

Original citation:

Cochrane, C. (2018). The haunted theatre: Birmingham Rep, Shakespeare and European exchanges. Cahiers Élisabéthains. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0184767818774857>

Permanent WRaP URL:

<https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/6649/>

Copyright and reuse:

The Worcester Research and Publications (WRaP) makes this work available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRaP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

© The Author(s) 2018. Article reuse guidelines: sagepub.com/journals-permissions

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRaP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact wrapteam@worc.ac.uk

The Haunted Theatre: Birmingham Rep, Shakespeare and European Exchanges

Claire Cochrane
University of Worcester

Abstract

Forests, the production by the iconoclastic Spanish-Catalan director Calixto Bieito staged at the 'Old' Birmingham Repertory Theatre in September 2012 functions here as the starting point for an exploration of the way a radical re-visioning of Shakespeare in performance stimulated through an engagement with European modernism began in this now venerable theatre over a hundred years ago. What was dubbed Bieito's 'epic arboreal mash-up' was I suggest haunted by the material traces of ground-breaking past performances mounted by the Rep's founder Barry Jackson which included the first Shakespeare in modern dress productions of the 1920s and the highly-influential 1951-53 staging of the *Henry VI* trilogy.

Keywords

Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Shakespeare, Barry Jackson, Calixto Bieito, European modernism.

Résumé

Janice will provide translation

Mots clés

Janice will provide translation

Corresponding author: Claire Cochrane, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Bredon, WR6 2AJ, Worcester, UK

Email: c.cochrane@worc.ac.uk

In the introduction to his 2001 book *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson writes:

The theatre has been obsessed always with things that return, that appear again tonight, even though this obsession has been manifested in quite different ways in different cultural situations. Everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilized, the language, the space itself, is now and always has been haunted, and that haunting has been an essential part of the theatre's meaning to and reception by its audiences in all times and all places.¹

Concerned as he is with the audience's experience of theatre in a range of forms and genres, he argues that every performance, no matter how determinedly new and radical, depends for its effects on the residual traces, the ghosts of past performances lingering in the consciousness of all concerned. In particular, he asserts, 'the physical theatre, as a site of the continuing reinforcement of memory by surrogation, is not surprisingly among the most haunted of human cultural structures'.² The concept of surrogation³ utilised by Carlson here as a process of trying to replace a lost original has particular relevance to the practice and study of Shakespeare in performance and it is one to which I will return as this essay explores the Shakespeare hauntings encountered in a theatre which is now over 100 years old. This essay focuses on models of radical innovation, but throughout I remain attentive to the material traces embedded in the memories produced from within the fabric of the building, to the evidence of cultural fusion, to the meshing together of past and present.

The Birmingham Repertory Theatre opened its doors in February 1913 as the UK's first purpose-built repertory theatre. That is, along with similar enterprises launched in Dublin, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow in the early years of the twentieth century, it was an attempt to establish a building-based, artistically autonomous play-producing company where an acting ensemble modelled on known examples in Germany especially, of state-subsidised theatres, could stage new and/or challenging European and British drama.⁴ For Shakespeare scholars broadly familiar with key landmarks in twentieth-century British theatre history, Birmingham Rep has been celebrated as the theatre where the very first of what is known as 'modern-dress' Shakespeare was presented in 1923. Ending with *Othello* in 1929, a series of six plays was given a contemporary 1920s setting and costuming. *Cymbeline*, which was the first, *All's Well that Ends Well* in 1927 and *Othello* were only seen in Birmingham. The other three, most famously *Hamlet* in 1925 and *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1928, were first staged in London before Birmingham and it is the metropolitan productions which feature most prominently in well-known published theatre histories such as J. L. Styan's *The Shakespeare Revolution* and Dennis Kennedy's *Looking at Shakespeare*.⁵

Dubbed the city of 1000 trades, one of the key nineteenth-century regional powerhouses of the industrial revolution and poised in the early twentieth century to enter a new phase of technological progress in the development of the car industry, the widening of Birmingham's boundaries in 1911 consolidated its UK second city status, one it still enjoys. Two years later, however, its new playhouse, erected on a cramped site behind one of the city's main railway stations, represented a deliberate rejection of the large-scale, capitalist imperatives of industrial modernity. The founding ideology behind the Rep and the company it housed was no less modern, however, in its claims of newness and radical challenge to traditional assumptions.⁶ But as this essay argues, the intellectual and aesthetic innovation here had emerged from encounters with forms of modernism which had resulted in a dynamic and quite idiosyncratic fusion of English and European sensibilities. This in turn, in the material environment and controlling artistic ambition, created the specific circumstances

which facilitated what was most influential about the Rep's work and, in particular, its Shakespeare. But it is also important to highlight the extent to which that influence has continued to resonate and how more recently that notion of dynamic fusion has propelled the theatre into the contemporary avant-garde with an even more distinctively European edge.

