

Inaugurating the complete works (again): Shakespeare Nation,  
Doranism and literalism  
in the Royal Shakespeare  
Company's 2014  
summer season  
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Waiting for the staging of the complete works of Shakespeare is like waiting for a bus – nothing for ages, then three come all at once.<sup>1</sup> The Royal Shakespeare Company under Michael Boyd staged the complete works in 2006–07 and, to coincide with London's Olympic Games in 2012, Shakespeare's Globe produced the Globe to Globe festival.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the former, Boyd took charge of the history plays whilst Deborah Shaw brought productions, in a variety of languages, to Stratford-upon-Avon from around the world. That model was copied by the Globe, though this time the home theatre contributed considerably less than two tetralogies.

In the preface to the season's brochure covering the period which concerns this article, Gregory Doran (the Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) current Artistic Director) writes, 'Under the banner Shakespeare Nation, we will lead a truly nationwide celebration

of our greatest playwright beginning next summer [2014] and culminating in 2016 [the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death]'. Notice how the focus has changed from Global Shakespeare to a 'nationwide' celebration; the Bard, it seems, is coming home. But

just as the geographical and cultural scope is reduced, so the aspiration to produce each show, rather than bus them in, makes the artistic undertaking that much greater. Doran declaims his intention 'to stage each of Shakespeare's plays just once in the next six years'.

Having directed Richard II in 2013, Doran moved on to both parts of Henry IV. In staging

the history plays himself, albeit across several seasons rather than all at once (as Boyd did), Doran is not only replicating his previous incumbent's plan for the complete works but directing the very same plays. Influence here seems unencumbered by anxiety.

Whilst consideration of Boyd's Complete Works season provides insights into how Doran conceives his Shakespeare Nation, a related concern is to question exactly what the point of a complete works is, which in turn raises issues about the function and responsibility of a large publicly subsidized theatre company dedicated to the work of a single playwright. Certainly it seems as though Doran's motivation is completeness rather than any kind of detailed exploration of the more canonical plays or even the resurrection of those that figure less prominently in the canon (such as Pericles, Timon of

Athens or Troilus and Cressida): '2014 marks the beginning of our journey through the full canon of Shakespeare's plays. I hope you will join us on this exciting journey'.<sup>3</sup>

What follows is an account of Doran's first summer season, his own productions of both parts of Henry IV in the main house which were followed by Simon Godwin's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In the Swan, four plays comprised the 'Roaring Girls' season, Smith 59

including Doran's own *The Witch of Edmonton*.<sup>4</sup> I have split my commentary across the two spaces rather than dealing with the productions strictly chronologically.

Royal Shakespeare Theatre

Was Shakespeare just too lazy to distinguish the location of the mock robbery in 1 Henry IV from one of its participants? Whilst Gad's Hill (the place) is two words, and Gadshill (the robber) is one, this is of no help to someone hearing (as opposed to reading) the play

and, whilst the role is a minor one, the potential confusion is unhelpful.<sup>5</sup> Doran to the

rescue: Gadshill (the character) becomes Rakehell (played by Jonny Glynn) – a renaming which has the advantage of sharing the same number of syllables as the original name, as well as indicating the less savoury aspects of his personality. The amendment is minor and perfectly sensible, but it illustrates the essence of what I shall label Doranism: clarity precedes all else – textual fidelity (not that I am a stickler for that, though one wonders if the emendation of 'Pharaoh's lean kine' [2.5.478] to 'cows' verges too close to dumbing down); radical appropriation or narrative deformation. 'Nothing wrong with that', I hear you protest, 'the director's job is to explicate and stage the text with the greatest lucidity'. Yes, up to a point. But Doran is so concerned about theatrical clarity that he too often crosses the border into literal mindedness. As Jeremy Lopez has argued in respect of Stratford-upon-Avon's Canadian cousin, this is to underestimate the audience's imaginative engagement. Of the Stratford Ontario festival, he writes of the habitual reliance on 'highly predictable theatrical events whose polish is clearly a result of constant dogged repetition'. Indeed, Lopez implies that there is a direct relationship between the scale of Brand Shakespeare and the poverty of the artistic vision: Shakespeare's 'name, one of our most powerful brand names, encourages and allows a conservatism and a complacency that – in a terrifically paradoxical irony – empties theatrical language and action of meaning and energy'.<sup>6</sup> In the light of this assertion, it is no accident, as I will argue, that the most interesting work of 2014 took place in the Swan. As Henry IV assumed his crown amid the magnificence of a medieval chapel, the ghost of Richard II appeared on one of the balconies above him, dimly lit but wearing the white shift and unfortunate hippy wig in which David Tennant had personated the Christlike king in Doran's production of 2013.<sup>7</sup> Split-second timing meant that as Henry lifted the crown above his 'shaken' head (1.1.1), an echoing drum beat and the extinguishing of the light on Richard gave us a son-et-lumie`re dramatization of the miraculous instant when power passes from one king to the next. As he brought the crown down onto his head, Richard's ghost disappeared: not so much a useful reminder of whence Henry's power derived as a clumsy and intrusive reification of the play's ambiguous handling of Divine Right.

Another example: in 2 Henry IV, we hear how the Lord Chief Justice dreads the reign of the future king as they are enemies, the loutish prince having once struck the Justice. Just to signpost that for us, Doran has the Justice enter along with the Sheriff into the Boar's Head in pursuit of the erring Falstaff (at 2.5.512), thus providing the prince with an opportunity to lash out and punch the imperious Justice. Various lines of the Sheriff are reallocated to the Justice in order to give him a purpose in the scene. Other lines are supplied including the rather wooden 'know you who I am?', so that the prince can let everyone know it is the 'Lord Chief Justice'. But this is not a radical reshaping of the plot, rather it is the literalization of the friction between prince and Justice so much talked about in Part 2.8 Nothing is allowed to happen offstage or, even worse, in the audience's imagination. Shakespeare's theatrical world is impoverished.

