentary view of contemporary London. However, I would suggest it meant that Jonsonian characters may be played in more detail than their underlying

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<sup>35</sup> Giles Gordon, ‘Humour’s monster’, *London Daily News*, 14 April 1987.



humour or character name implies – with a stage time of three hours there has to be a verisimilitude in the performance of character, however exaggerated that character may first appear. Caird went on to complement this reading of his comment: “‘Just because someone is called Trundle doesn’t mean he has to trundle about the stage all the time.’” Nokes furthered this idea, ‘It was a mistake to see Jonson’s plays as strip-cartoons of eccentrics’.<sup>37</sup>

Writing about Caird’s simultaneous project in Stratford, *The New Inn*, Nokes echoed the view that Jonsonian texts can be hampered by the notion that they are limited, reflecting only the interest in humours: ‘Mellow, humane and forgiving, it provided all the satisfaction of a complete masterpiece’. Comparing Jonson’s late play to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Nokes noted the difference in their settings: ‘whereas Shakespeare’s great drama of human reconciliation is set on an enchanted island, Jonson’s take [*sic*] place in a pub’. Nokes described the set for *The New Inn*: ‘Walking into the Swan theatre, the audience will also be walking into the pub, taking their place alongside the familiar pub cronies, the drinkers, boasters, cheats and ne’er-do-wells’. Nokes reported that this hospitable atmosphere and forgiving tone was central to Caird’s perception of Jonson amongst his contemporaries:

But why, I asked him, this particular obsession with Jonson rather than with Webster, Middleton or Tourneur? The trouble with that lot, he felt, was bile. They were all too negative and dyspeptic. They reminded him of the post-1968 generation of playwrights, the ones who couldn’t forgive England for failing to live up to the hopes of the 1960s.<sup>38</sup>

Caird’s reported views of Jonson as an amiable and optimistic writer may go some way in rejecting the notion of Jonson as a bitter rival to Shakespeare, the

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<sup>36</sup> Lyn Gardner, ‘Every Man in His Humour’ [*sic*], *City Limits*, 23-30 April 1987.

<sup>37</sup> David Nokes, ‘Setting Ben against Bill: John Caird is currently leading a one-man crusade to promote the plays of Ben Jonson. He talks to David Nokes’, *The Times*, 11 April 1987.

<sup>38</sup> Caird, in Nokes.

image of him that is suggested in Edward Bond's play *Bingo*. The eulogy to poetry and the ensemble singing at the close of *Every Man in His Humour*, and the musical structure and nostalgic tone to his production of *The New Inn*, challenged many critics' and audiences' preconceptions of Jonson as being more associated with intellectualism than feeling. For a time in the late 1980s the presentation of Jonson (including lesser-known texts) at the RSC seemed to be a real and profitable option.

Caird's *Every Man in His Humour* pointed to an interesting perception about staging Elizabethan plays within a period setting: all the critics found it a refreshing change to the more usual 'concept' theatre popular amongst RSC directors in the 1980s but they did not view the Elizabethanness as a concept in itself. They did not question the setting but enjoyed the spectacle and suggested the appropriateness for the play. They could not read its effectiveness in any other terms. They did not mention how it affected the perception of the characters' status or personalities or even notice the difference in styles within the design. None of the critics noticed the 'fantasy' element in the design that Caird has spoken of.<sup>39</sup>

Instead they saw Blane's version of the Elizabethan period as historically accurate and an invocation of the original staging. Whilst there is no need for design to be historically accurate, it would be desirable for commentators on such a production to recognize that there is no one style of Elizabethan and there are many other possibilities for staging. It is a misunderstanding of theatre practice for critics to view the use of period setting as the ultimate success of a production or to view it as an approximation of original staging. This is not the

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intention of any contemporary professional company. To view a production in this misguided way is to value it as an exercise in historical reconstruction and it dismisses its place in the contemporary theatre. Blane's Elizabethan design was undoubtedly an important part of the production, and it proved itself as an intelligent and practical choice of how to stage Jonson. Nevertheless, it was a design choice amongst many options that Blane and Caird could have made. The production proved that the Swan was an appropriate setting for Jonson's text. The unsuccessful transfer to the Mermaid showed the RSC's need to find a more suitable London base for its Swan shows. Therefore, the lack of success of *Every Man in His Humour* in London actually had serious effects on the programming of Jonson into the theatre repertoire. As he expressed in the interview with me, it was because of the ineffectual transfer of *Every Man in His Humour* to London that Caird chose not to transfer *The New Inn* to London a year later. Instead he scrapped it completely, denying the capital a chance to see a successful production of a play unseen in the theatre since its one original performance in 1629. This decision in turn had further reaching effects on the repertoire of unknown plays at the RSC, as would be shown by Danny Boyle's production of *Epicoene* in 1989.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Caird, in an interview with Amanda Penlington.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



**THE NEW INN IN PERFORMANCE****PRODUCTION DETAILS****THE NEW INN: RSC, SWAN**

Goodstock, The Host	Joseph O'Connor
Ferret	Peter Polycarpou
Lovel	John Carlisle
Frank	Sonia Ritter
Prudence	Deborah Findlay
Lady Frampul	Fiona Shaw
Nurse	Darlene Johnson
Trundle	Trevor Martin
Beaufort	Gregory Doran
Latimer	Mike Dowling
Sir Glorious Tipto	Richard McCabe
Fly	Clive Russell
Pierce	Sean Pertwee
Jug	Sally George
Jordan	Griffith Jones
Peck	Jimmy Gardner
Bat Burst	William Chubb
Hodge Huffle	Ian Bailey
Barnaby	Laban Leake
Nick Stuff	Ian Barritt
Pinnacia Stuff	Jane Leonard
Violins	Richard Springate, Gillian Springate
Percussion	James Jones
Director	John Caird
Designer	Sue Blane
Lighting	Wayne Dowdeswell
Music	Guy Woolfenden
Assistant Director	Bill Buffery
First performance: 4 November, 1987.	

**Archive resources for this production**

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material.

Music  
 Newspaper reviews  
 Performance video  
 Production photographs and contact sheets  
 Prompt book  
 Stage Manager's reports

## Theatre programme

INTRODUCTION: *THE NEW INN*

After the disastrous first performance of the play by the King's Men at the Blackfriars in 1629, *The New Inn* remained unperformed in the English professional theatre for 358 years. When the RSC revived the piece in 1987 expectations were low; as one critic reported, it was 'booed off-stage after just one performance' in 1629 and remained one of Jonson's dotages until its recent revival. The production met with much praise. Although the play was not lauded as a lost masterpiece equal to the more well known of Jonson's texts, it was greeted with many commendations that it was an infinitely performable piece with its own individual merits. However, since the RSC production in 1987 the play has not yet been subsequently performed.<sup>1</sup>

The challenges of the play in performance are: the unfamiliarity of the Courtly Love tradition, the basis for Lovel's long speeches; the length of those speeches; the pretentiousness of the Spaniard Tipto; the appearance of the Stuffs late in the play; the closing revelations of the familial relationships, allied to the problem of the frames of gender identity of Frank. These concerns are in addition to the usual challenging considerations of Jonsonian performance: the large cast, the assumed existence of simplified character types, and the social and linguistic topicalities of the seventeenth century. John Caird, the director of the 1987 production, has suggested that 'the satirization of the ludicrous Spanish Grandee's behaviour' was 'terribly abstruse even when he wrote it – perhaps deliberately so'.<sup>2</sup>

Caird, has also talked about the seeming difficulty of the language:

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Williamson, 'Cheer at last for Ben', *Sunday Mercury*, 15 November 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Caird, *This Golden Round*, p. 68.



You're dealing with sets of language – one set, the upper class characters, use heightened, slightly poetic, blank verse. It's a social comment on language three or four hundred years ago. It's dead after a few years. It's like the modern equivalent of black, street rap in a few hundred years' time – mind boggling – but the street rappers who are doing it know exactly what they're saying.<sup>3</sup>

Caird succeeded in unlocking the language through the creation of a particular world, a cross between Caroline realism and a theatrical metaphor. In this respect, Caird remembered Sue Blane's costume designs for his productions of both *Every Man in His Humour* and *The New Inn*:

They were updated in a way. The designer working on the two plays wonderfully captured the period and referred to the present. The costumes were not anything anybody would have ever worn – Elizabethan or Jacobean – they were a fantastic imagined version. They were fantastic just as Jonson is fantastic.<sup>4</sup>

This 'fantastic' quality in the play allowed Caird to explain his decision to stage *The New Inn*:

It's actually written in a very radical way, it's an extremely brave bit of work and it's among his best. It's his *Tempest*. The metaphor Jonson chooses to describe his life is a pub, which is wonderful. It's rather like *Camino Real*. In exactly the same way you've got this rather spooky metaphoric location where people find out truths. However, it's written off as the ramblings of an idiot.<sup>5</sup>

Caird's production went some way in challenging that misconception.

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<sup>3</sup> Caird, in an interview with Amanda Penlington.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

*THE NEW INN*: RSC, SWAN, DIR. JOHN CAIRD, 1987

Caird's production framed the text with music. As Guy Woolfenden, the composer for the production, has said, 'it would be unthinkable to have a production of *The New Inn* without music'. For verisimilitude Woolfenden used 'a rough pub ensemble with the two fiddles [...] a percussion player and a bass line from the bassoon. They were free to roam [...] but they also had a fixed position, from where they were visible'.<sup>6</sup>

An induction of melancholic strings and the softly sung 'Is this a dream now, after my first sleep ?/ Or are these phant'sies made i' the Light Heart,/ And sold in the New Inn?' (taken from Lovel's speech V.4.120-2), placed the play in the realm of fantasy.<sup>7</sup>

This musical setting was replaced by the jovial singing of the Prologue by the inn staff, positioned in a brightly lit tableau facing the audience: 'You are welcome, welcome, all, to the New Inn', which ended on a note of advice to be judicious, 'Before you judge, vouchsafe to understand'(Prologue,1 and 22). This induction gave way to general inn activity to set the scene and the play began with Goodstock. Songs from the staff also marked the beginning of the second half as they sang at the top of the staircase; this was less a moment of tableau for the audience and more a suggestion of musicality within the world of the play. The inn staff and their songs, therefore, functioned as a kind of chorus between the audience and the action. A tableau of the whole *dramatis personae* ended the production, with Ferret leading the company in a musical setting of Lovel's meditation from IV.4.4-13. After the first few lines the song continued in canon

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<sup>6</sup> Woolfenden, p. 148.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Jonson, *The New Inn*, ed. by Michael Hattaway, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).



as the staff disappeared down through the trap and the aristocrats ascended the staircase in their new-found couplings.

Just as the music was used in a sophisticated way to frame the plot and pinpointed the interaction between audience and stage, so the set presented a self-consciously theatrical world. The setting enabled a dual function: it was both a detailed semi-realistic Caroline world and a fantasy that acknowledged itself as a theatrical illusion. The physical setting, which was largely constructed out of a wood that blended with the wood of the auditorium, was a trestle stage on top of the thrust stage of the Swan. A diagonal staircase led down to this trestle and opposing diagonal steps led down to the real thrust.

The sign of 'The Light Heart', pictorially represented as a balance with a heart in one scale weighing less than a feather in the other mentioned by Goodstock in I.1.5, hung above stage left (see PLATE 20). This was a bare set which suggested the interior of an inn whilst drawing attention to the setting as part of the theatre building. Goodstock having a seat in the centre of the front row furthered this metatheatricality. He retired here immediately after the production-defining 'all the world's a play' speech (I.3.128) and used it throughout, being in the privileged position of the owner of the inn/director of events/observer of life. When he resigned his place to Fly as Host, Fly moved into this position. No person, other than the Host of the inn could sit there. Goodstock appeared as an actively successful director, like a Prospero without magical powers. His benevolent interest in humanity made him appear to be the figure that Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* and Overdo in *Bartholomew Fair* aspire to. Where they fail in their attempts to control behaviour through legislation, the disguised Goodstock's warm-heartedness, and the help of Pru,



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ensure his success. However, even he is out-manoeuvred in the *coup de théâtre* directed by his wife and youngest daughter.

Between Goodstock's seat and the trestle stage a trap allowed access for the inn staff and gave the impression of vertical depth, with the existing staircase. When Tipto was banished from the company he descended through the trap.

The trestle acted as both a stage where Pru 'takes her seat of judicature' (stage direction, III.2) on a stool on top of a table and Lovel preached at the Court of Love; and a landing – it united the bannistered staircase and the steps leading off to four sides (see PLATE 21). It represented the very heart of The Light Heart, at the inn's vertical and horizontal centre. As Blane has suggested it 'was absolutely right for getting at all the house'. She also discussed Pru's costume as 'a deliberate allusion to Queen Elizabeth I', to reveal Jonson's Courtly reference points. From this 'platform stage-within-a-stage' the characters could move on in any direction or retrace their steps already taken. This was in keeping with the affairs of the characters. For example, Lovel's passion for Lady Frampul is subdued when he remembers old Beaufort but he moves on through his experience at the Court of Love to being her husband; Lady Frampul arrives at the inn independent and single, scorning all her suitors as she is 'the courting-stock, for all to practise on' (I.6.154), and pursuing the 'mirth intended' (I.6.37) that may be found at the Light Heart, she leaves with a family that she thought lost and earnestly in love with her new husband. Pru moves from being a chambermaid to being the wife of a Lord. Goodstock, his wife and their daughter Laetitia all discover their family, with Laetitia acknowledging her true gender, relinquishing the role of Frank and marrying Lord Beaufort. Beaufort and Latimer begin as Frampul's 'train' (I.5.9), her fashionable wooers, they end with

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finding love with their true partners. The Stuffs' bizarre fantasies are exposed and they are humbled, just as Tipto's aspirations are defeated. Fly moves from servant to Host, with only the menial staff remaining unchanged.<sup>8</sup>

At the heart of all these transformations is the idea of adults at play: the characters take on roles separate from their true identities and these roles transform their lives. For them the inn is a magical place where transformation is possible because it is an arena where play is condoned. This was signified in the metatheatrical framing devices: the musical settings, the Host's seat, the stage placed on the existing stage, the mixture of Caroline realism and acknowledged illusion. The staff were an exception to this: their main contribution was their work, they did not play because play was shown as the pursuit of the leisured classes only. This is why the staff stood as a chorus between the detailed realistic action of the play and the observing world of the audience. The household chorus was a stable element in an otherwise mutable world of play and illusion.

As well as recognizing their own theatrical status the characters are aware that plays should end in harmony. After the playful activity of the Court has ended, with Lovel receiving his second kiss, Pru does not allow for his song, saying, 'The court's dissolved, removed, and the play ended' (IV.4.248). Lovel picks up on this metatheatrical language and likens his miserable status to the moments after the ending of a play – 'How like/ A court removing or an ended play/ Shows my abrupt precipitate estate'; 'these false hours of conversation'; 'I have lent myself out for two hours/ Thus to be baffled by a chambermaid/ And the good actor, her lady, afore mine host/ Of the Light Heart here that hath

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<sup>8</sup> Blane, p. 88.

laughed at all' (IV.4.252-4; 256; and 277-80). It is as if melancholy is expected to follow a play's joyful closure.

However, in production, Caird did not choose the cynical view of his characters and ensured the idea of reconciliation and unification predominated. The inclusion of the banished characters in Lovel's postponed song and the desire for everybody to join the singing literally showed a harmonious conclusion to the audience. After all, as Lovel acknowledged, the all-seeing viewer – in his speech he names the Host – has 'laughed at all': the spectators understand and expect the play to end harmoniously. The delight in the fantastical mood and power of theatrical illusion was strong but the real magic in the production came when both the disguises and the artifice of the characters were stripped away for the sake of familial and sexual love.

The playing of *The New Inn* yielded an unexpected find in Jonsonian performance. Unlike the humour plays, or the broad, type playing of *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, this production showed through most of its characters that subtler Jonsonian characters could be played. The earnestness with which Lovel, Frampul and Pru were executed was more akin to the complexities of Naturalism and relied on a psychological approach.

