

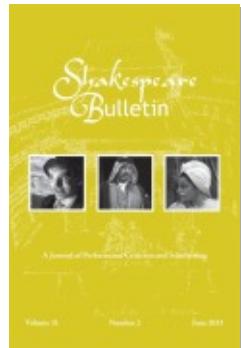


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The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice , and: Twelfth Night (review)

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Fig. 17. Brian McEleney as Lear and Abbey Siegworth as Cordelia in the Dallas Theater Center and Trinity Repertory Theater's 2013 co-production of *King Lear*, directed by Kevin Moriarty. Photo courtesy of Mark Turek.

The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice

Presented by the **Shakespeare Project of Chicago** at the **Niles Public Library**, Niles, Illinois. October 26, 2012. Directed by Peter Garino. Dramaturgy by Michelle Shupe. Sound by George Zahora. With Cassandra Bissell (Desdemona), Jeff Christian (Iago), Tony Dobrowski (Duke of Venice, Clown), Matthew Fahey (Cassio), Donte Fitzgerald (Othello), Hannah Gomez (Bianca), Royen Kent (First Officer, Third Gentleman, Herald), James Krag (Roderigo), Jeff Kurysz (Sailor, First Gentleman), Jack McLaughlin-Gray (Montano), Gail Rastorfer (Emilia), Frederic Stone (Brabantio, Gratiano), and Rod Thomas (Lodovico).

Twelfth Night

Presented by the **Shakespeare Project of Chicago** at the **Newberry Library**, Chicago, Illinois. February 23, 2013. Directed by Jeff Christian. Assistant direction by Brynne Barnard. Dramaturgy by Tony Dobrowolski. Sound by George Zahora, with original music by Jeff Christian. With James Krag (Orsino), Matthew Fahey (Curio), Cassandra Bissell (Viola), Roderick Peebles (Sea Captain, Antonio), John Kishline (Sir Toby Belch), Deborah Clifton (Maria), Daniel Patrick Sullivan (Sir Andrew Aguecheek), Jeff Christian (Feste), Elizabeth Laidlaw (Olivia), Will Clinger (Malvolio), Sean Cooper (Sebastian), and Dan Rodden (Fabian).

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The Shakespeare Project of Chicago specializes in producing semi-staged early modern readings, organizing an interpretation of a text around the use of playtext prompters. It is an intentionally stripped-down process: they rehearse a production for three days before a single weekend of performances at four Chicagoland libraries. The spaces are routine, but because of the tight schedule the players don't actually get a chance to rehearse in them. This means the company is typically unable to test blocking choices or experiment with the presentational options the architecture of a space might provide. This mode of production presents a unique challenge to each performance: how to adapt the use of plain black playtext prompters—often the only prop available—in these four bare and relatively untested spaces.

To get into the Niles Public Library performance of *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* one had to reserve a seat in advance online; a handful of patrons were turned away due to a packed house. Niles provided a separate event room that happened to include a very narrow stage space, approximately three feet deep and about a third as high: it provided nowhere to hide or to be “off stage.” In fact, with the audience and performers fully and equally lit, there was no sense that any part of the room could be marked as separate from the playing space. The aisles between sections of the audience were incorporated as a place for action, as in the early morning scene outside of Brabantio’s home where he is goaded by Cassio and Iago. With Brabantio on the lip of the dais, Iago and Cassio pushed themselves down rows and between aisles, then threw their voices in and from different directions amongst the audience in order to simulate a street. While it may have only been a difference of a foot or so in height, it was enough to create the effect of Brabantio leaning out an upper-story window.

Similarly, despite the fact that the costumes seemed to have come from the actors’ own wardrobes, they did work to emphasize political distinctions between characters. For example, nobles and military leaders were the most formal in neckties, slacks, and button-downs, while the soldiers went without ties to denote their lesser rank. Iago was barely distinguishable from the audience in his casual denim and t-shirt. Othello, however, was alone all in black. These hierarchies of dress suggested his liminal status in two senses: the nondescript black reinforced his Moorishness and also marked him in something we might associate with stagehand’s dress rather than overtly a performer. Thus, his dress took him not only out of the narrative’s classed hierarchy, but also nearly out of the fiction of the play. In the cases of blocking, lighting, and costumes, these choices

worked to erase as many barriers between the players and playgoers as possible without ignoring the necessity of marking political distinctions within the narrative.

Complementing these subtle costuming choices was the incorporation of the company's defining quality: the pointed use of prompters as the organizing principle for every production. There is no explicit ensemble method to handling the prompt books that, at the first, limit gesturing to an actor's non-dominant hand. Each actor each came up with his or her own method for incorporating the physicality of an in-hand text to the performance; as an extension of the actor's body, the prompter became a polymorphous prop. At times, however, it proved a trap. Because the actors were not provided with just their roles, but the full text, there was the opportunity to get stuck following along and removing oneself from the performative moment—looking for cues rather than listening for them (especially significant here wherein there were no wings to hide). However, as an ensemble this group was only nominally tethered to the text: most of the performers had largely memorized their parts, allowing them to experiment with the materiality of the prompter as a prop.

