



PROJECT MUSE®

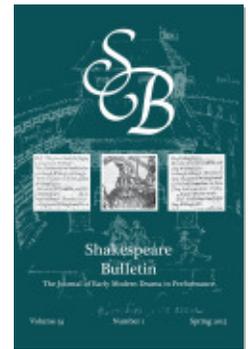
---

## The American Shakespeare Company

Andrea Stevens

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 26, Number 1, Spring 2008, pp. 181-186  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/shb.2008.0037](https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2008.0037)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/shb/summary/v026/26.1stevens.html>

## The American Shakespeare Company

**The American Shakespeare Center 2007 Actors' Renaissance Season and the ASC 2007 Summer/Fall Season 2007 at the Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Virginia.**

*Pericles*, February 9–March 22; *The Duchess of Malfi*, January 25–March 24; *Hamlet First Quarto*, January 11–March 23. *Love's Labor's Lost* June 26–December 8; *Romeo and Juliet* June 21–December 7; *Antony and Cleopatra* August 28–December 9; *The Winter's Tale* July 3–December 8.

ANDREA STEVENS, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*

The most memorable performances of the ASC's 2007 season came out of the Actors' Renaissance Season, a practice begun in 2005 and wisely expanded. During the Renaissance Season, the actors have limited time to rehearse (no more than ten days), operate from "sides" rather than from full scripts, and work without a director or designer. Doing it this way means, as the ASC brochure notes, "putting up the shows Shakespeare's way"—these restrictions thought to reflect the actual working conditions of Shakespeare's professional theater. The final production arises, then, from a period of brief but intense collaboration among all the performers. While some of the ASC actors have registered the potential anxiety the absence of a director produces (suggesting in particular that they feel more "secure" when the ultimate authority behind a production is vested in one person), I suggest that it is precisely this diffusion of directorial authority that shows this company at its best. Possibly because the absence of a director required the actors to lean more heavily on their individual training, the Renaissance Season displayed more sustained and innovative use of music, space, and certainly of dance and movement. These elements are necessary to create visually interesting and dynamic performances—and, given the ASC's commitment to the minimalist staging and universal lighting characteristic of "Original Practices," particularly crucial to shows at the Blackfriars Playhouse. Simply put, OP productions sometimes run the risk of looking under-imagined, and yet rarely do the shows put on in the Renaissance Season seem so.

Consider their visually striking production of *Pericles*. In the absence of a designer, the actors chose their own costuming, the main actors in each "world" (Tyre, Antioch, Tarsus, Pentapolis, Ephesus, Mytilene) responsible for developing that world's central design scheme. The re-

sult did not feel like haphazard eclecticism; on the contrary, the several worlds of *Pericles* were kept scrupulously distinct even as they merged to create a coherent whole. The actors' freedom allowed for some inspired costuming choices. A raid on the theater's *Christmas Carol* stock created a Bawd (Miriam Donald) and Pander (Christopher Seiler) straight out of Victorian melodrama. Chomping a cigar and sporting gravity-defying décolletage, Donald's lascivious exchanges with the confused Marina (Susan Heyward) in 4.2 were genuinely uncomfortable: "You shall fare well, you shall have the difference of all complexions;" "—are you a woman?" Heyward also doubled as the nameless and largely speechless "Daughter to Antiochus," her face-obscuring veil firing the audience's curiosity and also, I suggest, helping Heyward complicate Gower's opening condemnation of her as a "bad child" whose beauty lures her father into incest (John Harrell, here proving once again his talent for making even the most convoluted prose limpidly clear). As Heyward poignantly played it, the Daughter seemed more object than subject, entirely at the mercy of those around her. The inhabitants of Tarsus wore vaguely Asian-inspired robes, Cleon (James Keegan) and Dionyza (Vanessa Morosco) moving in slow tandem behind fans. In a play obsessed with the passage of time, this ritualistic or stylized movement captured something essential about the pace of famine-struck Tarsus. The dance and gestural elements of this production were very strong, spectacularly on display here in Tarsus and also during a joyous dance competition that substituted for the "joust" scene in Pentapolis. I was happy to be reminded that the visual resources of theater—then, now, tomorrow—necessarily encompass the body of the performer, and I would love to see the ASC experiment more with this kind of movement.