The production of Jonson's texts often utilizes broader playing styles but in *The New Inn* the only characters that adhered to this preconception were the comic subplots: Tipto, the Stuffs, and, to a lesser extent, the household staff. These characters represent what is regarded as more typically Jonsonian and it was here that most critics expected to find the most enjoyment of the evening; they are more comic and, inevitably, deflated after reaching the zeniths of their pride. Their single-mindedness is a counterpoint to the detailed complexities of



the others. But even when they are humiliated, the punishments are more in the spirit of the carnival festivities of *Bartholomew Fair* than the court room sentences of *Volpone*.

However, the subplots were not as well-received as the main plot. The pretensions of Tipto are cased within dead poetry in comparison to the lucid verse of Lovel; Tipto's language resolutely seems to be a product of its time and it is less immediate in its effect on an audience today than may be supposed from reading. In Caird's production these character types were reunited with the rest of the *dramatis personae* for a song at the close to reveal the final benevolent power of the magical space of the Light Heart. Where critics expected the play's strength to be, in the humour of the subplot, many were disappointed. It was the grace and lyricism of Lovel's speeches, which are of considerable length and played with little stage movement, that impressed most. Uncharacteristically emotional for Jonson, they appear dull on reading – philosophically-driven verbosity – but the lack of Latin tags and obscure puns (so plentiful in the subplots) helped to recommend these sections. The pursuits of honour, education and Platonic love may seem nostalgic but the desire for pleasure and rewards that are more than fleeting appealed in performance.

Alongside the array of fools, each endowed with a personality imbalance (reflected visually in the punning sign of the inn), the gentry seem not only un-Jonsonian when read but also unappealing. The pairing of Frampul and Pru echoes the earlier romantic comedy pairings of female consorts. In the performances of Fiona Shaw as Frampul and Deborah Findlay as Pru they appeared complex and human, not the conventional figures they seem on the page. They, like the Lords and Goodstock, were not driven by humour



imbalances but the desires of each moment. When Frampul reacts to Lovel's Courtly speeches on reading they may appear feigned and played to the Court, but in Shaw's performance they were earnest confessions to herself.

Jonson's usual critical satire was sidelined to the peripheral characters. There was no glib presentation of characters as types in *The New Inn*, as one type is the basis for more than one character. In the Lords Jonson presents three variations of temperament in one type: Lovel is the melancholic, Platonic lover, engaging the mind and denying the body – 'the minds/ Be first inoculated, not the bodies' (III.2.152-3); Beaufort is the sensory-stimulated lover who excludes any functioning of the mind – 'Gi' me the body, if it be a good one' (III.2.154); and Latimer is the balance, Jonson's ideal perhaps, who thoughtfully receives Pru on her own merits and not on the promise of a large dowry – 'fortune cannot add to her' (V.4.144). In production these differences were made clear in terms of gesture and behaviour – Lovel dissected flies under a magnifying glass before the arrival of Frampul and thereafter made no quick movements (as if he constantly thought before he spoke or moved); Beaufort was the trouser-dropping frenetic young man who moved rapidly and violently, grabbing Frank to kiss repeatedly during the Court scenes; Latimer was not as reckless in his movements as his friend, nor as measured as Lovel, but instead retained a grace of bearing throughout and only declared his interest in Pru after all the other matches and revelations were made.

This represented the difference between *The New Inn* and Jonson's other more frequently performed earlier comedies: it is a romantic comedy and the ultimate goal is balance and reconciliation through marriage. In the play marriages are forged and, after the close of the production, the indication was

immediate consummation as the couples disappeared up the stairs of the inn, as Goodstock suggested, 'Best go to bed/ And dream it over all. Let's all go sleep,/ Each with his turtle' (V.4.122-4).

The sympathy inherent in the main characters is what makes the play less interesting than the satires for some. Robert Knoll has written, 'the last plays are failures [...] softened by age, or wisdom, or fatigue'.<sup>9</sup>

It is tempting to see the reconciliatory tone as the mellow writing of an old man, in the same way that some catalogue Shakespeare's closing output as romantic as he reached seniority in *The Tempest*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*. However, the quality of romantic comedy in *The New Inn* also harks nostalgically back to the earlier romantic comedies typified by *Twelfth Night* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where families are reunited and marriages are celebrated. *The New Inn* may be an ironic invocation of this naïve taste or it could be the presentation of Courtly values and pursuits for a popular audience to whom Jonson had returned to after working solely for the Court.

In production these elements fuse and it is refreshing for an audience to see a play by Jonson where regeneration is achieved through family reunions, personal promotions, the deflation of pretension, and four happy couples leaving the stage. The Latin promise of Justice Overdo in the earlier *Bartholomew Fair* echoes Jonson's own intentions here: 'to correct, not to destroy; to build up, not to tear down'. *The New Inn*, as performed, was Jonson at his least cynical. The cast resisted any desire to make fun of their material and in doing so presented a

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<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Knoll, *Ben Jonson's Plays: an Introduction* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 181.



surprisingly moving Jonsonian play and the production was generally well received.<sup>10</sup>

Richard Williamson thought it ‘roaring, rumbustious good fun’ and he discussed the director’s treatment: ‘the plot has its threadbare moments but Caird embroiders over these with engrossing detail, filling the stage with many a grimace, grin, gesture and joke. It’s high-energy stuff played at a cracking pace’. Williamson’s comment about John Carlisle’s portrayal of Lovel was typical of the response, ‘splendid, quietly commanding our attention among all the mayhem as he speaks so beautifully of love and true valour’.<sup>11</sup>

Eric Shorter was less enthusiastic, proclaiming, ‘Jonson’s plot takes ages to get up steam’. But he admitted that the company was successful in illuminating an otherwise lost play: ‘Hardly a lost masterpiece perhaps, but the RSC stamps Jonson’s long-forgotten and rather ponderous revels with a surprising sense of warmth and charm’. Shorter thought Frampul a ‘sexually-liberated lady [...] played by the gawky and vivacious’ Shaw. Appearing as ‘the sullen suitor in solemn black’ Carlisle’s performance was highly praised, ‘his eloquence bowls everybody over, [...] he celebrates love’s spiritual values [...] This is breath-taking. With equal eloquence he defines true valour and, again, we are all enthralled. In fact he puts the play on its feet’.<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, David Ford thought that the RSC was less inspired with its choice – ‘a real dog of a play’ – he added sarcastically, ‘wonderful what you can do with a good sponsor.’ Ford swung between praise for the production and

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<sup>10</sup> ‘*ad correc- / tionem, non ad destructionem; ad ædificandum, non ad / diruendum*’, Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* ed. by E. A. Horsman, *The Revels Plays*, (London: Methuen, 1960), V.6.114-6; the English translation above was used in the production of the play directed by Boswell in 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Williamson, ‘Cheer at last for Ben’, *Sunday Mercury*, 15 November 1987.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Shorter, ‘Jonson’s party games’, *Daily Telegraph*, 12 November 1987.



scorn for the play throughout, commenting 'there's a quite dreadful final revelations scene' but that 'it's all very, very good'. He praised Sue Blane's 'heavy staired set' as 'excellent', before adding 'pity about the words'.<sup>13</sup>

Whilst Ford could dissect play and production as separate entities of differing worth, R. V. Holdsworth felt the production served the play well. It was revelatory in exposing the difference between the effect the critic assumed it would have and the actual effect in performance. According to 'Jonson's traditional comic and satiric strengths', Holdsworth thought that 'one would have predicted' that the main plot 'would appear dull and silly, while the grotesques injected the energy and life. At the Swan the opposite proves the case'. Holdsworth also appreciated the 'theatrical' style, which aided the improbable plot:

The production rightly leaves the audience in the dark about all the hidden relationships and Frank's true gender (a deception in which the programme co-operates), relying on a strong vein of theatrical self-consciousness, signalled by Goodstock and Lovel taking turns to sit in the front row, to carry off the final revelations.<sup>14</sup>

Holdsworth thought Carlisle offered pathos and eloquence, he 'journeys movingly from misanthropy to marriage, and his disquisitions on love and valour are spellbinding'. Again, he found a moving quality in Shaw's Frampul, 'engagingly fidgety rather than peevish, she leaves it poignantly unclear until the last moment whether she has really fallen for Lovel'. Both characters/actors satisfied Holdsworth due to complex, engaging performances, rather than playing according to expectations of type.<sup>15</sup>

John Peter, assumed his praise would not be believed because of the play's unfamiliarity, he advised his readers: 'I urge everyone to be brave and see

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<sup>13</sup> David Ford, 'Fine, if you stay awake', *Worcester Evening News*, 11 November 1987.

[it]'. Needing to qualify his advice he offered particular reasons for the play being thoroughly unpraiseworthy: 'It has an utterly preposterous plot'; 'the long opening is long on talk and short on action'; 'the finicky realism and mock extravagance [...] sounds, as dramatic speech, rather dense'. However, having denied these reasons – 'that isn't the point' – he added why the production was valuable, 'the harsh, realistic vigour of Jonson's great Jacobean plays is crossed here with the elegant didactic showmanship of his masques. The result is a piece of hugely entertaining theatricality'. He appeared to regard the performance as an entertaining exercise in theatrical fantasy and an educational display of the theatre of the past: 'this quirky play is thoroughly a product of its time, and the Swan exists precisely to show us what such plays were like'. The Swan had a commitment to putting on such forgotten dramas but it had neither a duty nor a responsibility to present 'what such plays were like'. It is a commercial theatre which presents plays, sometimes forgotten plays, to see what they are like. Calling it 'thoroughly a product of its time' and 'quirky', he presented the play as something apart from the contemporary theatre, positioning it as irrelevant and not likely to be revived again. Despite his dubious reasoning, Peter admitted the accessibility of Jonson's ideas: 'its theme, the sincerity or phoniness of our feelings, manners and beliefs, is thoroughly accessible to us today'. Peter finally asserted the quality of Caird's direction, with some misgivings about his approach to the play, 'Caird directs it with muscular fidelity; although when he brings back the pretentious characters, whom Jonson dismissed, for a cheerful finale, he is attributing to Ben a false touch of charity'. For Peter conciliation was difficult to attribute to Jonson, although he was right to say that the roles of

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<sup>14</sup> R. V. Holdsworth, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 November 1987.



characters like Stuff and Tipto are finished in the play before the final celebrations.<sup>16</sup>

Michael Billington thought the play had been ‘pleasurably restored to life’. He admitted his own doubts before seeing the production: ‘conventional wisdom asserts that if a play has been neglected for 360 years it is usually for good reason.’ He admitted that the production was fundamental to his reassessment: ‘Caird’s excellent production suggests the real reason is our own wilful ignorance; or the lack hitherto of an intimate space like the Swan.’ Like other reviewers, Billington presented Carlisle with the most praise, whilst mentioning other company members:

The play takes wing, thanks to the moving eloquence of John Carlisle’s Lovel [...] When he lists [...] “banishment, loss of children, long disease” [when talking of valour] he pauses over each of those words with a meditative quietness that stirs the soul. Mr Carlisle’s Gielgudian pathos is admirably reinforced by Joseph O’Conor as the bonhomous, Virgilian host and by Deborah Findlay [...] presiding over this Court of Love with true, queenly grace.<sup>17</sup>

In another review Billington presented the play as ‘perfectly playable in spite of some incomprehensible low comedy full of Latin tags and obscure puns’. He suggested the most interesting thing was the ‘similarity to Shakespeare’s final comedies’ and he drew attention to the closure, ‘a series of astonishing reversals pitched halfway between late Shakespeare and early W. S. Gilbert’. But he thought it a ‘strange, bumpy play’ with faults:

Where the play falls apart is in the low comedy. There are long, dead passages involving a knight with Spanish pretensions (their flatness is no fault of the actor, Richard McCabe); and the inn is staffed by a lot of gangrenous supers.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Holdsworth.

<sup>16</sup> John Peter, ‘The measure of modernity’, *Sunday Times*, 15 November 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Billington, ‘Tidy desks, closed minds’, *Country Life*, 12 November 1987.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Billington, ‘A draught of old Jonson’, *Guardian*, 14 November 1987.



Billington felt that the complexity of the lead male role was not equalled by his female counterpart, the fault was with the type of role and not the actor. Unlike Holdsworth, Billington felt that Frampul was too simple a type for Shaw to play: 'I feel it is high time the RSC gave her the chance to play something other than waspish virgins awaking to the power of love.' Nevertheless, he thought the Courtly orations delivered to her had 'a beautiful limpidity and grace'. Billington pointed to a change in his perception of Jonson: 'What it taught me was that the Jonson who started out as an Elizabethan documentarist ended up as a Caroline fantasist capable of finding magic even in a Barnet inn.'<sup>19</sup>

Peter Kemp found it a 'brave and splendid production - doing all it can to reinstate the play' because the play 'presents a modern audience with formidable problems of comprehension'. And he admitted that the play had been neglected to some purpose: 'Though the RSC cast strive, with inventive verve, to make tone and gesture compensate for unintelligible content, there's far more bemusement than amusement.' However, he was appreciative of the respect with which Caird treated the play: 'Honourably resisting any temptation towards send-up, Caird's production frisks through this farrago [the subplots] in a way that couldn't be bettered'. He found the production an, 'enterprising curiosity: rare Ben Jonson very well done'. The 'curiosity' factor labelled the play in production as a unique experience, again signalling the lack of future revivals.<sup>20</sup>

Irving Wardle also gave mixed praise, he criticized the plotting, 'the play is no masterpiece', but curiously added, 'for lovers of Jonson, though, it is a work of continuous fascination with passages of comic vitality equal to anything in *The Alchemist*'. To place *The New Inn* as equal to *The Alchemist* is praise

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<sup>19</sup> Billington, 'A draught of old Jonson'.

indeed, as the latter play is Jonson's most carefully and tightly plotted comedy. He thought Caird had 'directed it as an energy show with a still philosophic centre. The stage swarms with above and below-stairs life (making much use of the trap)'. Wardle drew out performances from the comic household for individual praise, 'Sean Pertwee's punk balletic drawer [Pierce]', and, 'Griffith Jones's Chamberlain [Jordan] - emptying a chamber pot over the stage with stately dignity - are considered down to the last detail'.<sup>21</sup>

Michael Coveney took great delight in 'a near perfect resolution of the Jonsonian intellectual tension between learning and hedonism.' He asserted that 'the nostalgic, reflective vein of the play is a statement of Jonson's dissatisfaction with the present,' and thought Lovel's two speeches 'are among the finest things Jonson wrote'. Coveney thought Carlisle's delivery of the love and valour speeches was 'electrifying': 'Not only does he attack the tavern low life and its posturers so beautifully delineated in other scenes, he also shatters the masque-like artifice of the charade with eloquent persuasion.' Through the production he identified Lovel's experience as the thematic drive in the narrative, moving from self-absorbed melancholic loneliness to the happiness of marriage. This enabled him to see the play afresh – the recognized success of Caird's production – 'it is this discovery of the play's dramatic motor that makes the revival so exciting. The company inhabits the play and the theatre (the two coalesce) with an irresistible relish, much aided by Sue Blane's glorious Caroline costumes, Guy Woolfenden's mellow song-settings and Wayne Dowdeswell's golden lighting.' This 'golden' resolution to the play came after the initial set up of The Light Heart Inn, where, 'the Swan itself becomes this place'. He also

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Kemp, 'Too many inn jokes', *Independent*, 12 November 1987.



found thematic unity in the presentation of the subplots, disliked by others: 'the comic and metaphoric worlds are linked in the splendid farce of the tailor Stuff'. Coveney, like Kemp and Wardle, enjoyed the portrayal of the comic subplots. He mentioned four by name for individual praise but began by applauding the whole company:

But all of Mr Caird's tavern fantasists come to unforgettable life. Richard McCabe's hilariously Hispanic Sir Glorious Tipto and Clive Russell's sinister supervisory Fly are the vital, conversational counterpoint to the bedrock realism of the resident staff, notably Griffith Jones's wonderfully imperturbable chamberlain and Jimmy Gardner's gibbering and put-upon little old ostler [Peck].<sup>22</sup>

The expectations of any Jonsonian comedy are that we will enjoy a production with energy and pace, expecting to laugh at the pretensions of character types and not to feel sympathy for any characters. In performance Caird's production proved that Jonson can also appeal through stillness and dignity, and that laughter is not the only yardstick for success. Joy lay in the detailed presentation of character in both the main and cameo roles. These factors were only really discernible through performance and it provides support to the argument that forgotten playtexts cannot really be judged until they are once again performed. The distrust of a play unperformed for almost 360 years was proven by Caird to be an invalid reason for such plays to remain unperformed.

