

Days of Significance

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Abstract

Days of Significance, written by Roy Williams, is one of the new plays commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of its Complete Works Festival. Premiered at the Swan Theatre in January 2007, this very loose adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* moves between modern-day England and Iraq to explore the tension between military and societal values that in Shakespeare lead to conflict when the soldiers return from battle. This version begins on the eve of two new recruits' departure for Basra, and traces the damage that war causes both for those who fight abroad and for those they leave behind.

Days of Significance, by Roy Williams. Royal Shakespeare Company. Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK. 10-20 January 2006. *Director* Maria Aberg. *Set and Costumes*, Lizzie Clachan. *Lighting*, David Holmes. *Sound*, Carolyn Downing. *Performed by* Claire-Louise Cordwell (Hannah), Ashley Rolfe (Jamie), Jamie Davis (Ben), Pippa Nixon (Trish), Trystan Gravelle (Dan), Nigel Cooke (Lenny), Amanda Daniels (Gail), Michelle Terry (Clare), Ony Uhiara (Donna), Daniel Dalton (Tony/Sean), Simon Harrison (Steve), Richard Katz (Vince), Mark Theodore (Brookes), Robin Lawrence (Drunken Man), and Jason Barnett (Bouncer).

"Distressing," "provocative," and "topical" are not normally terms used to describe *Much Ado About Nothing*, one of the few Shakespeare plays still usually produced as a festive comedy. Adaptations of *Much Ado*, including Sir William Davenant's *The Law Against Lovers* (1662) and Hector Berlioz's opera *Béatrice et Bénédict* (1862), have tended to foreground the high-spirited battle of the sexes between Beatrice and Benedick that ends in romance, to the exclusion of what few dark elements cloud Shakespeare's original, lodged in the Hero and Claudio plot. Roy Williams's adaptation, *Days of Significance*, takes a more disturbing approach by focusing on the soldiers, revealing how the harsh consequences of their experiences in battle shape them and their society.

The question of military morality is not absent from Shakespeare's *Much Ado*, which opens with the triumphant return of Don Pedro's army and depicts the soldiers adapting to peacetime codes of behavior. Claudio, less able than Benedick to put aside *esprit de corps* in favour of courtship and marriage, suffers greatly and causes great suffering before he can be integrated into life after war. In *Days of Significance* that suffering spreads, affecting all who go to war and all who are left behind. By starting the action the night before the soldiers depart to fight in Iraq and concluding where *Much Ado* begins, when the surviving soldiers return, Williams traces these characters' decline from innocence (or ignorance, perhaps) to hardened cynicism. Challenged to explain what they will be fighting for in Iraq, Jamie (the Claudio character) and Ben (Benedick) can only proclaim, lamely, that "Saddam's a cunt." They are vaguely frightened in the opening act, certainly less frightened than they should be in light of the mounting number of British casualties, but in the second act, through Ben's video diary and the depiction of a confusing, bloody battle in Basra, we see that the reality is both terrifying and dehumanizing. The final act reveals the brutal consequences: Ben dies a questionable hero, having fired on a group of Iraqi children, and Jamie returns home charged with war crimes similar to those reported at Abu Ghraib.

The trajectory from the farewell celebrations to Jamie's bitter homecoming is believably depicted. In the first act, Ben and Jamie are the clichés of disaffected British youth, representatives of the hordes found congregating at the nation's pubs and clubs each weekend, hoping to meet a girl or initiate a drunken brawl before nausea sets in. Hannah (Hero) is every yob's dream, a feisty working-class princess possessing real kindness beneath her tough posturing. Her brash friend Trish (Beatrice), the tart with a heart, is apparently a fan of the Catherine Tate Show, borrowing the comedienne's catch-phrase to let Ben know that she's "not bovvered" by his juvenile teasing. This is just one among the many contemporary allusions that already seem dated: Tate-speak, like the songs of Britney Spears and Robbie Williams quoted in the first act, has seen its cultural moment come and go. ("The Power of Love" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood is more carefully presented as

a deliberately retro moment.) That quibble aside, the characters behave just like many of the young adults living in my East London neighborhood, their tough posturing and inane conversations occasionally punctured by something vaguely sensible, swiftly deflated by the others before it can prove contagious. Dan, the odd man out and thus a kind of Don John character, is repeatedly belittled for articulating a more thoughtful stance on the war. His attempts to engage Ben and Jamie in a meaningful conversation before they leave to fight for a cause they barely understand are rebuffed, as are his rather jarringly sophisticated questions to Hannah in the third act (one of the few instances where Williams's nearly impeccable ear for realistic dialogue deserts him). Ben and Jamie would rather drown any qualms in drink than debate them, and Hannah, while the lads are away, tries to protect herself from having to take a stand on the war by pretending to be more vapid than she is. The final act of the play, focusing on Hannah's moral awakening and her consequent recognition that she must be either with Jamie or against him, is a poignant reminder that we are all implicated in the war. In this play, no bystanders are innocent, and all are collateral damage.

