8.9: Stagecraft

In addition to understanding Shakespeare’s language and how modern editions can affect how we read and perform his plays, it can be helpful to understand how Shakespeare made theatre, and how that stagecraft can provide insight for performance. Though there were many conditions for which Shakespeare wrote, we will focus on a few that can strongly affect production choices.

*Universal Lighting*

Shakespeare’s playhouses—the Theatre, the Globe, the Blackfriars—were lit by a combination of daylight and candlelight. In the absence of electricity and the ability to control lights, as we might in a blackout in the theatre today, both actors and audience were lit together. Perhaps because of this condition, plays from these periods—Shakespeare’s and others—almost without exception feature characters that talk to the audience. Though there are exceptions in today’s theatre and film (*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* is a classic example), the frequency with which it happened in early modern drama made this direct address a common convention in Shakespearean performance and presents a different kind of challenge for today’s actors and directors who may be more used to dealing with audiences in the dark. The challenge of a seen audience is that they move, they occasionally talk back, and they may or may not be paying attention—and so the actor has to account for a number of variables besides his or her own performance.

*Song and Dance*

Shakespeare’s plays have much more song and dance than we might expect in a modern, realistic, play, putting Shakespeare’s work somewhere between what we might think of as a play and what we would consider a musical. The presence of song and dance in Shakespeare can enliven the piece, set a certain emotional tone, or convey the nature of a particular moment such as the entrance of a king or queen. While we have some of the original music for many of these songs, other tunes have disappeared. Even with the ones we still have, directors and designers may find that the songs or tunes do not fit an updated concept. These songs, signals, and dances present challenges to actors, directors, designers, and technicians who have to navigate them in performance.

*Casting*

Shakespeare wrote for a small company composed exclusively of males. Women were forbidden to take the stage in early modern England, so boys who had not yet gone through vocal changes of puberty played the parts of younger women. The economies of playing companies prevented them from hiring more than usually twelve to eighteen actors. These casting conditions have two major impacts on performance today. First, since women were not allowed to perform in Shakespeare’s plays, there are fewer women’s roles in Shakespeare, meaning practitioners often choose to break conventional casting rules to accommodate their desire for more women in the east, often either by putting women into “breeches” roles (where women play men) or by making a given character a woman instead of a man.

Second, as a result of the small companies, one actor played potentially several small roles in a given production. In performance today, companies may choose to adopt this Shakespearean practice or east a fuller company based on the named characters in a script. The latter option is a common one but can often lose what may have been a clever or
compelling second layer to the performance. If one actor plays a role, say Banquo in Macbeth, who is killed about halfway through the play and returns to the stage later on in the play as Siward, we see an actor who is, in a sense, taking revenge for his own death.

**Embedded Stage Directions**

In very few cases do Shakespeare’s plays state in the stage directions where a scene is taking place, what time it is, what the temperature is, or any of the other given circumstances of the scene. Instead, the plays contain stage directions that are embedded in the dialogue itself or referenced with a prop. If a character is carrying a torch or candle, there’s an embedded cue that it’s nighttime. If it is nighttime, and dark out, there’s a direction for the actor to follow: you probably can’t see very well—that’s why you brought the light. The impact of this embedded stage direction has a direct impact on performance, telling the actor how to behave and, ultimately, how to tell the story more clearly.
Understanding some of the conditions for which Shakespeare wrote, and the conventions at work in the plays —internal cues, easting considerations, and the like —may help some modern practitioners navigate what can sometimes be a daunting, or obstructed, text. At the same time, there are plenty of other resources —new understandings of the text that scholars or previous productions have unveiled, longstanding performance traditions, critical essays on a given play, careful study of original texts, examination of derivative works, training in classical acting techniques, performance itself, and so on —that can help inform directorial choices and acting approaches. Our own imaginations, dispositions, and ideas can also help unlock Shakespeare, both for ourselves and for potential audiences. While we, as audiences or practitioners, can work to better understand Shakespeare, ultimately the quality of the exchange between Shakespeare and ourselves and with each other does not rely solely upon whether we understand how Shakespeare is supposed to work, but simply whether he does work as we enact the plays, speak the language, and engage in the performance. In this sense, Shakespeare is not Shakespeare, the imposing, weighted (and weighty), antiquated, supposedly perfect, monolith we have come to consider, but rather the fresh, sometimes bad, sometimes very good, “new,” alive Shakespeare we can help to create.