Shakespeare's Theatre Space

Michiko Suematsu

Abstract

Shakespeare's theatrical dimensions have been noted and defined repeatedly by the various methodologies of stage-centred criticism. In line with this performance-oriented criticism, this essay attempts to examine Shakespeare's theatricality in relation to theatre space. The main concern is in what way his text owes its full realization to theatre space, and this issue will be discussed, citing some examples from the recent history of British Shakespearean productions.

A growing interest in Shakespeare as an entity of performing texts encourages the reassessment of relationship between text and theatre space. Does text define space or vice versa? In the particular case of Shakespeare, what kind of space best provides the realization of his text, and why? This essay aims to clarify what physical characteristics of space enhance or limit the rich language of Shakespearean text, making reference to the recent stage history of British Shakespearean productions.

As one example, let us see how the Royal Shakespeare Company, the forefront of British theatre, has tackled this crucial problem of space. Since its establishment in 1961, the company has constantly searched for the best theatre space for Shakespeare. In addition to the repeated attempts to improve the original main house theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, they undertook trial seasons in several other venues both in London and in Stratford. At present, the company owns three theatres in Stratford (the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, the Swan, and The Other Place) and two in London (the Barbican and The Pit).

Availability of various theatre spaces itself is a great asset of the RSC; however, these spaces vary in the productivity of successful stages. To name a few examples, the
most memorable RSC productions in the last decade, in my view, are Deborah Warner’s *Titus Andronicus* (87, the Swan), David Thacker’s *Pericles* (89, the Swan), Sam Mendes’ *Troilus and Cressida* (90, the Swan) and *Richard III* (92, The Other Place and the Swan), and Adrian Noble’s *The Winter’s Tale* (92, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre). Except the last, all the productions were staged in the smaller theatres, the Swan or The Other Place, and this by no means is a coincidence. In fact, the success of production depends largely on the quality of space, and because Shakespeare’s text requires flexibility and intimate relationship between actors and audience, small-scale theatres which meet these conditions tend to stage distinguished Shakespearean productions.¹

To verify this hypothesis, and conclude what kind of space is most appropriate for Shakespeare, a further analysis of each RSC theatre space will be helpful. This short essay will limit itself to the RSC theatres in Stratford, which conveniently provide examples of theatres in different scale; large, medium and small.

The main house theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (the RST for short) is a huge 1500-seat auditorium characterized by a proscenium arch. Though still the centre of the company’s work, the RST has serious drawbacks in staging classical works. First of all, behind the proscenium arch which divides the stage and the audience, actors are reduced to two-dimensional existence. Each member of the audience here witnesses the sequence of spectacle on stage just like in a cinema. As a result of this passivity, the communal sense of creating the show is lost entirely to the audience. What is worse, the RST is stuck with the sheer bulk of space itself. The gigantic void which refuses naturalistic staging is so hard to energize. In spite of serious efforts in the past to restore the relationship between stage space, actors and audience in this theatre, the condition has not improved so far.²

On the other hand, the Swan, the newest venue of the RSC Stratford (opened in 1986), has distinguished itself as one of the most satisfactory spaces in the U. K. This medium-sized courtyard theatre houses 460 seats and an unusually long thrust stage (5.8m x 13.1m). Honey-coloured timber which is used abundantly on stage and surrounding walls welcomes the audience with a warm atmosphere.

It is mainly an actors’ theatre where they remain three-dimensional life-size figure and enjoy the greatest possible intimacy with audience. In this space, audience, as a congregation, can participate actively in the performance and share communal
imagination with actors. The underlying design of the artistic director (Trevor Nunn) and the architect (Michael Reardon) was “to re-create the relationship that exists between actor and spectator, when both are contained within a common architectural framework,” and this has proved highly successful.³