September 2012 saw a return of Shakespeare to what is now known as the Old Rep Theatre in the guise of the postmodern radical with a production by the Spanish-Catalan director Calixto Bieito.⁷ Various dubbing in British press reviews as a 'British Catalan Shakespearean mash-up'⁸ or 'an epic arboreal mash-up'⁹ or 'state-subsidised bilingual bilge'¹⁰, *Forests* was premiered in this now venerable, and most certainly haunted, building as a climactic contribution to the 2012 World Shakespeare Festival. This was not Bieito's first Birmingham Rep-commissioned Shakespeare: his production of *Hamlet* was presented in 2003 on the heroically proportioned stage of the company's current home. The 'New' Rep opened in 1971 in what is very obviously a late 1960s modernist building but which was closed from 2011 until 2013 for what was its third major refurbishment.¹¹ The moment of *Forests*, however, was a few months before the company's centenary and scenographically the production was conceived and assembled to accommodate the particular characteristics of the Old Rep performance space. The pre-production publicity put out by the Rep management made it clear that the conceptual daring, the shock that was likely to be delivered to the audience, was entirely in keeping with the theatre's history.

Speaking about *Forests* before the opening night, Bieito described what he had tried to create as a 'symphonic poem' which freed up Shakespeare's words – all taken from references to woodlands, trees, heaths in the plays and poems – in order to evoke and provoke a free-ranging emotional response in his audience.¹² One critic suggested it was best appreciated as a 'cross between a recital and an installation'¹³ – indeed, the epigraph to the production came from a quote from the conceptual artist Joseph Beuys: 'I think the tree is an element of regeneration which in itself is a concept of time'. Working with his dramaturg Marc Rosich, Bieito wove together texts in both English and Catalan translation to be performed by a cast of four British, two Spanish-Catalan actors together with the half-Macedonian gypsy rock guitarist Maika Makovski singing her own original songs as part of her onstage soundtrack to the action. As Maria Delgado pointed out in her detailed discussion of Bieito's 'multilingual Shakespeares' in 2006, compared with the attention given to German and French revisioning of Shakespeare's plays, Spanish production has been relatively neglected by English-language scholars. Bieito, who adopted his Catalan identity as a teenager in Barcelona, is, she argued, 'crucially the only significant stage director in contemporary Catalan, or, arguably, Spanish history to have forged his directorial aesthetic and reputation to a significant degree through Shakespeare's work'.¹⁴

The textual interweaving represented by *Forests* was grounded in an engagement with Shakespeare which began for Bieito in 1989 in Barcelona with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and continued with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1991), *King John* (1995), *The Tempest* (1997), *Measure for Measure* (1999), *Macbeth* (2002) and, following on from *Hamlet* (2003), *King Lear* in 2004.¹⁵ The script of *Forests* ranged even more widely, beginning with Makovski speaking the song from *Henry VIII*, 'Orpheus with his lute made trees', which ends with the line 'Fall asleep, or hearing die' (3.1.1-14).¹⁶ The actors echoed 'asleep, asleep', their first words before collectively moving into a bricolage of sound, visual imagery and physical action assembled around some twenty texts which included selections taken from the sonnets, *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI*, *Timon of Athens*, *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*.¹⁷

Structurally, the production also referenced the three levels of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* but in reverse.¹⁸ At the beginning of the *Inferno* Dante wakes to find himself in a dark wood. The journey into hell represented by *Forests* began with audiences and actors

sharing the collective space of the auditorium with the house lights up while the brightly lit stage was dominated by a huge bare, single tree installed in what looked like a black plastic container as an exhibit in a gleaming white art gallery-style box set. Actors arrived dressed in smart suits like city workers taking in a must-see exhibition in their lunch break. The exception, the distinguished Catalan actor Josep Maria Pou, in a tattered overcoat and bowler hat slumped against the tree was a Beckettian character who suddenly found himself in the paradisaical world of the Forest of Arden. His was the first Catalan translated speech from *All's Well that Ends Well*: 'They say miracles are past / Diuen que els miracles ja han passat' (2.3.1). The miraculously cured King of France shifted into *Troilus and Cressida* via Agamnon's warning of 'check and disasters' infecting the 'sound pine' / 'infecten el pi m' (1.3.8). Miracles can't be relied on.

