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Practice-as-Research and Original Practices

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Since the 1990s, two related but distinct movements have influenced the way in which scholars of early modern drama have used performance practice in their research. On the one hand, emerging from practice-based theater studies departments, is the discourse of “practice-as-research” (hereafter “PaR”); on the other, coming largely from the professional theater, is the “Original Practices” movement exemplified by work of the reconstructed Shakespeare’s Globe and the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia. Though these movements had different origins, they now overlap to a considerable extent in the work of scholar-practitioners exploring the drama of the early modern period. This article traces the histories of these practices, unpicking their differences but also exploring the productive middle ground between the two. It addresses some of the commonly-held apprehensions (and misapprehensions) about PaR as a tool for theater history, makes some observations about best practice, and argues that what are sometimes held to be PaR’s greatest liabilities—its indeterminacy, its open-endedness, its situatedness within the present, and its collaboration with non-academics—may in fact be its greatest assets.

Practice-as-Research

Several overlapping terms have been coined to describe the use of practical performance work as part of a research enquiry; among the most common are “practice-as-research,” “performance-as-research,” “performance-led research,” and “performance-based research.” Scholars specializing in this kind of work have come up with various taxonomies to describe the differences between these terms, and some are more common than others in particular parts of the world: Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter note that “practice-as-

research” emerged as the favored term in the UK in the 1990s, for example, while they trace a different genealogy for “performance-as-research” in the US (xvii-xviii). Robin Nelson distinguishes “practice-as-research” from “practice-based research” on the grounds that whereas the latter describes “research which draws from, or is about, practice but which is articulated in traditional word-based forms (books or articles),” the former “involves a research project in which practice ... is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (10, 8-9). John Freeman, on the other hand, uses “practice-based” to describe any research in which performance “forms the core of the contribution to knowledge,” and “practice-led” for projects that lead “primarily to new and/or advanced understandings about practice” (62-63). For Riley and Hunter, “practice as research” suggests performance-based work, while “practice-based research” has “a wider reach across the arts and sciences” (xvii). In the absence of a clear consensus as to the distinctions between these terms, I use the term “practice-as-research” to describe any scholarly work in which performance practice constitutes a major part of the research enquiry.¹

Work of this sort makes an implicit claim that artistic practice can lead to knowledge in a way that is, as Baz Kershaw puts it, “cognate to established scholarly research procedures and techniques” (“Transdisciplinary Innovation” 63). James Peck notes that PaR projects are united by “a way of seeking knowledge,” in that they enlist “theatrical practice as a mode of inquiry, an investigative process to learn something of import that they did not previously know” (ix). In a similar vein, Estelle Barrett describes PaR as “the production of knowledge” that could not have been achieved through other research processes, a demonstration “that knowledge is derived from doing and from the senses” (1). As she observes, this understanding of what constitutes knowledge is a subtle challenge to more traditional attitudes towards scholarly research, privileging the subjective, the embodied, the collaborative, and the provisional. It could be argued that PaR projects facilitate what the

social anthropologist Tim Ingold has called “knowing *from the inside*,” a form of knowledge that inheres “in skills of perception and capacities of judgement that develop in the course of direct, practical and sensuous engagements with our surroundings” (5).

A key area of debate amongst PaR practitioners is thus the extent to which the practice itself constitutes the research output, and the extent to which that practice must be disseminated via subsequent documentation. This concern with documentation is partly due to PaR’s history as a tool for research assessment. In the UK, though researchers had drawn on practical performance work for decades beforehand, the specific discourse of PaR emerged as a response to the government’s Research Assessment Exercises (RAE) in 1992 and 1996, which judged the quality of university departments’ research outputs and allocated research funding accordingly; as Riley and Hunter explain, “the humanities paradigm of written monographs, essays and articles” meant that several theater studies departments whose work was largely practice-based were excluded from assessment in the 1992 exercise, prompting the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments (SCUDD) to develop a PaR Working Group in preparation for the 1996 RAE (xvii). Kershaw, who chaired this Working Group, subsequently led the five-year “Practice as Research in Performance” (PARIP) research project at the University of Bristol (2001-06), and in this capacity he found himself “queasy about the officially produced paradox that the traces of a creative performance had more value than the event itself. Is an empty plate always the best part of a meal?” (“Live Events and Documents” 25). As Kershaw’s rhetorical question implies, many scholar-practitioners involved in PaR have been keen to develop strategies by which the practice is enabled (at least in part) to speak for itself