Apart from this intimacy, fluidity of acting space is another great advantage of the Swan. Unlike the RST, it does not demand lavish scenery or huge set but “what is immediate to actors—costume, props.”⁴ An empty space is changeable to anything with communal imagination incited by actor's lines. It is the space where you can leave the text to do its own work and nowhere else is the verbal imagery more easily translated into visual imagery. Moreover, flexibility of space can encourage both naturalistic and grand styles of acting. The shift from domestic to epic, according to a director Declan Donnellan, is most essential for Shakespearean production.⁵ For instance, Deborah Warner’s triumphant production of Titus Andronicus (1987, the Swan) crystallized the director’s resolution to exploit the possibility of theatre space. According to Ronnie Mulryine and Margaret Shewring, “Most remarkable about this Titus was the sense of human suffering conveyed through the simplicity of stage design, costume, sound and blocking.”⁶ Brian Cox, whose colossal portrayal of Titus stupefied the audience, achieved the utmost effect with “at once epic and intimate” acting—the most appropriate style in the Swan.⁷

Finally, the smallest of the three theatres, The Other Place (TOP) should be mentioned briefly. TOP is basically a studio theatre in which 200 audience surround a bare performing space situated in the centre. Domesticity of scale limits the style of acting and emphasis here is on details and psychological explanations of action. As Terry Hands rightly put it, TOP is “a voyeuristic space,” where audience are invited to peep into character’s mind, holding their breath.⁸ Relationship between actors and audience in this space is intense, but never intimate. In such extreme proximity, audience participation would distract and thwart the theatricality of the production. Though 1976 production of Macbeth directed by Trevor Nunn was a huge success in TOP, Shakespearean plays, which explore the dynamic of language and fluidity of space, find this confined space inhibiting to a certain extent.

Brief examination of three RSC theatres has confirmed that the characteristics of Shakespeare's text demand certain conditions of theatre space for an utmost theatrical effect. Because Shakespeare’s method is a mixture of realism and anti-realism, the
flexibility of acting space is essential. Furthermore, the language of his text, which the communal imagination of performers and audience vitalizes, requires intimacy. In brief, so-called “Chamber Shakespeare”—a radical challenge to an established norm of Shakespearean production—has restored the healthy relationship between actor and audience.

By no means Shakespeare is presentable only in a small-scale theatre. The past RSC history studded with celebrated productions has proved otherwise. However, from the 80s onwards, directors have increasingly found it difficult to cope with the huge space, which resulted in scarcity of satisfactory main-house productions.

To repeat, the main drawbacks of large auditoriums are audience’s detachment from actors and the vastness of space itself, which are interrelated problems. Given that theatre space can be energized aurally and visually, what is at stake now is the crucial balance between the two. In the theatre today, apparently the latter has been over-emphasized. For example, in the case of the RSC, the present artistic director Adrian Noble created the new definitive house-style in the 80s, opting for visual effects. As Robert Shaughnessy pointed out, Noble and Bob Crowley (the designer) “perpetuated the pictorial and scenic mode of production as its dominant, main-house, large-scale style.” Directors come to materialize their ideas in the form of kaleidoscopic sequence of spectacles, making the most of visual elements such as setting, costume and lighting.

This trend in the large theatre has resulted not only from the alteration in the RSC’s directorial policy but also from the changing nature of audience and actor. The arrival of film and video has totally “altered the reception of the performer’s body in the theatre.” Accustomed to a naturalistic acting style in films and TV, the modern audience feel distant to a non-naturalistic, epic style of acting. Besides, more and more audience go to the theatre to feast their eyes with lavish spectacles, rather than to “hear” a play. On the other hand, actors too are not free from the influence of the times. For the actors grown up in this age of films and TV, to deliver the density of Shakespearean verse in a fully epic scale is almost impossible. Michael Attenborough sadly admits that “a sense of scale, a sense of poetry, a sense of the non-naturalistic has sometimes been lost.” Actors can no longer respond to the richness of writing as they used to do.

It is true that visual impact in the theatre can be enormous. For instance, a set can
create a mood or strike a keynote in an instant when it is right. However, when a set begins to assert itself, or divert audience's attention, it often leads to a disaster. The 1990 RSC production of King Lear, which was directed by Nicholas Hytner and designed by David Fielding, is such a case. John Wood's intelligent Lear was reviewed favourably, but opinion on the design was divided among theatre critics. In the storm scenes in Act 3, a huge, white, open-sided box which almost covered the entire acting space appeared on the stage, and Lear in a frenzy howled within this revolving box. It was a clever idea to visualize chaos in Lear's mind and in the world outside at once. Unfortunately, however, the wheeling box fell short of their expectation and merely distracted audience's attention with the creak. One of the most powerful and moving scenes in Shakespeare was thus shattered by the "concept" of director-designer team.