The sunny morning in Arden – white streamers swirled round the tree – gave the freedom for discovery and play. The quotidian was stripped away with the formal clothes; gender and sexual roles were swapped. Christopher Simpson speaking Orlando's words 'became' a woman in a black wig, cocktail frock, gold stiletto-heeled shoes. Rosalind's lines were shared out with George Costigan as well as the women (Hayley Carmichael, Roser Cami and Katy Stephens), while Costigan also acquired the shoes for Jacques's 'All the world's a stage' speech (*As You Like It*, 2.7.139-65). The journey beginning in a woodland paradise suddenly lurched into a scenario of sexual violence which saw Bieito's own wife, Rosi Cami, stapled against the side of the stage through her coat by Katy Stephens. Cami was stripped naked below the waist and gagged while Simpson delivered Theseus's speech about the lunatic, the lover and the poet – in a ghastly pun exploiting the woman's exposed body, mistaking the 'bush' for a bear with visions, furies and madness and clearly referencing Lavinia's woodland rape in *Titus Andronicus*.

As the descent into barbarity began in earnest, the actors tore away the black plastic which supported the tree releasing a huge mound of soil through which they crawled and rolled. As the tree became even more obviously Beckettian, we were plunged into Timon's rage in another wood outside Athens; drawing rotten humidity from the earth, we saw Gloucester and Lear crawling through the earth like animals and the ultimate horror of civil war taken from Shakespeare's recreation of the battle of Towton in *Henry VI Part 3*: the father who hath killed his son and the son who hath killed his father. And it was by this point when the assault on my senses by this performative re-imagining of Shakespeare's scenarios of human suffering and death had begun to move me that I became increasingly conscious of the space of the old theatre, of other voices, ghosts from the past.

Those words of the shocked and grief-stricken father and son in *Henry VI* were first spoken on that stage in 1952, which was the second year of an experiment with the three plays of the trilogy. The project began with *Part Two* in 1951 and climaxed with the staging by the director Douglas Seale of all three in Birmingham and then at the Old Vic in London in 1953. The productions – the most complete versions of the original seen possibly since the late sixteenth century – were a key moment in the stage history of the trilogy¹⁹ and a major risk. They also represented an act of defiance on the part of the Rep's founder Sir Barry Jackson against what had emerged as the dominant mode of Shakespeare production as operated by the artistic directorate of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford upon Avon. In complete contrast to what was then the highly successful West-End influenced glossy star policy foregrounded in Stratford, Jackson's insistence on the value of a young, comparatively inexperienced dynamic ensemble tackling these scarcely-known rough-hewn plays was triumphantly vindicated.²⁰ Jackson edited the texts and in an article published in *Shakespeare Survey* in 1953 described how he contemplated cutting those two sequences of the father and the son. Even 'though', as he put it, 'we know that family cleavages of such a tragic nature occurred in Germany during our own life time', he was afraid that the audience

would laugh. But they didn't. The scene was played as a dream sequence in front of King Henry (Jack May) seated on a dais lit in a soft golden glow and, as Jackson recalled, 'it shone out away and above the violent episodes'.²¹ Thirty years later Rosalind Boxall, who played Queen Margaret, remembered insisting in rehearsal that she be allowed to carry on the severed head of her lover Suffolk wandering about the stage with a blood-stained bag – again to powerful effect.²² The bringing together of the whole trilogy, the trusting of these plays properly for the first time in the best part of three hundred and fifty years was immensely influential – not least on Peter Hall who saw the productions, 'realised their narrative muscularity',²³ and then subsequently refashioned them again, with John Barton, for the celebrated 1963-4 *Wars of the Roses* productions which defined the emerging style of the brand new Royal Shakespeare Company.

Much later it was acknowledged that Barry Jackson had laid the foundations for the RSC in his attempts to reorganise what was a moribund management in 1946. His tenure as Director of the Shakespeare Festival and then as overall director of the theatre did not end well – he was swimming against the tide and had an alarming habit of not worrying too much about deficit.²⁴ But amongst other things, it was Jackson who brought the twenty-one year old Peter Brook to Stratford and it was one of Jackson's favourite plays, *Love's Labour's Lost*, which Brook directed in his now celebrated Watteau-esque production. When Sally Beauman interviewed Brook in 1979 for her history of the RSC, he described Jackson as 'an essentially simple, direct man. An English gentleman of a kind that is now virtually extinct'.²⁵ And I am sure that is how this tall, patrician, emotionally reticent (albeit gay) man in his mid-sixties appeared. Not only did Jackson gift Brook his extraordinary Stratford debut in 1946, but in 1945 at the Rep in what was Brook's first full-scale professional Shakespeare production, he also permitted him to experiment with *King John*. A few months after the ending of the World War II, the actor playing Hubert (John Harrison) was encouraged to wear makeup with referenced German expressionist films as he threatened the terrified Arthur. Stanley Baker played the Duke of Austria as a bloated grotesque Hermann Goering-like figure. A highly coloured thirteenth-century-set production was overloaded with extraneous detail, but in substituting 'expediency' for 'commodity' in the Bastard's speech (2.1.573-4) spoken by Paul Scofield, the play came across to at least one observer as 'a tract for the times'.²⁶ The other two plays Brook was tasked with directing in Birmingham, Shaw's *Man and Superman* and Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*, combined with Shakespeare to form a cluster directly representative of the founding modernist principles of the theatre.

