

Extract Two – this is taken from the first of the chapters that concentrates on the CSF, itself. It is taken from amidst an investigation into the many effects of the audience proximity at the Festival.

Actors have enormous freedom and control. They can play up to the audience and the reality of their setting, for example, when they talk of a raging storm in *King Lear* and look out to people sunbathing, and yet, at the same time, they hold in place the character and historical situation they are portraying onstage. In the audience there is a similar stimulating tension between reality and the performed world of the play. You are simultaneously witnessing an Elizabethan drama, played much as it would have been in its own time, and you are somehow conscious of taking part in the whole experience, even contributing to it, in a college garden in the twenty-first century. It is a powerful, if near paradoxical, feeling and it is analogous to that felt by audiences over four centuries earlier. They too never confused the illusion of the play with reality as their theatre was similarly non-representational.

All of this allows the director and his cast to overcome over reverence and dutiful laughter which can bedevil theatre goes in more formal situations. Shakespeare's work is so powerful in itself and carries such a monolith of cultural import that an audience can keep its distance, and be respectful rather than connected. Conventional theatre accentuates this distance and as time passed there was a steady movement of actors away from the audience. Almost every theatrical and technological 'advance' widened the gap. Over the last century, the error of this approach has been highlighted and attempts have been made to return to settings that bring those on and off the stage together. At the CSF a strong relationship between cast and those gathered to watch them perform has always been a given, and is one of the bedrocks of the Festival.

The dutiful laughter I refer to is the live equivalent of TV's canned laughter, that deadening pre-packed laughter when an audience responds to something they are told is supposed to be witty by the release of carefully timed laughter at a given point. When the audience is as close and involved in the action as it is at the CSF this is obliterated. There, you laugh when something is funny or not at all and when you do laugh, it is because you cannot do otherwise. In all theatres it is a natural reaction to join in when people all around you break out in laughter. Such group responses play a major role in the knowingly shared experience. However, it is much more keenly felt at the CSF because the other members of the audience are visible all around you and you are physically part of the whole experience. This heightens the group reactions to an extraordinary extent and they become part of the whole dynamic of the performances.

Oliver Ford Davis writes insightfully about this kind of experience:

*'Richard III talks to the audience so much that David Troughton felt he needed them [the audience] to become an actual character, influencing and guiding his direction. Antony Sher likewise felt that they gave him new insights into the way of playing the character. This might suggest that the audience forms a cohesive group. While it's true that there will always be spectators who are bored, inattentive or even hostile, theatre at its best enables individuals to feel they form part of a group consensus. The effect of a neighbour's total concentration or outright laughter can be very potent. Group reaction helps the whole audience to become more uninhibited. The thrill of Iachimo emerging from his trunk or Benedick declaring that "This can be no trick" can unite an audience in gasps or laughter. Both reactions can actually make an audience breathe together, and there is no more exhilarating feeling than an audience holding and releasing their breath at the same time.'*

Actors at the CSF can be very quick to play on an unexpected occurrence. It is a major strength of the CSF, this electrifying effect of improvisation. Once, the explosive opening of a champagne bottle led to a slightly re-timed line about cannon fire. Another time, Benedick, in a matinee of *Much Ado About Nothing* that had been assaulted throughout by a steel band at an adjacent wedding, pointedly delivered the line 'I cannot woo in festival terms' in that direction. The audience loved this multiply punning, quick-witted re-focussing of the line.

'Iachimo emerging from his trunk' recalls a favourite personal occurrence of this off-the-cuff yet completely apt ad-lib. On the opening night of the first ever CSF performance of *Cymbeline*, (2013) Iachimo, played by Ethan Holmes, was slowly and quietly extricating himself from a laundry basket to creep up on the sleeping Innogen [The *New Cambridge Shakespeare* uses this name rather than Imogen.] Alas, the basket wheels were misaligned and his foot got caught as he tried to work his way out. As the audience sat or lay in a collective hush, the laundry basket toppled over with a crash. The noise it made seemed astonishingly loud because it happened just at a moment that demanded total silence. Innogen was lying, supposedly asleep, close beside him.

Ethan/Iachimo froze for a second but then, with tremendous presence of mind and quick thinking, he turned to us, and, putting a finger to his lips, fiercely whispered, "Shhhhhh" as though it was our fault. This funny reversal of what had actually occurred released the tension of the pent-up audience in an explosion of laughter. Then, in a brilliant touch, just as he was about to examine her bosom to see if there was '*On her left breast/A mole cinque-spotted...*', he glanced up at us again and put his fingers to his lips to warningly 'shush' us again, as though he could not trust us not to make a noise 'again'.

When I recounted this to director David Salter, he responded:

*'That's what I love about it, complete interaction between the audience and the actor. You wonder too how much of the work, the comic monologues particularly, were improvised in Shakespeare's day. I like it when that improvisation works and stays within the world of the play.'*

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