

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 11 (1998)

Artikel: Measuring performance
Autor: Holland, Peter
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99953>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 12.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Measuring Performance

Peter Holland

I thought I ought to begin with some numbers: $2\frac{1}{4}$ 1508, 564. I will come back to them later.

According to *The Washington Post* in January 1997, "This is the Age of Measurement." In every area of our lives we measure everything we can. In academic circles the significance of measurement is best defined in a statement by Lord Kelvin that can be seen carved on a wall of the Social Science Research Building at the University of Chicago: "When you can measure what you are speaking about and express it in numbers you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind" (*The Washington Post*, 16th January 1997, B1). By that standard the study of theatre performance and particularly the analysis of Shakespeare performance, the discipline of stage-centred or performance-oriented criticism in which I work, is clearly meagre and unsatisfactory knowledge. I want today to use my three numbers as a means of indicating areas where that knowledge is most meagre, where the discipline is, I believe, currently most vulnerable to a charge that it does not recognise the socially complex, culturally difficult nature of the experience of play-going for which it claims or implicitly assumes the ability to account. In particular, the audience, totalised and generalised, reduced from its inner differences to a manageable monolith, is consistently simplified in analysis so that its responses to performance can be recreated into a form with which a scholar can easily deal. But the audience, even when it is on its feet cheering, is not one mass: hence the difficulty I always have in deciding whether the pronoun for the audience is "it" or "they." My own understanding of the differences in theatre audiences was formed in 1965 when, as I was chatting enthusiastically about the performance on the way back from seeing David Warner as Hamlet at Stratford, I was firmly told by my older sister that she and I appeared to have been at different plays. It took 28 years before we ever went to the theatre together again.

My numbers are concerned with some of those aspects of the event which are both marginal to current analysis and yet central to individuals' actual experiences of playgoing. I want, by this device, to hint at what we have been missing, even if I can make no promises on how to fill these crucial gaps. At the same time, while my emphasis will be on the possibilities of measurement and the implications measurement makes possible, measurement has its limits. Knowledge, in a field like performance studies, necessarily resists the formulation of Lord Kelvin. It does not follow that all its knowledge is meagre and unsatisfactory because it has no means of measuring an aspect of its concern. My argument will move and modulate from the measurable to the unmeasurable, the incalculable, the pleasurably unknowable. To know what cannot be measured and therefore what we cannot know may sound a little too glibly Socratic but even that would take performance analysis much further than is currently the case.

Though theatre historians continually measure the physical space of theatres, performance itself, an event of such immense complexity that most theory has collapsed in the face of it, is rarely perceived as an area of precise measurement, of systematised, numerical calculation. But within the practice of theatre, within the work of theatre practitioners and playgoers alike, precise measurement figures far more substantially and visibly.

My first number, two and a quarter, is an example of such measurement. In the programme for the production of *Julius Caesar* by Peter Hall at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1995, the theatre-goer was informed that "The performance is approximately 2 1/4 hours in length." The length of a performance has significant consequences for an audience. Perhaps in Stratford the brevity and rapidity of this *Julius Caesar* served primarily only to reassure audiences that they would be out of the theatre long before the pubs close. But in London, the length of a performance has distinctly different resonances. Anyone attending a long performance at the RSC's London home, the Barbican, Adrian Noble's *Hamlet* with Kenneth Branagh for instance in 1992, is used to the way that, towards 11 p.m., various members of the audience will leave, not because of displeasure with the production but in order not to miss the last train home. I have found my attention to the last scenes of such a performance damagingly affected by nervous glances at my watch and mental calculations about the time it will take to get to King's Cross Station or, on other occasions, equally nervous assessments of whether I can get to the BBC studio to give my live review immediately after a first night.

The example may seem trivial but it does not seem so to me: the experience of performance, the playgoer's ability to comprehend the implications of production are affected by such factors so that the measurement of a performance's length has significance for the receptivity and pleasure of an audience. Assumptions about the audience's ability to assimilate meaning may be contradicted by such external factors. In an important passage in his novel *The Tragic Muse*, Henry James has Gabriel Nash express something of the effects of the temporal constrictions of performance in his analysis of "the essentially brutal nature of the modern audience":

the omnium gatherum of the population of a big commercial city, at the hour of the day when their taste is at its lowest, flocking out of hideous hotels and restaurants, gorged with food, stultified with buying and selling and with all the other sordid speculations of the day, squeezed together in a sweltering mass, disappointed in their seats, timing the author, timing the actor, wishing to get their money back on the spot, before eleven o'clock. Fancy putting the exquisite before such a tribunal as that . . . [The dramatist] has to make the basest concessions. One of his principal canons is that he must enable his spectators to catch the suburban trains, which stop at 11.30. What would you think of any other artist – the painter or the novelist – whose governing forces should be the dinner and the suburban trains? (748-9)

