

**A Public Talk to Introduce a Screening of the Richard Eyre (Director) *Film Stage Beauty* (2004: Qwerty Films/N1 European Film/Artisan Entertainment/BBC Films/Momentum Pictures/Returning Productions/Tribeca Productions) at the Broadway Cinema, Nottingham, on 9 September 2004**

Any large second-hand bookshop in any decently sized town in this country will have a section on theatre and/or a section on Shakespeare, and in these you will often find books concerning the acting profession in Shakespeare's time. Some are about the economics of the theatre industry, about which we know quite a bit, others about the repertoires of the various playing companies and the lives of the more famous actors that became national stars, about which new evidence is emerging all the time. Others still, usually rather older than the rest, describe the style of acting in Shakespeare's time, and are entirely worthless because, in plain truth, we know virtually nothing about the subject and probably never will.

Some bare facts about actors are apparent. For example, Edward Alleyn, played so impressively by Ben Affleck in John Madden's film *Shakespeare in Love*, was an unusually large man--which undoubtedly helped his celebrated presentation of Marlowe's anti-hero Tamburlaine--and a surviving portrait and signet ring confirm that he was about 6 feet tall, well above the period's average. To augment his bulk Alleyn apparently developed a powerful style of large gestures and loud speaking which others mocked as 'stalking' or 'strutting' and 'roaring'. So, some actors were louder and, as it were, larger than others. Another bare fact that everyone knows is that on the stage in Shakespeare's time the female parts were played by male actors. It is commonly asserted that women were forbidden to act, but this is not actually true: there was no law prohibiting it but England simply did not join the tradition of female acting that blossomed in other European countries in the C16. Drama in the centuries before Shakespeare was mostly connected with the Christian Church, a notoriously male-dominated institution until very recently, and this alone was enough to prevent a tradition developing. Female roles in Shakespeare's day were played by teenage boys who were apprenticed to an adult member of the company. (Teenagers developed later in those days, and their voices may not have broken until they were 17 or 18.) We might think that a role such as the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* is best played by a middle-aged man rather than a child, but all the evidence is against it. In a culture in which most men had beards, the point about boys was that they haven't yet reached adult maturity, and it is for that reason that they could play women who were, by contemporary standards, never fully adult.

Whatever we are to do in an effort to understand Elizabethan acting, it will have to be by using indirections to find directions out, as Polonius puts it. Eyewitness accounts of performances of Shakespeare's plays in his own time are rare, so there was considerable excitement when a new one--concerning *Othello* performed at Oxford--was discovered by Geoffrey Tillotson in the 1930s. The central comment of the account is revealing: "Moreover, that famous Desdemona killed before us by her husband, although she always acted her whole part supremely well, yet when she was killed she was even more moving, for when she fell back upon the bed she implored the pity of the spectators by her very face". This confirms the expectation that modern performances leads us to, that Desdemona's death is the central affective moment of the play. As Malcolm from *Macbeth* might have said, nothing in her life so became her

as a leaving it, or as a modern feminist might reply, in other words the only good whore is a dead whore.

The account from Oxford also confirms that the power of this scene lay in the detail: "she implored the pity of the spectators by her very face". Notice too how the account says that "she always acted her whole part supremely well", whereas we might say that he, the boy actor, played the female part well. There is here the same slippage of pronouns that we find in Samuel Pepys's comment upon the actor Edward Kynaston, that he was "the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life--only her voice not very good". Pepys and Kynaston are in tonight's film, and the eroticism of performance implied by Pepys's comment is a central theme.

When the account from Oxford surfaced in the 1930s, important new theories about acting were emerging and they focussed on naturalism. By the principles of Konstantin Stanislavsky, which have become almost universal in actor training, a dramatic character is not just a collection of lines to be spoken at the right time without bumping into the furniture, but is a full, albeit imaginatively constructed, human being. Buoyed up by Sigmund Freud's startling discovery that most of what comes out of our mouths is not entirely under our control--that we have a just-barely detectable unconscious with aims and drives all of its own--Stanislavsky's technique encouraged actors to ask seemingly banal questions of their characters. What did I have for breakfast this morning? What is in my pocket right now? What is my motivation in this scene? The point was to treat the character as though it were person, and to bring to bear the full weight of modern thinking about personality and one's own recollections of being in similar situations as the character, in order to find vocal and gestural effects that don't seem scripted but rather seem like spontaneous responses to the developing situation.

Stanislavsky's method has obvious limitations. Pity the poor actor cast as the Chorus in Shakespeare's *Henry 5*, or, of even more slender means, the instantly forgettable Adrian in *The Tempest*, trying to infer a human personality out of what he has to say. But for parts with richer material, the Stanislavskian method works extraordinarily well. I have been labouring this point about naturalism because it is central to the film you are going to see tonight, and in relation to the actor's craft--which is the film's topic--it can be approached via a single question: what it is to be a woman? In 1953 Simone de Beauvoir gave a very influential answer when she asserted that "One is not born a woman, but rather one becomes a woman". That is to say, upbringing and the influence of wider culture, not biological fact, are what print femininity onto the unformed mass of a human infant. In this view, gender is a kind of performance that one learns to give to the audience comprised of one's parents, siblings, friends, and teachers, rather than being an expression of an inner material reality. In the field in which I work, the academic study of drama, this social constructivist model of gender reached its high water mark in the 1980s and is now on the wane as scientific research appears to be discovering innate differences between the sexes. In the film, Kynaston's trick of performing gender is trumped, as it were, by the real thing: actual female actors taking the female roles.

The film you are about to see is not literally true, of course. Ned Kynaston was just starting his career when actresses first appeared on the English stage at the end of 1660, when he was 20 (Billy Crudup is 36). Rather than being instantly ruined, Kynaston continued his female impersonation and was said by some critics at least to

be a more convincing woman than many of his female competitors. The central theatrical figure missing from this film is the theatre impresario Sir William Davenant, of whom the Reverend John Aubrey recorded that "when he was pleasant over a glasse of wine with his most intimate friends . . . said that it seemed to him that he was writt with the very spirit that Shakespeare [had], and was seemed contentended [sic] enough to be thought his son". The tavern in Oxford owned by Davenant's parents was indeed on the road from Stratford on Avon to London that Shakespeare travelled so frequently. Davenant's leading actor, Thomas Betterton, who is in this film, was reputedly aided by Davenant's familiarity with the performances of John Lowin and Joseph Taylor who received their instructions directly from Shakespeare 50 years earlier. So, in theatre history at least we have some kind of continuum bridging the gulf between the pre-Commonwealth stage and the Restoration stage. The film offers us a vision of a complete rupture in performance practices but sensibly it does not extrapolate from this a simply heterocentric and biologically-determined norm of human behaviour. It ends, in my view, with an appropriate expression of ambiguity arising from the dissolving of artificially-imposed gender categories.

One final thought. I have spoken--and the film largely speaks--about the the play *Othello* in terms of gender difference rather than what many will consider to be its obvious dominant theme, racial difference. The Ghanaian actor Hugh Quarshie has said that he will never accept an offer to be cast as Othello because the play is a caricature of African characteristics. But there are many black actors keen to play Othello, and indeed it is unlikely that we see again a white actor putting on black make up to play the part, which was the norm until the 1970s. In one sense, of course, *Othello is* a white man: not in the sense of being a servant of the Christian Venetian state, but in the more basic sense of the part being written for a white actor. What tonight's film might be saying about racial identity as a matter of performance rather than biological fact I leave for you to ponder for yourselves as you watch it.