The first modest but nonetheless consciously innovative scenographic experiment with *King John* had been presented by Jackson's amateur Pilgrim Players in 1911, the first Shaw in 1910 and the first Ibsen in 1912. I do not know how much Brook was aware of his patron's record in 1945. That for example, Jackson had presented the first officially authorised English translation of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in London in 1929; that in Birmingham in 1923 along with the staging of *Cymbeline* as the first modern-dress production of Shakespeare, there had been a production of Georg Kaiser's expressionist play *Gas* as well as the British premiere of Bernard Shaw's monumental *Back to Methuselah*; that between 1920 and 1922 Jackson had staged chamber versions of operas by Mozart, Cimarosa and Donizetti.²⁷

The quintessential English gentleman was deeply entrenched in European culture and in the commitment to the high modernist principles of what was new, intellectually challenging and aesthetically disruptive. With this commitment came the elitism that lay at the heart of high modernism and a contempt for the English who, as he put it in 1924, 'are relentless and untiring in pursuit of anything save art'.²⁸ He was also, as the son of an entrepreneurial grocer who had grown rich providing dairy products to the burgeoning population of Victorian Birmingham, very wealthy. Born in 1879, Jackson could speak

several languages, had travelled round Italy, Egypt and Greece as a teenager and perhaps most formatively had spent eighteen months in Geneva studying French in the course of which it is clear that he experienced a varied spectrum of theatre. On his return from Switzerland, under protest he was articulated to a Birmingham-based architect while attending Birmingham School of Art in the evenings. The death of his father in 1906 released him from any further obligation to workaday training, left him with enough money to nurture an amateur activity towards professional status by 1912 and build his own theatre. In his own person Jackson thus embodied a core tension between modernism and modernity: the cushioning provided by material progress which enables a safely-located aesthetic revolt. His 1924 statement that his theatre was established 'to serve an art instead of making that art serve a commercial purpose' is still quoted today, but the assertion made with it that 'Art has no possible relation to money; the spiritual cannot be estimated by the material'²⁹ is nonsense. Jackson poured something like a million pounds into his theatre and it absolutely has to be acknowledged that the wide-ranging impact of his activities within British theatre in the 1920s, '30s and '40s would not have been possible without the wealth. No other theatre in England was able to sustain that degree of concentrated dedication to its founding principles.

In their discussion of modernist Shakespeare in the first half of the twentieth century Michael Bristol and Kate McLuskie suggest that 'for the modernist theatre, Shakespeare represents the possibility for the celebration of modernity's themes of emancipation and for resistance to modernity's chronic dislocations'.³⁰ The emancipation pursued through and for Shakespeare by Jackson and his friends began as early as 1908 with a production of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* staged in a tapestried setting in the assembly rooms located in Edgbaston, where Birmingham University had recently been established. Shakespeare was to be freed of the elaborate technological encumbrances of Victorian/Edwardian pictorial production, the text uncut but for twenty lines was allowed to play uninterrupted except for brief pauses between scenes, and the ensemble created by a group of enthusiastic amateurs acquired the legitimacy of earnest experimentation. Half a century later the companies playing Shakespeare in the haunted theatre were still imbued with their progenitors' energetic enquiry.

Scenographic strategies – what I'd like to think of as models of surrogation – conceived as a means of access to a more authentic emancipated original were adopted, Bristol and McLuskie claim, in the interests of 'reader's theatre, a theatre oriented to the rewards and the pleasures of the printed text'.³¹ Certainly Jackson and his directorial associates, along with well-known contemporaries such as Harley Granville Barker and William Bridges-Adams, foregrounded the importance of the (relatively) uncut text. Audiences, and, I might add, actors, could encounter roles and see and hear scenes and words more often excluded from mainstream commercial productions. In their different ways William Poel's archaeological, neo-Elizabethanism and Gordon Craig's conceptually resonant abstract environments tried to free up the stage for more fluid action. The early trajectory of Jackson's scenographic practice exemplified the impact of seeing the experimental practice of both. The simple tapestried setting for *The Two Gentlemen* was adopted for pragmatic purposes for which there were precedents, as Carey Mazer has demonstrated, in a contemporary trend for the 'draped stage'.³² But by any standards, the 1908 tapestries were extraordinarily ambitious. These were six scenic canvas curtains each 28 feet long and 16 feet wide on which designs copied by Jackson from Carpaccio's *Legend of St Ursula* were hand-painted. The costumes based on images taken from the fresco of the *Marriage of the Virgin* by Lorenzo da Viterbo were more brightly coloured.³³ The whole was lit with two arc lights positioned on either side of the stage – the effect immediately recognised by at least one observer as following Craig's example. If, as has been argued recently, the Pre-Raphaelites were the first 'modern' artists in their collective aspiration to

take the visual arts in a completely new direction, Jackson's direct referencing of Pre-Raphaelite stimuli merged Romantic historicism with a bolder aesthetic.³⁴