James's tension between the requirements of high art and the needs of the audience is a familiar one. The effect of length on audience perception is something of which in certain respects theatre companies are acutely aware. British theatre companies know well that there are economic implications in performance length: a long performance may mean that the stage crew need to be paid overtime, with a consequentially severe effect on a company's finances, the profitability of a production or even on the company's willingness to mount the production at all. The measurement of length can, then, be a powerful index both of response and of economic function.

In other cultural circumstances the effect of performance length on ticket-sales may be acute. In Moscow in 1994, I was made aware of the radically different position theatre now occupied, in the post-Soviet state. Audience attendances were down, partly, I was told, because the real theatre was now to be found on television, in the daily experience of the political theatre of social change and social upheaval. But long performances were especially at risk. The first question people asked at the box-office was no longer "what is the performance about?" but "what time does it finish?", a concern driven by the way that, in a largely non-car-owning society, audiences are reliant on public transport and that, in the aftermath of the new rule by gangsterism,

travelling home late at night was dangerous. Personal safety in London is also seen as a major contributory factor in the reluctance of women to attend theatres on their own, the gender composition of audiences a direct consequence of performance length. For a play like *The Taming of the Shrew*, such changes in audience make-up may be crucial to the interaction of production and spectators.

This interest in the measurement of performance length began surprisingly early. In 1767, John Brownsmith, the prompter at the Haymarket Theatre for many years, published *The Dramatic Time-Piece: or Perpetual Monitor*. Its lengthy title-page announces that it is “a Calculation of the length of time every act takes in the performing, in all the acting plays at the Theatres-Royal of Drury-Lane, Covent Garden, and Hay-Market, as minuted from repeated observations, during the course of many years practice.” It aims to enable a potential playgoer to know “the time of night when half-price will be taken, and the certain period when any play will be over.” The first part of this sounds straight-forwardly economic since a playgoer could calculate exactly when to turn up for half-price admission after the end of Act 3, catching the last part of a play without having to sit through the whole performance. Brownsmith puts this more politely by suggesting that his book will “be infinitely serviceable to all those whom Business may prevent attending a Play till after the Third Act” (sig. [A]2b) and he records the exact time by the clock at which Act 3 ends for each play: 7.47 for *Othello*, 7.46 for *Macbeth*, 7.56 for *Hamlet*, 7.19 for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

But the time of ending of the performance had for Brownsmith and hence, I presume, for his readers, a moral implication: this information “will also be a Means of their Servants staying at home, till within a very little Time of Attendance, instead of assembling in Public Houses, or Houses of ill Fame, to the Destruction of their Morals, Properties, and Constitutions” (sig. [A]2a). Where a short performance now in Stratford may be seen as an opportunity for the landlords of nearby pubs to increase their takings, Brownsmith offers his record as a means of keeping the working-classes away from such temptations. It matters, in this culture, that a performance of *The Beggar’s Opera* will take three hours and five minutes while, for Shakespeare plays, usually of course adapted, the time varied from one hour 41 minutes for *Coriolanus* to 2 hours 39 minutes for *Hamlet*. The five acts of *Julius Caesar*, according to Brownsmith, last 23, 37, 40, 27 and 22 minutes, adding up to two hours 29 minutes, fourteen minutes longer than Peter Hall’s 1995 production and ending at 8.59 p.m..

But the programme's advice about the length of Hall's *Caesar* also informed audiences that it "will be played without interval" and signs in the foyer each night reinforced the information. In this it followed Terry Hands's 1987 production for the RSC. The information matters not only for the theatre's bar-sales, an important source of company income, but also for the audience's comfort: such a long single span would never be allowed on Broadway where the difficulties of middle-aged men with prostate problems sitting so long are taken seriously. As Tom Stoppard found shortly before the Broadway opening of *Travesties*, his play had to be cut to accommodate the demands of what he dubbed "Broadway Bladder" and defined as "a term . . . which refers to the alleged need of a Broadway audience to urinate every 75 minutes" (Gaskell, 260).