Perhaps the most egregious instance of Doranism was the costuming of poor Joshua Richards as Owen Glendower in a Prosperian gown, with magic staff and long droopy moustache. He was every inch the Celtic twilight magus, surrounded by cauldrons with real flames and animal skins draped across the floor – Welsh wizard or Getafix out of Asterix. The point of all this is that Doranism is just not very interesting. Clarity is all well and good but it must not be at the expense of vitality: 'Give me life' (5.3.59). As the company's Artistic Director, Doran provides the vision for these central mainhouse

productions. It is a 20:20 clarity we receive rather than the more exciting meaning of 'visionary'. The literalization of every one of the play's features was ironic, given the fact that it contains, in the role-playing of Falstaff as the king and then the prince (2.5.402 ff.), a sustained illustration of the importance of political personation. The prince's soliloquy, 'I know you all . . . ' (1.2.192 ff.) makes his own role-playing explicit – even more so here, delivered to the audience under half house lights. And the disguise of Sir Walter Blunt as the king, as well as the 'many marching in his coats' (5.3.25) at the

battle of Shrewsbury, demonstrates the ease with which royal identity can be performed – Douglas, for one, is fooled. But in spite of these instances of theatrical selfconsciousness,

Doran chose to stage both parts infused with a documentary fidelity to detail and a concrete actuality.

The opening scene had Henry doing penance, prostrate on the floor of the chapel, a giant crucifix and burning lamps suspended above him. Jasper Britton's Henry was at the end of his tether, his opening speech as much a consolation to himself as a declaration of

future strategies. As he resolved to make his crusade to the Holy Land, he dug deep and found a new resolve, only to be completely undermined by Westmoreland's news of Glendower's revolt. Britton was wonderfully brittle, resolved and spiritually confident one moment, and despairing over his country's internal strife and his wayward son the next. As he demanded that Hotspur surrender his prisoners (1.3), he jabbed him in the chest with his fingers and then seized Hotspur's surprised face in his grip.

The play's juxtaposition of high politics and tavern debauchery was underlined as a double-bed was trucked downstage with Hal (Alex Hassell) frantically humping two prostitutes. A bundle of sheets at the foot of the bed parted to reveal Falstaff, corpulent, sanguine and with a bad case of the DT's – Hal had to help him uncork his flask of booze.

Antony Sher's knight was no oafish sot but a sophisticated aristocrat who spoke with a plum in his mouth. Phrases like 'thy quips and thy quiddities' (1.2.45) and 'O, thou hast damnable iteration' (90) were enunciated with a lingering precision. For all the character's

cynicism and his heartless pressing of soldiers to fill a pit, Sher managed to excite audience affection for Falstaff. This was especially true as he entered alone during the Gad's Hill robbery, lamenting the fact that all this physical exercise risked inducing flatulence. He addressed us directly and indignantly, 'If I travel but four foot . . . further afoot, I shall break my wind' (2.2.11). Indeed, Sher's tendency to address the audience Smith 61

candidly from within the world of the play constituted one end of an awkward relationship

so that we ended up rooting for him, in spite of our better judgement. As Hal conceded the corpse of Hotspur to Falstaff and undertook to verify his lie (that Falstaff, not he, had finished off Hotspur), he instructed the knight, 'Come, bring your luggage nobly on your back' (5.4.153). Falstaff looked into the first few rows of the stalls and incredulously mouthed the words 'on my back?'. This was not going to happen and indeed, two menials came quickly to his aid.

The Gad's Hill robbery was underlined by brassy comic music so that the sequence took on a Carry On Shakespeare mood. Doran's unwillingness to take seriously the play's darker side meant that its melancholia was underdeveloped. Most conspicuous here was the playing of Hal's nemesis, Hotspur, as a Tourette's sufferer with a bizarre range of physical tics. Trevor White's Hotspur looked as though his pants were full of itching powder. His swagger was more like playground hopscotch and he clenched his fists and scissor kicked his legs.<sup>9</sup> This weird restlessness lent the character a comic childishness rather than the military dignity ascribed to Hotspur by the king, and his scenes opposite Jennifer Kirby's sedate and pained Lady Hotspur were completely unbalanced.

Hassell's Hal was at ease in Eastcheap, more comfortable in the company of his

adopted father, Falstaff, than his legitimate one. As he foretold the rejection of Falstaff, answering the knight's 'Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world' with 'I do; I will' (2.5.486), he spoke the first part of the line in the person of the king. The latter half was spoken in his own voice and delivered, looking down so as not to catch Falstaff's eye. But the knight intuited Hal's warning and there was the briefest of anxious reactions before the production moved hurriedly on.

Hal's attempts to apologize to the king (3.2) prompted the latter to grab the prince by the ear and pull him to the high altar, just as Northumberland (Sean Chapman) had done

to the raging Hotspur during the earlier argument over prisoners (1.3). This neat parallel demonstrated Doran's appreciation of the play's internal mirroring. The idea of Hotspur as Hal's alter ego was most significantly developed at their only meeting (5.4.58 ff.). Terry King's choreographed sword fight lasted some time and was a fitting climax to such a naturalistic production. Of course, the spectacle was comically undermined by Falstaff's unlikely resurrection, though Hal's reaction was one of petulance rather than relief. The effect was to render the closing scene little more than a coda and to carry us eagerly forward to the more substantial fare of Part 2.