All creative practice, of course, produces embodied knowledge of some sort; the challenge for scholar-practitioners is thus to distinguish practice which is “cognate to established scholarly research procedures and techniques” from that which is not. In 1998,

the second SCUDD PaR Working Group suggested that it may be useful for individuals to determine whether their creative work “has a definite ‘research imperative’ or has a predominantly ‘creative’ or ‘professional’ imperative,” though they concluded that “any creative practice may qualify as research when the practice can be shown to interrogate itself, it locates itself within its research context, and to give rise to other forms of discourse” (Piccini). In 2002, Melissa Trimingham warned that PaR was “doing itself no favours by claiming that ‘all practice is research,’” and argued that practice “does not necessarily contribute to research until it is subject to analysis and commentary using a language that aims to be as clear and unambiguous as possible” (54). In order to qualify as research, she argued, practice “must be for the benefit of others apart from the researchers themselves”:

Research outcomes cannot be kept as the personal insight of the practitioner and/or viewer, claiming for example that the knowledge is “embodied” and untranslatable into words, or too complicated to translate into terms everyone can understand. (54)

Trimingham also insisted that “researchers should be honest with themselves in advance about their hypotheses,” since all research, “generally speaking, begins with some kind of starting point of belief which will be modified” (58). For Trimingham, such a hypothesis may be either “a declared statement or an undeclared hunch” (58); Kershaw concurs, seeing a “question” or a “hunch” as one of the “not-without-which” starting-points of any PaR project (“Transdisciplinary Innovation” 65). But it is equally a central tenet of PaR that “outcomes” are provisional, that such research is iterative, and that the questions or hunches with which a researcher starts are likely to lead to new questions, or new hunches. Trimingham advocates a “spiral model” for PaR in which “progress is not linear but circular: a spiral which constantly

returns us to our original point of entry but with renewed understanding” (56). The aim of the research, she says, “is always to ask a better question, not to reach a point where no more questions need to be asked (as might be the case in a linear model of progression)” (57).

Broadly speaking, PaR work in the study of Shakespeare and early modern theater currently tends to divide along the lines of the “and.” I surveyed a number of recent PaR projects in the field, and found that specifically Shakespearean projects tended to be driven by research questions that were rather different from those underpinning practical explorations of the work of Shakespeare’s contemporaries or predecessors. While the Shakespearean projects I surveyed were diverse, they tended to focus entirely on *modern* practice; in Rob Conkie’s words, on “how and what early English theatre might mean *today* rather than in its own context” (“Practice as Research” 2-3). Thus, for example, Conkie’s own PaR work has investigated the ways in which “Original Practices” work can “resonate” for contemporary Australian audiences (*Henry IV, Part 1*, 2011-12), or what happens to *Hamlet* “if the play is Indigenized” (*Hamlet: Remember Me*, 2013) (17). Bridget Escolme’s workshop production of *Coriolanus* in Minnesota in 2006 explored possibilities for bringing historical playtexts “into productive relationship with our own political crises and concerns” (“Living Monuments” 183). Andy Lavender’s work on a multimedia production of *The Tempest* (2009-13) was an examination of “contemporary multimedia production and Shakespearean dramaturgy”, an attempt “to make theatre that figures social process and digital culture today” (3-4). Dani Bedau and D. J. Hopkins’ “Shakespeare Laboratory” at San Diego State University (2013) explored “the capacities for producing a distinctly ‘Shakespearean’ effect from the interaction of live performers and new media”, investigating questions connected to modern audience reception and new technologies (150). Using similarly scientific terminology, Jonathan Heron describes the “performance laboratories” at the University of Warwick (2009-13) that led to the development of Fail Better Productions’

Discords (after Shakespeare), an “interdisciplinary collaboration with both philosophers and psychiatrists at the university”, and Ian Rickson’s 2011 production of *Hamlet* for London’s Young Vic (232-3).²

