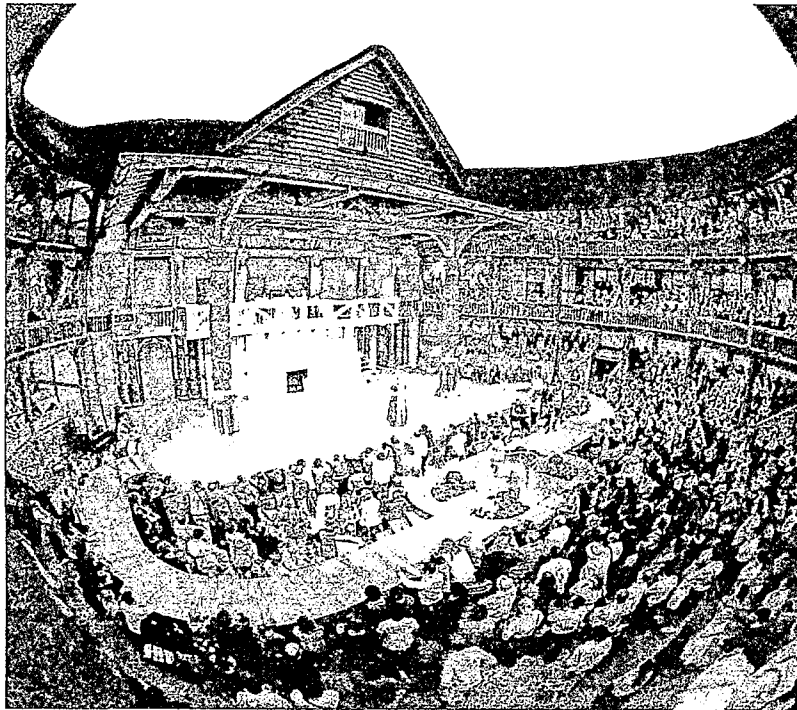




## LOOKING UP: THE 2008 SEASON AT LONDON'S GLOBE THEATRE

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*The Merry Wives of Windsor* : Shakespeare's Globe (2008). Photo by John Tramper.

No one ever doubted Mark Rylance's abilities as an actor.<sup>1</sup> As Michael W. Shurgot has demonstrated in the pages of *The Upstart Crow*, Rylance is a performer of skill and dexterity, an adroit interpreter of Shakespeare and a master of different playing styles.<sup>2</sup> But it remains a truth almost universally acknowledged that, in his capacity as Artistic Director, his pursuit of so-called "Original Practices" (including music, costuming, and even pronunciation) often took precedence over the theatrical quality of the Globe's productions. Rylance's obsession with authenticity reached its climax in his lunatic pursuit of the "real" author of Shakespeare's plays: his daft *The BIG Secret Live—I am Shakespeare—Webcam Daytime Chat-Room Show* only confirmed his eccentricity, and while one misses his performances, his departure from the Globe offers his successor new opportunities.

Dominic Dromgoole, who incidentally has described Rylance's anti-Stratfordianism as "baloney," is gradually turning the theater around.<sup>3</sup> This year he presided over four Shakespeare plays as well as two pieces of new writing (which will not be discussed here). He entitled the season "*Totus Mundus*" and in his program blurb he insists on Shakespeare's generic diversity: "This year we perform his most searching tragedy, *King Lear*; his most wild and inventive comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; his most thrilling and savage satire, *Timon of Athens*; and his invention of a new form, the sitcom, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*."<sup>4</sup> The repertory is a brave one—would the unpopular *Timon* stand up against the most popular of all Shakespeare's comedies? How would the diurnal trivia of *Windsor* compare with the profound melancholy of *Lear*? Would the resulting rep. be unbalanced? Could any attempt to find coherence between or common themes across such a declared variety of genres be anything more than over-ingenuity?

The first play to open the season, Dromgoole's *King Lear* offered new hope to a jaded and despairing Globe-goer. Without the populist gimmickry which characterized most productions during Rylance's reign, this production, predicated on some excellent casting, concentrated on clear articulation, detailed but not fussy playing, and contact with the audience, which was engaging rather than crassly diverting.