The prevailing medievalism of setting and costume was shattered at the opening of Part 2. Antony Byrne entered as Rumour wearing a pair of black jeans and a T-shirt with the iconic logo of the Rolling Stones printed on it – Mick Jagger's pouting lips and libertine tongue. The fact that the band had only recently been in the papers, following the sudden death of L'Wren Scott, Jagger's girlfriend, seemed oddly and unfortunately appropriate (her suicide was reported on 17 March; the first performance of Part 2 took place 11 days later). Rumour's own mobile phone interrupted his opening speech and he nodded in embarrassed acknowledgement before pulling it out of his pocket and turning it off but not before he had taken a 'selfie' with the audience in the background. As he mentioned 'every language I pronounce' (Induction 7), a Babel-like thicket of whispers 62 Cahiers E'lisabe'thains: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies 89(1) uttered a multitude of languages, and words in various alphabets were projected on the set upstage of him – more Doranian literalism: it was not enough to hear Greek or Polish,

we had to see them writ large as well.

Byrne suddenly pulled on a woolly hat and became Northumberland's Porter who admitted the false messenger from Shrewsbury. The play names him Lord Bardolph but Doranism forbade the similarity of Lord Bardolph and Bardolph (who is talked about in the following scene): Lord Bardolph was renamed Lord Randolph. We were back in the world of medieval verisimilitude in a way that left Rumour's modern dress and the Twittersphere out on a limb. The point was probably to insinuate the historical ubiquity of the paparazzi – Rumour is merely an earlier incarnation of the red tops' gossip columnists – but the effect, with Byrne left between the rock of the medieval setting and the hard place of his modern costume, was less than smoothly transitional. Doran's insistence on spelling out the most obvious of parallels sometimes causes more problems than it solves.<sup>10</sup>

Stephen Brimson Lewis's set (the same as for Part 1) comprised tatty wattle screens upstage, which occasionally parted along a diagonal fault line to reveal various projections:

a wash of bloody red, scudding clouds, knotted briars. The banisters of the theatre circle had been continued upstage on either side to form rough wooden balconies not unlike those of The George on Borough High Street in Southwark, surely one of the playwright's regular pubs.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the anachronistic Rumour alluded to the modern city's financial workers barking into mobiles in the George's courtyard after work (it is the best of pubs; it is the worst of pubs).

A trivial visual gag cast Youssef Kerkour as a towering and thickset Fang alongside a tiny and rather fey Martin Bassindale who played Snare as a reincarnation of the 1980s pop star, Marc Almond. The determination to separate the 'serious' and worthy court scenes from the comedy of Eastcheap was presumably a Doranian tactic to signpost the politically significant moments as opposed to those from the play's silly season, but the

collision course between high and low worlds with which this play climaxes was ill served by such an insistent and stubbornly enforced dichotomy.

Indeed, it was thanks to the brilliance of Sher's Falstaff and Oliver Ford Davies's Justice Shallow that the Gloucestershire scenes managed to fuse the melancholy of physical and especially sexual impotence (seen from within the world of the play) with its hilarity (seen from outside). The fact that these scenes were so conspicuous demonstrated the production's tendency elsewhere to flatten the play's emotional complexities into homogenous gravity (at court) and homogenous frivolity (in Eastcheap).

Like the insert play of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Gloucestershire scenes are pretty well fireproof, thanks in no small part to the suggestive

and gently teasing writing: 'Nay, she must be old; she cannot choose but be old; certain she's old . . . ' (3.2.204), but it was the complexity of emotions aroused by Shallow's painful nostalgia which set them apart from the rest of the production. As he reminisced about their sexual adventures with the 'bona-robas' (3.2.22 and 202), Shallow's right leg began to tremble uncontrollably and, in the new found confidence of his recollections of their lusty youth, he knowingly asked Falstaff about their night of debauchery 'in the Smith 63

Windmill in Saint George's Field' (192). It must have been quite a night for even Falstaff tried not to remember it and Sher's response was embarrassment thinly veiling a real yearning: 'No more of that, good Master Shallow [pause, in spite of himself, for fond memory], no more of that' (194).

After the Justices' exit, Falstaff turned to the audience. His account of Shallow's wantonness was delivered with relish: 'A came ever in the rearward of the fashion' (3.2.311) was targeted, gimlet-eyed, at a particular audience member – pure Frankie Howerd! Jim Hooper's drunk and sleepy Silence was little more than Alice's nodding dormouse and the catalogue of misfit soldiers, Mouldy, Shadow and so on, no more than thin caricatures.

Perhaps the most miscalculated attempt to inject jocularly was the bizarrely explosive Pistol (Antony Byrne) who entered from a trapdoor through the drifting smoke of the aftermath of an explosion like Ali Baba in a pantomime. With sticky-up hair, farcical make-up and a tendency to drop his trousers and moon at the audience, he was as unwelcome in the production as he was in Eastcheap. At one point, he climbed onto the table and lunged himself at the suspended light fitting, swung about for a bit and then returned to earth – a climbdown in both senses. Falstaff's poignant line, 'Peace, good Doll, do not speak like a death's-head, do not bid me remember mine end' (2.4.236), went for very little in the wake of such hubbub.

Running in parallel with this high jinx was the world of high politics – but parallel lines never meet. The mirroring of Part 1 was no longer tenable as Doran moved the settings of father and foster father further and further apart. Henry IV now seemed to be in a separate play, albeit one that, with a performance of tortured brilliance from Britton was profound and compelling. 'How many thousand of my poorest subjects / Are at this hour asleep?' (3.1.4–5), intoned the insomniac king, his head heavy with the concerns of civil war and memories of his usurpation. Yet even here Doranian literalism deflated the sense of drama: as he reached 'lulled with the sound of sweetest melody' (14), Mistress Quickly, napping on a stool from the previous scene, let forth a sudden snore. 'There', the moment seemed to say, 'those in high office are wakeful with the pressures of duty while those without political responsibility can sleep easily' – more than slightly reactionary.