The Swan theatre and a new interest in lost plays could help to make such texts live on the English stage again. However, the attitude of the RSC, with regard to lost works, has changed after the early experiments in playing when the

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<sup>21</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Coincidence run wild', *The Times*, 12 November 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, 12 November 1987.



Swan was first built. It is not a lack of merit that denies these plays a space but a lack of theatre producers' daring and innovation.

After its run at the Swan Caird's production transferred to Newcastle as part of the annual RSC residency but after that limited run it never transferred to a London venue, the customary fate for most RSC productions. Although this premature curtailing of the production could be attributed to distrust amongst the RSC management for finding an audience for the play in the capital it was actually caused by an intervention from the director himself. Judging from the critical acclaim and the audience satisfaction in Stratford this behaviour seems foolish. However, Caird has spoken of the lack of a satisfactory space in London for his Jonsonian productions.

Affected by the disappointing reception of *Every Man in His Humour* at the Mermaid, Caird decided to remove the production of *The New Inn* from the repertoire as an insurance policy for the production's integrity. He felt that a transfer to the London home of Swan shows, the Pit, would so adversely affect the staging that it would be more beneficial to remove the show altogether than for it to play in an inappropriate context, as he explained:

I refused to take it. I said that I wouldn't put it in the Pit. If there were an opportunity to go to some other theatre, like the Young Vic, I would be interested. But I couldn't bear the demolition of that play in a ghastly theatre like the Pit. Because in the Swan we had wonderful height and the argument was thrilling: you got involved in the argument of the poetry. I just knew that the same theatrical community that loved it at the Swan would suddenly turn around and say it wasn't that good. I thought, for the sake of history, we should leave it as a great success. Rather than preside over it to death. Especially as in the Swan it was the second performance it had ever received.<sup>23</sup>

Fiona Shaw has also spoken about the production's particular association with the Swan: 'Blane's set was a triumph for *The New Inn* because she built the

set like the Swan. You couldn't transfer the set though, because nowhere else would quite have that impact'.<sup>24</sup>

This distrust of playing *The New Inn* in London also signalled an emerging change in attitude at the RSC about the staging of unknown or lost works. Such plays were too financially risky for the company if they were to only play in the Swan, like Caird's *The New Inn*. This attitude was responsible for changing the repertoire of the Swan from its original purpose of producing lost or less well-known plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries to presenting well-known plays by Shakespeare, Restoration, nineteenth and twentieth-century writers and new works. The role of the Swan as a theatrical laboratory for exploring lost plays and presenting them as living theatre for late twentieth century audiences was sacrificed to present more obviously commercially viable plays.

This is surely a loss to all those interested in seeing lost plays, especially when much of the new repertoire of the theatre does not prove itself to be any more commercially viable than the earlier repertoire, with some new plays only selling half the seating capacity in some performances.<sup>25</sup>

If the placing of new works that do not find audiences continues in the Swan there may be a decision to restore the original premise of producing lost Elizabethan and Jacobean works in the venue. Such a response would serve Jonson well. However, the lack of a space for London transfers still needs to be addressed.

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<sup>23</sup> Caird, in an interview with Amanda Penlington.

<sup>24</sup> Fiona Shaw, 'Acting in the Swan', in *This Golden Round*, pp. 131-3, p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Between 1996 and 1999 the new plays staged at the Swan sold badly in comparison to the classical repertoire, namely Richard Nelson's *The General from America*, Stephen Poliakoff's *Talk of the City* and a dramatization of Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid*.



**VOLPONE IN PERFORMANCE****PRODUCTION DETAILS*****VOLPONE*: NT, OLIVIER**

Volpone	Paul Scofield
Mosca	Ben Kingsley
Nano	David Rappaport
Androgyno	Imogen Claire
Castrone	John-Angelo Messana
Voltore	Paul Rogers
Corbaccio	Hugh Paddick
Corvino	Michael Medwin
Sir Politic Would-be	John Gielgud
Peregrine	Ian Charleson
Celia	Morag Hood
Corvino's Servant	Ray Edwards
Bonario	Warren Clarke
Lady Would-be	Elizabeth Spriggs
Lady Would-be's Women	Brenda Blethyn, Lucinda Macdonald
<i>First Avocatore</i>	Nicholas Selby
<i>Second Avocatore</i>	Peter Needham
<i>Third Avocatore</i>	Brian Kent
<i>Fourth Avocatore</i>	Daniel Thorndike
<i>Notario</i>	Norman Claridge
First Merchant	Michael Beint
Second Merchant	Martin Friend
Third Merchant	Stanley Lloyd
Other roles played by: Jonathan Battersby, Irene Gorst, Chris Hunter, Liam O'Callaghan, Peter Rocca, Dennis Tynsley	

Director	Peter Hall
Assistant Director	Stewart Trotter
Set Designer	John Bury
Costume Designer	Deirdre Clancy
Lighting	David Hersey
Music	Harrison Birtwhistle
Sound	Susannah Ayliff

First performance: 26 April 1977.

**Archive resources for this production**

The NT archive, London contains the following material.

Costume file  
 Music  
 Newspaper reviews  
 Production drawings



Production photographs and contact sheets

Prompt book

Theatre programme

*VOLPONE*: RSC, TOP AND PIT

Volpone	Richard Griffiths
Mosca	Miles Anderson
Nano	Peter O'Farrell (TOP)/ Eugene Geasley (Pit)
Androgyno	Selena Carey-Jones/ DeNica Fairman (Pit)
Castrone	Paul Spence
Voltore	Henry Goodman
Corbaccio	John Cater
Corvino	John Dicks/ David Haig (Pit)
Sir Politic Would-be	Bruce Alexander
Peregrine	James Fleet
Celia	Julie Peasgood
Bonario	Nigel Cooke
Lady Politic Would-be	Gemma Jones
Lady Politic's Waiting Woman	Sheridan Ball
First <i>Avocatore</i>	Timothy Kightly
Second <i>Avocatore</i>	Jeremy Wilkin
<i>Notario</i>	Charles Lawson (TOP)/ David Haig/ Mike Murray (Pit)
<i>Commandatore</i>	Cyril Nri/ Christopher Wright (Pit)
First Merchant	Charles Lawson (TOP)/ David Haig/ Mike Murray (Pit)
Second Merchant	Timothy Kightly
Third Merchant	Jeremy Wilkin
Corvino's Servant	Cyril Nri (Pit)
Keyboard	Michael Tubbs (TOP)/ Martin Goldstein/Richard Brown (Pit)
Violin/Mandolin	Richard Springate (TOP)/ Wilfred Gibson(Pit)
Clarinet/Bass Clarinet/Saxophone	Leslie Cawdrey (TOP)/Alan Andrews (Pit)
Percussion	Nigel Garvey (TOP)/Bernard Shaw
Director	Bill Alexander
Assistant	Peter Clough
Designer	Alison Chitty
Music	Guy Woolfenden
Lighting	Leo Leibovici
Dance	Sue Parker
Sound	John A. Leonard

First performance: TOP, 28 September 1983  
Pit, 11 April 1984.

Archive resources for this production

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews

Production drawings

Production photographs and contact sheets

Prompt book

Stage Manager's reports

Theatre programme



***VOLPONE*: ALMEIDA**

Volpone	Ian McDiarmid
Mosca	Denis Lawson
Voltore	Philip Locke
Corbaccio	Cyril Shaps
Corvino	Timothy Walker
Nano	Malcolm Dixon
Castrone	Mike Burnside
Androgyno	Darlene Johnson
Bonario	Marc Warren
Celia	Cate Hammer
Three <i>Avocatori</i> :	Darlene Johnson, Mike Burnside, Malcolm Dixon
Other parts:	Simon Stewart, Antony Watson

Director	Nicholas Hytner
Designer	Mark Thompson
Lighting	Nick Chelton
Music	Peter Hayward
Sound	John Leonard
First performance: 3 April 1990.	

**Archive resources for this production**

The Theatre Museum archive, London contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews  
Theatre programme

***VOLPONE: ESC UK TOUR***

Volpone  
 Mosca  
 Nano  
 Androgyno  
 Castrone  
 Voltore  
 Corbaccio  
 Corvino  
 Sir Politic Would-be  
 Peregrine  
 Grege  
 Celia  
 Bonario  
 Lady Would-be  
 Waiting Women

John Woodvine  
 Stephen Jameson  
 Mary Roscoe  
 Piers Gibbon  
 Guy Burgess  
 Gary Raymond  
 Hugh Sullivan  
 Laurence Kennedy  
 Gary Taylor  
 Julian Gartside  
 Mandana Jones  
 Lois Harvey  
 Richard Attlee  
 Lolly Susi  
 Adam Magnani,  
 Mark Payton

Director  
 Designer  
 Choreographer  
 Composer  
 Lighting  
 Assistant Director  
 Sound

Tim Luscombe  
 Paul Farnworth  
 Quinny Sacks  
 Corin Buckeridge  
 Leonard Tucker  
 Tim Carroll  
 Will Glancy

First performance: Arts Centre, University of Warwick, 13 November 1990.

**Archive resources for this production**

The Theatre Museum archive, London contains the following material.

Newspaper reviews  
 Theatre programme

***VOLPONE: BIRMINGHAM REP***

Volpone  
 Mosca  
 Voltore  
 Corbaccio  
 Corvino  
 Sir Politic Would-be  
 Peregrine  
 Celia  
 Bonario  
 Lady Would-be  
*Avvocato*  
*Merchant/Notario*

Bernard Horsfall  
 Gerard Murphy  
 Charles Millham  
 Stuart Richman  
 Jamie Newall  
 Jim Hooper  
 Anthony Skordi  
 Andrea Mason  
 Max Gold  
 Linda Spurrier  
 Desmond Jordan  
 Tony Turner

Director  
 Designer  
 Lighting  
 Music  
 First performance: 1 June 1993.

Bill Alexander  
 Kit Surrey  
 Brian Harris  
 Jonathan Goldstein

**Archive resources for this production**

The Birmingham Rep archive, Central Library, Birmingham contains the following material.

Production photographs and contact sheets  
 Theatre programme



**VOLPONE: NT, OLIVIER**

Volpone	Michael Gambon
Mosca	Simon Russell Beale
Nano	Wayne Cater
Androgyno	Joyce Henderson
Castrone	Jonathan Stone
Voltore	Stephen Boxer
Corbaccio	Trevor Peacock
Corvino	Robin Soans
Sir Politic Would-be	Alan David
Peregrine	Rhys Ifans
Celia	Matilda Ziegler
Corvino's Servant	Simeon Defoe
Bonario	Mark Lewis Jones
Lady Would-be	Cheryl Campbell
First <i>Avocatore</i>	Seymour Matthews
Second <i>Avocatore</i>	John Griffiths
Third <i>Avocatore</i>	Paul Benzing
<i>Notarios</i>	Charles Millham,
	Malcolm James
First Merchant	Paul Benzing
Second Merchant	Edward Clayton
Third Merchant	Martin Freeman
Lady Would-be's Woman	Dariel Pertwee
Percussion	Martin Allen
Keyboards	Walter Fabeck
Mandolin	Ben Grove
Horn	Richard Hoad
Horn	Mark Smith
Choir: Lee Hickenbottom, Lorne Cuthbert, Malcolm Taylor, Mark Hillier	
Director	Matthew Warchus
Designer	Richard Hudson
Lighting	Peter Mumford
Music	Gary Yershon
Movement	Jane Gibson
Sound	Paul Groothuis
First performance: 27 July 1995.	

**Archive resources for this production**

The NT archive, London contains the following material.

Costume file  
 Lighting file  
 Music  
 Newspaper reviews  
 Performance video

Production photographs and contact sheets  
Prompt book  
Theatre programme

*VOLPONE: RSC, SWAN AND PIT*

Volpone	Malcolm Storry
Mosca	Guy Henry
Nano	Nick Cavaliere
Androgyno	Nicholas Tigg
Castrone	Colin Mace
Voltore	Christopher Good
Corbaccio	John Rogan
Bonario	David Oyelowo
Corvino	Richard Cordery
Celia	Claire Price
Sir Politic Would-be	David Collings
Lady Would-be	Susannah Elliott-Knight
Peregrine	Mark Bonnar
<i>Avocatori</i> : Michael Gardiner, Graeme Eton, Israel Aduramo	
<i>Notario</i>	Michèle Moran
<i>Commendatori</i> : John Sackville, James Auden	
Merchants: Graeme Eton, Israel Aduramo, Michael Gardiner	
Waiting Women: Jennifer McEvoy, Michèle Moran	

Violin/Viola	Richard Springate
Cello	Naomi Boole-Masterson
Saxophones/Bass Clarinet	Edward Watson
Trumpet	Peter Fisher/Andrew Stone-Fewings
Timpani/Percussion	Nigel Garvey
Harpsichord/Synthesiser	Roger Hellyer

Director	Lindsay Posner
Designer	Ashley Martin-Davis
Lighting	Peter Mumford
Music	Matthew Scott
Movement	Ian Spink
Sound	Fergus O'Hare
Assistant Director	Spencer Hinton

First performance: Swan, 18 March 1999.  
Pit, 9 December 1999.

Archive resources for this production

The RSC performance archive at the Shakespeare Centre Library, Stratford-upon-Avon contains the following material at the time of writing.

- Newspaper reviews
- Performance video (Swan only)
- Production photographs and contact sheets
- Prompt book
- Theatre programme



INTRODUCTION: *VOLPONE*

*Volpone* is Jonson's most moral play, virtue is eventually set free and the guilty are condemned to suffer in a manner befitting their crimes. The play presents a mixture of animal fable and grotesque human obsessions. Like *The Alchemist*, *Volpone* utilizes an interest in the presentation of the self through play-acting – and this extends from the obvious shape-shifting loci of Mosca and Volpone to the supporting characters of Politic and Peregrine in the subsidiary plot. The exotic location of Renaissance Venice usually leads most companies to evoke the thriving and corrupt social world of the period.

The King's Men first performed *Volpone* at the Globe to probable success in 1605 and Jonson dedicated it to the 'two famous universities' after performances at both Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>1</sup>

Problems for modern audiences are likely to be found in the depiction of the three freaks in Volpone's household and their masque-style entertainment and the Would-be subplot (as many of the jokes are topical references to events circa 1605). And the mixture of animal fable and seventeenth-century Venetian society may pose a challenge to the potential director or actor.

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, *Volpone or The Fox*, ed. by R. B. Parker, *The Revels Plays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), (Dedication, 2).

*VOLPONE*: NT, OLIVIER, DIR. PETER HALL, 1977

Hall's production used the Prologue to introduce the play. This had the effect of slowing down the spectacle of the opening. His reasons were due to a mixture of theatre politics and popular expectations: John Gielgud was cast in the cameo role of Would-be but to merely use him within Jonson's fiction would be to under-use the actor in the eyes of critics and audiences. So, his appeal as a popular performer was utilized by having him deliver the Prologue as himself before re-appearing later in the play in character.

Irving Wardle noted the 'opening gong stroke', for Gielgud's appearance signalled the actor's worth, allowing the audience a moment of recognition. Wardle thought the NT was brave in producing a text by Jonson, 'for whom no modern style has been forged'. However, this did not deter Hall, a recognizably successful character of the English theatre, himself. He had assembled an all-star cast, drawing on popular and acclaimed theatre actors and drew on a tested design team, with whom he had enjoyed previous Shakespearian successes at the RSC. John Bury designed a sumptuous set that was able to transform into each location with the use of screens in differing colours. Deirdre Clancy designed rich period costumes to allow the text to be set in period on Bury's open stage design. The focus of the production was on the skill of the classical performers and on the spectacular and rich effects that the NT could invoke to produce the text. It was played swiftly – under three hours – without any great changes to the text. Peter Barnes had been approached to edit the text but when he suggested the cutting of the Would-be plot his input was curtailed as Gielgud had already been contracted to play the part. This showed the effect that casting can have on the preparation of the text and also the importance the director placed on the pull of



the actor was central to the success of the performance, rather than the text performed. Because of the casting of Paul Scofield in the title role, another respected and experienced classical actor, who had many Shakespearian successes, this production never investigated the satire of the text, preferring Volpone's heroic status and surrounding light comedy instead. However, the casting of Gielgud as Would-be is interesting. Although few critics interrogated his performance, to cast an actor who had no recognized skill for comedy but instead is renowned for his vocal technique and sobriety, would have the effect of raising Would-be from being a clownish figure to being subtly comic. Gielgud would trust the text instead of pointing to the inherent jokes. Although seemingly bizarre casting, I would suggest it was probably one of the best decisions of the production. The reviews were generally favourable.