At the heart of this production's success was its realization that the Globe is a non-illusionistic theater. The production was designed by Jonathan Fensom. In the place of anything resembling a set was a pair of sliding screens which functioned, when drawn, to shield the discovery space or the doors which flank it. An octagonal platform had been erected in the middle of the yard at stage height and connected to the stage by a bridge. Two sets of steps led from this platform down to the yard floor. Both the main stage and the octagonal platform were equipped with traps (the latter used for Poor Tom's cell). Two



telegraph poles with climbing rungs stood at the downstage corners on either side of the stage and swags of greenery were draped from the tops of these back to the balcony.

The design was static and symmetrical as was much of the blocking. Frequently an actor would take a position at the center of the satellite platform and address other members of the company positioned geometrically across the main stage from this "hot-spot." The effect was frequently suggestive of a courtly formality but such obvious positioning hinted that the production was not interested in reconstructing the vagaries of real situations or conversations. Dromgoole seemed unencumbered by any obligation towards verisimilitude and stage positioning was used as much symbolically (to indicate relative degrees of political power, for instance) as naturalistically. Indeed the least successful sequence was when the production affected a labored naturalism by having several bloodied and muddled madmen (weird companions to Poor Tom) invade the yard from under the stage and haloo and whimper at the non-plussed groundlings. Fortunately, this was only a temporary distraction.

The real strength of this production derived from its casting. Not merely were the company vocally fluent and poetically lucid—notable here was Joseph Mydell's Gloucester—but they were physically well-cast. For instance, Jodie McNee's tiny Cordelia (whose sheer dress accented her slenderness) appeared all the more vulnerable when confronted and bullied by David Calder's Henrician monarch in a long furred gown like someone straight out of Holbein. Danny Lee Wynter's fey and whimsical Fool seemed, like Cordelia, to be physically, as well as politically, outsized by those around him. Daniel Hawksford was a strapping and handsome Edmund who could easily have proved attractive to both wicked sisters (Sally Bretton as Goneril and Kellie Bright as Regan). The fairly minor role of Oswald was played by the weaselly Ashley Rolfe, whose encounter with the grizzled and irate Kent (Paul Copley) was a comical mixture of pantomime bravado and desperate panic as the Earl pursued him and forced him to duck behind the screens like a *banderillero* fleeing an enraged bull.

Calder's Lear was, if not a revelation, a refreshingly new take on the role. This Lear took a long time to go mad. His initial rejection of "our last and least" (F, 1.1.81) was inspired not by lunacy but by anguish. As he presented Cordelia, without dower, to France, his attempted resolve not "ever [to] see / That face of hers again" (262-3) forced a shudder of grief from him and as he lamented his daughters' "filial ingratitude" (3.4.14), he was shocked by their callousness rather than inwardly demolished by it. Indeed this was a profoundly reasonable, and thereby even more pathetic, old man who (in spite of the warnings of Kent and the Fool) had miscalculated rather than proved mentally incapable. As he turned to Kent, sitting in the stocks, his "Follow me not; stay here" (2.2.228) was not a symptom of the blithe unawareness of madness—Kent wasn't about to go anywhere—but a final, and comically desperate, attempt to issue regal commandments: Lear was stubbornly and rationally attempting to articulate a remnant of authority. When, later in the same scene, he promised

"such revenges on you both, / That all the world shall—I will do such things— / What they are, yet I know not" (445-7), his hesitation suggested that this plot needed further deliberation rather than being a fissure in his ratiocination. As late as his exchange with Poor Tom, Lear spoke out of genuine concern which was eminently practical, sensible even: "Thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies" (3.4.91). Even during the mock-trial scene (the inclusion of this from Q and the Fool's earlier Merlin prophecy from F indicate the use of a composite text), the legal protocol allowed Lear some semblance of a residual rationality. Without the bald ranting insanity of so many Lears, Calder's was finally more *interesting*, more inflected and complex. As he regained consciousness in the camp of Cordelia, his modestly articulated description of his scalding tears (4.6.40) was profoundly moving—a testament to Calder's mastery of such an unintimate performance space as the Globe.



*King Lear*: David Calder as King Lear. Photo by John Haynes.