The climax of the court scenes was the exchange between an etiolated Henry and his finally repentant son. The leaden inertia of politics was brilliantly articulated by Britton's consumed monarch who in the very first speech of Part 1 bemoans his 'care'. In spite of the apparent distance covered in the intervening period, we have really come full circle: 'O my poor kingdom, sick with civil blows!' (4.3.262). Hal's faux pas, exiting with the crown too precipitately, aroused genuine sympathy for a father whose passing was as uneasy as his life.

Even here, with such a potent script, Doranian insistence on spelling everything out returned to belittle the remainder of the play. In order to justify all the previous tinkering

with the prince and Lord Chief Justice plot, it was deemed necessary (in fact it was entirely redundant) to have the text amended as follows. In the play, the Justice remarks

to the new king that his position of authority had been undermined by the wayward prince: '[you] struck me in my very seat of judgement' (5.2.79). This metaphorical

striking was literalized in the alembic of Doranism to 'you struck me in an Eastcheap tavern house'. Perhaps this was for the benefit of those in the audience who had not seen

Part 1, but the unwrapping and actualization of the text's metaphor typifies Doranism at its most insistent and intrusive.

The production's tendency to lever apart the worlds of the court and Eastcheap damaged the final rejection scene. Following the dragging off of Doll and Quickly, Henry V entered from downstage right whilst Falstaff et al. cheered their welcome. The king was thus facing upstage. Without hesitation, he swivelled round and barked to the gleeful crowd: 'I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers' (5.4.47). The cultivation of audience sympathy for Falstaff up to this point paid dividends here. Henry was aloof, unsympathetic, almost tyrannical. This reading is fair enough but meant that Henry V was a good deal less complicated or perplexed than his father before him. Moreover, the earlier separation of court from Eastcheap meant that the final rejection was in some ways inevitable, a *fait accompli*. The epilogue was cut, and the final image was of Falstaff's little page staring after his arrested master.

The two parts of Henry IV had their final performance in July. The Two Gentlemen of Verona, directed by Simon Godwin, took their place in the main house. There is an old adage about the inadequacies of young actors in the roles of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers: if you are experienced enough to play Juliet or Romeo, you are too old to do so. Conversely, if you are young enough to play them, you lack sufficient experience. Of course, this assumes (rather naively) an equivalence between the ages of the actors and characters, an equivalence that goes against the grain of acting itself – actors are paid to be other than they are. But it does suggest that, as with any other craft, acting improves with experience. What was surprising about the performers in this production of The Two Gentlemen of Verona was that several of their biographies were smaller than that of Mossup. Mossup took the part of Crab. No fewer than 9 of the 15 parts were played by actors making their RSC debut, including the play's four protagonists – Proteus (Mark Arends), Julia (Pearl Chanda), Silvia (Sarah MacRae) and Valentine (Michael Marcus). It felt as though Doran (as Artistic Director) was treating this play with little respect. Whilst trumpeting the fact that this is the first main-house production for 45 years, the show was given an absurdly short run – just over 8 weeks (compare the 24-week run of the Henrys). Clearly this is so the Verona box can be ticked on the complete works chitty.

Neither its director, assistant director, movement director, designer nor voice coach have worked for the company before, let alone in this large space. Whilst David Thacker (1991) and Ed Hall (1998) have demonstrated the strengths of the play in the Swan, Godwin's half-baked production, with its underpowered acting and tedious business, risked the play's being put back into cold storage.

The pre-show typified its tendency to replace emotional complexity or layering with empty spectacle. An Italian street scene saw half a dozen cafe tables peopled with stereotypical

characters from La Dolce Vita – a priest, a tramp, several glamorous lovers and busy waiters. All of this took place amid a host of floating heart-shaped balloons and beneath an elaborate array of heart-shaped lights. One of the waiters kept plucking audience members up onto the stage and taking them to an ice cream vendor, making small talk and returning them to their seats. Why? Of course, the play's opening words

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suggest that it begins in medias res with Valentine rebuffing Proteus' ongoing entreaties: 'Cease to persuade . . . ' (1.1.1), but this hardly justifies such an elaborate or protracted opening sequence. Later, the masculine rivalry of Valentine and Thurio (Turio in this production, played by Nicholas Gerard-Martin) over Silvia's affections (2.4) took place in a nightclub. The set-up, involving musicians, a howling singer and a set change, seemed to take longer than their brief exchange (a mere 40 lines, many of which are single words). In an awful miscalculation, Turio's lyrical aubade turned into a rockconcert parody and the sequence milked every comic drop it could find. The production felt obliged to eke out what it considered to be a slight play. In fact the irritating insistence on trying to thicken the play's texture and some very thin performances made this a slight production.

Even those copper-bottomed scenes of Launce and his dog failed to enthrall or even engage. Roger Morlidge's Launce seemed indifferently to share the stage with Crab rather than play off the endearing dog's yawning expressions of boredom. All the crazy business with Launce's shoes standing in for his mother and father (2.3) hardly raised a smile. Jonny Glynn's Duke of Milan was a pantomime villain, the first half ending with him sipping coffee behind his huge desk and cackling like a malevolent loon. Only Youssef Kerkour's Sir Eglamour demonstrated any depth of character at all, his expression tortured by the remembrance of his bereavement (4.3.20).