There were some props, mostly in the realm of costume, that served only a single function: putting on a hooded sweatshirt signaled that Roderigo or Othello were in disguise or hidden from view; the “unpinning” of Desdemona’s nightclothes was marked by a removal of earrings. However, those actors who committed some of the text to memory—thus resisting mere recitation—were then free to play with the prompters as infinitely transmutable objects. The development of Roderigo’s gullibility and cowardice was significantly influenced by the use of his prompter as a means to hide, a security blanket. It became a shield from Iago’s abuses and Cassio’s assault. He rested his chin on the top and leaned into Iago’s description of yet another plan to win him Desdemona. In moments of indecision, he chewed on its corners rather than just his lip. For Roderigo, the prompter served as a source of physical security that, in a metatheatrical turn, shone a spotlight on the assumptions that the printed text is a site from which an actor draws surety.

For Othello and Iago, however, the prompter provided the characters with places to retreat for security in less overt ways. On the one hand, Iago used the text as a vessel of authority, often indicating to it, leaning in and getting close to the gullible in order to reinforce his case. In the final act, Iago mimed being chained to his prompter and was led around by the authorities, arrested on the proof of his text made “busy in the paper.” On the other hand, Othello looked to his prompter as a manual

in social codes: to convey indecision he gestured at it as if to ask us what script he should follow. For example, in moments where Desdemona and Othello declared their love to one another, he seemed stuck on his lines, buried in what the right answer might be and placing the prompter between himself and his beloved rather than speaking to her. Whether a conscious choice or not, it suggested an emotional rift that increased once the troop arrived at Cyprus. There was something already out of joint between the newlyweds which was magnified by their move to the Turkish front.

In a production that gained so much from experimenting with the meaning of the prop, the purposeful limiting of materials on stage to costumes, bodies, and books means that one of Shakespeare's most ubiquitous tokens of competing and changeable meaning, the handkerchief, was absent. It was gestured at, mimed, and tossed about but did not exist as part of the material landscape of this production. Its lack of physical presence intimated that there might be more madness than paranoia in Othello's jealousy. Similarly, the other necessary plot object missing was a deathbed, for which the prompters did provide an analog. Desdemona was strangled with Othello's left hand from behind. She then pointedly closed her prompter and turned around, keeping still at center stage but with her back to the audience. The scene continued around her, Emilia and Othello eventually flanking her in matching death poses in a triptych of characters silenced in the literal closing of their prompters. It was an echo of the opening scene, where the players initiated the action with their backs to the audience; individuals were pulled from the line of still recruits and then handed their roles. For this observer, the absence of essential prop objects in exchange for the overt presence of the mutable playbook productively problematized assumptions about the fixity of the Shakespearean text. The library context, foregoing the usual theatrical trappings of an Equity production, underscored the communal significance of print objects as capable of multiple meanings—privileging as much an actor's ability to mime the sword as perform the presence of the pen.

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As a not-for-profit company, the Shakespeare Project of Chicago takes its free productions to libraries outside the city proper in order to provide access to local communities, especially targeting families and youth. The Newberry Library, as an elite non-circulating research library, is markedly different in the audiences it attracts, its architecture, and its relationship to the book—all of which might influence the overall tone of a play. The

status of the space links the quality of the library's collection (which includes a first folio edition of the works of Shakespeare as part of one of the most extensive early modern archives in North America) with its architectural container. The wood paneling, iron-wrought chandeliers, high ceilings, and draped windows looking out onto downtown Chicago bestow a prestige to the printed text that is dramatically counterpoised to that of a comfortably carpeted children's reading corner. This opulent spaciousness, by the logic of contrast, underscored the company's bare stage practices and stripped-down approach to staged reading: the actors are left alone with those "good words," as director Jeff Christian put it, to fill up the large lecture hall and its seventy-some early-morning attendees.

Without specially designed costumes, conveying the necessary storytelling elements of cross-dressed disguise in *Twelfth Night* becomes trickier. Olivia's household was unsurprisingly all in black—although she swapped her black shawl for a bright blue one once she gave up mourning. The garish yellow stockings (what looked, appropriately, like gym socks sacrificed to a home dye-job) made an appearance on Malvolio. The other nobles wore sport coats and cool colors, while the servants were in earth tones. Sir Toby Belch attempted to straddle the two worlds donning a bit of both, with a corner of his button-down shirt stuck out to reinforce his perpetual drunkenness. Feste, in golf cap and green plaid shirt, ran about the large space, his promptbook open, pages flying, and guitar bouncing across his back. On the whole, then, these costuming choices privileged the presentational rather than representational. In other words, as audiences, we did not need to be convinced of Viola's disguise, we merely had to be convinced that Orsino was.