While he had chosen slightly to mute Lear's madness, Dromgoole had given less central roles an increased prominence. Peter Hamilton Dyer's Cornwall, for instance, presided over one of the most horrifying extractions of Gloucester's eyes I have seen. Aided by the simplicity of the staging—Gloucester roped into a Jacobean wooden chair, stage center, no lighting effects (obviously)—Dyer reached over to Gloucester's face and rummaged with deliberation rather than frenzy to extract the first eye. He pulled the jelly out and threw it contemptuously upstage, wiping his bloodied hand across the front of his white shirt in an adumbration (poetic justice?) of his own stomach wound that



*King Lear*: Peter Hamilton-Dyer (Cornwall, left) blinds Joseph Mydell (Gloucester). Photo by John Haynes.

neck pace of the previous political maneuvering and the subsequent reunion of Lear and Cordelia. Lear sat up in a wheel-barrow bed which resembled the stocks we had earlier seen Kent occupy—a neat parallel which insisted upon an equivalence between the Earl's physical and the King's mental torture. Calder's quietly spoken Lear seemed to be struggling to determine his whereabouts and the intensity of his concentration was reflected on the expressions of those who sympathetically surrounded him: this was strong company playing. The battle was effectively staged as a choreographed stomp which contrasted neatly with the violent barbarism of the supposedly chivalric duel between Edmund and the anonymous knight—here Edgar was suited in black armor with a visor masking his face.

The final scene is the play's and this production's pinnacle. Lear entered with Cordelia's corpse draped around his shoulders in a ghastly parody of a childhood piggyback. Both wore simple white gowns. His fifth "never" (F has five while Q has only three) came after a pause between it and the fourth: when it came, it was entirely rational, accepting, fatalistic. It was as though he was admitting—in just that one word—his full responsibility for everything that had happened, including the death of his own daughters *without a trace of madness*. As if to physicalize the sense of exhaustion, Kent slumped against one of the stage pillars in utter submission. A single female singer walked down-

would later lead to his death. As the second eye was extracted he goaded his wife to sit on Gloucester's lap. As she screamed in a mixture of perverted delight and horror, tugging at the eye herself, Cornwall groped her from behind. Thus, within this single episode were moments indicative of a calm and deliberate brutality juxtaposed with a febrile eroticism. Poignantly, Dromgoole allowed the bleeding Gloucester to take his time, guided by the (Quarto only) second servant, to exit through the groundlings in an agonizingly protracted silence. Ingeniously the blinding sequence was to resonate across other productions this season.

The mad Lear was kept till after the interval and even then he was quietly confused rather than ranting. The inclusion of Quarto's scene 17, in which Kent and the Gentleman

bring each other up to speed, provided a transition between the break-

stage to keen over the bodies. Why, having effectively staged one of the most powerful scenes in Western drama, Dromgoole followed this with the Globe's jolly jig is one of the eternal mysteries / miseries of productions here.

The Larian "weight of this sad time" (5.3.299) seemed to have infected the opening, at least, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, swathed in mourning. *A Warning for Fair Women* includes the suggestive observation on the correlation between color and genre: "The stage is hung with black and I perceive / The auditors prepared for tragedy." Jonathan Munby's *Dream*, designed by Mike Britton, took shape around a central contrast: black with its connotations of melancholy, grief and formality for the court versus vibrant color with its associations of fantasy, cheer and youth for the forest.

Presiding, ambiguously, over both was a huge, white, spherical moon suspended at roof level above the yard (an allusion to or a "borrowing" from Greg Doran's 2005 *Dream* resurrected and currently playing at the Royal Shakespeare Company? Munby is clearly *au fait* with Doran's work having been his assistant in Stratford). Tethered on elastic, and illuminated from within, this source of watery light was buffeted up and down by the wind and served to cast indistinct and mobile shadows across the action. The court of Theseus was clearly and unhappily restrained—reflecting his opening lamentation on the delay of his and Hippolyta's nuptials. With its stage pillars shrouded in black and the upstage wall draped in a cloth of the same color, their entirely black costumes fitted them for this setting of disconsolate sable. The blistering Egeus and the four lovers were all similarly attired and, as they discussed the real possibility that Hermia be executed unless she take her father's part, the color (as in the quotation from *A Warning*) suggested the imminence of tragedy. Tom Mannion's Theseus showed real fury with Hermia's (played by Pippa Nixon) feminist intransigence so that it was entirely appropriate that Siobhan Redmond's Amazonian queen, who had earlier given permission for Hermia "to plead my thoughts" (1.1.61) with an approving nod, protectively embraced the young woman shielding her from the onslaughts of ruthless patriarchy. Her haughty exit in a different direction from Theseus' fawning "what cheer, my love?" (1.1.122), made clear whose side she was on.