Certainly all pictorial productions in a large space do not necessarily end in such an unfortunate result. For example, most of Adrian Noble's pictorial productions have succeeded in making text alive with fresh meanings. His 1992 production of The Winter's Tale, noted for its visual splendours, is a good example. A happy gathering of people holding colourful balloons in a huge see-through box—this delightful picture in the opening scene immediately engages audience's attention. Visual metaphors such as balloons and umbrellas were used repeatedly and tied a play together effectively. A fellow director, Sam Mendes commends Noble's genius as follows: "His great skill is of setting an impressive and resonant image and a very intimate and highly thought-through scene in counterpoint." Noble is also adept in handling acting space, and in the same production, he managed to stage 90% of the action on the forestage without letting us realize the fact. Vertical movement of Autoricas (he appears from heaven, hanging on a bunch of balloons), and the position of Hermione in the final act (her statue turns its back to audience) are other examples of his superb control over space. He knows how to make the most of theatre space and energize it with rich, visual language. His exciting picture never diverts our attention, and what is more, it never is a perfect and self-contained picture. He always leaves room for audience participation, that is, we are always invited to complete the picture with actors on stage.

Do modern large-scale Shakespearean productions have no other choice but to rely heavily upon visual language? What has become of Shakespeare's language which can create "the swelling scene" solely by working on audience's imagination? The language proved its potency on the main house stage at least twenty years ago. The
1975 RSC production of *Henry V* directed by Terry Hands (the former artistic director of the RSC) is one of the greatest productions in this century, which evoked the force of language fully with scenic minimalism. In fact, several mundane factors drove the company to be sparing. For one thing, the failure of 1974 season threatened the company economically, and also the government cut back subsidy because of the oil crisis at the time.

Hands fought through this economic crisis and staged a revolutionary production. His idea was to mount a series of history plays and see if it is possible to regain their energy and vigour with the simplest settings. The set designed by Abd' Elkander Farrah consisted mainly of bare-board thrust stage and brick walls exposed at the back. Location was indicated by curtains or canopies, and props were kept to a minimum. As costumes were introduced gradually, actors at first appeared in casual clothing. In this minimal setting, however, actors could rediscover the language and rise to its scale. According to Shaughnessy, “the economics of necessity produced what was for many a more essentially Shakespearean theatrical experience: from this stark setting the text, and the psychologised, universal individual, emerged more strongly and clearly than ever before.” The success of the stage owed much to Alan Howard who played the title role. He conveyed scale and intensity of the lines marvellously, while every aspect of their meanings was made clear through his delivery rich in nuances. This was a spectacular production in an entirely different sense, abandoning a gigantic set which dazzles today’s audience in a large auditorium.

As I said earlier, it is a smaller theatre that can offer an essentially Shakespearean theatrical experience. In practice, however, the modern theatre industry commercially needs a large-scale theatre which accommodates hundreds of audience. If that is unavoidable, productions in a large space should at least reserve their dependence on elaborate picture and rediscover the enjoyment of telling the story through Shakespeare’s lines. It is certainly a formidable feat, but a large theatre can offer a different kind of theatrical experience by exploiting the epic scale of Shakespearean language. After all, the way to savour Shakespeare, I believe, is through the ear and not the eye. Ours is a critical period for Shakespearean productions, when actor should retrieve the scale of language, and audience, participatory imagination.
Notes:
This paper is based on a report presented in a seminar “The Royal Shakespeare Company—A Reappraisal Today” at the 34th annual convention of the Shakespeare Society of Japan, held at Hiroshima Jogakuin University in October 1995.

7. Ibid.
8. Hands, p.159.
12. This production was staged at the Ginza Saison Theatre from 11 March to 7 April, 1994.
14. Ibid.
15. Henry V. 1. 1. 4.
17. Ibid., p.63.