

## Play Workshops at The Globe

At the end of February, a group of actors, theatre practitioners and academics met at Shakespeare's Globe to focus on the casting and playing practices of The King's Men for the original Globe stage. The workshops were led by **Dr Lucy Munro**, who was prompted by two quotations separated by three centuries:

*I wish they had Printed in the last Age (so I call the times before the Rebellion) the Actors Names over against the parts they Acted, as they have done since the Restauration. And thus one might have guest at the Action of the Men, by the Parts which we now Read in the Old Plays.*

**James Wright<sup>1</sup>, 1699.**

and:

*The replica of Shakespeare's Globe itself will be of no greater informative value than any other experimental stage setting for Shakespeare, unless we can re-create, at the same time, an approximation of the model of the pre-Commonwealth companies for whose use it was designed.*

**David Bradley<sup>2</sup>, 1992.**

The challenge was to explore the possibilities of guessing at the Action of the original players, and the playing practices of the company. As there is a group of plays, written between 1629 and 1632, for which almost complete cast lists are available, Munro had selected scenes from each of these, asking the actors present to assume the roles assigned to the same actor in each of these plays.

The most famous actors from the Elizabethan stage, of course, are Edward Alleyn and Richard Burbage, followed by clowns like Richard Tarleton or Will Kemp. Equally well known to their contemporaries, and with reputations surviving well into the Restoration period were the Jacobean/Caroline actors John Lowin and Joseph Taylor. Both of them played leading roles, and both became shareholders and later still housekeepers – that is general administrators – of the King's Men's Company, taking over from Henry Condell and John Hemmings, who were also editors of the First Folio.

John Lowin had originally been apprenticed to a goldsmith, and is first noted as an actor in Philip Henslowe's diary of 1602 as a member of Worcester's Company. By the time play-going was resumed again after the accession of King James, Lowin was a member of The King's Men, the company having been promoted from the Lord Chamberlain's very soon after the coronation (for which the established actors were supplied with cloth for royal livery). During his time with them, he graduated from small parts such as Macro in Ben

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<sup>1</sup> James Wright, *Historia Histrionica*, London, 1699 - p3.

<sup>2</sup> David Bradley, *From Text to Performance in the Elizabethan Theatre: Preparing the Play for the Stage* (Cambridge University Press, 1992) - p5.

Jonson's *Sejanus* to leading roles. He is credited with being the original Henry VIII, and was remembered for his Falstaff, Volpone, and Bosola (*The Duchess of Malfi*). His roles in Philip Massinger's plays include Eubulus, the wise old counsellor in *The Picture*, the tyrannical Domitian in *The Roman Actor* and Flaminius, the villain of *Believe As You List*. Villainous roles seem to have been his speciality.

Despite this it is Joseph Taylor who is credited with the role of Iago, as well as that of Hamlet. He was already a well-known actor when he was brought into the King's Men's Company in 1619. He started playing with them shortly after Burbage's death. Hamlet is a known Burbage role, so it is generally agreed that he took over from him as the lead actor. Certainly in the six plays which were under consideration his role is always one of the longest and most prestigious.

Those plays are *The Picture* and *Believe As You List*, both by Philip Massinger, *The Deserving Favourite* by Lodowick Carlell, a Court playwright, *The Soddered Citizen*, generally attributed to John Clavell, an ex-highwayman whose sentence of death was repealed by King Charles, *The Swisser* by Arthur Wilson, and a revival of John Fletcher's *The Wild Goose Chase*. Fortunately, the plays provide a cross section of genres, comedy, tragedy, and tragicomedy and, while Fletcher and Massinger were professional in-house King's Men's playwrights, the others were not.

### **Playing Parts Within Parts**

After an introduction to the plays and the King's Men personnel, the participating actors adopted one company member each and received their scripts. They then went away with the task of getting under the skin of a former member of their profession, dead for three hundred and fifty years or thereabouts, who had left no autobiographical notes to help them. They would return ten days later to act out the excerpts on the Globe stage, after receiving minimal stage directions by co-ordinator James Wallace.

In the event they were individually and collectively able to confirm many current assumptions. Philip Bird, who had undertaken to represent Joseph Taylor, had earlier offered the proposition that the leading players would be in an excellent position, since they were employing the playwrights, to ensure that their own roles were tailored to their liking. As he worked on the Taylor roles, he found his supposition confirmed. Although not typecast, Taylor roles always contain rhetorical speeches which give the actor an opportunity to demonstrate his skill and charisma. His characters, in the selected plays, had dignity and honour, requiring a trust between audience and character. Bird noted a tendency among his characters for intimate soliloquies with the audience, to whom he would turn for advice or explanation.

In direct contrast, Oliver Senton, who was reprising the Lowin roles, found a man ready to perform in any part, large or small(ish), hero or villain. He felt that Lowin was big in every way, stature, presence and ability, with an enormous

range. In the plays under consideration he was variously wise, good, wicked, forthright, devious, eloquent, and tongue-tied.

Both actors felt that there was an opposition in the characters they played and a chemistry between the men. Bird described it as fire and ice; Senton as an intuitive as opposed to an analytic approach.

Another of the actors studied was Richard Sharpe, whose career gives a poignant reminder of the shorter life expectancy of those days. He was born around 1602 and apprenticed to an adult actor in 1616. He played female roles during his 8-year apprenticeship and must have been exceptionally promising because he played the lead in John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* before moving on to young romantic leads — the type in all those plays selected in which he appeared. His career was cut short by early death in 1632.

The roles originally played by boy actors were all taken by women for this exercise. John Honeyman, a boy actor, had progressed from female parts to his first adult roles during the period, so that Claire Dutton playing the complex female heroines, Sophia in *The Picture* and Clarinda in *The Deserving Favourite*, became acutely aware of the drop in status when she read the minor roles assigned to Honeyman in the later plays.

So how much was achieved by the workshops? Certainties are elusive at a distance of more than three hundred and fifty years, over such a tiny cross-section of the plays written for the early modern theatres, and with little testimony from individual actors. In the main, empirical evidence tended to confirm reasonable scholarly suppositions; the in-house playwrights wrote to the strengths of individual players and tended to write plays including all the major actors; the leading players invariably played leading roles; and if a play lacked a suitable part for one of them, he was simply left out.

One play which did produce a surprise was *The Wild Goose Chase*, a comedy tailored to the company by their in-house playwright, in which the two major players are cast contrary to custom — Joseph Taylor as the unprincipled womaniser determined not to marry, and the articulate John Lowin as a bashful lover tongue-tied in the presence of women. It was generally agreed to be a piece of fun, offering wide opportunities for actively engaging the audience. This is a play for which we do have some comment by the two original actors. Published in 1652 for their direct benefit — both having fallen on hard times during the Commonwealth — Lowin and Taylor wrote an affectionate dedication for the play; so I leave the last word with them:

*We wish that you may have the same kind of joy in perusing of it as we had in the acting. So Exeunt, Your Gratefull Servants, John Lowin, Joseph Taylor.*

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[from *The Marlowe Society Newsletter 26* (Spring 2006)]