The outlaws were only so many extras whose main job was to set the scene with a huge camouflage mesh curtain and fussily arrange the hoisting of Valentine and Speed (Martin Bassindale) into a net from whence, after a brief conversation, they were lowered

back to the stage. But the production's closing sequence exemplified its tendency to eclipse the play with gimmicks. As Valentine struggled to control Proteus, he dunked the latter's head into a drum of water, a drum so large that it blocked out the subsequently kneeling and supplicant Proteus. One of the play's most emotionally disturbing moments was thus rendered invisible. Then, just as the apology was apparently sincerely offered (although I remain unsure because I could not see), Valentine, to a huge audience gasp, produced a gun which he pointed down at Proteus' head. In a bit of wildly melodramatic business, Silvia took Valentine's hand on the trigger and there was a beat of sensational 'tension' – would they, wouldn't they? Of course they didn't, and Silvia was forced to turn her back with a theatrical sigh. As the couples exited, Valentine and Silvia joined hands. Julia and Proteus stalked gingerly towards each other without meeting or touching – blackout. The ambiguity with which the audience was left was the first genuinely thoughtful moment in this production. What a shame it was also its last.

The Swan Theatre

The Roaring Girl, Arden of Faversham, The White Devil and (almost as a coda) The Witch of Edmonton constituted the 'Roaring Girls' season in the Swan Theatre. The theatre programme for the first of these was prefaced by two forewords: Erica Whyman, the RSC's Deputy Artistic Director, provides a brief introduction to the 'Roaring Girls' season as well as reminding us that the Swan was intended to be a place for the staging of

plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries – great thing of us forgot! Doran's shorter piece 66 Cahiers E'lisabe'thains: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies 89(1)

follows and it is odd. Having welcomed us to the RSC 'and today's performance of The Roaring Girl', the rest of his piece has nothing to say about it, the season to which it gives its name or anything further about the Swan. Only 4 of its 35 lines mention the Swan season, the rest being taken up with his own productions of Henry IV and the production of The Two Gentlemen of Verona as well as a suggestion that we 'visit Shakespeare's Birthplace in Henley Street or Holy Trinity Church where he is buried'. Perhaps Doran is reluctant, as company patriarch, to pronounce on a season of plays concerned with 'this year of work celebrating great women' (Whyman's note).

If Doranism is characterized, as we have seen from the Henrys, by a clarity of storytelling which, at its best, explicates complex plot lines but at its worst, literalizes the

intricacies of the plays, Jo Davies's production of The Roaring Girl offered us a confused

production of a confusing play. City comedies seem to relish the tangled and opaque fabric of city life and they are deliberately wily – replete with disguise, cant, intrigue plotting. Usually, their denouements are either far-fetched or entirely unfeasible (often both), and this serves to underline their morality: justice is arbitrary, an improvisatory intelligence is to be admired and the ruling class is (for the most part) self-centred and complacent. Most obviously, sexual politics are irrevocably loaded in favour of men. This ethical clarity cuts through the complexities of the plots and we are not required to make sense of every twist and turn in these elaborately woven story lines. But the trouble

with this production was that it made sense of almost nothing at all.

To begin with, Dekker and Middleton's Jacobean London was translated, via Naomi Dawson's design, to Victorian London. Both Londons are places of sexual licence, fallen women, patriarchal hypocrisy as King Lear on the one hand and Oliver Twist on the other insist (note Lear's reprimand of the 'rascal beadle' who 'hotly lusts to use [a whore] in that kind / For which thou whip'st her' [4.5.156–9]). The anachronistic setting made perfect sense of a world which depends upon the sexual availability of women at the same time as the sex industry is condemned at every turn. The problem was that Davies was not content to limit her production to the superimposition of the Jacobean–Victorian eras. The regular underscoring of the action with modern rock music and rapping wrenched the production away from either period and rendered its fictional world too plural to be comprehensible. It ended up as nothing more than a jumble of different situations set in random periods. There seemed no rationale for any of the time shifts and

we could equally be heading for the red-light districts of Victorian London or the urban rapping of contemporary Los Angeles.

Lisa Dillon as Moll Cutpurse had the unenviable task of steering us through this mayhem, but when she suddenly and temporarily became the front woman of a 1980s punk band, her own identity as a mischievously cheeky Artful Dodger was eclipsed. At one point, a Victorian street scene took place over loud contemporary rock music and the

moment seemed to demonstrate the production's inability to stage the play world in any coherent way. Geoffrey Freshwater as Trapdoor and Dillon's Moll rapped together, but since their lyrics were entirely composed of criminal cant neither the rap nor its contents made any sense.

The pretend wedding of Moll and Sebastian (Joe Bannister) was almost immediately revealed to be a hoax and the 'real' bride, Mary Fitzallard (played by Faye Castelow), Smith 67

quickly substituted for Moll. There was some patriarchal apologizing and recompensing but very little sense that anything had changed for the better. Moll's epilogue followed: 'some perhaps do flout / The plot, saying 'tis too thin, too weak, too mean' (16–7). Davies attempted to ensure that we did not take the epilogue at its word and followed it with a huge rock number, with full company dancing and singing at top volume – sound and fury signifying nothing at all.

I had never seen Arden of Faversham before. On the page it has always seemed to me to be a rather dry morality tale, reinforcing the importance of a well-governed (that is, patriarchal) family and lamenting the woes of female impetuosity: as Franklin (the play's moral commentator) puts it, 'it is not strange / That women will be false and wavering' (1.20–1). The brutal murder is followed by some self-recrimination and then the epilogue

looks forward to the murderers' comeuppance. There is no subplot, no complex characterization,

hardly anything in the way of intrigue. The play's contemporary setting makes it little more than a sensational take on Elizabethan family politics and an exemplum of the outrage of wifely infidelity.