Wardle thought the text was 'delivered at such speed, but with no loss to the variety and sense'. He liked Gielgud's Would-be in 'plus-fours and feathered beret'. He also identified that the Volpone/Mosca partnership is 'conducted on equal terms' but Scofield had subtle touches, which marked out the quality of his performance – 'where the plot starts going wrong [...] conveying unspoken anxiety – you hear the great trumpet voice beginning to crack'. He thought Celia and Bonario were 'rightly presented as boobies'. He noted Bury's design as 'three marble avenues radiating into blackness'.<sup>2</sup>

For Milton Shulman, Scofield's Volpone was a 'handsome, elegant rake' but the 'dignified superiority' had an effect that 'misses many of the laughs'. Nevertheless, he liked the fact that the audience could 'enjoy his subtle delight in his own trickery'. Ben Kingsley was 'a bossy, self-satisfied Mosca'. But the

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<sup>2</sup> Irving Wardle, 'A magnificent team', *The Times*, 27 April 1977.



production was 'faithful and fluid without having that extra quality of bizarre caricature' the play 'urgently needs'. He suggested that even Spriggs and Gielgud 'could not lift' the Would-bes from being 'garrulous bores'.<sup>3</sup>

John Barber thought the 'sumptuous' and 'superbly cast' production 'might have made Venice seem more real'. He 'missed' 'the manic Jonsonian tension', he pondered, 'perhaps the thing looked too pretty. Perhaps the laughter was too good-tempered, the sensuality too polite, Scofield himself too noble a figure'.<sup>4</sup>

Ian Stewart liked the 'dextrous speed' and the 'energetic and intuitive' use of the 'folding screens' at the rear of the set. He suggested the two central characters had 'made of their villainy a work of art' – 'they are godlike'. Scofield had a 'crimson cloak' and moved with 'effortless grace'; he was 'more leonine than vulpine'. But the glamour 'softens the edge of Jonson's satire. He found Spriggs – 'yellow-wigged and with clownishly white complexion' – 'so funny' that he wondered why the Would-bes are usually in danger of being cut. The whole thing was 'a sumptuous feast for the eye'.<sup>5</sup>

Jack Tinker noticed the 'sweetly sung seduction' of Celia and Mosca's 'real disgust for the flesh he feeds off'. But suggested the production had a 'faint heart': Jonson's 'highly coloured caricatures' 'remain largely an academic experience' as 'only' Spriggs 'captures the essence of savage satire'.<sup>6</sup>

J. C. Trewin liked the 'astonishing range of voice' from Scofield and 'the magnetism any actor in the very first rank must have'. With his 'vast relish' 'we are with him to the last' but 'we never fail to detest' Mosca. He thought the play

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<sup>3</sup> Milton Shulman, 'Scofield – miser superior', *London Evening Standard*, 27 April 1977.

<sup>4</sup> John Barber, 'Paul Scofield dominates *Volpone*', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 April 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Stewart, 'Vultures in Venice', *Country Life*, 12 May 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Jack Tinker, 'When faint heart just failed to win this fox!', *Daily Mail*, 27 April 1977.

‘incomplete’ without the Would-bes and enjoyed Gielgud’s ‘silver-voiced’ and ‘portentous gravity’ in the delivery of absurdity. He also liked the ‘ripe gusto’ of Spriggs, who appeared as a ‘much-battered Gloriana’.<sup>7</sup>

In another review Trewin revered Scofield as ‘one of our very finest actors’ and he played Volpone by ‘never cheapening the scene or turning high comedy to the coarser near-farce’. Trewin liked his ‘delighted zest’ for his dying impersonation and the ‘unaccompanied singing’ to Celia. It was ‘a grand revival’.<sup>8</sup>

Sheridan Morley thought Bury, Hall and Scofield ‘pull the play well away from the over-elaboration’ used in past productions and presented a ‘super-cool evening’ where the two protagonists ‘glide as though on castors’. And although each of the gulls ‘offers a little revue turn’, ‘the joys remain incidental’. Nevertheless, despite revealing his disinterest in the play, he thought this was ‘*Volpone* at its most spacious, elegant and distinguished’.<sup>9</sup>

Frank Marcus suggested the effect of the opening: ‘a clap of thunder resounded [...] A spotlight illuminated the corner of the circle. Into it burst the erect, distinguished figure of Sir John Gielgud, impeccable in modern attire, reciting the prologue’. He suggested that such boldness was appropriate because Jonson was ‘a creator of masks rather than a psychological investigator’ and his characters ‘require a broad and expressive style of acting’. There were some character insights – Mosca was ‘the most powerful figure in the play’ and Celia was ‘silly rather than virtuous’. He described the effect of Bury’s set and Clancy’s costume designs: ‘a semi-circle of brightly coloured doors, which are manipulated ingeniously, and dazzlingly glittering treasures’ (see PLATE 22);

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<sup>7</sup> J. C. Trewin, ‘Great voices at the National’, *Illustrated London News*, June 1977.

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‘Clancy has costumed the human zoo with a judicious blend of period garb and the appropriate feathers, furs, and feelers, plus the Callot-like masks’.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, Robert Cushman thought Celia not silly but self-centred ‘white in innocence (well aware of its own merits in Morag Hood’s delicious performance)’. He thought Scofield’s ‘heroic pride’ and ‘sonorous voice’ made ‘his final reckless self-exposure a believable (and thrilling) moment’. He thought Michael Medwin as Corvino was disappointing as he ‘goes through the motions of Corvino’s jealousy without ever probing its brutality’. Although he had praised Scofield in the final scene, he thought ‘Scofield himself snaps when he attempts to actually ravish Celia’ because ‘he misses the earthiness of Volpone’ in all his grandeur.<sup>11</sup>

Michael Billington described the ‘elegantly symmetrical set’: ‘with a ceramic-tiled floor, folding doors that can change from beaten-gold to bureaucratic white and a skeletal frame adumbrating the shape of St. Marks’ [*sic*]. Nevertheless, he felt this ‘a little too cool and precise for the tumultuous Jonsonian world’. But Scofield gave a ‘superlative performance’ with ‘real grandeur’ – ‘he raises sybaritic excess to the status of a heroic passion’. And finally, ‘he confronts the Court with a rigid, poker-backed disdain refusing to join in the general pleas for mercy’. In all this he saw ‘great acting’ which was ‘well-partnered’ by Kingsley’s ‘quick, sprightly, Iago-like Mosca’. Spriggs, with ‘buck-teeth and a red-tipped nose’ resembled Lewis’s ‘White Rabbit’. There was farcical humour from Hugh Paddick as Corbaccio, who was ‘forever exiting into thick doors’, he was ‘funny without conveying much sense of senile

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<sup>8</sup> J. C. Trewin, ‘New Plays’, *Lady*, 12 May 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Sheridan Morley, ‘Rare Jonson’, *Punch*, 4 May 1977.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Marcus, ‘The Magic Freak Show’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 May 1977.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Cushman, ‘After the fox’, *Observer*, 1 May 1977.

acquisitiveness' and Paul Rogers as Voltore was 'full of legal bluster but little legal slipperiness'. The problem was that these actors had identified that they were in comic roles but concentrated on finding comic business, rather than trusting the text. As Billington identified, such business goes against the qualities of the text.<sup>12</sup>

B. A. Young thought Spriggs as Lady Would-be had a 'voice high and harsh' that 'screeches out', suggesting her character's likeness to a parrot, despite her appearance resembling a rabbit. Young also noted the 'general lightness of production', which would be echoed twenty-two years later in Lindsay Posner's production, the most recent Jonsonian performance.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Billington, 'Paul Scofield opens at the National Theatre', *Guardian*, 27 April 1977.

<sup>13</sup> B. A. Young, 'Volpone' [*sic*], *Financial Times*, 27 April 1977.

*VOLPONE*: RSC, TOP AND PIT, DIR. BILL ALEXANDER, 1983-4

Alexander's production utilized a sparse but evocative design by Alison Chitty, which drew on the lack of space of TOP to great advantage. The set was a panelled room but each panel was hinged and either housed the amassed wealth or could be used to signify doors, windows or cupboards. The design was the production's chief contribution to the staging of *Volpone*. However, the casting of Richard Griffiths in the title role also helped to redefine the idea of the protagonist after Scofield's grand version at the NT. In contrast to the austere elegant Scofield, Griffiths was a large and ungainly Volpone, who was willing to appear grotesque. He revealed the physical and moral nastiness of the role.

James Fenton thought that Griffiths's shape limited the options for the depiction of the character, it 'precludes any over-insistent emphasis on the animal symbolism'. Nevertheless, the reviewer admitted that, despite the echo of the fox in Volpone's fur bedclothes, Alexander was wise to present the characters 'as human beings'. He suggested the effect of the set: 'a mass of little closets full of treasure. On the back of each door, there are criss-crossing tapes holding curious documents, title deeds' and 'other doors [...] reveal hiding places for human beings'. The effect was 'a house full of closets – a place of greed, possession and rape'. He thought Griffiths gave a 'tremendous performance': 'enthusiastically repulsive' in wooing Celia he 'forgets that his face is still besmeared with gunge. He does not woo as a lover, but rather makes a speech to a possession'. Whilst she 'clings to a chair in the audience' he 'drags her by her ears to the bed. He is horrible'. The length of the performance (four hours) necessitated a variety of pace to hold the attention but it would seem that Alexander preferred his understanding of the text to colour the speed of the



production, rather than probing for the play's natural rhythms. As such the masque of fools was 'got through as quickly as possible', revealing an embarrassment and distrust of this section of the text; the mountebank scene was 'vastly expansive' as Griffiths was 'putting the points across as if afraid that his audience might be a little too thick to get them'; and the final 'duel of wits' between Mosca and Volpone was 'taken at top speed', in the hope of creating the effect of farcical speed and escalating panic. Both of the Would-bes 'won applause' for their comic effect. And the whole production was 'thoroughly articulated'.<sup>14</sup>

Michael Billington thought the 'key metaphor' was 'acting' as this Volpone 'gets a big kick out of impersonation', even employing a 'fart cushion' to stop the gulls from getting too close. His square bed had 'hidden drawers' with costumes in and it 'becomes a stage' for the freakish masque as Volpone 'smokes a hookah'. The 'closet ham' Volpone was partnered by Mosca, played by Miles Anderson as 'a working-class, black leather boy rather more interested in the loot' (see PLATE 23). The gulls were 'bourgeois Venetian monsters' and when Corvino dragged Celia to the bed 'like all good satire, it is deeply shocking' as Volpone and Mosca 'sit looking on with smug superiority'. Billington felt the Venetian setting 'rather thinly evoked by a bit of laundry hanging out of a window' for the mountebank scene. He liked Gemma Jones as Lady Would-be who had 'tell-tale East End vowels' despite her pretensions, he thought this 'typical of Mr Alexander's alertness to social nuances'.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast, Giles Gordon thought the production was 'very much set in – and a product of – Venice'. To this end, all the characters were unappealing as

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<sup>14</sup> James Fenton, 'Ben Jonson's animal farm', *Sunday Times*, 9 October 1983.

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Mosca had 'no more contempt for Voltore [...] than he has for his master and indeed himself'. This was 'the drawback' as the reviewer felt alienated from 'the unmasking' as 'everyone's so ghastly'. Nevertheless, he found the gulls 'finely played and characterized' and thought 'it's very much an actor's play'. Despite this Griffiths was 'strangely listless': 'he exudes little character or personality in spite of a great deal of bustle'. Nevertheless, Gordon thought 'he caresses the silvered verse lingeringly with his lovely voice'.<sup>16</sup>

Irving Wardle thought the music by Guy Woolfenden was a 'languorously hypnotic accompaniment' which evoked an '*Arabian Nights* atmosphere'. But as Griffiths did not resemble 'one of nature's foxes' Wardle thought he missed 'sheer appetite' and 'sensuality' as his assault on Celia appeared as 'gently caressing'. Wardle suggested that Griffiths's Volpone was, 'from the start', 'no real match' for Mosca. And although he did not appear fly-like, Anderson was a 'transparently ugly customer, a black-leather athlete with a murderous face'. The 'success' of his performance was 'to show electrically quick wit'. He suggested the duo resembled 'two gleeful schoolboys' at the gulling but noted that Mosca 'dwells sadistically on the real sweat' of Volpone. He saw the animal analogies as the gulls were costumed using 'appropriate bird feathers' and he especially enjoyed Henry Goodman's 'thunderous delivery of Voltore's prosecution speech'. Bonario, like in the NT production, was a 'bookish booby' who rescued Celia and then 'tries to lead her to safety through the wrong door' – a cupboard – before re-entering and exiting.<sup>17</sup>

Jill Burrows suggested Griffiths gained the audience's sympathy by 'finding the laughs by playing straight down the lines, slowly, firmly and truly'

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Billington, 'Volpone' [sic], *Guardian*, 7 October 1983.



and James Fleet as Peregrine was ‘embroiling the audience in his own amazed disbelief at Sir Politic’, Fleet ‘succeeds in making the straight man funny’.<sup>18</sup>

R. V. Holdsworth summarized the opening, Volpone’s ‘straining, Marlovian excitement’ at his gold was ‘obliterated by the casual, unpaced delivery of what sounds like prose, after which Griffiths sinks tiredly onto the bed to have Mosca massage him, and peel him and feed him an orange, and to puff idly on a hookah’. For the seduction ‘he hops ponderously from one foot to the other, sings flat, and flails his arms, mimicking a passion he does not feel’. Holdsworth also disliked Mosca as ‘equally offhand and mirthless’, with an ‘East End accent’, who spoke his parasite speech ‘in level tones, as he lolls on the floor’. He felt the portrayal of Mosca was deliberately effortless as ‘he exerts himself only for a spot of grim-faced thuggery towards the end’ when he kicked Corbaccio’s stick, dragged Corvino ‘around the stage’ and ‘gropes up Lady Would-be’s skirts’. He suggested that Alexander had ‘chosen to thus assassinate the play’s two main roles’ along with ‘much of its power and complexity’. Holdsworth suggested that this could have been due to Alexander assuming that ‘after three years’ success’ the duo ‘are bored and reduced to going through the motions’ or ‘that the play’s attack on perverted values is unclouded by rogue sentiment’. Holdsworth suggested that the ‘loathsomeness’ of Volpone was ‘savagely stressed’ by ‘a blotchy human mountain snoring on the bed, with one foot swathed in sacking and a hand in constant spasms, [...] he rumbles incontinently beneath the bed clothes, causing his suitors to reel away gagging’. Nevertheless, other reviewers suggest that these elements were shown in collusion with the audience as Volpone painted on the blotches in sight of the

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<sup>16</sup> Giles Gordon, ‘Richly layered’, *Spectator*, 15 October 1983.

audience and the fart cushion was a known prop for the audience and not a surprise. Holdsworth thought there was a 'lack of tension' in the seduction scene – because this Volpone had no 'magnetic side' and Celia had thrown the handkerchief 'out of innocent impetuosity, not flirtatiousness'. The Prologue was cut to allow the visual spectacle of the gold in the set to be revealed. Holdsworth, like Billington, noted the 'animosity' of Mosca to Volpone from the start and the offer to 'stifle him' was accompanied with 'a brutal demonstration'. Holdsworth also noted the 'blasphemously misdirected rituals', as had occurred in the NT *Volpone* where Scofield had 'elevated the gold coin as the Host', in the RSC production Volpone performed an 'aperages, in which he sprinkles wine on his trinkets from a silver chalice [...] inadvertently dousing Mosca'. There was also a 'mock wedding' as the freakish trio 'shower' Celia and Volpone 'with blossoms' from an upper window as well as 'tittering maliciously at Celia's pleas' whilst 'ghoulishly lit from below'. With only Bonario being 'slightly sent up', the gulls appeared 'appropriately manic', especially John Dicks as Corvino, 'a haunted, sunken-cheeked neurotic who unconsciously cradles the chastity belt'. Holdsworth felt that when the duo of Mosca and Volpone dominated – as in the mountebank scene – the pace did 'begin disconcertingly to flag'.<sup>19</sup>

Michael Coveney thought the space inappropriate as it 'belittled' a 'great play'. He thought the design was unsuccessful, too, complaining about the 'drab' costumes, furniture, and 'the wigs are terrible'. He thought the play needed 'zest and vitality' but that only the subplot had this. He did find Griffiths satisfying for 'the first three Acts', especially his 'muted squeals of unbridled glee'. He

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<sup>17</sup> Irving Wardle, 'Volpone' [sic], *The Times*, 7 October 1983.