The forest outside Athens was as colorful as the court was monochrome. At the top of Act 2, the black disappeared and gave way to a vibrant and clashing palette. The fairies set large purple flowers around a blue disc on the stage



*King Lear*: David Calder (King Lear) and Jodie McNee (Cordelia). Photo by John Haynes.

floor which echoed the circularity of the moon hovering above. The black drape upstage fell to be replaced with one of diaphanous royal blue and the two arch-shaped walkways, like lunar crescents, which descended from either side of the stage down into the yard, were of the same color. The fairies were costumed in purple, green, blue or red tutus with torn and rebelliously unkempt lace and fishnets in a post-punk refutation of courtly authority. Puck's parodic tails were turquoise- and white-striped and his hair sported a wave of greenish-blue.



*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Siobhan Redmond (left, Titania) and fairies. Photo by Manuel Hartan.

It was not long before the lovers' black costumes yielded to this kaleidoscopic aesthetic. Their disrobing allowed them to reveal shirts, skirts and underwear of bright gold or green and the sexual licence of the forest was implicit in their casting off of formal attire and the exposure of legs and arms. As Helena (Laura Rogers) acted as Demetrius' "spaniel" (2.1.203) she provocatively crawled towards him on all fours and as she lamented her own uncontrollable desire, "I am sick when I look not on you" (213), she lay spread-eagled on the stage her skirts hitched indecently high revealing bare legs in a gesture of complete submission.

The sexual intensity of the forest was emphasized by the erotic presence of Redmond as Titania. (She and Mannion doubled the earthly and the fairy rulers though the fairy kingdom seemed set, vocally anyway, in Edinburgh while Theseus and Hippolyta spoke the English of Windsor Castle.) Provocatively, her bower was a cross between Salvador Dalí's red settee, based on the lips of Marilyn Monroe, and a large open and sexually suggestive rosebud which had something of the predatory exoticism of Audrey II, the cannibalistic plant from *Little Shop of Horrors*. Both the little Indian boy and the ass-headed

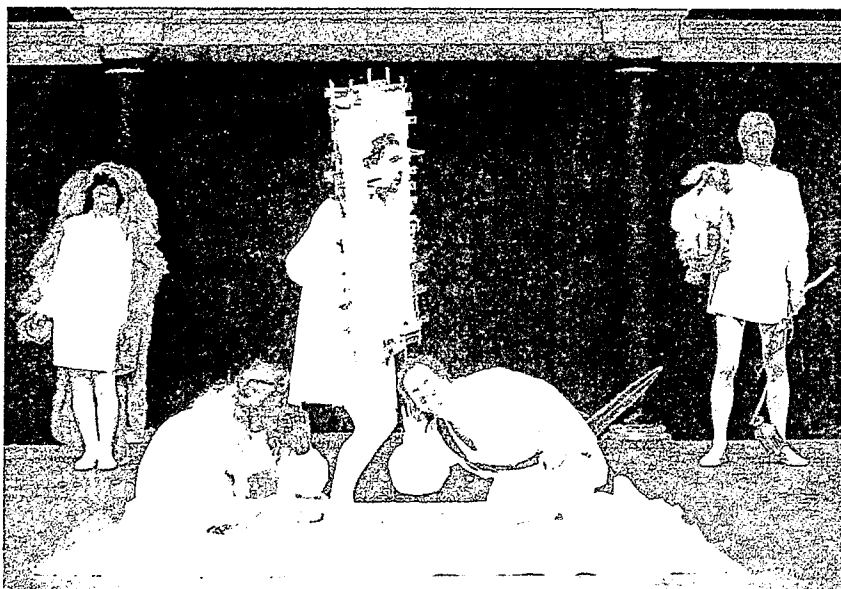
artisan were laid across the crimson bed. As she draped herself among their limbs there was an obvious, though very dark, parallel between her apparently maternal contact with the child and her copulation with Bottom: both were objects of her consummation.