Polly Findlay's bold strategy with such an unpromising text was to appropriate it and, in a good way, send it up. Merle Hensel's design placed its world somewhere in the 1980s with Alice Arden (Sharon Small), a sexy trophy wife to Arden's exhausted



businessman (the role played by Ian Redford). Arden's business, bizarrely, was the import and sale of the Japanese Fortune Cat (Maneki Neko), the like of which welcome, with their single waving arm, customers into Asian restaurants and shops around the world. This seemed such an odd product but had the effect of emphasizing the play's obsession with commodification, a theme in the play which puts prices on human lives: 'In London many alehouse ruffians keep, / Which, as I hear, will murder men for gold' (1.445). The cats were also to provide, at the play's climax, one of the most startling visual effects of the entire season. As Alice apostrophized Arden's snow-strewn corpse – 'Arden, sweet husband, what shall I say? / The more I sound his name the more he bleeds' (16.3–4) – a screen upstage was flown out to reveal row upon row of gold cats waving in synch. The effect was both to undercut comically the heartfelt compunction of the murdering wife whilst childishly, it looked as though they were waving goodbye to her. As Bradshaw puts it, 'Mistress Arden, you are now going to God' (18.2).<sup>12</sup>

The setting also served wittily to caricature several key roles. Keir Charles's Mosby was a hunk from a 1980s cop show – *Miami Vice*, perhaps. With tight jacket, sleeves rolled up and smacking chewing gum (which he deftly took out of his mouth before engaging Alice in a deep snog and returned to his mouth on completion of the kiss), he was a swaggering and self-important wooer. Christopher Middleton's unctuous Clarke with his pill-bottle of poison sported a zipped up sports jacket and a pair of oversized sunglasses and had an unsavoury whiff of the Jimmy Saviles about him. Elspeth Brodie's Susan Mosby, the sexual reward promised to several of the conspirators, was a virtually silent household drudge, forever dusting and polishing as though her life depended on it. Clarke creepily stroked and kissed Susan's hair.

Even the murderers were comical caricatures. Tony Jayawardena's Shakebag carried an enormous crowbar tucked into the back of his belt. With this he accidentally brained Will (Jay Simpson) and one of their mischievous sequences (played in blackout)

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emphasized their bumbling incompetence as they attempted to locate each other in the darkness. At one point, Shakebag emerged from the fog covered head to toe in green slime, having fallen into a ditch.

The murder itself utilized this comic momentum. The dinner guests sat around a table and the huge Will sought to crawl towards Arden behind his back. As the guests attempted to distract him from looking round, they strained to make conversation. Will's 'I fear he will spy me as I am coming' (14.228) was a statement of the blindingly obvious. Michael's solution to the problem caused more laughter: 'To prevent that, creep betwixt my legs' (229). Ian Bonar's Michael was about half the size of Simpson's Will so that Michael appeared at one point to be riding on the neck of Will like a mahout on an elephant.

Following the brutal murder, the production suddenly shifted away from comedy, its tone darkening considerably. The corpse was bundled into a cardboard crate, the like of which had been previously used to pack the waving cats. As it was hoisted above, it began to ooze and drip with blood. At one point, Mosby stood under it with his champagne

flute outstretched and ready to make a toast. By the time he had finished speaking his drink had become blood red from the drips above him. We could have been in one of the disturbing murderous farces of Joe Orton.

The dumping of the body in the snow followed in slow motion as the play accelerated towards its climax. The discovery of the murderers follows the more or less coincidental entry of Lord Cheyne (Joe Bannister) and the loose ends are rapidly tied up. It is a pretty clunky ending and Franklin (in the text) wraps up proceedings with a finger-wagging epilogue, but in this production, the epilogue was spoken by Alice. This reallocation made the show more self-aware. At this point, under full house lights, Alice was not a character in the play but now a spokesperson for the play's moral lesson and this sense of

distance from the story of the play, commenting upon it, made complete sense of the production's slapstick staging. As we were asked to 'pardon this naked tragedy' (Epilogue

14), we recognized the elasticity of the genre itself. Thanks to Findlay's bold theatrical vision, this production had broken away from the moral earnestness of the play. Billed in the season's brochure as a story of 'corruption, passion and retribution', The White Devil offered Maria Aberg an opportunity to complicate the play's simplistic sexual politics. The story of Vittoria, pandered by her brother into the arms of the lascivious

Duke Bracciano who then brutally rids himself of his chaste and modest wife, Isabella, is a feminist no-brainer. Women are trafficked, arraigned (Vittoria's defiance in the teeth of Monticelso's accusations of whoredom serves only to condemn her further), seduced and murdered. The virtuous mother, Cornelia, obstructs the duke's lechery and offers a pathetic and impotent moral compass. But the world of the play is full of predatory

men and exploited women. Chief among the predators is Flaminio, the brother of Vittoria who uses his sister's sexuality as a means of ingratiating himself with the duke. In pimping her and murdering his own brother, Flaminio is the play's machiavel par excellence. The White Devil's is a world of sinning men and sinned-against women where gender and morality match up with tedious predictability.

Aberg's imaginatively subversive take on this two-dimensional world was to cast Flaminio as a woman. Immediately the tired cliché's about patriarchy and exploitation Smith 69

were undermined. Further, Laura Elphinstone played Flaminio as an 'out' lesbian. Dressed in skinny black jeans and a cropped version of a tuxedo jacket with a simple white shirt, her short hair slicked back against her head, she appeared quite androgynous.