<sup>18</sup> Jill Burrows, 'Twin odysseys', *Times Educational Supplement*, 28 October 1983.

<sup>19</sup> R. V. Holdsworth, 'Spoiled by success', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 October 1983.



suggested that it 'is essential, surely, for the RSC to do plays like this on the main stage', contrary to RSC practice (see PLATE 24).<sup>20</sup>

Gareth Lloyd Evans agreed that 'studio theatre is not suitable for all drama' and that *Mosca* and *Volpone* were 'acting in a differently-styled production from the rest' as Evans found Griffiths's 'curiously offhand delivery and blank facial reactions' problematic. He also disliked the 'unsure playing' of the freaks as 'playful kids dressed up for charades' and noted 'their speaking and pointing of lines also leaves a lot to be desired'. In contrast, the gulls enjoyed 'strong playing' and Bruce Alexander's *Would-be caught* 'the role's incipient pathos as well as its self-deluding craziness'. Alexander's production was 'low on menace and irony'.<sup>21</sup>

The production transferred to the Pit in London one year later with very few changes.

Nicholas de Jongh thought it 'captures the play's prevailing sense of moral decrepitude far more effectively than' the NT version, 'which sanitized the satire into pretty romancing'. For de Jongh Griffiths was 'never once teetering into caricature or excess' but 'displays relish' as he 'adores his disguise'. However, he admitted that Griffiths's 'studiously unemotional manner makes him a far from ideal *Volpone*'. He noted the 'individualizing' of the gulls, with Goodman's 'sinister lawyer revelling in the rhetoric of deception' and Jones as 'an upwardly mobile girl from Croydon', whilst Nigel Cooke's Bonario was 'a gallant who has not quite the wit to make it'. He enjoyed the show of 'blind

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Coveney, 'Volpone/The Other Place' [sic], *Financial Times*, 6 October 1983.

<sup>21</sup> Gareth Lloyd Evans, 'Rung true to time', *Stratford Herald*, 14 October 1983.



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justice' when one judge was 'simpering with pleasure at his brother's sentencing'.<sup>22</sup>

Anthony Masters noted the likeness of the set to a 'heavily-overlooked square or a deserted church' for business transactions. He suggested the casting of Griffiths 'sacrifices the poetic flights and swelling sensuality' of Volpone but that his appeal was to see a villain 'so like ourselves'. He also liked Jones who 'lusts visibly after a black court usher' and noted that 'only towards the end does the production cease to be funny or lose its [...] leisurely, deadly pace'.<sup>23</sup>

B. A. Young thought Alexander 'squeezes every possible laugh from the script' and treated the text as 'a basis for action', for example, 'Celia's exclamation' in the seduction scene 'turns out to be a whole-hearted prayer, complete with devotional cross'. Young liked the layered approach to characterization as Mosca was 'clearly deceitful to see and to hear' but Peregrine was 'concealing his sophistication below a mask of naivety'. In contrast to others, Young suggested that the seduction was effective and beautiful: 'the glorious poetry with which Volpone woos Celia is superbly spoken'.<sup>24</sup>

John Barber, however, thought the 'production's weakness is mainly due to the playing of Richard Griffiths'. Nevertheless, as 'an accomplished comic actor', Griffiths, 'makes a repulsive figure of the supposed invalid' but he 'does not rise temperamentally to the grandeur of the man, the high insolence of his obsession'. The key problem was that 'the grandeur needs to be monstrous, as well as the body'.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, 'Greed unbridled', *Guardian*, 18 April 1984.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Masters, 'Volpone' [sic], *The Times*, 18 April 1984.

<sup>24</sup> B. A. Young, 'Volpone/The Pit' [sic], *Financial Times*, 18 April 1984.

<sup>25</sup> John Barber, 'Vicious view of vice', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 April 1984.

J. C. Trewin thought the production's 'noise and skirmishes do try the patience' but he enjoyed the 'savage touch' when 'for one of the judges the sentences grow funnier and funnier'. He admitted that Griffiths 'misses the true flash of the verse in the Celia passage' and, somewhat contrary to others, thought 'that tortoise impersonation can never have been very funny'.<sup>26</sup>

To its credit, the production mostly resisted the urge to fall into slapstick and throwaway jokes and it succeeded in presenting a very different evocation of the two central roles from the earlier NT revival. It showed Mosca as an individualist from the start but someone prepared to debase himself by scratching and feeding his patron whilst hating him. Volpone was illuminated as an overgrown child, immature and solely interested in exploiting others for services and possessions. Griffiths lacked Scofield's grandeur and in doing so he did not elevate the verse to the status of high poetry, as his predecessor had (somewhat mistakenly). The casting of Griffiths highlighted the body, rather than the voice or the brain, of Volpone. This was a self-absorbed Volpone who aimed at the possession of everything, regardless of its inherent value. The critics suggested that the purported playing of the whole text did not especially affect the production – other than making it very long – and suggested, rather than fidelity to the text, a director who did not quite know how to prepare the play for performance. In reality Alexander had edited the text but none of the reviewers noticed.

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<sup>26</sup> J. C. Trewin, 'Volpone' [sic], *Birmingham Post*, 18 April 1984.



*VOLPONE*: ALMEIDA, DIR. NICHOLAS HYTNER, 1990

Just as the RSC had used its smaller space of TOP for its production with a limited budget and proved that the text could work in such an environment, so the Almeida found their small-scale production a success with the critics. Hytner cut the subplot completely in favour of concentrating on the main plot. This aided the amount of actors required and accentuated the satirical focus. The production was based on the appeal and interplay of the two main performers: Ian McDiarmid as Volpone and Denis Lawson as Mosca. They had known each other since the beginning of their careers with amateur performances in Scotland. At this point both were known actors in theatre, film and television and the production utilized their appeal. Similar to the panelled closets of Chitty's design in 1983, Mark Thompson designed a bare set with free standing trunks and a trap door. The freakish trio (who doubled as the *Avocatori*) emerged from these areas, along with Volpone's wealth. The main feature was the flooded stage, which evoked Venice's canals and also suggested that Volpone's wealth was sinking into its surroundings. It captured not only the atmosphere of the geographic location but also the moral degeneracy of Volpone's environment.

Maureen Paton thought Volpone lived in 'a basement lair full of puddles', like a 'sewer'. She called it 'the campest show in town with its homo-erotic overtones of unnatural appetites'. With the cutting of the subplot the other characters used a more obvious comedy than is sometimes afforded them, Paton particularly liked Timothy Walker as Corvino – 'hilarious as a pigeon-toed fortune-hunter who bears a striking resemblance to Bruce Forsyth'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Maureen Paton, *Daily Express*, 9 April 1990.

Steve Grant thought the production was 'attuned to the cramped eeriness of the venue', utilizing a mixed aesthetic: 'bowler-hatted carrion birds in bright yellow boots, Vincent-Price style horror skits, James Bond chappies, degenerate sidekicks clothed in PVC' and a set that is 'some treasure-strewn rubbish-tip full of closets, trunks and trap-doors promising secrets, money and dreams'. He thought McDiarmid did exude 'some human feeling' in the title role.<sup>28</sup>

Charles Spencer thought that 'purists' would 'dislike this production' because of Hytner's treatment of the text, the 'mixture of ancient and modern' and the 'adventure playground of a set'. He liked the use of cupboards to house Volpone's gold and 'revolting companions'. The set appeared 'an island of possessions, dominated by a huge, fur-lined "sick-bed" which rises up through a trap door', the surrounding canal was 'an ugly, polluted stream awash with litter' and the gulls had to 'splash their way through it to gain access', revealing the depths of their tactics to amass wealth. He noted that McDiarmid 'rises gleefully to the challenge' of the role 'swathed in an enormous fur coat and with his hair dyed red'; as the sick man he wore 'a ludicrous Balaclava, speaking in a croak and wheezing horribly, he cuts a wonderfully grotesque figure'. However, at other points 'he combines vulpine vitality with a haunting melancholia' in contrast to Lawson's Mosca, who was 'razor-sharp, funny and disturbingly attractive'. Walker's Corvino was 'a screaming, Basil Fawltyish monster'. Spencer found the production 'bleak' and 'invigorating'.<sup>29</sup>

Christopher Edwards thought Hytner was 'celebrating the grotesque in an almost carnival spirit'. He evoked the opening as Volpone 'throws open his cellar doors and allows his leering face to be bathed in the golden light shining

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<sup>28</sup> Steve Grant, *Time Out*, 11 April 1990.



up from his treasure'. He thought Lawson's Mosca resembled a 'cocky Scotch wheeler-dealer in black plastic trousers and punk hair-do' [*sic*] and Walker's Corvino was a 'pencil-moustached dupe' who evoked 'Terry Thomas and John Cleese'. He admitted missing the subplot but admitted the 'brilliant focus' of this production.<sup>30</sup>

Whilst Matt Wolf thought it looked 'wickedly sensuous and forbidding' and was 'just this side of Berkoff-like high camp', David Nathan thought the 'over-fussy set' was 'ridiculous'. However, he praised Cate Hamer's Celia as she 'invests virtue with passion'. And John Gross liked the set of 'a subterranean strong-room [...] that gives off showers of gold sparks' but he found Lawson's portrayal crude as, 'parasites, outwardly at least, should be made of softer stuff'. Irving Wardle found it a 'success in combining modern-dress realism with the freakish grotesque'.<sup>31</sup>

Michael Billington noted that the playing time was 'a brisk two-and-a-half hours' – a complete contrast to Alexander's four hour RSC version. He liked the suggestion that the trap door was 'like a fiery entrance to hell' and that the gulls 'were prepared to pad through filth to achieve riches'. He thought it a 'brilliant stroke' that the freakish trio 'emerge from boxes' 'as if they were doll-like symbols of his freaky acquisitiveness'. He noted that this Mosca and Volpone 'get a tangible sexual excitement out of cony-catching' as 'their faces are constantly pressed close together' and 'Mosca lovingly applies a sickly make-up' to Volpone. For the moment when Volpone wishes he could 'transform' Mosca 'to a Venus' 'Volpone starts to undress his accomplice'. This

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Cruel face of black comedy', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 April 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Edwards, *Spectator*, 14 April 1990.



was the great discovery of this production, as Billington noted: 'this is the first production in which I have seen the sexuality of deceit made so explicit'. He liked McDiarmid's 'rapid switches of tone' which 'betoken a sadistic delight in playing with his victims'. He noted the closure – 'a resonant image' – of 'the Venetian judges bathing lasciviously in Volpone's appropriated loot'.<sup>32</sup>

Michael Coveney felt Hytner issued 'abrasiveness in bucketloads'. He liked the 'revenging Scots double-act' and noted McDiarmid's appearance, his 'foxy red mane tapers to a torso of sprouting ginger down'. He thought Peter Hayward's score was 'a-jangle with madrigal memories' as the freaks 'spring near-naked from illuminated caskets'. The debased sensuality of Volpone was indicated by the amount of bare-flesh on show and this stripped-down approach aided the Almeida's tight design budget.<sup>33</sup>

Martin Hoyle noted the religious burlesque in this production, to echo that in the two previous productions, as Volpone performs a 'mock eucharist [*sic*] at the altar of his gold'. Nevertheless, the production 'lacks fangs' and 'the characterization is muted' as Volpone appeared 'detached' and not at all prompted by sensual self-indulgence, perhaps because of the stripped-down aesthetic. Apart from Hamer's 'touchingly straightforward' Celia, 'the grotesques carry the day' for the acting. Walker 'gives an impeccable demonstration of high, stylized farce, cawing and shrieking, loping and mincing, snarling and prancing': 'this is a truly Jonsonian performance that propels us into

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<sup>31</sup> Matt Wolf, 'Volpone' [*sic*], *City Limits*, 12 April 1990; David Nathan, *Jewish Chronicle*, 20 April 1990; John Gross, *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 April 1990; Irving Wardle, *Independent on Sunday*, 8 April 1990.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Billington, 'Sex and deceit', *Guardian*, 5 April 1990.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Coveney, 'As the camel said to the fox...' [*sic*], *Observer*, 8 April 1990.

accepting the inhumanity as part of the joke'. In contrast, McDiarmid was 'Hogarthian'.<sup>34</sup>

Paul Taylor also spotted the blasphemy of the mock Eucharist as, 'to a distant liturgical chant', Volpone was 'planting, in place of a host, sterile gold coins on their lewdly twitching tongues'. He liked the 'sardonically apt touch' of using the freaks as the judges in 'red robes of office' and 'the dark glasses of the blind'; they 'provide a final image of rampant avarice when they grub for gold, like furtive grave-desecrators, in the money-pit of the man they have just indignantly sentenced'. He also noted the visual accuracy of the 'bright yellow footwear' of the gulls as 'the only vestigial link' between the gulls and their animalistic namesakes. He thought McDiarmid 'lapses into moments of meditative lethargy, when his voice grows hushed and his eyes seem to peer inward' and the actor 'signals an obscure boredom and frustration' with the play. In contrast, Lawson was 'all mean mouth and calculating eyes', who has his 'face always too close to his interlocutors (as though he might any second headbutt them)' and he 'has a way of making flattery sound more intimidating than a threat'. Like Anderson in 1983, Lawson's Mosca 'is the cleverer of the two' and 'you are never in any doubt that this is a worm that will turn'. He found Hamer played Celia with 'hysterical chastity' in a 'slinky dress' and Marc Warren as Bonario was 'togged out for tennis and abseiling down to rescue her', he appeared 'a self-righteous, public school cipher'. Taylor revealed that the Epilogue was played 'as a self-consciously fictional character' by McDiarmid.<sup>35</sup>

Benedict Nightingale thought McDiarmid played Volpone 'plausibly in Jacobean furs and breeches' but that there was a 'chronological identity crisis' as

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<sup>34</sup> Martin Hoyle, 'Volpone', *Financial Times*, 5 April 1990.



Mosca wore plastic trousers and a 'green bomber jacket' and Bonario was 'a cricketer' who 'waves a tennis racket and carries a dagger'. On the 'minuscule stage' the result was 'a fussy, attention-getting evening' and the expectation of 'visual sparseness' was belittled by a design that was 'more distracting than practical'.<sup>36</sup>

Jim Hiley agreed that Thompson's designs would 'work splendidly in a large, proscenium-arch playhouse, but the Almeida is a horseshoe-shaped studio' and the 'sightlines are atrocious'. In this atmosphere the relationship of the duo was 'a festering, claustrophobic love-affair' but 'the homo-erotic touches make nonsense of Volpone's infatuation with Celia' and 'his sexual passion is no more convincing than his lust for gold'. The production was 'occasionally funny, but more often pretty grim'.<sup>37</sup>

Clare Bayley thought McDiarmid 'magnificently vulgar, bare-chested in long johns and a huge fur mantle', he showed 'huge enjoyment'. She suggested that the 'large, black coffers' could also be 'coffins'. She thought the production rested on 'first-class spectacle' and 'a spirited bit of ingenuity'.<sup>38</sup>

Sheridan Morley thought it a 'relatively low-key, jokey affair' which cut the subplot to appear as 'a brisk two-hour romp' with 'a series of increasingly manic chases' and a 'brilliant double-act'.<sup>39</sup>

The editing process refined the focus of the play onto the two main parts but these then appeared to be self-serving opportunities for the lead actors who delivered self-aware performances. The idea of the grotesque reached its height in their unsubtle playing styles. Style is, obviously, a matter of taste and many

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Taylor, '20<sup>th</sup>-century fox', *Independent*, 5 April 1990.

<sup>36</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Gaudy parade in Jacobean animal house', *The Times*, 4 April 1990.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Hiley, *Listener*, 19 April 1990.