The projects listed above all conform to Trimmingham’s understanding of PaR as an iterative process. Bedau and Hopkins’ “iteratively developed collaborative research project” evidently followed a model similar to Trimmingham’s spiral: their student-researchers were asked “to articulate a critical question prior to the start of work on each discrete performance,” to review their work afterwards, “to make adjustments and then to run their experiments again” (145, 149). Heron likewise describes the Warwick workshops as “experimental ‘trial and error’ processes” in which students were presented with “performance problems” and invited “to investigate these problems through embodied action”, then brought back together on a weekly basis to continue these investigations, “informed by dramaturgical research, archival study and previous experiments” (232, 234). Lavender’s *Tempest* project was developed over several “work-in-progress” productions, allowing the work “to be reviewed, and subsequently reiterated (or developed differently)” (12); Escolme notes that by the end of her month-long *Coriolanus* project, the questions underpinning it “had shifted somewhat” and it was now “primarily exploring the role of space, and performers’ and spectators’ bodies in space” (“Living Monuments” 171). Conkie observes that while his initial research questions tended to be answered by his practical work, his subsequent documentation of that practice often opened up new, unexpected questions (“Practice as Research” 17-18). We might thus think of “the work of Practice as Research”, he suggests, “as an iterative process constituted by a succession of extra-generative outcomes in various, evolving, and sometimes surprising forms” (11). Indeed, as Escolme has observed elsewhere, “practice, however controlled, always produces meaning in excess of authorial intention” (“Being Good” 90). It is arguably this “excess” that makes PaR such a productive

and exciting research methodology. Bedau and Hopkins measured the success of their project on the “excess knowledge” produced: “work that *exceeds* the parameters of the assignment, the syllabus, and the walls of the classroom” (150).

Much of this, of course, is also true of any artistic process. What distinguishes such activities as *research* is the reflexive attention paid to the developing work, at strategic intervals, by the practitioner-researchers, and the openness of the work to that evolving thinking. Though both of Heron’s projects contributed to public performances—notably Rickson’s *Hamlet*, which developed aspects of the students’ work with his professional cast—Heron identifies the *process* as constituting the PaR, and the students’ own public performances as merely part of that iterative cycle “rather than output or end point” (234). This emphasis on process rather than product may be a useful challenge to the tendency in Shakespearean performance criticism to think of performance as a manifestation or interpretation of text, rather than as activity in its own right; PaR focuses us on what *happens* in performance, inviting us to investigate practice in all its indeterminacy.

The inescapable *presence* of PaR work has led some commentators, including some of its own practitioners, to argue that it is an inappropriate method for researching theater history. Bedau and Hopkins are careful to distance themselves from the “Original Practices” movement, declaring themselves “suspicious” of any practices “that make claims to, or even seek, an ‘authentic Shakespeare,’” and emphasizing that what they seek to learn from their PaR work “is not necessarily, perhaps never about Shakespeare, but rather it is about ourselves, our ideas, our world” (152, 153).³ Indeed, some of the Shakespearean PaR work I have mentioned is concerned to signal its *difference* from historical practices: Escolme’s *Coriolanus*, for example, was designed “as an exercise in finding alternatives to [ahistorical] analogy in Shakespeare production,” and as it developed, it found ways to encourage its audiences “to find the early modern drama both familiar and strange” (“Living Monuments”

170-71). Conkie's work has likewise foregrounded its distance from past practices—his *Othellophobia* (2003-04), for example, used “grotesque comic exaggeration” in an attempt “to critique the racial politics of Shakespeare's *Othello*” (“Practice as Research” 16-17). But where Bedau and Hopkins are keen to distance their PaR work from that of theater historians, Conkie is more ambivalent. While he notes that the theater historian's “desire to have their pet theories tested and proved” might risk impeding the PaR practitioner's imperative “to be open to surprise and to resist the pre-determined,” he concludes that such surprises can include insights into “how the plays might have worked in their own context” (12, 20).

The body of PaR work exploring non-Shakespearean early modern drama tends to be much more focused on the investigation of historical practices. A key reason for this is not hard to fathom. As Richard Allen Cave has pointed out, Shakespeare's plays

have been extensively staged, and staged in accordance with allegiance to a wealth of modes and styles of acting; but this has not been readily the case with the plays of Shakespeare's contemporaries, which have tended to be relegated to an inferior status.