The production made a good deal of female sexuality in terms of costume (or lack of it). At one point, we saw her smooching with Zanche (Joan Iyiola) who was got up in an Ann Summers 'nun' outfit: Flaminio was just as desirous of women as her male peers and just

as eager to consume and exploit them. 'Sisterhood' in this production, with this major role cross-cast, meant less a female solidarity in the face of patriarchy than Flaminio's social rise using her sororal resources.

Vittoria (Kirsty Bushell) opened the production by entering in bra and pants, smiling at the audience and donning a tight glittery dress and long blonde Lady Gaga wig. The candidness with which she affected the trappings of the sex worker suggested the habitual recourse to the erotic as well as the ease with which sexual desire could be manipulated. There followed a disco sequence with various erotic displays which allowed the liaison of Vittoria and Bracciano (David Sturzaker) to appear as just another nightclub grope and emphasize the ubiquity of sexual currency. But this point did wear thin as we were repeatedly taken into S and M clubs, bondage parlours and even the house of the contrite convertites had them displayed behind glass screens in underwear as though in the brothels of Amsterdam.

The centrepiece of Webster's play is the trial scene between a defiant Vittoria and a magisterial and holier-than-thou Cardinal Monticelso, played here magnificently by David Rintoul. Rintoul's Monticelso, in secular clothes (though his jacket was cardinal red and he sported a conspicuous crucifix-like costume jewellery), was belligerent with a gigantic voice and a voracious presence. He circled Bushell's Vittoria who stood centre stage, in a white pencil dress, glamorous and cheekily impertinent. Again the morality is pretty unimaginative as the Cardinal is shown to be utterly corrupt and the trial a travesty.

But Aberg seemed less interested in challenging this part of the play, leaving Webster's anti-Catholicism in place so that it seemed oddly out of kilter with the secular updating of the plot's sexual element.

The seeing-off of the inconvenient Isabella was brutally achieved. Dr Julio, the play's malevolent assassin (played by Michael Moreland), poisoned the picture of her husband that she was wont to kiss every night and gouts of blood orally and rectally intensified the horror of her murder. The sequence with the poisoned helmet was just as sensational. Aberg had translated the duel into a wrestling match so that

the helmets were leather balaclavas in the style of a modern cage fighter. As he tore his off in agony, Bracciano seemed to pull half his face with it. Simon Scardifield's Francisco (brother to the murdered Isabella) sought his revenge but not without timidity. Hiding behind a pair of dark glasses, his was an unsure and complicated revenger and one felt that Rome's (im)moral structure had compelled him to seek redress almost reluctantly.

There were a number of visually provoking sequences: Cornelia (Liz Crowther) struggling to drag the body of her son across the stage and handing out rue – a maternal

version of Ophelia; Rintoul's Cardinal, now elevated to Pope in a gorgeous cloth-of-gold cassock, dishing out excommunications from above; Bracciano strangled by a chain of a 70 Cahiers E'lisabe'thains: A Journal of English Renaissance Studies 89(1)

thurible before being zipped up in a black body bag. Perhaps the most puzzling was the near-naked Vittoria shoving a blood bag down the front of her pants. As she was stabbed cruelly in the pudendum, this blood soaked into her lace tutu. But why had we witnessed her provision of this special effect? Was this odd metadramatic moment designed to disrupt the sexual bias of the play and challenge our own patriarchal assumptions? Was it

the antidote to Flaminio's hoax with the pretend suicide pact? Or were we in some way bearing witness to her agency in her own death? Was she, if not a willing at least a complicit victim? This provocative but ultimately tangled ending was never adequately explained.

Lest his prospective performance as the lion in 'Pyramus and Thisbe' disturb the ladies and bring about the hanging of the players, Bottom assures his fellow artisans, 'I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove' (1.2.77). The 'Roaring Girls' season ended similarly – not with a roar but with a production that sucked. Doran's own *The Witch of Edmonton*, the last of the plays in this season, had neither a female director nor a strong female protagonist and whilst Eileen Atkins played Mother Sawyer with a powerful cocktail of vitriol and pathos, the play itself eclipses the witch with other narratives and, even when Atkins was on stage, this production often marginalized her by focusing on the spectacular rendering of her diabolic, canine companion, Dog. Perhaps it is the play's reliance on this supernatural element which necessitated its early modern setting – all the

other productions in the Swan season had been updated in terms of era.

Whilst recent work on early modern drama has demonstrated the virtues of collaboration,

*The Witch of Edmonton*, the authors of which include (at least) Rowley, Dekker and Ford, illustrates its pitfalls.<sup>13</sup> Martin White's programme note insists that 'the collaborators

took great care to create connections and overlap between the separately written plot lines', but the tatty narrative of the production made this sound like special pleading. The play is episodic and, in spite of the best efforts of many of the performers, there was precious little in the way of developed character or even a coherent theme. This is a play about the randomness of village life: a father plans the marriage of his son who is already secretly married to someone else; various neighbours quarrel over the possession of land and kindling; there is an unnecessary morris dance as well as a protracted sickbed scene and a lonely woman is victimized as an outsider. But the driving force behind this variety of action is nothing more than village gossip: 'All the country whispers' (1.1), warns Sir Arthur Clarington (David Rintoul).

Given the high profile of the Henrys in the main house, one wonders why Doran chose to direct *Edmonton* (at all). With its early modern setting and its triumphant patriarchy, the

play seems to depart from, rather than endorse, the feminist objectives of the season. For

instance, Frank (Ian Bonar) apologizes to Carter for murdering Susan (Faye Castelow) and

as Frank is led off to execution, Carter (Ian Redford) absolves him, 'she's in Heaven, and I'm glad to see thee so well prepared to follow her' (5.2). It is as though the death of his daughter is a mild inconvenience. Justice is done and seen to be done, both the witch and

the bigamist are put to death. The parting shot of the production was Shvorne Marks's Winnifride, heavily pregnant, looking blankly into the audience, the father of her child having been executed and her future prospects deeply uncertain. Just as this final image  
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underlined not the independence of autonomous women but their dependence on the masculine world around them, so the whole production, coming at the conclusion of the 'Roaring Girls' season, was more of a submissive coda than a rousing climax.