Intervals are a feature of performance that await proper investigation. They constitute one of theatre's sharpest means of defining interpretation, controlling articulation. For some plays the choice is ready-made: I have never seen a production of *The Winter's Tale* that has not placed the interval immediately before the speech of Time as Chorus, as natural a break as one could wish for. But in *Troilus and Cressida*, for instance, the modern convention of placing the interval as the lovers head off to bed both defines the shaping of the play, framing its two movements with Pandarus's two moments of direct audience-address, and denies and mutes the dramatic sharpness of Calchas's entry to demand the exchange of Cressida viciously hard on the heels of the lovers' one night of love. Some productions take intervals in mid-scene: Trevor Nunn's 1991 *Measure for Measure*, for instance, stopped half-way through 3.1, transposing some lines from later in the scene to provide a conveniently emphatic close; John Caird's *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1992 halted, to be precise, after Act 3 Scene 6 line 19, Octavius's description of Antony, Cleopatra and their children in the market-place, an event that was seen as well as described. Sometimes intervals are taken disproportionately late: productions of *King Lear* often go through to the blinding of Gloucester before the interval; Adrian Noble's *Macbeth* in 1994 broke just before the English scene (4.3). The theatrical articulation accomplished by this choice of the placing the interval can be acute but it can also be determined by other factors than directorial interpretation of the performance structure. At the Lansburgh Theatre in Washington, the interval in the 1997 production of *As You Like It* was placed after the torture of Oliver in 3.1 because of the amount of work the set designer required to be done to make Arden a place of spring, onstage pond and all. The particularly power-

ful close to the first half was less a matter of directorial intention than design necessity.

For *Julius Caesar* Hall – and Hands before him – identified the sweep of the play as one that denies or at least resists a performance's articulation by the interposition of an interval, choosing instead to follow Elizabethan practice and allow the play its single arch. Our understanding of Shakespearean dramatic structures recognises the predisposition of Shakespearean tragedy towards a central plateau, a long stretch of unbreakable action across the centre of the play. Theatre directors, attempting to accommodate performances to companies' and audiences' expectations of intervals, had long understood the problem. But *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* are the only plays regularly permitted to articulate their construction without the artificial structuring device on audience perception that an interval constitutes.

The length of Hall's *Julius Caesar* was a direct consequence of Hall's attitude to pace. Actors were driven by the director towards an unusually rapid delivery. The impetus was partly derived from Hall's entirely reasonable perception of the play's rapidity, the delivery matching and illuminating the pace of the dramatic action. But it was also a consequence of Hall's belief in the necessity of Elizabethan verse being spoken at speed. Hall has become obsessed with a metronomic approach to Shakespearean verse. He sits in rehearsal counting five stresses for each verse line, tapping the stresses with a pencil and demanding a pause at the end of the line, whatever the syntax may be doing. Hugh Quarshie, who played Mark Antony in Hall's *Caesar*, dubbed the approach (in a seminar discussion), in a marvellous phrase, "iambic fundamentalism" and complained that it was deeply inhibiting for actors, less the discovery of meaning in the rhythm of the verse than a constriction on that discovery, a denial of the provocative tensions between verse rhythm and syntactical meaning in Shakespearean language. Its inhibition on the actors' freedom was also an inhibition on audience's comprehension. I was painfully aware, on the first occasion on which I saw the production in 1995, that actors seemed to be speaking with one eye on the clock, determined to bring the performance in at the two and a quarter hour mark set. Speeches rushed by monochromatically, their definition of the stress beats denying any variety and hence local effect and colour.

In a notorious letter, Chekhov complained to his wife Olga Knipper about Stanislavsky's production of *The Cherry Orchard*: some relatives had reported that in the last act Stanislavsky "drags things out most painfully. This is really dreadful! An act which ought to last for a maximum of twelve minutes – you're dragging it out for forty. The only thing I can say is that

Stanislavsky has ruined my play" (330). Chekhov saw that speed is meaning, that the act played as fast as he intended denied the fatalist tragedy that Stanislavsky's approach was designed to reveal. But in the equally extreme case of Hall's *Caesar*, speed denies meaning, prevents the audience following the drama's and the production's argument. It was striking that, when I saw the production again in January 1996, it took ten minutes longer, the actors now taking control and finding some of the detailing that they had previously had to refuse themselves.