(9)

Cave argues that encounters with plays in performance can enrich and complicate an understanding of early modern dramaturgy in ways that simply reading a play cannot, even when that performance is self-evidently not a reconstruction of original playing practices. This principle is perhaps what underlies the history of practice-based research and research-based practice that predates the specific discourse of “practice-as-research” by several decades. Since the 1960s, medieval theater societies like *Poculi Ludique Societas* in Canada

and Jocolatores Oxonienses (later Jocolatores Lancastrienses) in the UK have staged research-informed productions of early English drama; more recently, major grant-funded projects like “Shakespeare and the Queen’s Men” (2005-9), “Staging the Henrician Court” (2008-10), “Staging and Representing the Scottish Renaissance Court” (2012-14), and “*The Three Ladies of London* in Context” (2015) have used historically-informed practice to explore research questions relating to rarely-performed plays. The most recent issue of *Shakespeare Bulletin* discusses many of these, and provides some newer examples. Co-editor Eleanor Rycraft argues that work of this sort “undeniably raises questions that aren’t readily imaginable without this particular research methodology,” giving instances from her own experiences: the practicalities of staging John Heywood’s *The Play of the Weather* at Hampton Court Palace (2009), for example, made the research team more “keenly aware of the complex politics of admittance in the play” sharpening their focus “on aspects of the text easily overlooked during reading” (257). Oliver Jones describes some of the ways in which staging the Queen’s Men play *The Troublesome Reign of King John* in Stratford-upon-Avon’s Guildhall allowed his team to explore the particular demands of that space as well as more general questions about the adaptability of plays for regional touring (274, 277); Emma Whipday and Freyja Cox Jensen give an account of their “Original Practices” production of *The Tragedy of Merry*, which they argue made possible “a theatrical close reading of the play” that shed particular light upon its “spatial and generic features” (304, 305).

Original Practices

While some of the PaR projects surveyed above are keen to advertise their distance from historical practices, then, others align themselves—or are aligned by others—with “Original Practices.” Whipday and Jensen use the term quite frequently to describe their use of a range of historic rehearsal and performance practices; the academic-practitioners of “Shakespeare

and the Queen's Men" note more cautiously that their project "has been categorized as 'original practice' production", but distance themselves from the terms "recreation," "reproduction" and "reconstruction" ("Project Overview"). The "Original Practices" movement (hereafter "OP") evidently has some major academic stakeholders, but it emerged just as much from the professional theater as it did from the academy. While OP can be driven by research questions, these questions are not always explicit, and the hypotheses upon which such work is founded are not always clear; "research imperatives" often sit side-by-side, and not always comfortably, with "creative or professional imperatives." OP has a discourse of its own, developed in a different context from that of PaR.

The term "Original Practices" emerged in the late 1990s in response to the early performance work at the reconstructed Shakespeare's Globe, and the comparable work then taking place in North America. The Globe's artistic director, Mark Rylance, was certainly using the term by 2001;⁴ the American Shakespeare Center's co-founder Ralph Alan Cohen recalls attending a meeting with representatives of various Shakespeare companies at the same year's Shakespeare Theatre Association conference in Washington DC, where the assembled group agreed that "Original Practices" was preferable to "authentic" in describing the kind of work they produced (1). The term describes a wide variety of theater practices, all of which draw selectively on aspects of what is known about early modern theater practice. Some OP projects focus on a material reconstruction of the conditions of Elizabethan and Jacobean theater, including architecture, lighting, clothing, make-up, and all-male casting. Others have attempted a conjectural reconstruction of historical rehearsal and performance processes; others try to find modern approximations of these elements in looser experiments with, for example, shared lighting, open stages, doubling, director-less or time-limited rehearsal, or flexible blocking. While OP projects are always *informed* by the research of

theater historians, it is not always clear that such projects are designed as research projects in themselves.