In spite of its anomalous inclusion in such a season, the production was not wholly disappointing. Jay Simpson's Dog was the personification (or should that be 'caninification'?)

of a malevolent charisma. Simpson was costumed in a loincloth, a weird girdle with an erect tail and an exoskeletal spine. He sported a pair of horns-cum-ears and was daubed entirely in black body paint. The rings around his eyes were reddened to point up his baleful stares and he moved lithely and insidiously. Frequently he appeared through the tall rushes upstage (design was by Niki Turner) and regarded with satisfaction the violence of the villagers who were, it was suggested, acting under his influence. At one point in 3.4, he lunged at Sawgut (Timothy Speyer) grabbing his violin and demonically whisking the jolly morris men into a frenetic imbroglia, his fiddle screeching and gliding as in the Charlie Daniels Band's *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*.

Atkins's Mother Sawyer was a panto crone, all in grey and leaning on a stick. She had an oddly intimate relationship with Dog: 'kiss me, my Tommy' (4.1) and as she faced him, she sweetly scratched his chest, 'let's tickle'. Yet his subsequent rejection of her was suddenly callous: 'I shall run mad', she said (5.1). 'Do so', he responded immediately,

'Thy time is come to curse, and rave, and die'. Straight away she is carried off to prison and, though she calls on him for assistance, Dog relishes her arrest: 'Let not the world, witches or devils condemn; / They follow us and then we follow them' – a line as chilling as any spoken by Faustus's disloyal Mephistopheles.

In his preface to the March to October 2014 RSC brochure, Doran writes 'The Roaring Girls Season, led by RSC Deputy Artistic Director, Erica Whyman, revives a series of fantastic Jacobethan plays with wonderful roles for women at their centre'. Whilst the appearance of Eileen Atkins at Stratford is to be welcomed, one could not help wishing that Doran could have found her a better role in a better play.

As this article has suggested, the RSC's summer season 2014 was very mixed. The main house suffered a poorly executed (though thankfully short-lived) *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Doran's *Henry IV* plays were capable, though unexciting, prone to the kinds of literalism I have discussed and reluctant to demand of their audience much of an imaginative

investment. The more interesting work took place in the Swan and whilst *The Roaring Girl* was messy and *The Witch of Edmonton* tiresome, there was some insightful and exciting work in both *Arden of Faversham* and *The White Devil*. These two plays demonstrated their worth anew in productions that managed to evade the literal mindedness

so characteristic of Doranism.

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Notes

1. This article is based on seeing the following performances (all in 2014): 1 Henry IV: 18 and 28 April and 13 May; 2 Henry IV: 30 April and 22 May; The Two Gentlemen of Verona: 29 July; The Roaring Girl: 12 May; Arden of Faversham: 17 June; The White Devil: 18 August and 15 October; The Witch of Edmonton: 13 November. I am grateful to Dean Asker, Kath Bradley, Florence March, James Stredder, Janice Valls-Russell and Kate Wilkinson.
2. For the RSC Complete Works season, see Peter J. Smith and Janice Valls-Russell (eds), *Cahiers E´lisabe´thains: The Royal Shakespeare Company Complete Works Festival, Special Issue*, 2007. On Shakespeare’s presence in the Olympic games, see Paul Edmondson, Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan (eds), *A Year of Shakespeare: Re-living the World Shakespeare Festival* (London, Bloomsbury, 2013).
3. Royal Shakespeare Company brochure, Summer 14 March-October 2014 Stratford-upon-Avon, preface, 2.
4. The missing apostrophe is the RSC’s.
5. The name appears as both a character’s nickname and a location in *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, lines 163–6.
6. Jeremy Lopez, ‘A Personal Viewpoint: Fifty-Three Years On, Is There Still a Future for the Stratford Festival of Canada?’ *Cahiers E´lisabe´thains*, 70 (2006), 64–6, 66.
7. See Peter J. Smith, ‘Richard II’, *Cahiers E´lisabe´thains*, 85 (2014), 117–20.
8. The striking of the Lord Chief Justice happens on stage in *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* at line 357.
9. Of the characterization, Gae´lle Ginestet and Janice Valls-Russell write, ‘the silver haired Hotspur (Trevor White) retained the same battle-evoking garments, juvenile impatience and strange gait throughout the play, stamping, grimacing, then hopping in joyful anticipation before the battle.’ *Cahiers E´lisabe´thains*, 86 (2014), 112–15, 114.
10. Ginestet and Valls-Russell comment as follows: ‘While drawing attention to the issue of when a play actually starts, and to the timelessness of Rumour, this jarred with the rest of the production and seemed unnecessarily gimmicky’ (113).
11. See Pete Brown, *Shakespeare’s Pub: A Barstool History of London as Seen through the Windows of its Oldest Pub, The George Inn* (New York, St Martin’s Press, 2012).
12. Maggie Domon Pathy read the moment in slightly different terms: ‘the back-drop turns to a wall of giant golden waving cats sitting in judgment over the murderers’. *Cahiers E´lisabe´thains*, 87 (2015), 116–18, 117.
13. Gary Taylor and John Jowett, *Shakespeare Reshaped: 1606–1623* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993); Bart van Es, *Shakespeare in Company* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013); and Peter Kirwan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Apocrypha* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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