

'Excess of It': William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged) at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2016

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Abstract *It is timely in 2016, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, to consider his legacy as a figure ingrained within popular culture. This critical review will investigate one of the chief exponents and parodists of the dichotomy which Shakespeare symbolises between supposed 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' culture: the Reduced Shakespeare Company, a comedic theatre troupe who, to use their own slogan of droll self-deprecation, have been 'reducing expectations since 1981'.*

The review will investigate the company's most recent and tenth production, William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged), as a template for considering Shakespearean parody, focusing on the contemporary process of adapting and condensing Shakespeare's texts within a populist context.

Debuted at the Folger Shakespeare Library in April 2016, the play was first performed in the United Kingdom in August 2016 as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It is those performances upon which this review focuses. It will also use primary material drawn from live interviews and rehearsal observations conducted with Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor, the company's managing partners, co-directors, co-writers and performers.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, popular culture, Reduced Shakespeare Company, theatre, Edinburgh Festival Fringe

It was hard to escape Shakespeare at this year's Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In the year which marks the 400th anniversary of the playwright's death, Edinburgh offers insight into Shakespeare's often polarised position on the alternative Festival circuit, both as a bastion of 'highbrow' culture and a figurehead for fringe artists who seek to dislodge this status by reducing his work for a modern, non-Shakespeare initiated audience. Shakespeare related productions at the Fringe are often inconsistent in

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quality, perhaps due to its very format, where most shows do not exceed an hour or so in duration. It is difficult, therefore, to stage plays that average two to three hours, especially when trying to compress a traditional Shakespearean production which uses the text verbatim. Adaptations, parodies, and abridgements, therefore, tend to elicit more enthusiastic reviews and audience responses. It helps that Fringe audiences have come to expect their Shakespeare to be fast-paced, frenetic and audience-involving, in parallel to the stand-up comedians and street performers with whom these productions vie for attention and ticket sales. This contact with Shakespeare is far removed from that of the traditional theatre-goer attending the Royal Shakespeare Company. It is closer to the Globe Theatre, where the audience members experience a direct encounter with Shakespeare, rooted in that of the groundlings of Shakespeare's day. But must it always be so?

The Reduced Shakespeare Company's new play *William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged)*, which made its UK premiere at this year's Fringe, and addresses the dichotomy between 'high' and 'low' culture and their respective appropriations of Shakespeare, as the company has done with the Bard and several other topics throughout its thirty-five year history. The play centres around the uncovering of a lost Shakespearean manuscript and the resultant extended mash-up of his characters within a 'shared universe' which this provides. In interview with Austin Tichenor, the company's co-writer, director and performer, expressed the belief that the production offers an eighty minute show which creates an atmosphere closer to that of performances of Shakespeare's plays within the playwright's own lifetime, as opposed to the experience of contemporary Shakespearean audiences. How successful, then, is the RSC's new play as an example of staging a successful Shakespearean celebration outside the gravitational pulls of London and Stratford-upon-Avon during, to borrow their term, his '400th Deathiversary'?

In reviewing *William Shakespeare's Long Lost First Play (abridged)* as a Shakespearean parody, it is essential first to outline and analyse the play's imagined narrative within the imagined manuscript. This focuses on a conflict between Puck and Ariel, somewhat akin to the relationship between Oberon and Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The two spirits conjure a series of Shakespearean characters, both major and minor, manipulating each in turn, by way of demonstrating their own magical superiority. Such creative collisions fuel both the story and the satire, with these two facilitating inspired combinations, such as when Lady Macbeth is conjured onstage by Ariel to provoke Hamlet into action. She tells him 'we'll be here all night' (**Martin and Tichenor, 2015: 26**),

insisting 'no, no pausing, Hamlet!' (26) and rationalising that 'you tend to be a "not to be" Hamlet; / I need you to be a "to be" Hamlet' (27).