For the timing of the performance that the programme offered was deliberately phrased as "approximately 2¼ hours in length." Such measurements are necessarily imprecise but the differences can be highly significant. Stephen Pimlott's production of *Richard III* at Stratford in 1995 claimed in the programme that the performance is "approximately 4 hours in length" but, by the night immediately following the Press Night, a slip had been inserted in the programme saying that "the running time for tonight's performance is approximately 3½ hours." In a production heavily laden with stage mechanics the running time can change significantly: David Troughton, who played Richard, proudly announced to a seminar in January 1996 that the previous night's performance had shaved seven minutes off the running time, partly because the machinery had all worked smoothly but also because the actors felt the confidence to let the performance move more quickly. In any case, the programme's measurement of performance length derives from an estimate, not a precise measurement, made in the later stages of rehearsals, at the point when the copy for the programme needs to reach the printers. Subsequent to that, the production may decide to cut speeches or whole scenes, to eliminate slow-moving effects or to speed up over-portentous delivery.

Performance analysis is inhibited both by the imprecision and the inadequacy of its data. It is not only the exact measurement of performance that may be lacking but also the range of variation within which a particular performance may be placed. The analysis of the meaning of performance is directly dependent on the measurement of performance but it is not only a matter of a critic sitting with stop-watch in hand: the full extent of the meaning that a production generates will be defined by the full extent of its timings as much as by other necessarily immeasurable factors. Stage managers' nightly production reports regularly indicate the running time night by night, a need to measure that suggests their inheritance of the fascination with timings of John Brownsmith two hundred years earlier.

But the internal timings may also be highly significant. Jonathan Miller's 1987 production of *The Taming of the Shrew* for the RSC defined the major

switch in Katherine's relationship to Petruccio through a long pause in the sun/moon scene (4.6). As Katherine (Fiona Shaw) observed the sun, looking at it through her wedding-ring, she silently meditated on her marriage and analysed the relationship before resolving to accept it and value it. The prompt-book for the production indicates that the stage-managers became intrigued by this pause, timing it each night as they waited for the next lighting cue, dutifully and delightedly noting when Fiona Shaw set a new record as the pause lengthened and lengthened in the course of the run. Like the famous pause in Peter Brook's *Measure for Measure* before Isabella would kneel to intercede for Angelo's life in the last scene or the one before the entry of the king in Robert Sturua's production of *King Lear* with his Georgian company in Tblisi, each performance allowed the moment the maximum space the performers believed the audience could or would tolerate. The measurement of the pause's length becomes an indication of the measuring of the actor's silent investigation of the action and of the audience's understanding of the tremendous import of an event that the production found outside language, in the space of performance between speech.

The second of the numbers I mentioned at the beginning was 1508. This is the official figure for the maximum capacity of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford at present, with the current configuration of seating and permitted number of standing spaces. I want to use it both in relationship to the measurement of theatre space but also to the measurement of audience size.

The three theatres that the Royal Shakespeare Company run in Stratford – the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the Swan and the Other Place – attract the most particular and peculiar audiences. It may possibly constitute the largest audience for Shakespeare in the world but it certainly constitutes the most heterogeneous. International Shakespeare scholars, the world's theatre experts, regular theatre-goers, local residents, tourists both English-speaking and those without a word of English in their vocabularies are to be found there. It is traditional to mock the Stratford audience but the problem can be found in London as well. Brian Cox who played King Lear in Deborah Warner's production for the Royal National Theatre commented:

Clearly, if you are doing a play by Shakespeare the audience must comprise people who are interested in the plays of Shakespeare . . . but how interested? At the NT there are schoolchildren dragged there unwillingly for the sake of their GCSEs, husbands who would rather be asleep in front of the television, socialites who go because it is the place to be seen, sponsors whose product is patronising

the event, tourists there in error. Ian McKellen says that only nice people go to the theatre; they do, but sometimes on automatic pilot. (4)

The rhetoric of the disgruntled actor is not trustworthy as audience research. But there is little hard evidence for the social composition, the age range, nationality or cultural and commercial interests of audiences in Stratford or London.

Like all other theatre companies, the RSC knows the size of its nightly audiences. It can identify and measure both its percentage capacities and also its percentage box-office performance by performance. The two measures are significant in their differences: a production may be nearly full but the box-office significantly lower as a percentage of its maximum, a consequence of, for instance, the number of customers paying full-price for their seats compared with the number coming on a group booking at a discounted rate or the number paying a high price for a seat in the stalls compared with the number paying much less for the balcony. A play that attracts groups or a play that appeals more to those unable or unwilling to pay a high price per ticket may be nearly full but the distribution of the audience within the house will be a measure of the nature of the production's or the play's appeal. The two ranges of appeal – play or production – are eloquent distinctions of measurement. Some plays in the repertoire will attract near-capacity audiences irrespective of the quality of the production: Adrian Noble's dreary production of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1995, trashed by the reviewers and disliked by almost everyone who saw it, still did "good business," as the jargon has it, while Trevor Nunn's production of *All's Well that Ends Well*, starring Peggy Ashcroft, one of the most famous and finest Shakespeare productions of the century, played in Stratford often to tiny audiences.

