Shakespeare’s American Playhouse: The Blackfriars Theatre

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Staunton in Virginia simultaneously fits nowhere and everywhere when trying to place it historically. Staunton (pronounced ‘Stann ton’ by locals) is situated in Virginia, one of the oldest colonial sites in the United States. It boasts colonial style buildings and the Frontier Culture Museum which has English, Irish and German historical buildings purchased and flown from their countries of origin. Staunton also offers visitors the chance to have afternoon tea at ‘Anne Hathaway’s Cottage’ in a reconstructed timber-framed building filled with pictures of the British monarchy and descriptions of how to eat a scone correctly. The city itself is constructed around performativity, so it is no surprise that this is the place chosen for the American Shakespeare Center’s replica Blackfriars theatre. Staunton itself feels like Stratford-upon-Avon; shops and cafés are keen to promote their proximity to the theatre (and Shakespeare) in much the same way that you can visit Hathaway Tea Rooms or the Shakespeare Hospice Bookshop on a visit to the Bard’s home town.

Visiting Staunton (<http://www.visitstaunton.com/>) leaves you with a curious feeling as though you have fallen down a rabbit hole into a world where centuries and cultures co-exist. This feeling intensifies when you explore the site. The front of the building is a nod to early modern building techniques, with a timber board and peg design. A tour of the playhouse draws the eye to the building style, encouraging guests to appreciate the attention to detail. Inside the building the foyer is modern with toilets, a giftshop and a lift. According to the tour guide, this was a deliberate decision so that when theatre-goers step into the theatre, its early modern appearance astonishes them. The ‘wow’ factor of the space is heightened by the juxtaposition of modern and early modern.

The playhouse itself is a beautiful jewel of a theatre; constructed from Virginian oak and lined with early modern style tapestries to improve the acoustics, it offers audiences the opportunity to step into another world. History and the present are side-by-side in the playhouse – with electric candle bulbs in wrought iron chandeliers and spotlight up-lighting. The seats in the pit have little wooden backrests in a bid to comfort a modern audience. Cushions can also be hired, like at the Globe in London, for those who find the gallery wooden seats too uncomfortable.

**The Fall 2017 Season**

The Shakespearean productions themselves mimic this curious dichotomy of time and place with early modern ‘Elizabethan-esque’ costumes and modern songs. The first production of the fall season was *3* *Henry VI* directed by Jim Warren and Jenny Bennett. Before the show, Allison Glenzer, part of the theatre’s resident troupe of twelve, appeared on stage with a basket of red and white roses and advised the audience to ‘choose a side’. The production strove to get the audience involved, handing out shakers to those occupying the gallant stools and imploring them to become part of the battle scenes. Whilst this worked for the first half of the production, most of the gallants chose not to join in as the play progressed. Those situated in the upper side galleries in the second row struggled to see the action taking place directly beneath them and many left in the interval.

During emotionally charged moments in the production it became difficult to follow the dialogue due to the speed it was spoken and the sometimes-excessive volume. Emotion, particularly fury was often conveyed by shouting and this made it hard to engage with. Overall, whilst the production had enjoyable moments it relied on bombast instead of subtlety. The good acoustics of the space mean that the actors did not need to shout, and as repertory members they should be accustomed to that fact. Chris Johnston’s King Henry stood apart in offering a more nuanced performance. Johnstone directly addressed particular members of the audience and fostered the illusion of friendship. In Act 2 Scene 1 Johnstone’s Henry sat on the stage, close to hell but clasping a bible to his chest when the Gamekeepers capture him. The physical staging of the scene foreshadows Henry’s death. Johnstone did not overplay the moment, offering the audience a beautiful and distressing scene in the midst of a verbally aggressive production.

In contrast, the other two Shakespearean productions of the fall season, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Much Ado About Nothing* were more successful. The two productions had different directors, Matt Radford Davies and Jenny Bennett respectively, but for both plays the decision was taken to dress the stage using ivy and floral garlands for both productions – inviting the audience to view them as a pair as the Royal Shakespeare Company had done in 2016 (see Peter J. Smith’s reviews in *Cahiers* *Élisabéthains*, 88 (2015), 182-6) – and a tapestry hung in front of the discovery space to give the stage four exits and entrances. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was far more energetic than *3 Henry VI*,and the actors appeared to enjoy taking part in the production more. Like *3 Henry VI,* the costumes were early modern in style, but the Princess (Shunté Lofton) wore a red leatherette corset. To a non-academic audience, the costumes looked authentic and they complemented the theatre itself. The dresses were bustled, and at one point the women were on stage in just their corsets and shifts – which caused visible discomfort to some members of the audience.