Mannion's Oberon maintained the tyrannical edge of Theseus though here his fury was directed not at a disobedient young woman but against his mischievous servant. Michael Jibson (who had earlier, fittingly, doubled as Philostrate), relished the confusions of the night and maintained a good rapport with the audience, entering through the yard and puffing his way up the ramp to present Oberon with the love-in-idleness. He and Oberon took up spectators' positions, standing on the shelves formed by the bases of the stage columns and watched the confusions of the four lovers over the rotating identities of their various love objects. There were some excellent and carefully choreographed *lazzi* between them—movement was by Glynn MacDonald. There was a nice touch as Puck attempted to resolve the problems by anointing the eyes of the male lovers with the magic juice. As he bent over each of them, lying on the floor, he plucked out their eyeballs on long elastic threads of red, drew them towards him, sprinkled them and then replaced them. Given *King Lear's* truly ghastly blinding of Gloucester (see above), there was clearly a crafty nod in that direction.

*Pyramus and Thisbe* was played at a furious pace and was full of effective comic business. We were returned to the court by the upstage blue cloth being pulled by fairies over the heads of the cooing groundlings. This time the courtiers wore matrimonial white and the presence of the "Hard-handed men" (5.1.72) took place with the women of the onstage audience downstage left and men downstage right. This represented an interesting revision of the convention which usually blocks them as embracing couples and hinted at the propriety of unmarried modesty which Theseus laments at the play's opening remained in force.

Against this abstinence, the comic crudity of the inset play was especially effective. The "Wall's chink" (5.1.132) was Snout's spread legs which offered Flute (Peter Bankolé) a disgusted double-take on "Thy stones with lime and *hair* [acknowledging the proximity of his mouth and Snout's pubic hair] knit up in thee" (190). Snout (Jonathan Bond) wore only the tiniest briefs. Thisbe's subsequent kissing of "the wall's hole" (200) was preceded by Snout's turning his back on Flute so she kissed his anus. Paul Hunter's unusually diminutive Nick Bottom was powerfully overacted and he played his suicide as a protracted amputation of toes, fingers, genitals, arms, legs, tongue and eyes before laying on his back, his sword sticking out phallically between his legs. This allowed him to wince with terror as Flute's Thisbe clumsily pulled the weapon out on "Come, trusty sword" (338). There was a lovely detail as the arrogant Theseus condemned the entertainment's author: "if he that writ it had played *Pyramus* and hanged himself in Thisbe's garter it would have been a fine tragedy" (351). Theseus looked at Bottom as he said this and there was an uncomfortable silence as Bottom gestured to Peter Quince (Michael Matus) with an embarrassed shrug

to indicate the inept playwright. Hastily attempting to cover his tracks, Theseus continued chumily, "and so it is, truly, and very notably discharged" (354), but it was too little too late. The awkwardness of the moment was comically rescued by the incompetence of Snug (Robert Goodale) who ended up dancing on the wrong side of the stage and facing the opposite direction to everyone else in the bergamask. It is Snug who has earlier confessed to being "slow of study" (1.2.63). The production ended with Oberon's blessing on the lovers—here set to music—and Puck's cheeky epilogue. The Globe's trademark jig forced one to wonder, as usual, why the theater refuses to trust the playwright to end his own plays without populist razzmatazz...one day, perhaps...



*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: From left to right, Robert Goodale (Snug), Peter Bankole (Flute), Jonathan Bond (Snout), Paul Hunter (Bottom) and Sam Parks (Starveling). Photo by Manuel Harlan.

The production's moon demonstrates, unsurprisingly, the reciprocity that exists between the Globe and the Courtyard, temporary home of the Royal Shakespeare Company, in Stratford upon Avon. One of the trademarks of Michael Boyd's work at the RSC is its exciting verticality: rope-work, entries from suspended ladders and walkways, as well as the use of trapdoors to bring actors on from beneath stage level, all employed in his recent magnificent cycle of history plays. Doran's current RSC *Dream* has Bottom and Titania and later Oberon and Titania suspended from the flies. Even as the Main House in Stratford is being rebuilt with thrust stage in order to emphasize its depth and fully exploit two dimensions, the current work seems impatient to lift the action from the stage floor. The Globe has always been happy with this sort