OP and PaR projects have, however, often shared a discourse of “experiment”. Robert McCrum’s newspaper report on the reconstructed Globe shortly before its official opening in June 1997 quotes the theater’s chief executive Michael Holden describing the theater as “a laboratory,” and McCrum notes that this is “a word that is echoed by several people on the new Globe site” (3). Andrew Gurr, the Globe project’s chief academic advisor, was explicit about his vision for the theater’s research mission in an essay published the same year:

Essentially the new Globe is no more than a test-tube, the basis for experiments aimed at getting a better idea of how Shakespeare expected his plays to be staged. The experiments that will follow its completion depend on a new cross-fertilisation of different skills. Now it will lie chiefly between the scholars analysing the original features of Elizabethan staging and the actors who test their ideas in practice in the new playhouse. (159)

Gurr’s essay gives an impression of the sorts of research questions he expected the Globe to explore, from the pragmatic (for example, “how long it takes to walk offstage,” or questions of acoustics) to the comparative (the “difference in the responses to the plays of modern audiences compared with the original audiences”) (159). His metaphor of a test-tube casts the Globe as a controlled environment for the conducting of experiments in which ideas derived from archival research are “tested” in practice. The underlying assumptions of his essay were picked up again by Pauline Kiernan, one of the Globe’s two Leverhulme Research Fellows

(1995-98), whose book *Staging Shakespeare at the New Globe* concluded with the observation that “playing the Globe space is able to produce research findings about original staging” and that the “experiential evidence” of its actors could “be weighed with archaeological evidence and academic scholarship” (123).

Such faith in the empirical value of the Globe’s findings has been widely critiqued. Paul Menzer, for example, has questioned the “language of creeping empiricism” in the writing of the Globe’s scholarly collaborators, arguing that the “casual deployment of terms derived from scientific experimentation”—experiments, tests, trials, test-tubes, and so forth—“promises empirically demonstrative ‘finds’” that it cannot possibly deliver (224-25). In the Globe’s Research Bulletins, he notes, such experiments “often result in vague invocations of ‘what works,’” but “the determinant of ‘what works’—or even what the term means—is unclear” (225). Menzer observes that such claims tend to rely on actor testimony for their support. The Globe is by no means unique in this respect: after all, the artists involved in such practice develop a huge amount of embodied knowledge, and are generally willing and able to articulate that knowledge in interviews. But as Menzer points out, the questions facing OP scholars are easily effaced: “What counts as evidence? And what is it evidence of?” (227). Modern actors (and, for that matter, modern audiences) are trained in particular ways, their tastes and instincts conditioned by years of experience in the modern theater. Their insights are certainly useful and often revealing, but they are evidence of “what works” in the modern theater, not necessarily of what might have “worked” on the early modern stage. Cave, recognizing the problems inherent in actors’ articulations of “what works”, stops himself as he begins to describe what “worked” for him in a particular workshop on *Macbeth*, questioning the extent to which his own preferences might be influenced by his “situation within a post-Stanislvskian theatre, which, in its commitment to tenets of realism, subscribes

to [Stanislavski's] theories about 'building a character' and the need for continuities in the shaping of a performance" (3-4).⁵

The behavior, discoveries, testimony and embodied knowledge of modern actors and audiences cannot, then, be considered straightforward evidence for a research enquiry into historical practices. Jeremy Lopez argues that OP actors "generally lack expertise in early modern history or theatre history," and he takes issue with the fact that they are nonetheless called upon

to deploy, by means of their decidedly modern training and skills, a wealth of academically sanctioned details for a similarly inexpert audience, under the pretense that "discoveries" about historical performing conditions and audience response are being made. (315)

As Holger Syme has pointed out, when modern actors encounter the strangeness of historical practices, their "discoveries" tend to reveal more about the gap between past and present than they do about the practices themselves: Syme observes that actors who note the effects of early modern costume on their movement, breathing and posture, for example, are merely observing a fact of early modern everyday life, not of theatrical practices in particular, and he goes on to critique Globe actors' accounts of the effects of "original pronunciation" performances on the grounds that they describe only "how a particular accent *feels* to a particular group of 21st-century British listeners" ("Where is the Theatre").⁶ Modern actors using early modern techniques such as working from "parts" over a limited rehearsal period frequently express an anxiety that they are under-prepared for performance (Whipday and

Jensen 294; Bessell, “The Actors” 101), but again, this is indicative of the strangeness of these practices to the modern actor, not a feature inherent to the technique itself.