<sup>38</sup> Clare Bayley, *What's On*, 11 April 1990.



were satisfied by their performances. I would suggest that this production would please only through the aesthetics of satire and debasement; the surface meaning was potent but there was little beneath the accomplishing of effects. However, even the set design – brilliant in theory – failed in both its size for the auditorium and its practicalities for the actors.

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<sup>39</sup> Sheridan Morley, *Herald Tribune*, 18 April 1990.

*VOLPONE*: ESC, UK TOUR, DIR. TIM LUSCOMBE, 1990-1

The ESC utilized the same touring cast for *The Merchant of Venice*, the natural Shakespearian companion piece to *Volpone*, this ensured that Shakespeare insured the financial risk of *Volpone*. However, both plays were part of the A'Level syllabus at the time and this almost guaranteed the company a prospective audience. For many of its tours the ESC relied on this student market and when the company scaled down its tours later in the decade they remained committed to their role as an educational theatre company. Their commitment to producing classical texts for young audiences had a particular effect on the company's style. In their aims to make classical texts accessible to all, especially the young, they sometimes undercut the plays they were presenting with inserted twentieth-century jokes and simplistic visual images.

In a burlesque of the company's directors, Robert Hewison discussed the aims of the company with regard to *Volpone* and *The Merchant of Venice*: 'Barnstorming Britain in their unstoppable style of whizzy, whacky popular theatre, bringing the regions classics with a crunch [...] we need a concept [*sic*]'. The company used 'lots of modern references hammered on to the text, doesn't matter if they fit or not'; and for setting the requirement was 'modern dress of course, that's cheaper – but it has to be period modern dress. Sort of 1950s for *Volpone*, because it's a comedy'. The cast's assembly and style was satirized as 'it's an ensemble show, innit? Just as long as they don't mind mucking in and mugging along'. The director, Luscombe in place of the usual Bogdanov – 'He can do it like Bodger does. Not as well, of course, but never mind' – had given his company only one direction, according to Hewison: 'Pace, pace, pace, don't

let up for a minute. Respect for the text? Characterization? Knotty problems of morality? Forget it. This is popular theatre'.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, Hewison's review accurately summed up the tone and the lack of any apparent approach for the production. In an attempt to create popular and accessible theatre Luscombe assumed that the audience would not be interested in the play and instead used the text as an excuse for stage mania and cheap comedy. Balloons and coloured lights hung from striped poles in an attempt to evoke a Venetian carnival atmosphere but the effect was more akin to an end of pier show. As Sidney Vauncez suggested, Scoto was in 'lurid checks like Osborne's *Entertainer* selling cure-alls on Blackpool's Golden Mile' (see PLATE 25). In bed he lay 'heavily bandaged and inert'. In such a production there was little choice for the actor, John Woodvine, nevertheless, Vauncez found him 'consistently amusing' and praised the company's 'robust popular theatre'. He did not notice that Luscombe's tactics were patronizing for the youngsters it was intended for, and for everyone else who saw it.<sup>41</sup>

Woodvine recalled the production as disappointing: 'I don't think I ever did work out what the plot of *Volpone* was. Now, in that sort of situation if the actor doesn't know what he's doing how can the audience?'. He thought it was set in 'a bastardized period' because the ESC was 'faced with real austerity', in contrast to the larger budgets of the RSC (where he had been Subtle in a minimalist production), but the problem was 'at some point in *Volpone* you have to show riches'. The lack of funding, an adequate setting and suitable direction meant that Woodvine was unhappy in the role, he recalled: 'Every night was a sort of minefield of waiting for the tricky moments – of climbing one hurdle and

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<sup>40</sup> Robert Hewison, 'Knocking the classics about a bit', *Sunday Times*, 10 February 1991.



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knowing you've got another coming. And you can't give a good performance in those circumstances'.<sup>42</sup>

John Gross described the opening: 'a musical-comedy chorus, funny costumes, coloured balloons, sqwawks and screeches, frantic writhings, any number of agitated skips and jumps'. He added that 'even a good production would have trouble recovering' but that 'the whole evening proceeds in much the same vein'. The approach was 'Classics can be Fun' [*sic*] and suggested this was done by adding 'supermarket trolleys and tunes from television commercials'. In fact, Volpone's treasure was stashed in the trolley, an idea which, although it revealed the acquisitive attitude, debased the sense of luxury and wealth to the level of the everyday. Gross noted how Bonario rescued Celia in an imposed joke, burlesquing popular cinema – 'a priest comes to the rescue. Then why not have him make his entrance swinging on a rope like Tarzan?' And Gross explained the visual appearance of Scoto – not so much an Archie Rice reference as something less intellectual – 'Scoto? Then he had better wear a bright tartan suit'. The overall effect was that 'poetry is swamped and the subtleties of the plot are ironed out'. Nevertheless some actors tried hard to overcome the inadequacies of the production, 'now and then the actors – especially John Woodvine as Volpone – deliver their lines in a way that does them justice', however, the effect was the reviewer realized 'how much you are missing the rest of the time'. His conclusion was that it was 'really a massive vote of no confidence in the play it is meant to be serving'.<sup>43</sup>

Paul Taylor called it 'Carry On Up the Grand Canal' [*sic*], but added 'not that you would guess that the play is set in Venice'. He thought it was aimed

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<sup>41</sup> Sidney Vauncez, 'Seeing double at the Lyric', *The Stage*, 28 February 1991.

‘either to parties of non-English speaking foreign visitors or to rows of sniggering adolescents’. Whilst there was some truth in his words here, the production failed to appeal to these groups, too, given the desperation and overall lack of humour or subtlety. He noted the ‘feeble, half-hearted fashion’ of recreating Venice as ‘Blackpool or Brighton’ and the unease with which the poles, lights and balloons ‘sit oddly with the brutalist scaffolding and gantry’. The cheapness of the wealth ‘destroys any sense of its compulsive but sterile aesthetic appeal’ and the cheapness of the jokes was illustrated – ‘word games like “Mantua” equals “Man-chewer” equals “Rottweiler”, geddit?’ Such jokes were part of the ‘forced vim and distracting phoney brightness’ and the wearing of ‘bondage gear’ by the freaks created ‘a jumpy jolly-japes atmosphere’, rather than being ‘attempts at decadence’ to be taken seriously. He thought there were some ‘good ideas’, for example, playing Lady Would-be as ‘a gabby Yank tourist’ but with the addition of ‘two faggoty style-minders’ this was ‘sabotaged through coarse overkill’. The three-headed judges (each actor had two papier mâché heads pasted into their red robes) ‘look absurd’ but not ‘corrupt, which is the main point’. He ended by suggesting that such a production ‘from a company with the profile of the ESC, it’s a sheer disgrace’.<sup>44</sup>

Charles Spencer thought ‘it is hard to do full justice to the crassness of this abysmal production’ and that ‘the show doesn’t even work on its own *Hi-De-Hi* level’ because ‘there is an air of desperation’ in the ‘relentless jollity and mindless mugging’. He suggested that some actors ‘know they are patronizing their audience and selling a masterpiece short’. In the title role Woodvine

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<sup>42</sup> John Woodvine, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 5 July 1996.

<sup>43</sup> John Gross, ‘A pair of giants get duffed up’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 10 February 1991.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Taylor, ‘An embarrassment of superficial riches’, *Independent*, 8 February 1991.



'appears to be on auto-pilot' as all is 'squandered by his all-purpose, actor-laddie fruitiness' which 'entirely fails to suggest the real sickness of Volpone's soul'.<sup>45</sup>

Michael Billington thought the argument was 'instantly rendered inaudible through carnival music'. His review added another inserted gag to the list – 'his doll-like Dwarf cries, as Volpone unzips a banana, "O, that's a big one"'. The effect was that 'nothing vital seems at stake' as 'everything about the character is reduced to the commonplace', for example, in the wooing of Celia 'he is here reduced to fishing sex-shop lingerie out of the linen-basket'. He thought both Mosca and the gulls were also 'scaled down in size', too, when Corvino threatened Celia the 'mustard-suited merchant simulates anal intercourse'. 'Vulgar without being funny', the production was 'a wretched advertisement for what is supposedly our leading touring classical company'.<sup>46</sup>

Benedict Nightingale thought Luscombe, with the help of designer Paul Farnworth, 'reduces *Volpone* to a gaudy cartoon'. There was praise for Stephen Jameson as Mosca, 'a smirking butler with the toughness and stealth successfully to cross the class barriers', and Kennedy's Corvino as 'an upper-crust spiv' who, 'misses none of the violence' as 'a sadist and wife-beater' and 'threatens Lois Harvey's wan Celia with a hacksaw when he is not twisting her nose'.

Nevertheless, the endless invention was criticized as Volpone 'sexily replaces his pyjamas with an embroidered red waistcoat and puffy yellow trousers that jointly leave him looking like a Turkish matador' to woo Celia.<sup>47</sup>

James Christopher, thinking that the production was 'a jobbing actors' production for A-level students', thought 'it works on one garish, unremitting level' in a 'fairground sickroom' with 'massive rude caricatures' in 'a cartoon

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Massacring a masterpiece', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 February 1991.

strip'. For example, Corbaccio was reduced to 'decomposing in a soiled romper-suit'.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the production found some fans. Malcolm Rutherford felt 'you are almost wishing for more' as the lack of wealth left Volpone's 'motivation' as 'simply to play tricks', which the production delighted in. The use of a television commercial, noted by Gross, was explained: 'when Sir Politick [*sic*] recovers from having been disguised as a tortoise, he lights a cigar: the theatre is then filled with the music from a familiar television commercial' (for *Hamlet* cigars). Proving the difficulties of perception between stage and auditorium, Rutherford wrote Woodvine 'has great stage presence and looks as if he is thoroughly enjoying himself'.<sup>49</sup>

Cathy Howes thought Woodvine 'supreme' in a 'colourful interpretation' where 'the entire cast is faultless'. She thought the 'strength' was 'the way Luscombe dips unashamedly into the genres of farce and pantomime to make the production comic, musical and visual'. She recognized, however, that 'purists might well deplore [this] as weakness'. She found it 'three very professional and entertaining hours'.<sup>50</sup>

Howes's review proved that reviewing any production is most often allied to personal taste than anything else and also that somebody did appreciate the production. Nevertheless, it crowded the text with immediate visual effect and offered little insight into successful strategies for realizing the text on stage in the late twentieth century.

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Billington, 'Camping it up with bananas and lingerie', *Guardian*, 8 February 1991.

<sup>47</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Labouring hard for laughs', *The Times*, 7 February 1991.

<sup>48</sup> James Christopher, 'Volpone' [*sic*], *Time Out*, 13 February 1991.

<sup>49</sup> Malcolm Rutherford, 'Volpone', *Financial Times*, 8 February 1991.

<sup>50</sup> Cathy Howes, 'Volpone' [*sic*], *Ms London*, 18 February 1991.



*VOLPONE*: BIRMINGHAM REP, DIR. BILL ALEXANDER, 1993

Just as Paul Scofield had played a distinguished, beautifully-spoken Volpone for the NT in 1977, so Bernard Horsfall was cast in a similar vein for the Rep's 1993 production but the casting of the attention-grabbing style of Gerard Murphy eased the production's focus onto the figure of Mosca. The great success was the design, which evoked Venice fully but Kit Surrey transferred the play to the 1800s, rather than the seventeenth century. Surrey had worked with Alexander on *Othello*, the production that preceded *Volpone* at the Rep and a play that begins in Venice. This was Alexander's second attempt at the play, following his 1983 RSC production. This time he cut the text more and in doing so excised the song to Celia and the three freaks living in Volpone's household. This cut down the options for the playing of Volpone, strangely dismissing the option of the romantic lover, despite the casting of the distinguished Horsfall, and also negating the depravity of his existence by axing the freaks. The only remaining decadence in the now sparse and dour household was a mural evoking the style of Klimt. As well as visual opulence and the idea that a piece of famous fine art may have been a gift from a dupe, reviewer Paul Taylor's mention of the 'kinky Klimt-esque screen' could suggest this decoration was the last remnant of Volpone's fascination with the erotic value of freakish bodies. In replacing the three freaks with a painterly suggestion of them, Volpone's grotesque desire was distilled to the level of good taste and the setting of 1800s polite society limited the aesthetic of the grotesque throughout.<sup>51</sup>

Alastair Macaulay described the setting, it 'evokes the city's scale' through the use of 'an arching bridge looming high above the Rep's large stage'.



Macaulay noted the similarity between the surrounding sets: ‘Surrey has taken his basic *Othello* set – huge tiles lining floor and walls – and dyed it brown and gold’. But Macaulay thought the team ‘diminish the play by locating it [...] at the turn of the century, with café society, boaters, and frock coats’. He felt the ‘skill’ of the production was in ‘contrasting public and private scenes’, using a ‘robust vitality’, and to giving ‘surprising comic emphasis’ to the gulls so that the grotesque Corvino appeared a ‘comic monster’ and the Would-be scenes were ‘hilarious’. Macaulay thought Horsfall appeared ‘scurrilous, lofty, urbane’ but ‘neither cunning nor predatory’ because ‘he lacks the acid [...] and he is too obviously the passive dupe of the parasite fly Mosca’. Macaulay thought the casting of Murphy was ‘not just wrong’ but it ‘also over-indulges all his worst hark-at-me mannerisms: the odd back-of-the-mouth tone formation; the unspontaneous delivery of even so simple a line as “Do so”’. He also disliked Andrea Mason as Celia who was ‘coarse and under-refined, her elocution as weak as her maquillage is strong’. Nevertheless he liked the use of ‘20 extras to help to swell the big scenes’ and the ‘decision to bring the front of the Rep stage right forward beyond the proscenium’.<sup>52</sup>

Jeremy Kingston thought it ‘splendidly enjoyable’, providing ‘delighted laughter’, despite cutting it still ‘plays over three hours’. He suggested the effect of Volpone’s room: ‘against a curving, gleaming mural, like an Aubrey Beardsley mated with a Douanier Rousseau and coloured by Klimt, Bernard Horsfall’s Volpone sprawls on a great brass bed’. It was ‘dimly lit’ but Mosca ‘flings open the yard-wide floor tiles’ to reveal the treasure and ‘a light brighter than sunshine radiates’, so Voltore ‘stands in amazement, warms his hands in the

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<sup>51</sup> Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 10 June 1993.

rays'. Murphy's Mosca was 'first seen gazing up at his master with the sappy look of an idiotic lover' but 'he then retreats behind his mask of busy plotting' and at the end there was 'a brave weariness, a quiet dignity at recognized defeat'. After the interior scenes 'the mural is raised to reveal a dozen little tables beside a canal [...] with waiters to-ing and fro-ing' and the 'wooden bridge gives access to doors high up'. Kingston, too, noticed Newall as Corvino – 'utterly shocking and comically absurd' – 'jerking his head' and 'snapping his sentences shut' and Stuart Richman was praised for 'a macabre and ravaging Corbaccio'.<sup>53</sup>

John Peter called Horsfall a 'sombre, regal Volpone' and noted that he was 'given to no more than the odd malevolent smile' who tricked the gulls 'with calm relish'. Gerard Murphy was an 'athletic but relaxed' Mosca, with a 'murderous relish' for his art. Corvino was 'excellent' and played by Jamie Newall 'with a prim but debauched look and almost contorted with greed'. Max Gold turned Bonario from 'an unbelievable romantic do-gooder' to 'a sanctimonious zealot', the effect was 'the play's only dissonant scene becomes another piece of savage Jonsonian comedy'.<sup>54</sup>

Stewart McGill thought it a 'stylish and visually delightful' production, with the Celia/Corvino scenes being 'distasteful and shocking'. McGill recognized these as 'the most successful'. He appreciated the decision to 'update the setting to a glittering Venetian café society of the 1800s' and the 'sense of choreography and clear, unfussy images' but wondered about the worth of the 'local extras to people the stage'. He admitted they 'help define the social world on the Venetian piazza' but 'their over-use occasionally jars and distracts'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 4 June 1993.

<sup>53</sup> Jeremy Kingston, *The Times*, 3 June 1993.

<sup>54</sup> John Peter, *Sunday Times*, 6 June 1993.

<sup>55</sup> Stewart McGill, 'Volpone' [sic], *What's On*, [June 1993 (?)].