of perpendicular style, exemplified in Kathryn Hunter's 2005 *Pericles*.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the marked verticality of the Globe's *Timon* may have signalled its debt to its director's fondness for roofs. When she directed *Titus Andronicus* in 2006 Lucy Bailey hinted both at the gladiatorial blood-lust of the play as well as its internecine destructiveness by mimicking, in a series of black swathes, the *velarium* off the Roman amphitheater. The Globe's yard was plunged into an ominous shadow by this awning which both symbolized the play's murky treachery and added a claustrophobic element to this usually open and airy performance space: we seemed trapped too close to the play's violence.

For her production of *Timon*, Bailey had turned the theater into an aviary (design was by William Dudley who collaborated with her on *Titus*). From the stage canopy out to the thatched roofline, a coarse netting was stretched above the yard across the top of which aerial acrobats walked and squawked like malevolent ravens (a shot from Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* was included in the program). Most spectacularly, these scavenging birds could dive, head first, down into the pit from several circular apertures let into the netting and plummet onto the groundlings before being halted on bungee cords and returning just as abruptly to the heavens. They signified an aerial rapacity that could swoop at any time—and they did as the fare of Timon's feast, held aloft, processed through the yard. Like the harpies from Prospero's vanishing banquet, they functioned as the gods of a cursed nature dispensing a justice as wild as it was sudden. In the light of this avian predation, Timon's altruistic optimism sounded ominously naïve: "I am not of that feather to shake off / My friend when he must need me" (1.1.102-3).

In common with all the other Shakespeare productions at the Globe this season, the stage had been extended into the yard. This was the slightest extension, though, and served only to convert the straight downstage edge into a curved border beyond which a bench seat ran parallel. This enabled assembled lords to sit around the edge of the stage and consume Timon's feasts as they looked on at the various entertainments staged for their benefit. In this way the arrangement resembled the row of bar stools stretched across the front of the platform of a pole dancing club (so I'm told!). At the dancing of the Amazon, an aerial acrobat dropped on a pair of white silk skeins and erotically and gracefully wrapped herself in and out of the ribbons before descending to Timon's clutches: "You have done our pleasures much grace, fair ladies" (1.2.137). Her tiny white costume and bare legs contrasted with the cawing crows, entirely in black, who presided overhead throughout. The guests' drunken profligacy was illustrated as the bread which Timon distributed among them became missiles flying between them, much to the sneering disgust of Bo Poraj's huge and shaggy Apemantus and the party broke up with the antics of an inebriated guest running around the stage, flashing his genitals. This disgusting sexuality was explicitly staged during Timon's later cursing of Phrynia and Timandra (Pippa Nixon and Laura Rogers). As they lay on their backs, their legs open towards him, Timon placed his hands on their crotches at "Be strong in whore, allure him, burn him up" (4.3.141). The effect was of the laying on of hands—a

mock ecclesiastical blessing as their wantonness and disease were blessed by his doctrine of misanthropy, his parting curse insisting on their canine lewdness: "Get thee away," he growled at Alcibiades, "And take thy beagles with thee" (174).

Bailey had clearly read *Timon* as an Aesopian allegory and many of the stage costumes (such as those of the Poet and the Painter—Michael Matus and Michael Jibson respectively) echoed the short, feathered capes of the opportunistic raptors. Throughout, the dividing line between the human world of reason and the animal kingdom of Darwinian survival was erased. The gifts with which Timon is presented include "Four milk-white horses" and "two brace of greyhounds" (1.2.179 and 184) while he reciprocates with "a bay courser" (206) and, as the beastly orgy of giving and receiving intensified, the dinner guests fell onto all fours and chased each other round the stage barking like dogs. Later, as Timon condemned the stingy inconsistency of his so-called friends, he muttered "such summer birds are men" (3.7.29) and, following the unveiling of the mock-feast, they departed in a chorus of twitters and cheeps, hopping like chicks. The theater audience themselves became the victims of the aggressive birds as they screeched and flapped their wings at us to clear the yard at the interval.