These are serious challenges to the OP project, but I am not sure that they undermine its theoretical basis to the extent that some commentators have suggested. Practical work cannot, of course, make straightforward “discoveries” about the past through modern practice, but this is rarely what it claims to do: its discoveries are of the present, about how practices “work” here and now, and any resulting speculations about historical practice provoked by the work ought to be (and generally are) subject to the expert scrutiny of the participating theater historians. In their introduction to the recent *Shakespeare Bulletin* special issue, Sarah Dustagheer, Oliver Jones, and Eleanor Rycroft point out that PaR is simply another method of practicing history, subject to the same enmeshment in the present as any other form of historical study, and that “historical gaps are not necessarily a problem if they instigate a fruitful dialogue between past and present” (178). PaR work is not, of course, directly analogous to other scholarly methods of “reading” the past—its inherently collaborative nature means that not everyone involved will be a trained historian. But this need not be an obstacle to PaR’s utility as a tool for historical research: there simply needs to be a historian present whose task is to contextualize and, if necessary, problematize the responses of his or her fellow participants. The “Shakespeare and the Queen’s Men” website is explicit about the project’s disjunction between modern and historic practices, noting that “while the relationship between our company and the original Queen’s Men is a complex one, that very complexity is worthy of study” (“Project Overview”); they draw attention to the largely Stanislavskian training and habits of their actors, and note occasions when modern norms and expectations made a “straight” performance—for example, of the “love test” scene in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*—difficult to maintain.

PaR may not be a suitable method for the establishment of facts about historical performance, but as Trimingham points out, it can “have impact on our historical understanding, revealing the prejudice and unspoken assumptions clustering around accepted historical interpretations” (58). Historical performance practices can serve as a kind of alienation effect, distancing us from our habitual conventions, our often unconsciously learned tastes and preferences. At the Globe, for example, actors often found themselves rethinking their assumptions about early modern plays as they moved from the rehearsal room to the stage. Towards the end of the rehearsal period for 2002’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Philippa Stanton, playing Hermia, felt her role was largely self-contained:

I feel I don’t have many lines that I can deliver to an audience ... Although the audience are on my side, Hermia is such a contained and focused character that she doesn’t speak to them that much. (“Hermia”)

A month into the run, however, she reported that she had “become far more adventurous with the lines I’m delivering out to the yard,” giving several examples of opportunities for direct address (“Hermia”). Similarly, as rehearsals neared completion for 2005’s *The Winter’s Tale*, Peter Forbes, playing Polixenes, observed that “Polixenes doesn’t have any soliloquies to the audience” and decided “to try to allow the audience in on the scenes without ‘playing out’ to them”; by the time the show had opened, he noted that he and his fellow actors were “sharing our thoughts with the audience more frequently” (“Polixenes”). These were not discoveries about early modern playing styles: they were moments at which modern assumptions about direct address in early modern plays seemed suddenly less certain than they might have been before, the historical situatedness of the modern practitioner suddenly exposed.

What is it, then, that OP-style PaR investigates? The Shakespearean PaR projects surveyed in the first half of this essay tended to ask questions about modern practice: how do modern audiences behave? How can they be provoked to behave differently? How can modern technologies be employed? This is, at first glance, a world apart from the attempts at historical reconstruction evident in OP-style PaR. Farah Karim-Cooper, for example, describes the historically-focused questions underpinning her work on make-up at the Globe:

How did [early modern] cosmetics look once applied to human skin? What was the relationship between aesthetic representations of women in portraits and the living canvases of boys' faces on stage and women's faces in the public sphere? How was makeup used on the early modern stage, both as a theatrical device and as a signifier of femininity? (67)

She concludes that her practical experiments with make-up “have not necessarily answered my questions, but have instead helped to reshape my thinking and forced me to ask more focused questions” (68). The generation of new questions is, as we have seen, a key characteristic of iterative PaR. But I suspect questions of the sort Karim-Cooper lists are never definitively answered by PaR work, and that in fact the underlying questions posed by such work are rather more open-ended in nature. Karim-Cooper's colleague Will Tosh gives examples of some of the questions explored in the PaR “Research in Action” workshops at the Globe:

How did asides work in the intimate interior of Elizabethan and Jacobean indoor playhouses? Can performers conjure the spirit of the great outdoors in candle-lit conditions? What effects can be produced by sinister woodwind music, or by boisterous drum beats and trumpet blasts? (Introducing⁷)

It is striking that these questions move from the historical (“How did...?”) to the speculative (“Can...?”). Performance is, after all, a practice, not an archive; it cannot conclusively answer questions that demand historical fact. When we ask PaR questions of this sort, I suggest, practice returns our questions to us transformed: no longer “How did...?”, but “How can...?”.