The RSC has developed a vast body of information over its life-span that suggests that a particular Shakespeare play will produce a particular size of audience, completely irrespective of the production. The RSC's productions in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre are, by the terms of its Royal Charter, restricted to the plays of Shakespeare: non-Shakespearean plays in their repertory, which substantially outnumber their Shakespeare work, cannot be played there. As Trevor Nunn, the RSC's sole artistic director from 1968 to 1978, expressed it in 1973, "We are dedicated to the works of Shakespeare. To put it in a slightly livelier way, Shakespeare is our house dramatist" (Berry 60). Yet the financial constrictions, consequent on that crucial measurement of 1508, and the tremendous financial commitment that productions in the main house represent, mean that the repertory for that theatre is far less than the full range even of the Shakespeare canon. At present, the main-

house repertory is approximately 25 plays: we cannot now, given the current state of theatre economics, expect to see large-scale main-house productions of plays like *Timon of Athens*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* or even *All's Well That Ends Well*. Financial measurements preclude them.

Particular plays come round for production with surprising frequency. The RSC is on a cycle or perhaps a treadmill which is becoming increasingly arduous, a strain on the demand for invention and originality. While Nunn recognised over twenty years ago that the company must preserve Peter Hall's founding principle, "that whenever the Company did a play by Shakespeare, they should do it because the play was relevant, because the play made some demand upon our current attention," he also recognised that "to present the plays of Shakespeare relevantly, but also to present them (roughly) once every five or six years, is contradictory . . . The difficulty is to avoid novelty but remain fresh" (Berry 61, 63). What was true in 1973 is all the more emphatically true now: the pressures of the contradiction have only intensified.

The cyclicity of the process, the inevitability of needing to return to a play and hence of needing to find a new way of doing it, has its own consequences. Some of the company's work seems to have forgotten the limited knowledge of the bulk of its audience; it often speaks more directly to those whose theatre-going is within a frame of repeated Shakespeare productions, those for whom the narrative is familiar, the production does not need justification and whose perception of the production is always in relation to other productions and to a knowledge of the text itself. There is a closed circuit of theatrical communication here, something that is not, of course, in itself undesirable but which may function to exclude other parts of the audience.

Even so, marketing, that mysterious part of the theatre industry, can produce surprising effects. David Thacker's *Coriolanus* in 1994, starring Toby Stephens, did reasonably but not remarkably well in the RSC's second Stratford theatre, The Swan Theatre (capacity 458). Since the opening of the Swan in 1986, the RSC has always had the problem of finding the right London theatre to which to transfer the Swan productions. There is no London theatre which in any way reproduces the stage size or audience configurations of the Swan. With *Coriolanus*, the company took the bold decision to move the production up into the much larger expanse of the Barbican main stage. An aggressive marketing poster campaign used a photograph of Toby Stephens, face and shirt terrifyingly drenched in blood, charging violently at the camera. It built on the cult success of the film *Natural Born Killers* and carried the slogan "A natural born killer too." There were protests in the let-

ters columns of the up-market newspapers but the effect on the box-office was extraordinary: sales, particularly of cheaper seats and stand-by tickets, were exceptionally high, up over 1000% on other plays in the season. The campaign may have put-off middle-aged theatre-goers but had plainly attracted an enormous audience of young people, many of whom had never been to a Shakespeare production and had no idea what the play was going to be about.

Marketing Shakespeare and measuring the response to marketing is a precise indication of the cultural placing of Shakespeare in late-20th-century Britain. Yet the details of audience measurement for box-office and capacity are acknowledged to be inaccurate about the exact composition of the audience. The very heterogeneity of the Stratford audiences, the most extreme example of the problem, means that the reception of production is never unified. The proper understanding of cultural consumption, of Shakespeare as consumerist product, would necessitate a much more exacting measurement of the varieties of audience and their discrepant perceptions than anything currently available.

