
RENAISSANCE DRAMA IN PERFORMANCE

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A key objective of the core first-year Renaissance Drama module (EN1050), which was taken in 2010 by over 290 students in the School of English, is to encourage the consideration of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays both as written scripts and as theatrical performances. The 'Renaissance Drama in Performance' project will enhance the current teaching provision on EN1050, to get students really engaging with contemporary performance contexts and investigating the history of Renaissance plays on the stage from the sixteenth up until the twenty-first century. Through collaboration with academic staff and working actors and directors from locally- and nationally-based dramatic companies, this project delivered a series of seminars and practical workshops designed to develop the students' knowledge of the particular challenges of staging and participating in Renaissance plays. These additions to the EN1050 teaching provision will encourage students to think of these plays in the three dimensions (visual and spatial as well as verbal) for which they were originally written over four hundred years ago.

1. BACKGROUND

This project was motivated by a double need: first, by the specific requirements of the Renaissance Drama assessment scheme, and second, by the fact that most of our students have relatively little experience of thinking about plays as performances as well as texts. In terms of the EN1050 assessment, students are required to write a review of a theatrical or cinematic production of a Renaissance play for 20% of their module mark. Currently, apart from one practical study skills session on 'Writing a Review', there is relatively little curricular provision for considering questions of acting, staging and performance. Among the 'Learning Outcomes' listed in the EN1050 entry in the School of English undergraduate handbook, we currently state that students will 'be able to comment critically on theatrical and/or cinematic productions of Renaissance plays, learning the skills necessary for writing an analytical review'. We were not doing enough to develop this ability to analyze performance, and that is why we proposed the project, which focused on two main areas: developing awareness of the challenges of performing Renaissance plays, and introducing students to other (practical, as well as intellectual) approaches to the study of performance and theatre history.

2. PROJECT AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The project aims were:

- to enhance first-year English students' understanding of early modern performance contexts, both in their drama studies more widely and with the specific intention of helping them write their EN1050 (Renaissance Drama) theatre/film review
- for academic staff to collaborate closely with theatre practitioners with the purpose of encouraging students to think about the relationship between dramatic theory and practice

3. PROJECT OUTCOMES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Three separate events were organized in January-March 2010:

1. 24/02/10 (ATT. LT1): Director's Talk: Simon Plumridge (director/set designer of the Platform 4 Theatre Company, <http://www.platform4.org/>). Simon designed and directed the performance of 'The Tempest' (January 2010). Dr Sarah Knight and Dr Holly Craggs conducted an interview with Mr Plumridge and then we held a question and answer session with the students.
2. 17/02/10: Two two-hour performance workshops (12-2; 2-4) on 'The Merchant of Venice' (Belvoir Park Lounge): Ben Spiller and Aaron Kelly (Artistic Director and Company Actor respectively for the 1623 Theatre Company, <http://www.1623theatre.co.uk/>). Approximately 20 students attended each workshop; Dr Knight and Dr Craggs introduced and attended the workshop.
3. 17/03/10: Two two-hour performance workshops (12-2; 2-4) on 'The Tempest' (Belvoir Park Lounge): Ben Spiller and Aaron Kelly. Again, approximately 20 students, along with Dr Lund and Ms Suman (GTA) attended each workshop.

4. EVALUATION

The project was very successful: all in all, about 100 students from the EN1050 cohort attended these three events, which represented nearly half of the entire module cohort. 1623 and Dr Knight systematically gathered and collated student feedback in official questionnaires circulated to all participants.

Responses included:

1. Which aspect of the workshop did you most enjoy, and find most useful to your understanding of Renaissance drama?

I found the directing part at the end the best, because it showed how much more lively a play can be on stage and the variety of portrayals that it can take, this will be useful for my film review (even though I'm not doing it on The Merchant of Venice) because this is a factor in the direction of all renaissance plays and films.

I thought the iambic pentameter task was useful and helped me understand the rhythm of the lines.

The directing section towards the end of the workshop was the most enjoyable and the most useful. As well as the comical element to the exercise, it gave us a chance to consider different character and line interpretations. As a result, we were able to consider the language of Shakespeare in a much more three-dimensional manner.

The last part of the workshop, where we had directorial input in a scene the visiting actor acted out; not only did it bring Renaissance writing alive in a way that, it was clear to see, was inspiring for all, but it also got us thinking more intensely about interpretation, realising the variety that are possible and trying to back up our own. Additionally, the brief time we spent on reading a passage on a 'stage' we'd constructed by where we were standing; the actors were brilliantly forthright in their ideas for improvement and accurate rendering of the scene. Also made us realise the issues involved in an intimate performance space.