Such questions, and their necessarily provisional answers, demand an approach to theater history that sees flux and indeterminacy as integral to performance rather than as problems to be solved. Syme has argued that PaR work cannot reveal anything reliable about dramatic text, since actors’ choices are “creative” rather than purely “interpretive” (“Practice-as-Research”).⁷ But as Andy Kesson has pointed out, Syme’s distinction between “interpretation” and “creativity” here sets up an unnecessary binary, as if early modern players were bound to a performance somehow inherent in the text in a way that modern actors are not (2). Practical exploration, argues Kesson, can help “to resist scholarship’s obsession with facts, that-which-can-be-argued and the primacy of text,” highlighting instead the extent to which early modern dramatic texts invite, and always have invited, multiple possibilities for performance. He gives the example of stage directions “which may be original or added by modern editors and which seem intuitive, sensible, and self-evident” on the page, but which “frequently turn out to be not only complex but also contestable” in performance (3).

Finally, it is worth remembering that PaR is *collaborative*, its driving questions and its direction of travel determined just as much by the artists involved as by its academic participants. Theater historians can only be part of what it does; practitioners and audiences are working in the present, and have present concerns. For the practicing artist, “how can...?” is always the more pressing question. OP work is rarely an attempt to recreate the past, but is more frequently characterized by a belief on the part of its practitioners that historical practices can reinvigorate modern ones. In this sense, its “experiment” is not necessarily the pseudo-scientific, fact-seeking term that Menzer suggests. Like Gurr and Kiernan, Rylance used a discourse of “experiment” to describe his work at the Globe, repeatedly calling the theater “the most experimental space in British theatre,” but his understanding of the nature of the Globe “experiment” was evidently very different (Gardner 14). In a talk at the Shakespeare Institute in 1996, he explained that it was a “big misconception that we are to be the authentic Globe. There is no such thing. We are an ongoing tool for experiment” (Notes for Talk). At the first rehearsal for his production of *Julius Caesar* in 1999, he “stressed the experimental nature of the work, rather than the potential desirability or feasibility of ‘authenticity’ in production,” at which the actors apparently felt some relief (Bessell, “Findings” 11). A program note for 1998’s *As You Like It* explained to the audience that the historically-inaccurate steps that linked the front of the stage with the yard were “not a known original feature of the Globe but part of an experiment in the use of the space.” In each of these examples, “experiment” evidently signals practice that tries new things, that deliberately runs the risk of failure – that does not seek, but rather stands in opposition to historical “authenticity.”⁸

In fact, the term “Original Practices” itself emerged as a result of Rylance’s attempts to distance his work at the Globe from suspect notions of recreating the past. While early productions at the Globe were sometimes labelled “authentic,” including by Rylance himself,

he evidently found the claim impossible to defend, and eventually settled on “Original Practices” because he felt it implied, more accurately, that the work was selecting only *particular* historical stage practices for reconstruction in the present. He explained the distinction in a letter to the cast of *Twelfth Night* in 2001:

I do not ever call this [OP] work “Authentic.” It isn’t. And indeed we choose which known “original practices” may be helpful to the modern relationship between actor and audience and reject those we think will constrict that relationship.

Thus, for example, some OP performances staged scenes in the yard, while others did not; some productions utilized all-male casting, while others staged mixed-sex or, in three cases, all-female casts. By 2002, Globe audiences were being informed in production programs that the company’s “imaginary play with you today is authentic only in its desire”: “Like Shakespeare and his fellows we have reconstructed an urban amphitheatre to resonate with words and stories for our time” (Introduction to Season Programs).