Similarly, Hamlet shares a scene with *Dream's* Rude Mechanicals in which his and Bottom's ideological clash mirrors Shakespeare's own exploration of dramatic delivery, through both Hamlet's naturalistic instruction to 'suit the action to the word, the word to the action' (45), and Bottom's tendency towards melodrama, insisting that 'if I do it, let the audience look to their eyes. I will move storms!' (44). This leads an exasperated Hamlet to conclude that 'as much as I loathe to appear a jerk, / This play within a play's not gonna work' (45). Tichenor explained that the company wanted to explore how adding and subtracting characters from different plays would speed up or slow down the drama. For instance, if Lady Macbeth was dropped into Hamlet, it is clear that this 'mean motivator' (25), as Ariel calls her, would have the whole revenge plot tied up in a trice, given how well her charms and enterprise convince Macbeth to act, despite the fact that he is initially as uncertain about killing a king as Hamlet. He described their process of adaptation as 'probably like fracking or clearcutting. We use [Shakespeare] as fuel. We just go in and grab everything and take what we need' (Tichenor, 2016a).

Another of the play's notable devices, which runs throughout their plays, is the RSC offering theatrical footnotes to the action, as company members either comment on what has just occurred, or debate the direction they should follow next in the mode of dramatic improvisation. For instance, prior to the play's first scene involving the central villains of the piece, Macbeth's Witches, Tichenor, playing himself, explains to the audience that 'another great feature of Shakespeare's long lost first play is that we get to see some of his smaller more crowd-pleasing characters in larger more prominent roles' (Martin and Tichenor, 2015: 50). This has historical precedence: Thomas Middleton achieved it in 1608, when he is believed to have incorporated additional scenes from his own play, *The Witch*, focusing on the Witches and their queen, Hecate, into *Macbeth*. Similarly, giving the Witches an expanded role allows the RSC to use them as direct instigators in Puck and Ariel's later downfall, rather than operating on the shadowy fringes, as they do in *Macbeth*. The RSC also diminish their frightening presence by making them visible, rendering them more effective as a vehicle for black comedy rather than actual horror, and giving rise to such smutty word-play as 'I love to be on the Moors / Especially the Moor of Venice!' (Martin and Tichenor, 2015: 51).

The expansion of character further relates to Tichenor's consideration that 'Shakespeare's plays are one expanded universe' (Tichenor, 2016b), explaining why the Witches are integral to the play's exploration of magic and tris as recurrent Shakespearean tropes across his 'theatrical

universe'. For instance, the doubling of the Witches as Lear's three daughters offers an interesting commentary on how many of Shakespeare's scenes, such as the Edmund-baiting opening of *King Lear*, revolve around two characters making a joke at a third person's expense, with the results being either tragic or comic – or sometimes both. This ties closely to the RSC's process of recycling Shakespeare in order to expand or reduce him, and relates strongly to Shakespeare's own cross-filtration across various genres, particularly in the repeated use of lost twins, shipwrecks and tempests in many of his comedies, which the RSC lampoon during the first act's climax, 'when a single mighty tempest rips through the entire play, affecting every character we see and most of the ones we don't' (**Martin and Tichenor, 2015: 55**).

There are clear parallels to be drawn between the play's line-up of Shakespeare's heroes and villains across an expanded universe and contemporary film franchises. Indeed, the RSC acknowledge this comparison in their programme notes for the play's Edinburgh run: 'Shakespeare's long lost first play also suggests that every character in his entire canon was once part of a single universe, an idea that comic books and superhero movies are currently exploiting to massive success' (**The Reduced Shakespeare Company, 2016: para. 4**). This acknowledges the similarity between the RSC's approach and the film industry's current preoccupation with 'world-building', a term used to describe the process of creating a shared imaginary world, in order to facilitate such collisions and mash-ups, as successfully demonstrated by Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Tichenor's reference to this 'massive success' is also a subliminal acknowledgement of the Shakespearean reference points contained in many recent superhero movies, particularly those directed by filmmakers with Shakespearean pedigree, such as Kenneth Branagh's *Thor* (2011) and Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012). Both of these examples make intertextual allusions to Shakespeare, through their casting choices, central tropes and, in the latter case, a direct invocation of the playwright's reputation, when Robert Downey Jr's Iron Man asks Thor whether they are performing 'Shakespeare in the Park'? (**Whedon, 2012**). This specific moment – in which Iron Man comments on Thor's heightened and archaic costume, diction and posture, referencing the previous film's Shakespearean intertexts, something acknowledged by Branagh and the cast of *Thor* – creates a conflict between traditional and non-traditional interpretations of canonical literature, similar to that of the RSC's work. The difference is that while Whedon and Branagh are treating Shakespeare, they do so in relation to the much coveted story-lines of Marvel comics. Therefore, both interpretations could equally be described as 'fan fiction'.