I enjoyed directing the actors playing a character in scene, the visual representation really brings Shakespeare to life and makes it easier to understand if you can discuss how you'd set/say/act it.

2. Which aspects would you consider changing for future workshops?

I wouldn't change anything.

I would consider changing the task where we walked around the performance space, changing direction at punctuation marks. Personally I was too focused on walking around and not hitting someone that reading the lines.

Perhaps there could be a more interactive, ice-breaker style activity at the beginning. I got the impression that sometimes people were not willing to express their ideas freely. I think a short, student-based exercise would create a relaxed environment and encourage people to be more verbal throughout the workshop.

I think less time was needed on the exercise where we were speaking aloud, focusing on pronunciation and metre, although important and interesting to bring up.

Maybe spend less time walking round saying the lines, I think people got the idea after the first time so the repetition, although interesting to see how different stresses and breathing works, was a little pointless.

3. Do you have any other comments about the workshop that you'd like to communicate to module tutors and to the theatre practitioners?

The section on iambic pentameter was useful, because it showed the different speed of a character's words and the emphasis in particular phrases or lines.

The two practitioners were brilliant and kept a good pace.

Keep up the good work and I hope there will be more workshops in the future!

The workshop helped me to understand that the variety of interpretations that can be explored/presented to the audience through the subtlety of an actor opens up a whole other area of the play to consider.

Overall a fun workshop, would be better if it was a little longer, just so time constraints wouldn't interrupt the activities

4. What was the most interesting idea that you took away from the workshop?

That each adaptation of a renaissance play is different from another, because the reading of the language, the characters, stage directions and meaning is to a large extent subjective. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the workshop, it was very innovative.

I think the summary of how Shakespeare can be delivered and performed in different ways was interesting and something to think about.

The exercise which helped explain the iambic pentameter was very useful. I now read blank verse with this idea in mind.

The workshop made us realise that the words on the page are perhaps not so stable/definite.

The ideas surrounding the staging of the performance, how different interpretations can alter the whole feel of a play.

5. CONTINUATION OF THE PROJECT

My report on the 2010 NTI project has been delayed because I wanted to add specific details of how the project would be continued, and these have only recently become finalized. Building on the School of English's work with the 1623 Theatre Company, Dr Knight, Dr Lund and Mr Spiller submitted a collaborative bid to the 'Igniting Ambition: Creative Innovation' fund (<http://2012.emda.org.uk/cultural-olympiad/igniting-ambition/igniting-ambition-festival-2010>) of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, partly awarded by the East Midlands Regional Development Agency, the European Regional Development Fund and the Lottery-funded Legacy Trust. We were awarded £1000 in summer 2010, although (due to regional funding cuts) the money was eventually awarded to us by the Arts Council. Our new project is on Shakespeare's 'Richard III', and we are also collaborating with another Derby-based theatre company, Lostboys Productions (<http://www.lostboys.eu.com/>), which specializes in combat staging, as well as with colleagues at the Bosworth Heritage site (<http://www.bosworthbattlefield.com/>). About thirty students have signed up to participate in the project. We are in the middle of the project now, which consists of the following events:

1. 2/3/11: Coach trip to Bosworth Heritage Site; visit to the Bosworth exhibition and guided tour of the site; 2 x 2-hour workshops run by Ben Adams and Paul Smith (Lostboys Productions) on staging on the battlefield scenes in Act 5 of Shakespeare's play.

2. 9/3/11: Academic and performance workshop on 'Richard III' (Belvoir Park Lounge): this workshop consisted of 4 x 10-minute talks by Dr Andrew Hopper (Centre for English Local History, School of Historical Studies) on the historical context of the battle of Bosworth; Dr Mary Ann Lund (English) on Shakespeare's use of Raphael Holinshed's 'Chronicles' in composing the battle orations of 'Richard III'; Dr Sarah Knight (English) on Shakespeare's use of rhetorical techniques in 'Richard III'; Mr Ben Spiller (1623) on contemporary Elizabethan history and 'Richard III'. The students then participated

in an hour-long performance workshop run by Ben Spiller with assistance from Paul Smith which focused on how to stage and articulate Richmond's battle oration.

3. 16/3/11: Performance workshop on 'Richard III' (Belvoir Park Lounge): this workshop, run by Ben Spiller with assistance from Paul Smith, will focus on Richard III's battle oration. We will then combine the battle staging work with the performance work on rhetoric and speech, and will consider in a plenary session what we have learned from the three workshops.

In addition, Simon Plumridge has recently contacted me about bringing a production of 'Macbeth' to Leicester in spring 2012, which I am currently exploring as a possibility.

I have reported on the project to my own School's Board of Studies, and Mr Spiller has reported on our collaborative work to his own company's advisory board.

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