Seen in this light, the Globe’s OP work starts to look less like an exercise in retrieving lost meanings and more like the speculative, open-ended experiments of Conkie’s PaR work. In the program notes for his 2013 *Othello*, Conkie described the performance as “a game with ‘Original Practices,’” listing the 11 “rules of the game” (among them an all-male cast, make-up, thrust stage, shared light and minimal rehearsal) (*Writing Performative Shakespeares* 63). The aim, he writes, was not to recreate past practices but to investigate modern spectatorship—“to test, with all the limitations we were bringing to it ..., whether an

audience could still be caught up in the narrative” (65). Conkie describes his 2011 production of *Henry IV, Part 1* at the University of Western Australia’s “approximately reconstructed” New Fortune Theatre as an “originalish practices” one, his playful terminology indicating not that his work was significantly different in style from much of the work produced under the OP banner (shared light, reconstructed stage, small cast, limited rehearsal, and so forth) but that, perhaps, he was reluctant to associate it with the claims to “authenticity” that may be implicit in the label.⁹ As he describes it, the performance was hampered by its small cast, Conkie’s own throat infection, and frequent interjections by some noisy nearby peacocks, but what he describes as the resulting “fiasco” led to “a shared, performer/audience acceptance and enjoyment of demonstrable artifice” (121). In both cases, Conkie stresses the discoveries facilitated by the “aleatoric” effects of OP performances, the unexpected and the accidental opening up new research questions and areas of enquiry. This is a phenomenon that crops up repeatedly in discussions of both OP and PaR, and it may be that OP work, with its emphases on limited rehearsal, shared light and open air performance, is peculiarly facilitative of such accidental discoveries.

It is an unfortunate irony that the term “Original Practices” has become associated with the sort of ahistorical essentialism from which it was originally designed to signal its difference. OP work may be informed by the past, but like any PaR, what it investigates is the present, the here-and-now of embodied practice. It is facilitative of a particular kind of “theatrical close reading,” one that seeks plurality rather than fixity, possibility rather than fact. It necessitates collaboration, treating the different kinds of expertise in the room with equal weight, while being unapologetic about the need to historicize the insights generated. It offers opportunities to embrace and explore the strangeness of historical practices, generating surprise and “excess knowledge,” opening up new questions—and new possibilities for practice—as we reflect upon our encounters with that strangeness.

Notes

¹ It might be observed that definitions that are dependent on the practice's relationship with subsequent written research risk subordinating that practice to the written form: under Nelson's definition, for example, does a piece of "practice-as-research" become a piece of "practice-based Research" the moment somebody writes an article about it?

² These productions were described variously by their investigators as "Practice as Research" (Conkie), a "practical research project" (Escolme), "a practice-as-research process" (Lavender), "practice-based research" (Bedau and Hopkins), and "performance-as-research" (Heron).

³ Perhaps this observation sets up an unnecessary binary between "Shakespeare" and "our world"; it is, after all, our world that determines what constitutes "Shakespeare" at any given moment (see Kidnie).

⁴ As Jeremy Lopez notes, Rylance used the phrase "original playing practices" in an article in *The Times* in 1998 (qtd. in Lopez 305).

⁵ W. B. Worthen, in fact, is similarly sceptical about the discourse of "laboratories" in PaR, and suspicious of any PaR project that finds its validation in subjective judgments about "what works": "can we excavate the stated and unstated, the affective and the conceptual, implications at stake when something 'works?' And if we can't, or don't, how do we know we're not unreflectively or even willfully reproducing values as 'knowledge,' perhaps the cardinal sin of research inquiry?" (286).

⁶ Syme wrote this paper for my seminar on "Original Practices and Originality" at the 2014 International Shakespeare Conference, and published it on his blog.

⁷ Syme wrote this paper in preparation for the workshop I co-led with Andy Kesson on PaR at the 2014 Shakespeare Association of America conference, and published it on his blog.

⁸ The announcement in 2016 that the then-new artistic director of the Globe Emma Rice would be stepping down was framed by a similarly ambivalent use of the word “experiment” (see Purcell).

⁹ Elsewhere, Conkie has suggested that the term “Original Practices” was simply a “euphemised version” of “authenticity” (*Globe* 200).

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