

IT MUST HAVE BEEN LIKE THIS

This July's kaleidoscopic original pronunciation production of *Henry V* left **David Crystal** feeling closer than ever to Shakespeare.

The original pronunciation (OP) production of *Henry V* by Ben Crystal's Passion in Practice company displayed the dramatic possibilities of this approach in all sorts of fresh and unexpected ways. OP, it needs to be remembered, is just a tool, as any other original practice, and its effect on a production needs to be judged in terms of the vision of the play as a whole. Ben adapted his innovative production to suit the intimacy of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. Not for this space the Olivier-style fortissimos of 'Once more...' and 'Crispin's day', but an exhausted muted appeal for the first and a quietly executed cameraderie for the second, with the OP underscoring these famous speeches to make them unexpectedly moving.

Nothing in the Shakespeare canon matches the stylistic variability in this play, and the company brought the OP to life in ways I'd never heard on stage before. At one extreme, there was the colloquial banter of the Eastcheap characters, with lots of elided sounds; at the other, the rounded and resonant tones of the bishops. And in between, we have Henry himself, who we know from *Henry IV* has the ability to code-switch – able to talk to tapsters in their own language as well as to match diplomats in their linguistic games. Henry also knows that kings set fashions – he says as much to Kate – so his OP reflected a formal style – for example, with word-initial *h*'s pronounced – that the other English nobles emulated.

The military scenes demanded a different set of OP choices. We heard the articulatory exaggerations of the Celtic captains, which added a novel comic dimension to OP, with an energetic Welsh *r*-trilling Welshman, an explosively palatal Irishman, and a comically incomprehensible Scot whose speech left the other captains baffled. Then, when Henry walks around the camp, the night before the battle, he stumbles across a group of soldiers (Williams *et al*) being told a story to keep their spirits up: in an ingenious addition, we hear the Rumour speech from *Henry IV Part 2*, told in a mesmerising OP by a Caribbean performance-poet who had joined Passion in Practice for the occasion.

Chorus was distributed around members of the company, displaying OP in a wide variety of accents, from Lithuania to California. People sometimes forget that OP is not a single accent, but a sound system that allows many accents – just as there are in Modern English today – and it is important to hear

it in all its variation. From a dramatic point of view, the vocal diversity strengthened the role of Chorus as a universal observer.

Several other innovations informed this unusual production. The quarrel between Nym and Pistol has the two men shouting at each other with their speeches overlapping – a technique used to great effect after Duncan's murder in Ben's *Macbeth* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse last year.

Henry's mind wanders as he listens to the Archbishop's interminable exposition about Salic Law, so at one point his speech fades into the background and we hear characters whispering lines into his ear from earlier history plays. Then there are the songs.

Songs in *Henry V*? Ben found five references to contemporary songs in the

play in Ross Duffin's *Shakespeare's Songbook*, and located them at appropriate points. Hazel Askew researched them and taught them to the company. From my point of view, this was a first, as I'd never adapted OP for singing in a Shakespeare play before – least of all in Latin and French, as well as English.

The character of Boy (Falstaff's page) was developed to join the pantheon of Shakespeare's later-play Clowns. Ben drew our attention to the fact that Boy does something very unusual in this play: he talks directly to the audience, in quite long speeches – just as Clown would. He therefore had him introduce the play, as a sort of Chorus-Clown, by speaking the anticipatory epilogue at the end of *Henry IV* ('our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katharine of France...'), leading directly into 'O for a Muse of fire...'. Boy-Clown is thereafter always around, hovering and observing, in the Eastcheap scenes. We see him killed, when left alone in the camp, and – in another innovative Ben Crystal twist – we see the dirty deed done by the cowardly Dolphin, who has escaped the battle and disguised himself as Monsieur Le Fer.

The handling of the French OP was also a first. What surprised me here was its stylistic diversity, ranging from the lofty tones of the French King to the semi-French used by Henry when wooing Kate. In between, we have the genteel dialogue between Katherine and Alice, and the bonhomie among the French nobles, with the Dolphin in this production opting for a speech style as distinctive in its way as Pistol's. It proved quite difficult for me to develop a way of getting the actors to speak that sounded French yet avoided having them being pale

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Photos Aslam Husain

imitations of Inspector Clouseau. My solution was to have them speak OP exactly as the English characters did, but with syllable-timing – the ‘rat-a-tat’ rhythm that is natural to French. This then allowed the Ambassadors and the Herald (Montjoy) – who in view of their calling would presumably have been more competent English speakers – to use an OP that was ‘less French’.

All these choices resulted in an unprecedented kaleidoscope of OP – and revealed some new readings. For example, France is usually spelled *France* in the First Folio, but it is spelled *Fraunce* when the French are speaking (suggesting a pronunciation of ‘frawnce’). Henry is also given this spelling when he is trying to speak French to Kate – and he has it just once when he is speaking English. At the point when Alice begins to interpret what Kate has said – that it isn’t the fashion for ladies of ‘Fraunce’ to kiss – Henry interrupts with ‘It is not a fashion for the maids in Fraunce to kiss before they are married, would she say?’ The spelling suggests that he is mocking Alice’s pronunciation. It’s a tiny point, but it adds an extra nuance to the way Ben had this scene played, avoiding the lovey-dovey way it’s often done, and underlining the fact that Kate is, after all, a political pawn. An interpretation where she is a reluctant player in the king’s game, and where there is a great deal of tension in the room, seems wholly justified.

As with all OP productions, there were surprises on the opening night. I wasn’t expecting Jamy to be quite so unintelligible, so the other captains were genuinely nonplussed, but the audience loved it. And the French nobles themselves decided that, when the Dolphin was praising his horse so fulsomely, there was sufficient closeness in OP between *horse* and *arse* to poke some extra fun at him. I never taught them that, but it worked!

Passion in Practice is a company devoted to recreating, as far as is humanly possible, the work ethic of Shakespeare’s company, cutting a play in the direction of ‘two hours’ traffic’, using cue-scripts, and not relying on weeks of rehearsal runs. It can be tricky when working in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, as – the space being so well-used – there is very limited opportunity for the actors to spend time there to see how to exploit it to best advantage. They had just the day before to explore the best ways of using the candles to point the night-

time scenes and to implement one of the major insights of this production – the theme of shadows (‘if we shadows have offended...’). Candles behind banners generated atmospheric silhouettes, creating the impression of many soldiers (‘Into a thousand parts divide one man...’). Katherine did the whole of her English-learning scene behind a banner, as if in her boudoir, with the parts of her body displayed in silhouette (‘the hand, the fingers...’).

There was an opportunity on the day to ‘top and tail’ the scenes, so that the actors knew their entrances and exits; but the first time the company had the opportunity to present the play as a whole was when the audience was there. I was playing Fluellen, and after the battle there is a short scene where he talks to the king about them both being Welsh. The first time I had the chance to speak those lines to Henry and to hear how he would respond was during the performance. As I approached him verbosely (‘Your grandfather of famous memory...’), he gave me an ‘Oh no, not Fluellen going on and on again’ reaction. It completely altered the way I then said the lines.

It must have been like this on the original Globe stage, with the actors surrounded by friends and family as well as the public at large. Not only did the audience not know what was going to happen next: the actors didn’t either. Everyone was on their auditory toes, and the result must have been an electrifying freshness, which I sensed, at that moment, we were recreating with our OP production. It was the closest I’ve ever felt to Shakespeare.

David Crystal OBE is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. His books include *Shakespeare’s Words* (with Ben Crystal) and its accompanying website www.shakespeareswords.com, *Pronouncing Shakespeare* and *Think on My Words: Exploring Shakespeare’s Language*.