Paul Taylor also appreciated the implications of the design with its ‘sunken pits of dazzling golden booty’ and ‘the stairs’ of the bridge ‘down which they make their clattering entrances [...] help drolly expose the avidity of these human vultures’. The ‘huge bridge’ doubled as ‘the public gallery in the court’. He noted the use of an inserted gag, which may have appeared unnecessary but it could be seen to underline Volpone’s endless improvisation as well as his moral bankruptcy, ‘Volpone gets out of a scrape by coolly hijacking the white stick and dark glasses of a blind man who then topples into the Grand Canal’. The design also prompted other business ‘that’s revealing as well as space-filling’, for example, ‘the self-regarding priggishness of the “virtuous” Bonario [...] is beautifully underlined here by having him insist on following Mosca at a safe, unincriminating distance, like some coy, sexual pick-up’. This allowed Mosca ‘on the complexities’ of the ‘large set’ to ‘lead him a pretty dance’. Taylor thought Murphy a ‘fine’ Mosca who ‘has a provokingly unfussed air’ and ‘he swears devoted loyalty’ to the gulls ‘in a manner that almost dares them to perceive its blatant insincerity’. Taylor continued, ‘he clearly gains a deadpan enjoyment’ from the tricking and, ‘with a fine display of roguish finger wagging, a calm, sinister Murphy’ showed how Mosca ‘plays on his master’s insecurity, urging caution to incite him to its disastrous opposite’, Taylor’s account suggested that Murphy played Mosca as if he was a prototype Iago. The conclusion was that it was an ‘acute, enjoyable account’.<sup>56</sup>

The production was a successful follow-up to the Rep’s *Othello* for local audiences and it freed the play from the confines of the Renaissance without resorting to a denial of opulence, as Luscombe’s production had done. However,

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<sup>56</sup> Taylor.



the relocation of the setting imposed its own demands, contrary to the society evoked in the text, as the production attempted to live up to the polite, art-loving café society selected by Surrey and Alexander. The production also relied on a Naturalistic approach to evoke such a detailed nineteenth-century world. Its reviews indicate a relatively successful production that, on the whole, preserved the dignity of the play. Nevertheless, Alexander had to cut the play in a radical way to make the text fit within his directorial vision. No other production covered by this thesis has cut the freaks from the play – the Would-bes are the usual area of the plot that most reviewers suggest should be cut, as Hytner did at the Almeida – and in cutting them Alexander missed the texture of the play. However, cutting this area would enable the problem of their portrayal to be solved within a theatre that still insists on approaching the play through Naturalistic rehearsal techniques.

*VOLPONE*: NT, OLIVIER, DIR. MATTHEW WARCHUS, 1995

In casting two well-known theatre actors, Michael Gambon and Simon Russell Beale as Volpone and Mosca, Matthew Warchus achieved a successful partnership between the two performers, neither of which appeared to overshadow the other. Gambon had enjoyed critical success for a television series by Dennis Potter, *The Singing Detective*, which had seen him confined to a hospital bed for many scenes whilst his imagination transferred him to the disguise indicated by the title. There were, of course, some parallels here between the television role and Volpone and some critics did notice the similarity. However, Gambon was the most successful Volpone of recent times, due to the juxtaposition of his large physical type with his ability to play, to the extent that he sometimes appeared childlike and, therefore, pathetic, and this contrasted with his plausibility as a lover of Celia. Simon Russell Beale played Mosca as the intelligent half of the partnership, drawing both on his own methodical delivery and Gambon's willingness to play the vulnerable fool. Despite their recognized appeal to theatre audiences, both actors resisted playing up to this status, neither gave overtly self-aware performances, and the production was the richer for this. The other richness of production came from a dazzling design by Richard Hudson who set the play in period Venice but with imaginative twists that prevented a reading of realist accuracy. He described his work on the production:

Matthew wanted it to be a labyrinth with passages and dark doorways and places to hide. I remember being keen that it should be very dark and I ended up painting the set slate: it's not black, it looks black and it lights very well. I wanted the comic characters to be quite brightly coloured or white to really glow out of the dark. Matthew was quite keen it shouldn't stop and start, which is one of the reasons I used the double revolve: a revolving walkway and the revolve in the middle. That theatre doesn't have any parameters it all peters out towards the edges. I like things to be



contained, framed pictures. By bringing it right downstage all the doors masked people coming on, on that vast stage entrances were more immediate. For the costumes I was quite keen to have a mish-mash of periods but Matthew was quite nervous of that. By no means did I do a straight seventeenth century, there were a few contemporary things thrown in but fewer than I would have liked, especially in the comic characters. I think I could have made the costumes even funnier if he'd allowed me a bit more leeway period-wise (see PLATE 26).<sup>57</sup>

To complement this setting the playing could not be classified as being wholly Naturalistic but used measured excess to present a heightened version of Renaissance Venice. This tone was set by the nightmarish start of a fox chase, which may have drawn on a realist attempt at psychologizing Volpone's personality, but which appeared as heightened baroque – a level which the rest of the production lived up to in every detail, such as the excessively long (over six foot) scribed notes taken during the court scenes by the court officials who were raised above the stage, whilst the *Avocatori* wore the scales of justice on their heads. Such detailed excess was symptomatic of this astonishingly inventive but tonally sound production. Warchus wanted *Volpone* to be 'much more of a thriller, more predatory, cool and sour' than his earlier production of *The Devil is an Ass*. *Volpone* was 'more nightmare in its feel, the idea of a fox hunt dominated the design'. So, in rehearsals, 'I encouraged the actors to use animals, mainly in the way they walked and held themselves'. Because of the nightmare, the music was 'a wild requiem about death, an old man being chased by death and the loneliness of being a great criminal'.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, Michael Gambon who played the title role has said, 'essentially I saw it as a farce'. He suggested his approach to the language: 'the thing we discovered with Jonson is there's no great subtext in the actor's mind.

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Hudson, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 18 August 1998.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew Warchus, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 5 August 1998.



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It's all in the words, it's got to be driven through with great force and energy'. In the mountebank scene Gambon improvised freely, 'I started making it up in rehearsal. In the end I was outrageous in that scene but I kept to the general gist'. His other innovations were to suggest a real sickness in Volpone after the court scene: 'I introduced a fit as the run went on. I thought Mosca's comment ought to prompt Volpone to look as if he really has got something wrong with him. I shoved in quite a bit of physical trouble' (see PLATE 27). Generally, Gambon's performance was very physical, as he called it, 'dancing and jigging around. I wanted him to be seen as a fit bloke', in contrast to his persona in the bed, 'as a crude counterpoint between the two images'. Gambon also had strong ideas about the costume, 'I knew what I wanted as soon as I read it: a nightdress with a pair of slippers because this man hasn't been out of the house for three years'.

His make-up was 'just accident':

he's got to look as if he's dying. With the nightmare he could be in a state so I put white powder and funny noses on my face and struggled my hair up. That works for the opening sequence for the shock value of the image. It works for the rest of the play as well. It doesn't quite work for wooing Celia so I used to get underneath the bedclothes and wipe a bit off, put the funny wig on.<sup>59</sup>

Stephen Boxer, who played Voltore, suggested that the production utilized the theatre very well: 'what it did was thrust everything forward and it gave you a semi-circle, the same shape as the auditorium. It's an out-front play so it gave you licence to sell it to the audience'.<sup>60</sup>

Benedict Nightingale described the 'robust and inventive' 'sinister dumb-show' opening:

Freakish homunculi hover [...] Cowled black figures scurry beneath carved lintels, through heavy doors and down grey corridors that, thanks

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Gambon, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 25 April 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Boxer, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 31 July 1996.

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to [...] the Olivier's revolving stage, seem to go on forever. They seize [...] Volpone and tear at his clothes, like the scavenging grave-robbers [...] suddenly the old fox wakes up, looking about as bright as the skeleton that, complete with hour glass, he keeps hooked to the wall above his bed. It was all a nightmare, and "good morning to the day" is a long gasp of relief. He is still alive and he shows by cranking up his mattress to reveal piles of coins.<sup>61</sup>

He thought that the nightmare and Gambon's 'want to suggest feelings of depression behind' Volpone's 'games-playing' 'cannot and do not go very deep', prevented by Jonson's non-Naturalistic approach: 'Jonson deals less in subtleties of personality and more in a kind of moral caricature'. He thought Gambon gave a 'marvellous' performance with 'energy' and 'such variety'. Nightingale noted the motivation for Volpone's behaviour as 'natural restlessness and the sheer boredom of having nobody and nothing [...] to divert him'. As such Gambon's voice 'sounds like gunpowder and his words bang across like bullets' and 'that is why he clatters around the room, hops onto the bed, and launches into the elaborate tricks'. As the dying man in bed he resembled 'a decaying mummy, an old suet pudding, a rotting slug, or, thanks to his bonnet and squashed, lipless face, Mr Toad dressed as a washer woman'; the one variant Nightingale did not mention was the wolf dressed as the grandmother from *Red Riding Hood*. To woo Celia 'he dons a preposterous ginger wig and leaps at the woman of his dreams'. Simon Russell Beale gave Mosca a 'sly obsequiousness if not quite the malice'; Robin Soans was 'a nasty, violent sort' as Corvino, who had 'a high, almost cawing way of speaking'; Boxer was 'a dry, cold Voltore' and Trevor Peacock as Corbaccio had 'an ear-trumpet weirdly sprouting from his head'. This was a design joke but the physical appearance of the gulls wrested the play from too precise an attempt at realism. Nightingale thought Warchus was 'perhaps too

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<sup>61</sup> Benedict Nightingale, 'Tour de force of bite and bile', *The Times*, 29 July 1995.

fond of little visual jokes', like the 'blend of wheelchair and drinks trolley, which comes complete with luridly coloured medicines and a pair of bellows that puff oxygen up his nose'. He found the subplot 'even sillier and more irritating than usual' but concluded that the production 'has bile, bite, and plenty of both'.<sup>62</sup>

Phil Gibby also noted the opening 'amid the flames of torchlight, to a powerful operatic score', from this 'the tension never lessens'. Both Gambon and Beale made 'drooling monsters of their characters, driven by a swaggering amorality' and the production 'confirms Warchus as a truly outstanding talent': 'this is a great piece of theatre'.<sup>63</sup>

Louise Doughty found it a 'successful combination of flawless casting, gorgeous set design and impeccable direction' She found the play 'authentic and modern', with Gambon as 'a restless, revolting bear of a man, fat with avarice'. She thought Cheryl Campbell 'shriekingly good' as Lady Would-be, 'declaiming with solemn self-importance, 'I pray you, lend me your dwarf!': 'her mad-orange get-up is one of the many lush Venetian costumes'. She concluded, 'you will never see a better production of this play'.<sup>64</sup>

Paul Taylor thought Warchus's decisions to cut the Epilogue and provide a dumbshow aimed 'to demote and demystify *Volpone*'. He thought the opening rush through the panelled rooms was 'over-preemptive, establishing in one fell swoop that insecurity in the hero' that he felt should run through the play. Nevertheless, he enjoyed the acting – Beale was praised for 'letting you hear the privately relished contempt under the surface flattery of a line like "You still are what you were, sir"'. He had a 'beady disingenuousness' and a 'provokingly pious, butter-wouldn't-melt manner'. He liked some of the 'bright ideas', like the

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<sup>62</sup> Nightingale.



‘thunder and lightning [...] when Volpone realizes he has been locked out of his own house by his side-kick’ in ‘a touch of Lear’ [*sic*]. Yet he criticized the cast, for it ‘too often seems to be playing to the audience rather than to one another’. He also disliked Warchus’s closing image, which he described: ‘a scourged Mosca crawls across the stage on his belly so that he can peer (with parasitic voyeurism) at Volpone through the bars of the latter’s cell’. He felt this ‘blurs the fact that Volpone [...] is the superior being, with an integrity that prefers self-destruction’ and the audience was robbed of the artistic resurrection of Volpone, as Gambon could not ‘bounce back and appeal to the paying punters’ in the Epilogue.<sup>65</sup>

John Gross thought Gambon – ‘slack-mouthed, rolling around, assuming gargoyle faces and a piteous little voice’ – showed Volpone as ‘an impersonator who takes endless pleasure in the exercise of his gifts’, ‘he succeeds in communicating his secret joy’. Gross’s review revealed the contrast between the two central characters in this version: ‘Mosca isn’t in it for kicks. He never stops calculating, and the sudden gusts of affection that Volpone feels for him are a strictly one-way affair’. In comparison, ‘his master’ appeared ‘a mere practical joker’, ‘you can’t imagine him fooling around’. As an antithesis, Gambon’s Volpone as Scoto was ‘slipping in and out of half a dozen accents, from Belfast to Brooklyn, just to show he can do it’ and, at the gulls, ‘he can’t help registering momentary surprise (followed by appalled bemusement)’ at the extremes of their desire. As well as the claustrophobia noted by others, Gross saw the opening

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<sup>63</sup> Phil Gibby, ‘Volpone’ [*sic*], *Stage*, 17 August 1995.

<sup>64</sup> Louise Doughty, ‘Theatre’, *Mail on Sunday*, 6 August 1995.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Taylor, ‘Theatre: *Volpone*, National Theatre, London’, *Independent*, 29 July 1995.



setting as a 'labyrinth' from which 'there is no escape' and he proclaimed the production 'a triumph'.<sup>66</sup>

Shaun Usher thought it the 'laugh-aloud funniest and most spectacular *Volpone*' on 'a dreamlike roundabout of sets'. He thought the opening was 'evoking an Elizabethan court masque' and Lady Would-be was 'in a hooped skirt six times her own width' in 'a panto for grown-ups'. In a later review he placed this idea against Beale's 'contrastingly naturalistic, sweatily-convincing portrayal of Mosca' and Gambon's 'pitiable, half-crazed hoaxer [...] outrageous and memorable'.<sup>67</sup>

Robert Gore-Langton enjoyed the 'dream casting' and noticed another detail of the chase – that Volpone was 'dropping his valuables in his panic' to the sound of 'liturgical chanting' – and, after the address to gold, 'with a whirling dance he rotates deliriously at the thought of the riches beneath his bed'. Despite praising Gambon, Gore-Langton felt that 'too often, though, he rises to the challenge of Jonson's blazing verse only to tail off in inaudible mumbles'. Beale, however, 'is on tremendous form, investing every line with his brand of mocking intelligence' and whose 'insincere flattery is lethally funny'.<sup>68</sup>

Martin Spence thought, in contrast to most critics, that it was a 'small, unimaginative, unfocused production' with a 'wildly indistinct', 'schizoid android Volpone' in Gambon, 'who always plays himself'. Beale, too, was unsatisfying: 'a surfeit of sincerity' – 'so quietly desperate he fails to target his asides to any audience except himself'. All in all 'everyone does their own thing' and he suggested that anyone who enjoyed it was foolish: 'Dim the lights, cue revolve,

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<sup>66</sup> John Gross, 'The joy of tricks', *Sunday Telegraph*, 30 July 1995.