As he cast himself out from the city, Simon Paisley Day's slim Timon, stripped to a white loincloth and matted with filth, resembled one of the gaunt and angular Christs of El Greco. But, ingeniously, this too was overlaid with a feral deportment. Part baboon and part starved dog, he rummaged in the ashes of his hovel for roots to eat before sardonically wondering at the gold he uncovered. Day's powerful vocal range was illustrated during his invective against the worthless but still precious metal and its alchemical properties which can effect oxymoronic transformations such as "Black [to] white, foul fair, wrong right, / Base noble, old young, coward valiant" (4.3.29-30). He recounted these in a racked mixture of wonder and reproach.

As if to illustrate what Lear calls "Unaccommodated man" (3.4.101), Timon lowered himself onto a midden and pulled his loincloth down. Grunting and heaving, he relieved himself with visible contentment and, as the Poet and the Painter scowled their disgust, he let fly a trumpet fart. Realising he had *nothing with which to wipe himself, he wandered around on all fours in simian style* looking for something and, in the process, pointed his bare and shitty arse at the audience which prompted a universal groan. He decided to use his hand before offering to shake those of his visitors, "Have I once lived to see two honest men?" (5.1.54) he remarked with mock-enthusiasm. Their recoiling was met with his fury: at "You are an alchemist; make gold of that" (112), he reached his hand into the dungheap and smeared their faces with faeces, an outraged Yahoo tearing off the veneer of cultivated refinement.

Timon spoke of his "everlasting mansion" (5.2.100) as the crows gathered portentously above him. He lay down amid his ashes and they descended upon him, the first one sitting on his chest like the goblin from Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* and then, deliberately and carefully pecking out his eyes. (See

comments above about the anointing of the lovers' eyes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* echoing the blinding of Gloucester.) The murder of crows was quite literally that and they scattered with bloodied mouths and talons at the entry of Alcibiades (Gary Oliver). His closing declaration, to use the olive rather than the sword, was small comfort after the bestial depravity of what had gone before and the residing sentiment was the pessimism of Lear: "man's life's as cheap as beast's" (2.2.433).

The tonal distance between this scabrous satire and the season's second comedy could not have been more extreme. Indeed, choosing *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to accompany *Lear* and *Timon* felt like a play too distantly related to them generically. But whereas the *Dream* seemed in the shadow of Doran's successful RSC version, Christopher Luscombe's *Windsor* was justifiably anxious to get as far away as possible from Doran's disastrous musical version (RSC, 2006) which inflicted terrible damage on the play. Doran's production trivialized the closest thing Shakespeare wrote to a city comedy, a genre which satirizes the profoundly ordinary anxieties over money and sex which reside just below the surface of social convention and apparent normality. In turning this dark comedy into a West End romantic musical, Doran demonstrated his incapacity to recognize the play's acuminate vision and blunted its ironic design. Shakespeare's witty and acerbic soap opera was reduced to the most anodyne of Christmas musicals. Rachel Kavanaugh's 2002 RSC production, on the other hand, demonstrated the play's acute awareness of these societal concerns. Set in the late 1940s, the production used post-war deprivation to charge the Windsor atmosphere—Falstaff's aspirant seduction of Mistress Page and Ford is as much financially as erotically motivated. Luscombe's Globe version was somewhere between these two poles. In places, it tapped into the text's caustic comedy and its documentary realism served to point up the self-interest of the Windsor residents. Elsewhere, however, it played to the lowest comic denominator and typified Globe populism.

Yet again the stage had been extended. Janet Bird designed a walkway that ran across and bisected the yard and curved round at each end to connect to the stage. Stage right, the walkway ascended into a humpback bridge so that groundlings could get themselves under it and occupy the yard between it and the downstage edge of the stage. The middle of this walkway widened out into an oblong-shaped platform that contained a stage that flipped over to present variously a knot garden complete with love seat or the severed trunk of Herne's Oak. The set comprised a timber-framed Elizabethan house (echoing the Globe Theatre itself) with a balcony that extended to half the depth of the stage.