The tapestry curtains remained a scenic staple for at least the next twenty years, but Jackson's preliminary scenographic experiments with Shakespeare were to undergo two more phases before 1913. In 1910 a production of *Measure for Measure* used a combination of black and grey curtains to evoke stone columns – a gesture towards what would become Jackson's characteristic deployment of simple suggestion. The 1911 *King John* introduced a staging model which formed the basis of Rep Shakespeare design until after World War II and indeed Brook's production of the play. What was described as the 'three-stage method' is best known by theatre historians through Harley Granville Barker's famous Savoy Theatre productions of *The Winter's Tale*, *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* between 1912 and 1914. What Jackson did was to divide the stage in the Edgbaston hall into two areas by using a second false proscenium painted to resemble the walls of a medieval castle framing an inner stage reached by three steps the width of the second proscenium. This could be swiftly closed off with curtains at the close of a scene while the rest of the play proceeded smoothly in front.³⁵ The third component, the apron or forestage which Poel considered so vital to the audiences' direct engagement with the actor, could only be put in place in the new theatre.

As I have outlined elsewhere,³⁶ the first history of the theatre written by the Rep's Business Manager Bache Matthews makes clear that Jackson and his colleagues were fully aware that there was nothing particularly original about the method, but that knowledge clearly derived from careful investigation into the European, especially German, antecedents of structural innovation both scenically and architecturally. When the first audiences arrived to witness the opening production of *Twelfth Night* in the brand new theatre, what they saw and experienced around them and in front of them was a complex amalgam of influences stretching back in the 'modern' period as far as Karl Immerman in Düsseldorf in 1840, but also proudly promoting the latest technological advances in the Fortuny lighting system which reflected light through coloured bands of silk lighting. The costumes would have been familiar from any traditional production of the play, but the lit elliptical plaster cyclorama evoked a blue 'heaven' to complement very simple, suggestive set pieces for outdoor scenes. The theatre itself was modelled on the lines of the Max Littman-designed small theatres in Germany, especially the new Künstlertheatre in Munich with its 'relief-stage' originally designed to initiate a festive collaboration in dance-drama between actor and spectator. In Birmingham a capacity of just 464 seated in a very steep straight rake with no divisions except a balcony which held 200 demanded undistracted attention on the stage action – this was not a social space. The main acting area was extended by a small apron stage onto which actors entered through two permanently fixed doors set on either side of the proscenium. Structurally the theatre had to be flexible enough to accommodate a full range of classical and modern drama. Already a thoroughly haunted theatre in conception, it was the most radical playhouse in the UK – a permanent, concrete realisation of European modernism shoehorned into a Birmingham street.³⁷

In stating in 1993 that the modern-dress *Hamlet* 'probably had more effect on twentieth-century international performance than any other British production between the wars', Dennis Kennedy also suggested that the Rep thrived precisely because the theatre was not based in London.³⁸ Given Jackson's complex managerial activities and metropolitan relationships, especially in the 1920s, this is debatable.³⁹ But what is certainly the case is that the modern-dress productions were grounded in a wholly consistent set of performance principles mediated steadily and with growing effectiveness year on year for Birmingham and then London audiences for more than two decades and by 1929 with some nineteen plays. One response to the modern dress enterprise is to think of it as the logical extension of Poel's

Elizabethanism, audiences and actors in character mirroring each other in appearance and gesture through a shared lived experience. Poel, unlike Granville Barker, strongly approved of the experiment.⁴⁰ But, as Bristol and McLuskie point out, while Shakespeare's thought and feeling continue to resonate across the centuries 'at the same time, an actor's performance can reveal a semantic intonation that would not have been intelligible to the author's own public'.⁴¹

H. K. Ayliff, a former actor, whose major revivals of Shaw's plays were mounted alongside directing all the modern-dress productions, declared in 1928 that 'Shakespeare was a modern author'. What comes across strongly in the surviving records of the productions is a very determined approach to a semantic intonation which aimed to give to Shakespeare's texts the inflections and nuances of modern, naturalistic speech and a physical vocabulary of comparatively restrained movement and stance to enable the actors to inhabit their characters *clothed* rather than costumed.⁴² The plays were not used to comment on the growing societal turbulence of the 1920s, although the significance of a smoothly plausible political leader in the shape of an elegantly-dressed Claudius was not lost on some reviewers. There were visual allusions to the recent shared wartime experience: the gaoler in *Cymbeline* as 'Old Bill' from World War I's cartoons, Imogen/Fidele incorporated into the Roman army in a blue Bersaglieri uniform, the sky-blue colours of the French soldiers in *All's Well That Ends Well* with the officers discussing Bertram in what could have been a Western Front mess. Most strikingly in *Macbeth*, where the three witches were elderly destitute women accosting Macbeth and Banquo, the designer Paul Shelving created the gaunt silhouettes of shattered battlefield buildings. From the outset of the performance the audience could hear the authentic sounds of modern warfare in recordings of artillery batteries and machine guns. Pace Poel, this was not an attempt to access the mentalité of long-gone audiences rather visually, aurally and orally a patina of modernity was carefully layered over the originals placing Shakespeare on a spectrum of modern British theatre which could now be extended to admit more radical possibilities.