A melancholic Pericles, René Thornton Jr. also made a sympathetic, gentle, and thoroughly domestic Antonio in the *Duchess of Malfi*, one whose masculinity couldn't have differed more sharply from the other men on stage (or, to be sure, from the "masculinity" of his powerful Duchess). All the characters save Antonio, moreover, seemed sex-saturated: the leather-clad, incestuous Ferdinand (Greg Phelps); the appetitive Cardinal (Ben Curns, who at one point entered with his mistress Julia wrapped around his waist); and certainly James Keegan's seductive Bosola, brilliantly played here as an isolated, marginalized figure increasingly disgusted with the world and his own role in it. In Thornton's rendition, Antonio was far from an upstart schemer. When the Duchess (a superlative Morosco) proposed marriage he seemed genuinely surprised by the turn of events—and touched by the Duchess's sudden and uncharacter-

istic show of vulnerability. The private marriage the Duchess seeks with Antonio made perfect sense, given her alternatives (“why should I, of all the other princes in the world, be cased up like a holy relic?”). Perhaps the show’s most memorable moment (second only to the “dance of madmen” in 4.2) came in the Duchess’ macabre death. Here, the actors made impressive use of the space of the stage in a complex strangulation scene. As she stood in the open trapdoor, the Duchess was strangled by ropes attached to her from three different directions and held by black-clad executioners stationed at different points of the stage, including above. The ropes pulled taut; the Duchess crumpled, her limp body then carefully laid out in her coffin to the singing of a dirge. Indeed, the moment was so effective one felt it ought to have ended the show—how could any action resume after this? I happened to see *The Duchess of Malfi* the night before it opened officially, and not all the actors were off book for the performance. These visible rough edges didn’t detract from the overall effect; in fact, it was exciting knowing that we were watching an experiment still in progress (invited behind the curtain, so to speak). Perhaps the audience’s sense of excitement at watching something inherently risky gives this season its special edginess.

A formidable presence onstage—his Mercutio (noted below) was electrifying—Ben Curns was a riveting Hamlet (*First Quarto*). Scholarship is divided as to the “badness” of this quarto, or whether indeed the epithet “bad” distinguishes, in any meaningful way, among the surviving texts of *Hamlet*. Whatever the origins of the text, the First Quarto is fast, action-driven, and a refreshing change from the canonized *Hamlet*. Curns ably defamiliarized the “to be or not to be” speech (in Q1, “to be or not to be—ay, there’s the point”), delivering it as a collaborative, interactive speech act rather than a hermetic meditation in the tradition of, say, an Olivier musing to himself on top of the Elsinore battlements. In particular, the repetition of “ay, ay” throughout the soliloquy implied his thoughts were only just occurring to him. Curns also ably solicited the audience’s participation when he caught the King at prayer. With a dagger pointed to the King’s ear, Curns delivered his line “. . . shall I kill the King?” to an audience member seated onstage, demanding that viewer’s consent to his proposed revenge. Garbed in a sober schoolgirl outfit, Ofelia (Heyward) vividly contrasted with the much larger and older Hamlet, and the disparity of their physiques made for a disturbing confrontation in the “nunnery” scene (Curns also played Antiochus to Heyward’s Daughter in *Pericles*). It seemed to me that the performers were crisply communicating *all* the possible choices in that scene: that Hamlet was performing this

rage for the benefit of his uncle and Corambis, both concealed onstage; that he was genuinely angry at what he took to be Ofelia's duplicity ("where's your father?"); that he knew he was being watched; and that he forgot he was being watched as the scene turned into an oddly intimate, if violent, private altercation between lovers. Curns and Heyward ended up on the floor, Hamlet writhing on top of a terrified Ofelia.

In sum, the 2007 Renaissance Season shows were visually arresting and frequently surprising. By contrast, certain moments of the ASC Summer/Fall Season felt static in comparison, as if more time to rehearse somehow yielded less urgency, and therefore less theatrical capital (I found the pastoral parts of *The Winter's Tale* interminable, for example). One of the most notable things about this company is its use of popular music in preludes and interludes. The 2007 season was marred by what struck me as an inexplicable staging choice: the decision to confine the majority of these musical interludes to the balcony (for example, *Romeo and Juliet's* opening number "Under Pressure"; "Hazy Shade of Winter" in *The Winter's Tale*). Whether the choice to wedge musicians together above the stage conforms to some newly-discovered principle of OP staging, I'm not sure. I *am* sure the decision leached energy from the playhouse instead of infusing the room with color and noise. Director Jaq Bessell's wise choice to buck this decision for the opening sequence of her *Love's Labour's Lost* (the summer's standout show) should, I hope, force the ASC to revisit their desire to imprison their music. *Love's Labour* opened in a riotous can-can club, a love-struck Berowne (Jan Knightley) circling around the dancers and zeroing in on the woman who would later appear as his Rosaline (Elisabeth S. Rodgers, here delivering a stunning torch song). Dance choreographer Doreen Bechtol (also appearing as Moth) deserves praise for this scene's composition, as does Kimberly Morris for her vivid costumes. The play's transition in the fifth act from comedy to tragedy (with the news of the death of the French king) was swift and stunning.