Tichenor explains that such an 'expanded universe was very much in our heads. We were conscious of that. Some of it was inspired by the graphic novel *Kill Shakespeare*, which also takes a very specifically superhero approach' (Tichenor, 2016b). *Kill Shakespeare* intertextually draws characters from disparate Shakespearean texts, first plucking Hamlet from a shipwreck to help Richard III in his quest to 'free us from the tyranny of William Shakespeare' (McCreery and Del Col, 2010-2014: 31), a wizard who has spread dissidence throughout his kingdom, thus setting the action on a trajectory towards its characters meta-textually meeting their original author. The RSC echo this, with Puck and Ariel settling their magical score in the play's final scene by commanding the spirits to show them 'the most powerful magician of all' (Martin and Tichenor, 2015: 110). They then reveal William Shakespeare to be the literal architect of his own long lost play within the play, who proclaims himself 'a living / Post-modern and meta-theatrical / Coup d'theatre deus ex machina' (111).

The resultant Shakespearean bricolage matches Tichenor's own explanation of his artistic process of excavation and strongly emerges throughout *Long Lost*, in which they seamlessly blend Shakespeare and pop culture references, as seen in the representation of Disney's and Shakespeare's endless overlaps. The will to believe in this specific correlation is satirised in an extended skit in which two of the actors, Reed and Teddy, convince the more academically-minded Austin of the similarities between *1 Henry IV* and *The Jungle Book*, 'where a young man shirks his responsibilities with his fat, lazy friend' (16), 'magic run amok' (17) in *Dream* and *Fantasia*, and the more obvious examples of *The Lion King*'s direct appropriation of *Hamlet*, the lags in *Othello* and *Aladdin*, and Ariels in *The Tempest* and *The Little Mermaid*:

REED: I mean, when you think about it, Disney was the modern-day Shakespeare.

AUSTIN: No, he wasn't!

TEDDY: Yes!

REED: He became ridiculously rich by rewriting history and stealing existing stories and making them his own. (19)

The RSC's references to Disney are part of what makes this show accessible and appealing to a Fringe audience who, because of the abundance of improvised and parodic material on offer at the Festival, are perhaps more predisposed towards the series of cross-pollinations between 'high' and 'low' culture which the play provides.

Another reason for this success are the moments in which the company interrogate the shared, public experience of Shakespeare. This takes the

work beyond theatrical 'in-jokes' and addresses the problems rooted in varying responses to Shakespeare, as shown by the following exchange:

REED: I've made some cuts.

AUSTIN: Wait, what?

REED: Yeah, we gotta be out of here in two hours.

AUSTIN: No no no, we've got to perform this whole masterpiece. We have a literary responsibility!

REED: No, we have a theatrical opportunity! And uncut this thing is over a hundred hours long (7).

In this conversation, the RSC dramatises the eternal conflict between scholar and performer, examining why attitudes that rely on a purely literary perception of Shakespeare's work can limit audiences from understanding his words if they are unable to experience them in the theatre. This is demonstrated further when Reed declares to Austin, who insists on silently reading a speech for his own pleasure, that 'this play was created to be performed, not read' (30).

The RSC's high-octane, self-confessed cartoonish take on Shakespeare answers Orsino's call in *Twelfth Night* to 'give me excess of it', which they quote early in the opening soliloquy (1). This is sugar-coated, fast-food Shakespeare, serving up the playwright's greatest hits and uncovering a couple of B-sides too. The nature of *Long Lost's* premise, which satirises the literary excavation of a rare manuscript, together with the process of revealing more about unexpressed narratives within Shakespeare's plays suggests that the RSC may be using some forms of expansion within their reduction process. However, the continuum of expansion and reduction is not so simple, and, as Tichenor himself admits, 'you expand on a single aspect of a play by reducing the rest of it away' (Tichenor, 2016b).

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