Shock, however, as Dominic Johnson has recently pointed out in *Theatre & the Visual*, 'is a historically contingent phenomenon'⁴³ and any proponent of the avant-garde in any era has to grapple with customary ways of thinking and looking. In the case of what was deemed the failure of the 1928 *Macbeth*, the juxtaposition of the banal and the barbaric, the detailed scenic evocation of brocade-upholstered elegance and domestic familiarity as a setting for regicide and child murder coupled with the casting of Eric Maturin – an actor better known in modern 'crook drama' and film – as Macbeth, the challenge to the contemporary sense of civilizational decorum provoked an incredulous response. Writing in 1943 after four years of war when no familial security or sanctuary was safe, the Rep's second historian, T. C. Kemp remarked that had the production been mounted in 1941 'when Nazi butchery was at its height', the spectacle of massacre in modern dress would not have appeared so distorted'.⁴⁴

The historical contingency of shock is actually very complex, however, and dependent on many differential factors even within the same community of interest. The critical reception in 1928 was far from uniform with close observation of stage business and textual phrasing yielding subtle new readings. In an oddly serendipitous temporal convergence, the first affront delivered by Calixto Bieito's Shakespeare to English-speaking audiences was with *Macbeth* presented in Catalan and Castilian at the Barbican Centre in April 2003. The Birmingham Rep/Edinburgh Festival co-venture with *Hamlet*, Bieito's first English-language production, followed rapidly in Edinburgh and Birmingham in August and September. Maria Delgado's analysis of both productions is very detailed and illuminating in her discussion of the societal ambience created. For *Macbeth* 'a garish, tawdry world' of white leather sofas and drinks trolleys formed a background to a 'hedonistic, drug and drink-

fuelled culture with no bounds'. For *Hamlet* a 'savagely self-indulgent milieu' for which Elsinore 'was reconceived as a sleek contemporary cocktail bar' – complete with a suspended and disconcertingly dominant fluorescent pink neon sign spelling out 'Palace' – accommodated 'the decadent court's incessant partying and guilt-ridden mourning rituals'.⁴⁵

My sense of haunting is profound. In the 1920s and the 2000s what antagonistic press reviewers and audiences reacted to was the contemporary quotidian visually represented in disturbingly specific detail as a plausible material environment for the primordial experience of human suffering. For Bieito, as now for many postmodern theatre-makers, some British as well as European, textual fidelity – concern for the diligent reader as Bristol and McLuskie conceive it – is not a priority. The text is 'pliable'. 'The sound of the words is like a song; it's like music'.⁴⁶ Thus in *Forests*, the Catalan, more monosyllabic and less guttural than Castilian and considered the most 'Shakespearean' of languages,⁴⁷ was juxtaposed with the English, the actors switching language with roles. They ghosted their own histories with Bieito's Shakespeare: Josep Maria Pou as Lear in 2004, Roser Cami's Lady Macbeth in 2003 and Regan in 2004, George Costigan as Claudius in *Hamlet*, crooning into a microphone 'a seedy cross between Frank Sinatra and Humphrey Bogart'.⁴⁸ Recording her impressions of *Forests*, Kate McLuskie saw other figures: not just Beckett but Jan Kott in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* and the Peter Brook of his Theatre of Cruelty phase – all in the 1960s constrained in their capacity to shock by the censoring powers of the Lord Chamberlain and legislative controls on sexuality.⁴⁹

The mash-up devised and shared by Bieito and his actors was created in image, light and sound out of an unrestrained emotional and physical response to fragments of Shakespeare's texts, albeit, as McLuskie pointed out, performed with complete focus and control. When Katy Stephens spoke Claudio's 'Ay, but to die, and go we know not where' from *Measure for Measure*, the 'kneaded clod' was literally picked up from the onstage earth. Henry VI's long lament over the horror of civil war was spoken in Catalan by Rosi Cami with a coat draped over her naked breasts:

Ara guanya l'un, ara l'altre és fa més fort.
Tots dos combaten, cos contra cos, per merèixer la victòria.