But even if it were possible to identify with statistical reassurance the breakdown of the audiences it would not signify, for the myth of the audience is far more potent and pervasive than mere statistical evidence. Actors assume that audiences are of a particular type, that their ingredients can be analysed and responded to or battled with. When the RSC in Stratford performs for an audience that contains the delegates at the International Shakespeare Conference, the actors find themselves fixated on the presence of this august body. As in analysis of the court's dominance over audiences in the Restoration, a perspective on dominance is created. Actors seem to believe that when the conference delegates are there the performance must be played to them, for them and, occasionally, in spite of them – but never without them. It is certainly the case that mid-week matinee performances in Stratford or in London contain parties from schools and actors occasionally report that they have played up to (or down to) that part of the audience, as if the rest of the theatre were empty. It is not only the influence of the spectator's position that affects his or her perception of a production and responsiveness to it; it is also that the participants in a production, consciously or not, gear and regear performances according to their assumptions about the audience.

From the moment of their inception, whole productions will set out to define a form of relationship to the composition of their future audiences, be it an intractable refusal to compromise like Deborah Warner's or the firm be-

lief, not necessarily intellectually cheap, that the production has a primary responsibility to please those whom it can reasonably expect or imaginatively and mythically assume will come to see it.

I have been suggesting that assumptions about audience measurement affect choice of play and the nature of actors' work but the argument applies equally strongly to production style. The most common complaint heard from actors in main-house Shakespeare productions at the RSC concerns the elaborate, often extravagant set designs, an objection often echoed by theatre-critics and academic Shakespeareans. While the RSC in the 1960s and 1970s eschewed an inheritance of Victorian spectacular theatre, it seems now to have capitulated, offering sets that are both 19th century in their splendour and a theatrical attempt to rival cinema, in itself a denial of the specificity of theatre as form. Increasingly design-concept seems dominant over directorial concept or at least that the latter is made most explicitly visible through the former, as the collaboration between directors and designers began to make it appear that the designers might be controlling directors, the designer as director, rather than the traditional pattern. Design-dominance has its own consequences: designs can be so massive as to dwarf and fundamentally redefine the actor on the stage. But the time it takes to construct a set for a major production at a theatre like the RSC is never less than the whole of the available rehearsal period. That, together with the nature of the director-designer relationship, means that actors now arrive on the first day of rehearsal expecting to be shown a model of a set over which they can have no influence. The elaborate sets define interpretation before the actors can have any influence on the development of the production and, unsurprisingly, they feel as a result excluded from the processes of creating interpretation. The set-model can loom in the rehearsal room as an object suggesting a future and unequal struggle. What appeared in the rehearsal room to be actor-centred comes, for actors and audience alike, to be set-dominated, the actors inevitably losing in the unequal battle.

Actors are also often presented with a stage-set that is complex and even dangerous for them to work on. Its mechanical devices can be restrictive and prone to break-down. Stephen Pimlott's 1995 *Richard III*, a production designed by Tobias Hoheisel, made extensive use of an inner-stage platform which rolled out from a huge sliding-door in the back wall of the set. Dubbed by the actors "the cd-player," the platform was entirely dependent on electrical stage machinery to move in and out without any manual override. It regularly stuck, either in or out. At one preview, when it had been particularly liable to eccentric and unexpected movement, David Troughton,

playing Richard, looked straight at the audience, knelt down beside the platform and crossed himself, praying that this time it would move on cue. In discussion, Troughton has made it clear that he would have preferred to play on a bare stage with a curtain in the back wall.

But the elaboration of the sets for the main-house at Stratford, even when they work efficiently and are approved of by actors, is a direct consequence of an assumption about audience measurement. The RSC's extravagant sets for the RST, its house style of strong and elaborate design, is not an aesthetic decision consequent on directors' and designers' theories about the most effective or important way of interpreting a Shakespeare text. Instead it is a style driven by marketing, by the assumption that the audience that the company needs to attract into those 1508 seats is the audience for *Cats* and *Les Misérables* and that that audience wants the RSC's visual style to rival the theatrical experience of such musicals, mostly, of course, directed by RSC-trained directors. Because the numbers by which it measures its audiences are large, the RSC must give its audience what it understands the audience to demand. The sets are measured not against the play but within the system of sets for big theatres that seek a tourist audience. All other considerations, for example about the appropriateness of the sets to late-20th-century readings of the plays, are subordinated to theatre economics.

My final number was 564 and, like 2¼, it is a figure I take from an RSC programme. The programme for Adrian Noble's *Romeo and Juliet* states "The text used in this production is the New Cambridge Shakespeare from which approximately 564 lines have been cut." Measurement suggests the comparison of something to a standard, a definition of relationship. In the case of cutting the text, the performance is measured against a preceding text, the play-script, the assumed authority for the words spoken.