The music that saturated this production, like the costuming elements, worked to signal motifs associated with a single character as well as constructed relationships between characters. Music is an important site for directorial flexibility, and for Feste (played by the director) to perform the original music composed for guitar he could not also hold his prompt book. The guitar became another kind of substitute for the book, a form of material accompaniment that guided an ephemeral performative moment in the song itself, from rim-shot comedy to a soundscape for amorous meditations. The separated twins Viola and Sebastian donned similar, but not identical, ski caps that helpfully hid Cassandra Bissell's long red curls when she was incognito as Cesario. What helped the cap evolve into a token of identity was the fact that Sebastian also used one as a marker of overt disguise. In his case, disguise did not enable upward mobility: it limited the disenfranchised son of a duke to slumming it

rather than working his way into the foreign court. At the moment of recognition between the twins, both removed their caps simultaneously to one another, reminding us that Viola's revelation has implications for her class and not just her gender status.

Jewels, money, and other tokens all were mimed, often to metatheatric effect. Sebastian, assessing his reality and whirlwind romance, felt into his pocket and gestured largely that he was fingering a pearl given to him by Olivia. Being able to see it would confirm that his love was not a dream. He pulled his hand out of his pocket to reveal the pearl, but we spectators saw nothing in what was clearly a moment of confirmation for him. In a similar scene teasing out the kinship between perception and deception, Cesario and Sir Andrew Aguecheek provided not only a swordfight without a fight, but also one without swords, suggesting the lack of motive on either side. It seemed that the overt material presence of the playtext by means of the prompters allowed for absences to resonate with meaning rather than merely a lack.

Both disguise and the prompters were at work as impediments to love in this production. For example, Orsino and Malvolio were certain, at least at the start, that Olivia's love could be found in a text. Orsino, in love with the idea of love, remained buried in his prompter until act five. When he then came face-to-face with unrequited love, he signaled change by instead looking heavenward to signal an impromptu speech rather than a reasoned explication of passion. Similarly, Malvolio leaned hard into his prompter to read Maria's forged epistle as a script to his aspirations of love and advancement. Throughout the performance, in fact, Malvolio held his prompter like a choirboy who wants very much to do things correctly and play by the rules. Inversely, prepared texts proved a poor guide for both Olivia and Cesario. Olivia was utterly dissatisfied with Cesario's carefully conned speech, and only rendered smitten when Cesario strayed from the text. Elizabeth Laidlaw was the only performer to fold her prompter in half and assess it like an account book, representing both her character's governing status as a countess and assumptions about love as a simply a script.

This interrogation of the idea of social scripts in a library context made me conscious of the fact that this *Twelfth Night* performed the book as much as it was a performance by the book. The prompters were often looked to for their text but more frequently as a place for a character to consider, pause, sigh, or change their mind. This was especially true for Sir Toby and Antonio, looking to the book as a place to breathe between speeches, turning it into an aid in pacing rather than an interruption.

The company seemed uniformly to make the choice to vacillate in their dependence on the physical text in order to craft characters: for love speeches it was better to let the prompters fall to the side as a means of suggesting emotional authenticity, while close attention to prompters suggested indecision and insecurity. It was by those characters (and actors, for that matter), who broke from the fantasy of the stable text, that we were rewarded with loves of conviction, all the while with due reverence to the playtexts hanging at their side.



Much Ado About Nothing

Presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, England. July 26–September 15, 2012. Directed by Iqbal Khan. Set by Tom Piper. Costumes by Himani Dehlvi. Lighting by Ciaran Bagnall. Music by Niraj Chag. Sound by Andrew Franks. Choreography and Movement by Struan Leslie. Fights by Kev McCurdy. With Meera Syal (Beatrice), Paul Bhattacharjee (Benedick), Shiv Grewal (Don Pedro), Sagar Arya (Claudio), Amara Karan (Hero), Madhav Sharma (Leonato), Gary Pillai (Don John), Simon Nagra (Dogberry), Bharti Patel (Verges), Chetna Pandya (Margaret), Kulvinder Ghir (Borachio), Neil D’Souza (Conrade), Robert Mountford (Panditji: Friar Francis), Ernest Ignatius (Antonio), Raj Bajaj (Balthasar), Darren Kuppan (Messenger), Rudi Dharmalingam (George Seacole), Muzz Khan (Hugh Oatcake), Peter Singh (Francis Seacole: Sexton), and Aysha Kala and Anjana Vasan (Maids).

JUSTIN B. HOPKINS, *Franklin and Marshall College*

Subcontinental sights and sounds filled the Courtyard Theatre foyer. Car horns beeped and bicycle bells rang—some of those same cycles hanging suspended from the ceiling. Flowery garlands, sacks of seeds, baskets and buckets littered the lobby. Bollywood posters plastered the gift-shop walls. Before I even entered the auditorium, Tom Piper’s immersive design brought me to India.

Inside, Piper had transformed the Courtyard stage into the courtyard of a contemporary Indian household, paved with red brick, framed by stucco arches and metal railings, and shaded by a tall tree, its branches and trunk tangled with strings and kites and cables and lights and laundry lines. As I settled into my seat, day dawned in India. Housekeeper Verges—later absorbing Ursula’s part as well—emerged, calling for the maids, who giggled and hid. Discovered, they reluctantly began their chores.