Now one the better, then another best
Both tugging to be victors, breast to breast (2.5.10–11)

Maika Makovski became Ophelia describing her approach to the brook only to be suffocated by a polythene bag and half buried in the mound of earth. Conflating Timon and Beckett's Krapp, Josep Maria Pou rewound spools of tape listening to Timon's epitaph before shooting himself in the mouth (see Figure 1). The final sequence, when blood was transformed into red balloons tied to the tree branches, was dominated by the acceptance of death as expressed in the sonnets, Duke Vincentio's 'Be absolute for death' / 'No temis la mort. I així mort i vida' (*Measure for Measure*, 3.1.5) and finally the dirge for Imogen, 'Thou hast finish'd joy and moan' (*Cymbeline*, 4.2.273).

In a year of what the theatre critic David Jays dubbed 'Bardic saturation', when a benign Shakespeare was invoked for 'jubilee and Olympic uplift',⁵⁰ the intertextual, intercultural and intergenerational revisioning offered by *Forests* was bracing and abrasive, uncoupling words and the intellectual and emotional energy which forged them from the original shaping narrative. In tracing through a thematic preoccupation in Shakespeare's plays, the surrogation in this production was arguably trying to grasp a more complex and shadowed continuity between past and present. The words returned to the old haunted theatre which had heard them before in many different voices.

Since 2012 there have been more voices, more ghosts. As living links to the resonant past of Barry Jackson and Birmingham Rep Shakespeare, Peter Hall and John Barton died within a few months of each other in September 2017 and January 2018. The ambition for European exchange which stimulated the Rep's relationship with Bieito's multilingual Shakespeares has been inevitably battered, although by no means defeated, by the outcome of the 2016 British European referendum.⁵¹ The project of juxtaposing English and Catalan sensibility through Shakespeare has been thrown into sharp relief by the continuing political confrontation between the Spanish state and the Catalan independence movement. Catalan cultural identity is foregrounded and disseminated through direct alignment with the global cultural phenomenon of Shakespeare's texts even as linguistic boundaries blur through the force of performance. The spirit of emancipation remains strong.

Acknowledgements

This article is a revised version of the keynote lecture 'From Tapestry to Tapas: The Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company, Shakespeare and European Exchanges' given at the 2015 European Shakespeare Research Association Conference held at Worcester University in 2015. I am grateful to Clare Jepson-Homer at the REP for a copy of the script of *Forests* and the production image

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

¹ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002), 115.

² Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 2.

³ The concept of 'surrogation' is introduced and explored by Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996), 30.

⁴ Claire Cochrane, *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1929* (London, Society for Theatre Research, 1993), 11–14.

⁵ J. L. Styan, *The Shakespeare Revolution: Criticism and Performance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977); Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁶ Claire Cochrane, 'Theatre and Urban Space: The Case of Birmingham Rep', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 26 (2000), 137–47.

⁷ *Forests* was a co-production between the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and Barcelona Internacional Teatre in association with the Royal Shakespeare Company and played in Birmingham from 31 August–15 September, 2012. Following a European tour, it was staged at the Barbican Arts Centre in London from 6–10 November.