Of course, the cutting of a Shakespeare play has a long history. I, like others, doubt that anything approaching a full text of *Hamlet*, either in its second Quarto or first Folio form, was ever played in the Jacobean theatre. When Davenant's mildly adapted version of the play was published in 1676 it carried the following information, directed "To the Reader":

This Play being too long to be conveniently Acted, such places as might be least prejudicial to the Plot or Sense, are left out upon the Stage: but that we may no way wrong the incomparable Author, are here inserted according to the Original Copy with this Mark." (sig. [A]2a)

The statement is a complex and resonant one. It marks one step in the opening of an explicit gap between text and performance in the representation of the text, a gap that needs identifying as a space between the conceptualisation of Shakespeare as a location of value, "the incomparable Author," and the theatre as a place with its own constrictions, a place in which that which is "too long to be conveniently Acted" necessitates abbreviation. The consequences are substantial. Many speeches which no modern full-scale performance would dream of eliminating are marked as having been cut in performances of this version: for example, Hamlet's instructions to the players, "Speak the speech, I pray you," the first 45 lines of 3.2, are to go, lines which we recognise as able to be cut without being "prejudicial to the Plot" but whose significance to modern understandings of the play defines the cut as certainly prejudicial to "Sense."

But the treatment here of the text for a scene like 1.1 suggests a very different process at work. A modern edited text of the scene based on Q2 usually runs to 176 lines (the scene is nearly twenty lines shorter in F1). Of those, the 1676 quarto marks 54 for cutting, reducing the scene by nearly a third. The longest single cut is 14 lines, the description of the portents in Rome "A little ere the mightiest Julius fell" but many of them are single lines.

Scholars investigating a play's stage history minutely identify such cuts, examining their significance for interpretative choices made in production. Irene Dash has eloquently argued that the perception of Shakespeare's female characters in the history of performance has been deeply affected by the often savage cuts in their lines, eliminating for example material that was perceived as too explicitly sexual.

Occasionally there is a recognition that cutting is also a matter of theatrical expedience, of an acting company's awareness of different priorities in performance (See Kliman 62-86). As Boris Pasternak, whose translation of *Hamlet* Grigori Kozintsev used both for stage and film productions, commented in a letter to the director,

Cut, abbreviate, and slice again, as much as you want. The more you discard from the text, the better. I always regard half of the text of any play, of even the most immortal and classic work of genius, as a diffused remark that the author wrote in order to acquaint actors as thoroughly as possible with the heart of the action to be played. As soon as a theatre has penetrated his artistic intention, and mastered it, one can and should sacrifice the most vivid and profound lines (not to mention the pale and indifferent ones), provided that the actors have achieved an equally talented performance of an acted, mimed, silent, or laconic equivalent to these lines of the drama and in this part of its development. (Kozintsev 215)

The cuts marked in 1.1 in the 1676 text generate a scene that is more dynamic, more excited and animated, less prone to digressive accounts of material that, whatever its intrinsic worth, disrupt the forward momentum of the scene and hence produce a much slower impetus for the opening of the play. It ensures, for instance, that the theatre audience have less time to wait for the moment they are expectantly anticipating, the first entrance of Hamlet himself, the star's first appearance. Significantly, no line is "pricked" down while the Ghost is on stage, only segments of the lengthy conversations before and after his appearances. The cut version can be precisely measured against the conflated text and we can note that much – but not all – of the material omitted in the Folio text is cut here.

But my interest in the activity of cutting and the measurement of performance that it enables is not mathematical and scholarly but perceptual. Almost the whole of an audience is totally unaware of cuts, even when they have, at Stratford, read their programmes carefully and watch armed with the information that a certain number of lines have been cut. I saw Adrian Noble's 1995 *Romeo and Juliet* twice but I must admit that I cannot confidently identify more than a few of the "approximately 564" lines which were not spoken. I also have to state that I feel unembarrassed about admitting that I cannot. I do not find myself seated in the theatre checking off the lines in my mind against my knowledge of the play. My consciousness of the text against which I measure the performance is not statistical, not a matter of putting mental ticks and crosses against the lines. Even in a production as poor as Noble's *Romeo*, which I found myself watching with considerable disengagement as it tediously unfolded, the text of a play with which I think I can claim a reasonable familiarity was not present within my activity of watching. When Jay Halio suggests that "the critic must depend upon having a complete knowledge of the play" (666), he is asking for a kind of perception that cannot allow any comfortable commitment to the pleasures of the performance, for all the scholarly rigour that he reasonably requires.