<sup>67</sup> Shaun Usher, 'Panto laughs from a dark classic', *Daily Mail*, 28 July 1995; Shaun Usher, '*Volpone*: Royal National Theatre', *Daily Mail*, 4 August 1995.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Gore-Langton, 'An orgy of greed and deceit', *Daily Telegraph*, 31 July 1995.

reach for your scratch-card and pray for luck. Yup, there's one born every minute'.<sup>69</sup>

R. H. thought the 'stunning' design successful as it 'makes full use of the Olivier's double revolve' and 'every costume tries to top the last'. To complement this, 'the acting starts at such a pitch that its impact becomes exhausting'. However, R.H regretted that 'Warchus has neglected the psychology of the characters' and ended by complaining that 'overwhelmed by spectacle, we come out reciting the set'.<sup>70</sup>

The impact of the design was strong on all reviewers but Nick Curtis gave more detail of the interplay between design and individual performance. Volpone was a 'vast, slovenly voluptuary, all bulk, black-lacquered fingernails and flyaway hair', in bed he was 'twittering and drooling hilariously', out of bed 'he slurs his words as if he's french-kissing them. And he enjoys a playfully erotic relationship with his servant'. His relationship with Mosca, 'spilling over into affectionate petting and codpiece-grabbing foreplay'. For the 'diverse triumvirate' of gulls Boxer was 'ascetic-looking' and he 'looms unnervingly, beaked and quiffed like a bird of prey'; 'precise' Soans 'goes through exquisitely agonizing torments' and Peacock, as Corbaccio, 'provides riotous comedy as the deaf old duffer'. Whilst Bonario and Celia were 'fittingly insipid', the Would-be and Peregrine scenes 'really drag' but Lady Would-be was 'a hectoring maniac who hits the stage like a shrapnel bomb'. Curtis thought the set 'unfolds like a magic box' and was 'visually ravishing'.<sup>71</sup>

Kate Kellaway thought it 'sensational', with Gambon as the lead, 'huge and white-faced. He has a look of sweetness playing about the lips which is

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<sup>69</sup> Martin Spence, *Midweek*, 17 August 1995.



slightly shocking'. An 'extraordinary performance', she noted that when alone with Mosca 'he throws on a fantastic russet velvet robe with fur trimming [...] and jumps for joy or lies on the bed waving his legs in the air'. Beale 'could not be better' as Mosca: 'he looks gleeful yet stressed out. His long grey hair and muddled clothes are as tangled as his gulling imagination. He perspires with effort and his shoulders are stooped as if he is physically oppressed' by the plots. The design was 'a knockout' as, 'against velvety black or ruby backdrops, the costumes shine in brilliant relief: saffron yellow, orange and red. Deepest black is only worn by the three corvine suitors'. Of the three, Soans was 'outstanding': 'he is quite mad, a psycho in tiny sunglasses'. And as Lady Would-be Campbell was 'a joy. There's no end to what she has in her pockets: literature, drugs and worse'.<sup>72</sup>

David Benedict described Volpone in his 'fur-covered bed': 'in a mangy mob-cap [...] his enormous, grasping hands fumbling in his groin'. He thought Hudson's 'magnificent, animalistic costumes speak volumes, nowhere more than in his blazing, double-panniered creation for Lady Would-be'. Benedict thought Hudson's 'black wooden set' was 'a smart idea', with its 'heavy doorways and dark passage-ways' 'complementing the play's chicanery and intricate plot twists, and focusing attention on Volpone's shimmering gold'. However, it also created a negative effect as 'characters rush about the perimeters [...] you feel that things are happening at the periphery rather than the heart of the play' and Warchus 'has been side-tracked by his over-attention to detail'.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> R. H., 'Theatre check', *Sunday Times*, 6 August 1995.

<sup>71</sup> Nick Curtis, 'Making a meal of greed', *London Evening Standard*, 28 July 1995.

<sup>72</sup> Kate Kellaway, 'Other side of the coin', [(?)], [1995 (?)].

<sup>73</sup> David Benedict, 'Plenty of precious metal, not enough alchemy', *Independent*, 30 July 1995.



Michael Billington felt Warchus's production gave 'the right quality of disciplined excess', which he felt was 'a world of dark dreams, teeming fantasies and a sinister Venice in which gold [...] offers the only security'. He expressed 'a profound sense of shock' at Beale's playing of Mosca, he 'sends each word winging across the stage like poisoned darts'. He seemed satisfied that 'for once a director and designer, both making their debut at the Olivier, have got the measure of this difficult space'. Nevertheless, he was disappointed by 'a somewhat moralistic conclusion'.<sup>74</sup>

In another review Billington claimed Warchus was 'rapidly becoming our theatre's expert Jonsonian', he directed with 'relish for its gusto, excess and biting portrait' on a 'brilliant set' with *Volpone* first seen 'pursued like a fox': 'it exactly conjures up the madness, greed and fear that lie at the heart'. He noted how in bed Gambon appeared 'like the wolf in Little red Riding Hood' [*sic*] and that he entered into the part of the dying man 'with an insane glee' but that Mosca was really the 'man turned on by power' – 'constantly rubbing his left hand with his right palm, and relishing his gift for manipulation'. Soans as Corvino was 'made all the more terrifying by his finicky articulation'. Whilst Alan David 'lacks the giddy delusion' Gielgud had in playing *Would-be*, Campbell as his wife 'has the right dementia', 'with hair that sticks up like two ginger horns'. Warchus had captured 'an inordinate world in which everyone is driven by a frantic obsession that spins them into madness'. He ended with the idea that Warchus 'should be encouraged to work his way through the Jonson canon', a prospect which, at the time, was possible through a planned follow-up

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Billington, 'Vivid *Volpone*', *Guardian*, 29 July 1995.

of *The Alchemist* but one that now seems unlikely as Warchus has not returned to Jonson since *Volpone*.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Michael Billington, 'Theatre', *Country Life*, 10 August 1995.

*VOLPONE*: RSC, SWAN, DIR. LINDSAY POSNER, 1999

Lindsay Posner's *Volpone* was the only mainstream theatre production of a Jonson text since 1997. It began with a green to gold spotlight fade-up on the face of a sleeping Volpone. This was accompanied by the amplified soundtrack of a *falsetto* voice singing, what has been described by the composer as, 'a dream of innocence'.<sup>76</sup> This angelic image was subverted by a *coup de théâtre* when Mosca entered through a door, stage right, rang a hand bell to wake his master and pulled off the fur cover on Volpone's bed to reveal Volpone surrounded by the half-naked figures of Nano, Castrone and Androgyno. This opening surprise gained the audience's first laughter of the production. But the potential for amorality indicated was not realized in the rest of the performance because the three freaks in Volpone's household were characterized by their childlike qualities, shown by a bald Castrone squealing like a baby and being comforted by a dummy in the shape of a doll's head. The three freaks appeared to take on the role that Mosca suggests to Corvino: 'the dwarf, the fool, the eunuch are all his,' (I.5.47). However, this idea was dismissed for the sake of humour when Malcolm Storry's Volpone signalled surprise (upstage in his bed) when Mosca told this to Corvino (both sitting on the downstage end of the bed).

Although the production stressed the childish aspects of Nano, Castrone and Androgyno, Volpone's own childish qualities were not brought out as much as in the Alexander/Griffiths or Warchus/Gambon *Volpones*. This caused Volpone's key *gestus* (of lying in a dirty nightgown in a soiled bed) to become questionable, particularly since Storry's Volpone appeared energetic. Paul Taylor pointed to this anomaly in his review: Storry was a 'virile and rugged'

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<sup>76</sup> Matthew Scott, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 4 September 1999.



Volpone but ‘a fat, faggoty Volpone would be a more logical outgrowth’ of the circumstances.<sup>77</sup> This lack of Volpone’s degeneracy was all the more noticeable in the production because the circumstances of Volpone’s household were clearly defined by aspects of the set. In a ‘tomb-like store’<sup>78</sup> – a large cabinet at the rear of the stage that also housed the king-size bed – Volpone kept his treasures around a crucifix featuring ‘a deceased monkey’, that Taylor suggested was ‘the putrefaction of the flesh’ juxtaposed with the ‘incorruptibility of the gold’.<sup>79</sup> Despite the visual impact of this store it was a challenge to the clear presentation of the text. It resembled only limited gains for Volpone’s efforts; as Storry has pointed out, it caused problems with the potential impact of ‘my other hoards’ (I.1.7) and it necessitated Volpone to turn away from the audience at the start of the play to worship his gold (see PLATE 28).<sup>80</sup>

Another feature of the set that appeared visually striking but did not fully serve the demands of the text was the rear stage overhung with dead animals on meat hooks. They contributed to the element of prey and carrion suggested by the character’s names but the metaphor failed by being inexact. There were no birds of prey but they included a number of foxes, one swan and many rabbits. A chastity belt on a meat hook hung hidden for most of the play but was lowered to enable Corvino to threaten Celia. The belt was the only flown in property gestured to in the production, creating an inconsistency of use in the set elements. Nevertheless, the image of the dead animals and the moment with the chastity belt – where critic Jane Edwards thought Corvino emerged as ‘the real

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<sup>77</sup> Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 26 March 1999.

<sup>78</sup> Nicholas de Jongh, *Evening Standard*, 25 March 1999.

<sup>79</sup> Taylor.

<sup>80</sup> Malcolm Storry, in an interview with Amanda Penlington, 6 May 1999.

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villain' – were visually impressive and suggested that the hunters and hunted are caught in the same traps.<sup>81</sup>

The set design dominated the Swan: the bed, cabinet and rear hangings filled the thrust stage. The inclusion of two built-in doors stage right and stage left gave a feeling of claustrophobia that was acutely realized by the actors, who were restricted to moving around the small perimeter of stage surrounding the bed. This severe lack of space had the effect of limiting variety and blocking. The facility of the upper gallery was effectively used to represent Celia's window and for the *Avocatori*. The symbolic placing of these elements was, therefore, strongly brought out by the spatial difference between the gallery and the stage. Celia was the young woman whose beauty was (literally) elevated above others and whose imprisonment from society was made clear. Situated on the same plane, the *Avocatori* could dispense an almost Divine kind of justice from on high but they could also be read as being detached from the Venetian society (socially and literally) beneath them.

Despite deeper meanings being suggested by these spatial placings, the production was received as being little more than 'jovially light', with the 'satirical savagery diluted'.<sup>82</sup> Like Nicholas de Jongh, Robert Butler felt that the 'joviality muffles' the text because 'we don't feel chilled'.<sup>83</sup>

The light tone was in contrast to the dark set, the atmospheric lighting and the grand costumes – the dark, heavy gowns worn by Voltore, Corvino and Corbaccio caught the air as they walked and so created menacing, whooshing

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<sup>81</sup> Jane Edwards, *Time Out*, 31 March 1999.

<sup>82</sup> De Jongh.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Butler, *Independent on Sunday*, 28 March 1999.



sounds to complement their appearances as ‘authentically one-dimensional stereotypes’.<sup>84</sup>

But the perceived lightness was most clearly evident in two factors of the production. Firstly, the angelic music that framed the opening and closure of the performance hinted at an innocent, perhaps holy, ideal. The promise of this goodness prevented the action of *Volpone* from ever being perceived as truly threatening. The mountebank lyric, ‘You that would last long . . .’, (II.2.198-209), was delivered in recitative by Mosca with a light jazz accompaniment. Matthew Scott intended this to be ‘a patter song’ influenced by Kurt Weill but, performed with simultaneous *commedia dell’arte*-style mimes of ailments from the three freaks, it gave the impression of being a moment of clear-cut comedy rather than satire (see PLATE 29).<sup>85</sup>

As well as the music, the area that caused the lightness, noted by the critics, was the performance of the two central actors. Nicholas de Jongh thought Storry conveyed ‘too little of Volpone’s fanaticism or gleeful nastiness’ and Henry was criticized because he ‘misses Mosca’s malign energy’.<sup>86</sup> Alastair Macaulay concurred, stating that ‘Henry is not a great Mosca, but he is an adorable comic actor.’<sup>87</sup> Patrick Carnegie thought Storry had ‘the exuberance for the role but devours his lines without always sharing them’ and ‘there remains something ill-defined in his relationship with Mosca’. According to Carnegie, Henry’s ‘deadly stick-insect’ Mosca had ‘tentacles around your attention like no one else’.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Anthony Holden, *Observer*, 28 March 1999.

<sup>85</sup> Scott.

<sup>86</sup> De Jongh.

<sup>87</sup> Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 29 March 1999.

<sup>88</sup> Patrick Carnegie, *Spectator*, 3 April 1999.

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The production was well-received by audiences who produced much laughter in response to the performances, as Macaulay suggested, 'the audience watches happily'. However, this laughter was not so much due to the comedy inherent in the play as Macaulay's comments may illustrate: there was 'little especial insight into the play' and the language was not considered – 'there is a beating pulse in Jonson's verse, however, that few of the actors hear; and there are a great many misplaced caesuras'.<sup>89</sup> These remarks, and the response to Henry's portrayal of Mosca, may be taken to support my own view that Henry's performance was the self-affected focus of the production, causing audiences to laugh by using excessive gestures that pointed to his tall, thin physique and by employing a variety of inappropriate – and unexplained - accents for individual phrases. Henry had enjoyed previous success as the RSC in buffoonish roles, including Cloten, Dr Caius and Thurio, where his irreverent approach to the text was regarded as amusing. But although his tremulous voice worked well for these roles and for Ananias's petulant verbose outbursts in Mendes's *The Alchemist*, it failed to address Mosca's role as an astute motivator of the plot. The laughs gained were in opposition to the effect suggested by the text and pointed to the actor's lack of understanding and the director's lack of control. For example, Mosca's soliloquy, where he denigrates those who 'Make their revenue out of legs and faces' (III.2.21), was accompanied (like most of Henry's performance) by a series of jumps, skips and grotesque facial expressions. When the Pit transfer of the production was reviewed the critics' comments indicated Henry's use of his body to create his performance. Sarah Hemming described Henry: 'Tall, thin and dressed in black, his creepy Mosca is all wrists, elbows

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<sup>89</sup> Macaulay.



and knees'.<sup>90</sup> Jeremy Kingston went further to categorize the physical appearance of Henry's Mosca:

Perpetually active, he squirms and schemes, hugging himself with glee at his almost infinite cleverness, seemingly double-jointed in his ability to grovel and topple around the stage, as though his body were that of a marionette he himself manipulates. Across his face a little smirk is always playing.<sup>91</sup>

Henry's approach to the comedy was to signal to the audience when to laugh, whether the timing was appropriate to the text or not, rather than encouraging them to listen to the text and allow them to judge when to laugh.

Because of Henry's performance style Storry's role of playing Volpone was made more difficult. Charles Spencer praised Storry for being 'splendidly vigorous and well-spoken', which he was but, as Taylor's earlier comment suggested, his 'virility' was an oddity in his surroundings. His vitality meant that there was nothing new or surprising about him when he announced to Celia that 'I am, now, as fresh, / As hot, as high, and in as jovial plight . . .' (III.7.157-8). His vigour was never diminished, even when feigning illness his gurgles hinted at the spiritedness that the audience had previously witnessed, so his attempted rape of Celia was, paradoxically, regarded in a light-hearted way by the audience. The audience laughed as he pinned her down and wrestled with many layers of petticoats and, when prevented by Bonario, Volpone's line 'Fall on me, roof,' (III.9.275) was also greeted with laughter.

The focus on the two central performers, rather than on the text, was also evident in the playing on the Epilogue. Storry re-entered in the same costume within the confines of a spotlight and spoke directly to the audience (as the text indicates). Storry has admitted that he had wished for this section to be omitted.

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<sup>90</sup> Sarah Hemming, *Financial Times*, 15 December 1999.

However, it neatly concluded Posner's approach of appealing to the audience through the personalities of the actors, rather than through the text.<sup>92</sup>

Some of the other performances were greeted with praise by the critics. Carnegie enjoyed the treatment of the 'sexual grotesques' kept by Volpone; Taylor enjoyed the moment when Mosca threw 'a handful of gold coins through the door' and 'they gambol, gibbering after them'. Taylor also appreciated Richard Cordery's 'black toad of a Corvino'. De Jongh liked Susannah Elliott-Knight who, as Lady Would-be, 'scores the one true comic bull's eye' and Jane Edwards concurred that the playing of the 'baffling sub-plot' was 'a great delight'.<sup>93</sup> But although Edwards thought Posner had an 'immense respect for the text', my response to the production was closer to Anthony Holden's reaction when he suggested that Posner's account of *Volpone* was a 'garish staging', in which 'the frantic pace rarely lets up' and the actors 'rant and yell as if they were still in the main theatre'.<sup>94</sup>

The overwhelming lack of consideration of the demands of the space was evident by contrast in the Would-be scenes when the bed was retracted into the cabinet and the stage appeared bare. These scenes were played simply with Would-be and Peregrine sitting on two benches or merely standing upstage. The actors, who had to present some of the most localized references in Jonson's text, did not signal the jokes to the audience nor did they apologise for the text by implementing excessive gestures or vocal deliveries (as Henry did). Instead they delivered the passages with confidence, resulting in a positive audience response, as indicated by Edwards's review.

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<sup>91</sup> Jeremy Kingston, *The Times*, 15 December 1999.

<sup>92</sup> Storry.

<sup>93</sup> Carnegie; Taylor; de Jongh; Edwards.

<sup>94</sup> Edwards; Holden.

Future producers of Jonson would do well to consider the design faults and the sometimes inappropriate acting styles of Posner's *Volpone* as warnings of how Jonson can fail to work effectively. But the success of the subplot – always the most difficult part of the play, according to reviewers – suggests that ways to approach Jonson can be found. It is up to future producers to build on the strengths of all the productions documented here and find new ways of producing Jonson in the new millennium.