*Love's Labour's Lost*, at least at its conclusion, therefore hit the saddest note of the season while the first few acts of *Romeo and Juliet* hit the funniest. The ball at the Capulets was represented as an exuberant dance to "Twist and Shout," and at this moment one felt far removed from tragedy. A veritable engine of comedy, Mercutio (Curns) nailed every bawdy joke and mounted a compelling crusade against the delusions of romantic love, the play clearly turning dark after his death. Granted, the ASC advertises its ability to "show the world how much comedy Shakespeare wrote into his drama and how much drama he put in his comedies."

ASC artistic director Jim Warren also writes in his notes to *Antony and Cleopatra* that “if you think laughter doesn’t belong in Shakespeare’s tragedies, I’m glad you are here to join us.” Certainly tragedy and comedy are not, and ought not to be, separate phenomena, but I for one would like ASC directors to consider what might get lost in the over-solicitation of laughter or the quest to keep Shakespeare “familiar.” *Antony and Cleopatra* ended jarringly abruptly, the actors concluding the play posing in the “Egyptian” stance familiar to Bangles fans. Antony (Knightley) in this production was consistently self-mocking, often mugging to the audience and sharply undercutting his own death scene; I’d have liked to have seen in him some element of the Antony for whom Enobarbus (Curns) died of a broken heart—the only character in all of Shakespeare so to die—but I didn’t. There was much to admire about this well-paced production (Glenzer as Octavia and Harrell as Caesar, for example) but I don’t always want Shakespeare to be “immediate and recognizable” (Warren’s notes). The power of *Antony and Cleopatra* lies in its alien or mysterious or infinitely various parts—Cleopatra’s tantalizingly oblique “something it is I would—Oh, my oblivion is a very Antony,” our sense of her as a series of performances without center and without end. This Cleopatra (Rodgers) seemed to confirm the narrower Roman view of her, rather than Antony’s more expansive vision.

I conclude with an arresting stage picture from *The Winter’s Tale* (directed by Kathleen Powers). At the play’s end, Paulina (Glenzer) pushed out a statue of Hermione (Rodgers) on a pedestal. We were clearly meant to understand that Hermione was, in fact, stone. The statuesque Rodgers impressively managed her appearance as literal statue—she was unblinking, unbreathing, completely immobile. When she came to life (with a sharp, prolonged intake of breath), the moment was played as miraculous: where she was stone, now she is flesh, and the dead wife is restored to Leontes (although this scene focused more on Hermione’s reunion with Perdita, the reunion with the husband acted as bittersweet, to say the least). Textual purists might blink at this—after all, the scene includes several lines teasingly acknowledging that the statue seems to breathe (“Would you not deem it breathed? And that those veins did verily bear blood?”), and earlier it is suggested Paulina has been feeding somebody, somewhere, several times a day. These lines were not cut from the production. Nevertheless, Powers clearly committed to this choice, in part, I think, to preserve the character of Paulina, whose anger would seem disturbingly comprehensive if she were able to conspire to keep Leontes from his living wife for so long (indeed, Hermione, if alive, would also be-

long to this conspiracy; she tells Perdita that she has “preserved herself” in the hopes of seeing her daughter one day). In other words, if Hermione’s reanimation is unambiguously miraculous, then the women of the play are unambiguously good, the reawakening proof of something like divine intervention compensating for the death of Mamillius (Heyward). The moment was visually beautiful, Rodgers’ performance of “stone” flawless—but I confess I regretted the absence of a Hermione and Paulina in long league with each other. I prefer my magic to belong to this world: two women keeping their pact to punish Leontes for sixteen years, and yet still able to find forgiveness. What might on the face of it seem to be a risky directorial decision—to have Hermione rise from the dead—ended up ironing out some of the play’s important complexities. The Summer/Fall season left me thinking about theatrical process—and what certain forms of divine directorial intervention (within an OP framework) end up sacrificing. In the pursuit of laughter or accessibility or intimacy, does this theater sometimes overlook wonder?



## Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre

### Shakespeare at the Globe Theatre, London, Summer 2007

PETER J. SMITH, *Nottingham Trent University*

#### *Othello* May 4–August 19, 2007

As each generation’s freshman lecture notes make clear, generic distinction is not only about thematic difference but about varieties of dramatic construction. Genre is unfair, for while comedies allow a more or less even spread of lines across the whole company, and therefore facilitate an ensemble effort (among which a single weak performance can be allowed to fade mercifully into the background), tragedies prioritise an individual—Richard III, Coriolanus, Lear. Occasionally two members of the company carry the production’s weight upon their shoulders—Antony and Cleopatra, Juliet and Romeo, Iago and Othello. In the case of these pairings, the dramatic structure can make matters even worse. If the pair is not evenly balanced, the virtues of one performance can serve to magnify the shortcomings of the other. Likewise, a poor performance by one