Of course there are moments at which the text and its absences can be immanent for a particular member of the audience. I was shocked that, at the end of Gale Edwards' production of *The Taming of the Shrew* for the RSC in 1995, after the dark, bleak reading Josie Lawrence gave Katherine's final speech, Petruccio did not say "Why, there's a wench! Come on, and kiss me, Kate" as he knelt, appalled by what had happened to their relationship. There was, in the tormented account of the play's ending that the production argued for, simply no way in which the line could have been spoken, its cut-

ting a necessary consequence of a particular take on the play, of the production's reading of the play against its grain. But a colleague of mine, seated next to me, did not note the cut of such a famous and familiar line, even though he was fully aware of what the production was arguing about the text. I do not find this anecdote critical of my colleague, even though I leave him anonymous; it is, rather, a definition of the ways in which the text is being made differently manifest, divergently present for spectators in the course of the experience of production.

Measuring the treatment of the text in this manner is not necessarily engaged with the particular audience member's acceptance or rejection of a production's interpretation; it is not a factor of a measuring of a production against the particular reading that the spectator believes the play must have, so that a production is damned or praised for its willingness to align itself with the putative version the playgoer wishes all productions of the play to have. But the measuring of the presence of text, in the examples I have been using through the awareness of its local absences, is a measure of the playgoers' varying awarenesses of the text's immanence, of the ways that their particular perception of performance and knowledge of the text conjoin and interrelate.

In 1983, Patrice Pavis used a questionnaire for his students studying theatre semiotics at the Institut des études théâtrales at the Sorbonne Nouvelle. One of the questions asked "what role is given to dramatic text in production" and Pavis comments that "the text in performance does not always have the same status" (209, 211). I would go further. In a rich variety of ways, both the processes of production, of *mise-en-scène*, and the experiences of the spectators are measured against a concept of the text. The production of a Shakespeare text devises a reading, constructs an intention for the communication of meaning based on its own location of the text within a wide range of determinants: for example, its assumptions about the play, the work's cultural and theatrical history, the theatre company's cultural placing and the assumed nature of its audiences. Within a foreign-language Shakespeare production, a non-Anglophone production, the spoken text is itself processed and consumed in relation both to a range of degrees of knowledge of the Shakespeare text and in relation to the history of translations of that text, its variances from culturally normative presentations of that play.

We can, as theatre researchers or as students of Shakespeare, investigate with comparative ease the construction of the presentation of meaning. We can explore the structures of intentionality within a production, for example by interviewing a number of the theatre workers associated with the genera-

tion of the production. But we have no mechanism to understand the degrees of immanence of the text in the consciousness of the consumers of the performance. This is not simply a matter of awareness of cuts, of the visible absences of segments of the generating text, even though I have used that as the basis for my examples. It can, just as easily, be assumptions about character and action, about the historical or contemporary placing of meaning, about the relationship of a production to the history of the play in performance.

Shakespeare is not and cannot be measured precisely in performance. The audience fragments into its constituent individuality, dissolving the myth of a unity of reception and creating instead an unassimilable and unmeasurable diversity. Theatre critics and Shakespeare scholars, our most frequent sources of information about audience response to a production, are a statistical aberration, a deviation from anything approaching a median reception, let alone the illusion of a normative one. For, in the end, our reactions only measure ourselves.

Works Cited

- Berry, Ralph. *On Directing Shakespeare*. London: Methuen, 1989.
- Cox, Brian. *The Lear Diaries*. London: Methuen, 1992.
- Dash, Irene G. *Wooing, Wedding, and Power: Women in Shakespeare's Plays*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981.
- Davenant, Sir William. *Hamlet*. London: 1676.
- Gaskell, Philip. *From Writer to Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Halio, Jay. "Finding the Text." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36 (1985): 662-9.
- The Oxford Chekhov, vol. 3. Ed. Ronald Hingley, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- James, Henry. *The Tragic Muse*, in Henry James, *Novels 1886-1890*. New York: Library of America, 1989.
- Kliman, Bernice. *Hamlet: Film, Television, and Audio Performance*. Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988.
- Kozintsev, Grigori. *Shakespeare: Time and Conscience*. London: D. Dobson, 1966.
- Pavis, Patrice. "Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire." *New Theatre Quarterly* 1 (1985): 208-12.
- The Washington Post*, 16th January 1997.