Both productions offered substantially more audience interaction, particularly with those sat on the gallant stools. During *Love’s Labour’s Lost* Nathaniel, the priest (Allie Babich) hobbled on stage with a stick, and forced one of the audience members off the stool so he could rest. Berowne, Longaville, Dumaine and Ferdinand handed the audience furry animals attached to sticks from the hunt. However, it was Don Armado (Chris Johnston) who stole the show with his ridiculously over-exaggerated Spanish accent and gesture.

**Universal Lighting and Renaissance Principles**

In her 2011 essay *The American Shakespeare Center: They Do It with The Lights On*, Marina Favila (*Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 81 (2012), 39-45) discussed the origins of the theatre and the company’s distinctive style. Each production still follows their Renaissance principles of original staging conditions: universal lighting, doubling, gender-blind casting, production length (brisk), minimal sets, costume and sound, regardless of whether they are touring or based in the Blackfriars theatre. Their decision to continue to light the audience and playhouse immediately distinguishes them from the only other reconstructed indoor playhouse, the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in London. Each production in the 2017 Fall season embraces the lack of fourth wall by taking every opportunity directly to address individual members of the audience who are visible not only to the actors, but also other members of the audience. Rather than make the audience uncomfortable, this actually has the effect of making the audience feel as though they too inhabit the world of the play.

The non-Shakespearean *Peter and the Star-Catcher*, whilst adhering to many of the Renaissance principles set out above, decorated the stage and used considerably more props than the three Shakespearean productions. Ropes, boxes, and billowing sheets were used to turn the stage into a ship. The effect of this was to remove the production from the theatre. It felt as though the production could have taken place on any stage, whereas the three early modern productions constantly drew attention to the space. Whilst the choice of electric chandelier lighting has come under fire in Paul Menzer’s recent book *Shakespeare in the Theatre: The American Shakespeare Center* (2017), they offer the audience this juxtaposition of old and new; the electric lighting sits cheek by jowl alongside the early modern costumes and they work in much the same way as the Wanamaker’s candlelight – highlighting the jewellery and sumptuous costumes.

Aside from the beauty of the space – and the Alice in Wonderland town of Staunton – the Blackfriars offers audiences layers of meaning within its productions. The resident troupe of twelve actors means that audiences see the same people in a variety of roles. The effect of this is that the stage is crowded with ghosts of performances past. If you’re there for the weekend and you choose to see two or more productions, you’ll see actors referencing previous roles from the night before with a hand gesture or an expression. For comedic scenes this creates a moment with the audience where they feel as though they have been let in on a secret, offering a hilarity that you would not find if you watched two consecutive productions at a theatre with more than one troupe. This relationship between actor and audience (which feels stronger when one sits on the lower level of the theatre), feels the most like ‘original practices’, and it is easy to imagine that Shakespeare’s audience at the Globe and the Blackfriars would have felt this relationship.

**What does the space offer?**

The playhouse offers audiences a distinctive, energetic style of Shakespeare that is unapologetic in its modernising infringements. Visiting the Blackfriars feels like attending a fancy-dress party – you know it’s not Elizabethan or Jacobean Britain but the speed, the audience engagement and the beautiful space sweep the audience up into a Shakespearean adventure. And according to Ralph Cohen, the Executive Director of the American Shakespeare Center and author of *ShakesFear and How to Cure It: A Handbook for Teaching Shakespeare* (2007), enjoying Shakespeare is what it is all about.

Biography

Michelle Manning is a doctoral researcher at Anglia Ruskin University. Her thesis examines two indoor theatre reconstructions the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse (London) and the Blackfriars Theatre (Virginia). Her thesis questions the impact the two theatres have had on the academic and cultural landscape of each country, and resulting wider implications on the perception of early modern drama in a modern climate.