Christopher Benjamin played Falstaff as a fruity lecher from a British seaside postcard. He relished the dirty possibilities of lines like: "[Mistress Page] examined my parts with most judicious oeillades" (1.3.51) and he left just the optimal comic pause after Mistress Quickly's "they mistook their erection" before responding with the inevitable *Carry On Shakespeare* line, "So did I mine" (3.5.36). Robin's apparently innocent description of Falstaff's location to Mistress Ford was allowed to ferment into a smutty suggestion: "My master Sir

John is come in at your back door" (3.3.19). But along with this cheeky music-hall muck was some carefully preserved moral insight and this was equally well honed, such as Falstaff's "When gods have hot backs, what shall poor men do?" (5.5.10) or Mistress Page's axiomatic "I will find you twenty lascivious turtles ere one chaste man" (2.1.70).



*The Merry Wives of Windsor*: Serena Evans (Mistress Page), Christopher Benjamin (Falstaff), and Sarah Woodward (Mistress Ford). Photo by John Tramper.

In spite of the production's capacity to run comedy and morality alongside one another, some tricks were missed. The episodes with the laundry basket were played only for laughs with Andrew Havill's Ford discharging a gun into the basket before glumly concluding, "Well, he's not here I seek for" (4.2.138). His attack on the old woman of Brentford was little more than Punch and Judy slapstick and never offered a glimpse of the violence which flows just below the surface of this relentlessly patriarchal society. Indeed Serena Evans's Meg Page and Sara Woodward's Alice Ford were never really much more than comic plot devices and Ford's resolution to "take him [Falstaff] and torture my wife" (3.2.33) was followed by a matter of fact shrug of his shoulders as though he had suggested something quite reasonable. That the audience were encouraged to giggle their assent demonstrated the production's refusal to take seriously the play's darker aspects.

Will Belchambers was an unusually sympathetic Slender and his attempts to woo Anne Page, played by Ellie Piercy, were full of embarrassed and embarrassing pauses as he groped clumsily for the next thing to say. As John Rugby (Timothy Speyer) told Dr Caius (Philip Bird) of his lack of prowess with a weapon, he settled on an altogether more restful occupation: his "Alas, sir, I cannot

fence" (2.3.13) was accompanied by his casting a fishing line into the yard.

Falstaff's comeuppance at Herne's Oak was neatly effected. Half a dozen or so children were got up like the fantastic demons from a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. Their anti-masque revelry began as they emerged from under the walkway (Evans has previously ordered them to "Follow me into the pit" [5.4.2]) so that they were among the groundlings and thus served to erode further the boundary between spectator and player. This breach of decorum was entirely appropriate to such a carnivalesque scene as well as being suited to the openness of the Globe. Falstaff's ecstatic "Let the sky rain potatoes" (5.5.16) was gleefully delivered at the very point that the fairies were about to appear, which made the imminence of his disappointment all the more exquisite. It was a testament to Benjamin's performance that one almost wanted his fantasy threesome to come true. The various denouements followed hard on the heels of this episode but the production hardly paused over any of them. Given that the play's very title alerts us to the importance of marital negotiations, the revelation of the marriage of Fenton and Anne felt perfunctory indeed. While tapping into the seriousness with which the play addresses social concerns such as marriage and fidelity, Luscombe had settled, ultimately, for a less demanding "feel-good" production.

Although *Windsor* felt the least significant of this season's offerings, it was by no means an ineffective production. Perhaps the fact that a perfectly sound (if slightly routine) production is the norm rather than the exception at today's Globe is symptomatic of the achievements already made under Dromgoole's new artistic leadership. If he can maintain the movement of the theater in this positive direction, the Globe may finally and deservedly begin to shed its unfortunate reputation as Shakespeare-meets-Disneyworld.<sup>6</sup> Things at the Globe are looking up.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to the following: Elizabeth Rivlin and Michael W. Shurgot for inviting me to write this review essay and to Farah Karim-Cooper and Penelope Woods of the Globe who read earlier versions of it and provided helpful commentaries. James Lever of the Globe's press office was a model of efficiency with press comps and pictures.
2. See, for instance, Shurgot's account of Rylance as Duke Vincentio in "The Globe 2005 Season," *The Upstart Crow* 25 (2005), 77-91.
3. *The Independent*, 5 May 2008.
4. Dominic Dromgoole, foreword to all the 2008 season's programs, 2.
5. Discussed by Shurgot, *The Upstart Crow* 25 (2005).
6. W. B. Worthen, "Reconstructing the Globe: Constructing Ourselves," *Shakespeare Survey* 52 (1999), 33-45.