-
- ⁸ Ian Shuttleworth, 'Forests, Barbican, London', *Financial Times*, 8 November 2012.
- ⁹ Alfred Hickling, 'Calixto Bieito: 'Shakespeare's theatre was full of blood and violence'', *Guardian*, 3 September 2012.
- ¹⁰ Quentin Letts, 'Forests Birmingham Repertory Theatre', *Daily Mail*, 5 September, 2012.
- ¹¹ This now physically joins the REP to the visually extraordinary brand new Library for Birmingham designed in yet another European connection by a Netherlands-based architectural practice Mecanno led by Francine Houben. Claire Cochrane, 'Birmingham Rep, Youth and Community and the Products and Possibilities of Precarity', *Research in Drama Education*, 22 (2017) 36–49, 37. Since the reopening of the theatre in 2013, the REP has been the preferred name rather than Birmingham Rep or the Rep.
- ¹² Calixto Bieito quoted in Hickling, 'Shakespeare's theatre'.
- ¹³ Heather Neill, 'Forests', *The Stage*, 5 September, 2012; the quote from Joseph Beuys comes from a conversation between Beuys and Richard Demarco in 1982 on the occasion of the '7000 Oaks—City Forestation instead of City Administration' planting project in Kassel, West Germany cited in Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis, *Land and Environmental Art* (London, Phaidon, 1998), 64.
- ¹⁴ Maria Delgado, 'Journeys of Cultural Transference: Calixto Bieito's Multilingual Shakespeares', *Modern Language Review*, 101 (2006), 106–50, 109.
- ¹⁵ Delgado, 'Journeys of Cultural Transference', 112–15.
- ¹⁶ All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from G. Blakemore Evans et al (eds) *The Riverside Shakespeare* 1st edn (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1974)
- ¹⁷ The script for *Forests* supplied by the REP is dated 24 August 2012.
- ¹⁸ Calixto Bieito, quoted in Hickling, 'Shakespeare's theatre'.
- ¹⁹ Claire Cochrane, 'Shakespeare at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1971', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1987, 226–251; see also Stuart Hampton-Reeves, 'Rediscovery: nation, war and Empire (1899–1953)', in Stuart Hampton-Reeves and Carol Chillington Rutter (eds), *The Henry VI Plays* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006), 33–53.
- ²⁰ *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, 18–25.
- ²¹ Sir Barry Jackson, 'Producing *Henry VI*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 8 (1953), 49–52, 51.
- ²² Rosalind Boxall, interview with the author, November, 1983.
- ²³ Peter Hall, *Making an Exhibition of Myself* (London, Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), 174.
- ²⁴ Sally Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company: A History of Ten Decades* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982), 166–95.
- ²⁵ Beauman, *The Royal Shakespeare Company*, 168.
- ²⁶ 'Shakespeare at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1971', 209–14.
- ²⁷ J. C. Trewin, *The Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1963* (London, Barrie and Rockcliff, 1963).
- ²⁸ Barry V. Jackson, 'Introduction', in Bache Matthews, *A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1924), xi–xv, xii.
- ²⁹ Jackson, 'Introduction', xiv–xv.
- ³⁰ Michael Bristol and Kathleen McLuskie, 'Introduction', in Michael Bristol and Kathleen McLuskie with Christopher Holmes (eds), *Shakespeare and Modern Theatre: The Performance of Modernity* (London, Routledge, 2001), 1–18, 4.
- ³¹ Bristol and Kathleen McLuskie, 'Introduction', 3.
- ³² Cary Mazer, *Shakespeare Refashioned: Elizabethan Plays on Edwardian Stages* (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1981) 73–4.
- ³³ Cochrane, *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1929*, 36–40.

- ³⁴ Alison Smith, 'Were the Pre-Raphaelites Britain's first modern artists?', blog, 23 August, 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/were-pre-raphaelites-britains-first-modern-artists> (accessed 2 April 2018).
- ³⁵ Cochrane, *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1929*, 40–2.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ³⁷ Sam N. Cooke, 'The Building' in Matthews, *A History of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*, 156–62.
- ³⁸ Kennedy, 'Looking at Shakespeare', 113.
- ³⁹ Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 70–1.
- ⁴⁰ In a letter written to Jackson dated 26 August 1925, Poel stated 'Your achievement is another nail in the coffin of the rotten tradition associated with the acting of Hamlet on the stage which came into vogue in the time of Betterton', unpublished letter, MS 978, Papers of Sir Barry Jackson and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Library of Birmingham.
- ⁴¹ Bristol and McLuskie, 'Introduction', 5.
- ⁴² I provide a detailed account of all the 1920s modern-dress productions in *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1929*, especially 97–147.
- ⁴³ Dominic Johnson, *Theatre & the Visual* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 71.
- ⁴⁴ T. C. Kemp, *The Birmingham Repertory Theatre: The Playhouse and the Man*, 2nd edn. (Birmingham, Cornish Brothers, 1948), 23.
- ⁴⁵ Delgado, 'Journeys of Cultural Transference', 125–35.
- ⁴⁶ Bieito quoted in Delgado 'Journeys of Cultural Transference', 126.
- ⁴⁷ Delgado, 'Journeys of Cultural Transference', 117.
- ⁴⁸ Kate Bassett, 'Never mind Hamlet's Oedipal complex, the whole of Elsinore's gone sex mad', *Independent on Sunday*, 24 August 2003.
- ⁴⁹ Kate McLuskie, 'Year of Shakespeare: 'Forests'', 5 September 2012 <http://bloggingshakespeare.com/year-of-shakespeare-forests> (accessed 2 April 2018).
- ⁵⁰ David Jays, 'Into the dark woods', *The Sunday Times* (Culture), 9 September 2012.
- ⁵¹ Bieito's next production for the REP is scheduled for May 2018. *The String Quartet's Guide to Sex and Anxiety*, a 'montage of melody and madness' reflecting on the work of the sixteenth century author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton, and the contemporary cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han is to be presented in association with Brighton Dome & Festival, Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg and Holland Festival.

Author biography

Claire Cochrane is Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Worcester. She has published widely on both the history and contemporary practice of Shakespeare in performance. As a historian of especially regional British theatre she has published two books on the Birmingham Repertory Theatre: *Shakespeare and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre 1913–1929* (Society for Theatre Research, 1993) and *Birmingham Rep A City's Theatre 1962–2002* (Sir Barry Jackson Trust, 2003). Her most recent monograph *Twentieth Century British Theatre Industry, Art and Empire* was published by Cambridge University Press in 2011.