Reviewers have tended to accept *Days of Significance* on its own merits, dismissing its admittedly tenuous connections to *Much Ado*. Though the echoes of Shakespeare's original are faint, they are present and sometimes resonant. In particular, Williams explores the relationships between Shakespeare's characters in ways that can shed light on the original. Trish's bullying of Hannah, for instance, makes one reflect on the implications of Beatrice's propensity to dominate her cousin, while Dan's growing bitterness, as his social position becomes increasingly peripheral, lends some depth to Shakespeare's rather two-dimensional Don John. The pointlessness of Steve's plan to derail Hannah and Jamie's nascent relationship using gossip overheard by his girlfriend in the ladies' room, for lack of anything more amusing to do, underscores the petty nature of Borachio's plot to ruin Hero and Claudio's wedding. Jamie's disturbing lack of affect, as he speaks of torturing prisoners of war, comments interestingly on Claudio's initial lack of remorse following Hero's ostensible death, both men satisfied with the moral evasion of "just following orders." Like other adapters from Mary Cowden Clarke and the Lambs to David Nicholls (who wrote the *Much Ado* adaptation for the BBC's 2005 *ShakespeaRe-Told* series), Williams mines a rich vein of things Shakespeare left unsaid.

If some vestiges of *Much Ado* remain in plot details and characters, this adaptation's realistic dialogue comes at the expense of the effervescent wordplay that has made *Much Ado* an enduring favorite in the theater. Listening to its replacement, it was difficult not to long for Beatrice and Benedick's witty badinage:

Ben: What?

Trish: What!

Ben: Well . . .

Trish: Well?

Ben: You know.

Trish: Do I?

Ben: Yeah.

Trish: Right. I know.

Ben: You know?

Trish: I know.

Ben: You know. What do you know?

Trish: I know how you feel.

Ben: You know how I feel?

Trish: Yeah.

Ben: Good.

Trish: Right.

Ben: I know how you feel.

Trish: Good.

Ben: Right.

Trish: I always knew.

Ben. Always knew too.

Trish: Oh for fuck . . .

She lunges at him. They kiss like animals. Ben tries to put his hand up her skirt.

This combination of profound emotions, half-expressed through inarticulate gruntings and gropings, is a hallmark of Ben and Trish's relationship and continues through all three acts. Trish, lamenting Ben's absence in the final act, tells Hannah: "He should be here, so I can cuss him down like I always do, then he'd have a lame go at trying to cuss me. Then we'd go and shag each other senseless. Like fucking animals, Hannah! Now we can't."

The final act largely retains this true-to-life, if rather flat, dialogue — except for a few lapses when Dan begins quoting the news media nearly verbatim — but it abandons realism in other ways. The act consists of a series of vignettes featuring Hannah confronting Trish, Dan, her stepfather Lenny, and the newly-returned Jamie as she struggles to articulate her views on the war. In this production, Hannah stood within a chalked rectangle, reminiscent of the impromptu boxing ring one could imagine being used for street fighting, with Hannah battling a relay-team of opponents. Characters stepped in from the periphery of the rectangle to engage with her, then

receded as their conversations ended. This technique achieved dramatic tension and immediacy, foregrounding Hannah's struggle to come to terms with her moral obligations in a dramatically compelling way, but the result is a rather unsatisfying conclusion to the otherwise realistic portrayal of compelling human relationships established in the previous two acts. *Much Ado* becomes, in this treatment, a problem play rather than a comedy, with exploration of the play's issues taking precedence over the further development of plot and characters.

For a Shakespearean conditioned to expect five acts, two of them ideally following a well-timed interval, the three-act, ninety-minute *Days of Significance* felt incomplete. Even without such traditionalist biases, the abrupt shift from realism to this pastiche of vignettes was redolent of the rehearsal room or the drama workshop, not the RSC's Swan Theatre. I must admit, however, that I sat through the entire production entirely gripped by what was happening onstage, even during the congested and rather disappointing final act. The impression of a rushed, under-written conclusion was exacerbated by Williams's ill-advised decision to introduce ever more peripheral elements. Lenny's confession of inappropriate longings for his step-daughter is an especially irritating example of this lily-gilding that was noted by several reviewers. Other innovations worked much better than one might have expected. The promenade staging, used to good effect in the first act, made for some satisfyingly uncomfortable moments as ground-level spectators hastily positioned and repositioned themselves to avoid becoming part of a fight scene or being doused with a stream of quite genuine-looking vomit. Several elderly matinee-goers looked as though they were wishing they had chosen instead to see Judi Dench in *Merry Wives: The Musical*, which was playing on the main stage, but this device should be even more effective (and more welcome) when the play transfers to Davidson College in North Carolina, along with *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. Whether American college students will be able to make sense of the dialogue's most idiosyncratically British lines remains to be seen.

Days of Significance works fairly well as a modern play, but it is at best a very loose adaptation of *Much Ado*. This is perfectly fair, given that Williams's commission, reiterated in the program notes, was simply to craft a "response" to any Shakespeare play. The result tells us much more about Williams and about contemporary British drama than it reveals about *Much Ado*. *Days of Significance* fits in nicely with Williams's creative output to date, in which his specialty is young, urban adults coming of age and confronting controversial issues. It also coincides, more troublingly, with the agenda of a group of British playwrights known as "The Monsterists," to which Williams belongs. Their manifesto, available online at www.monsterists.com, "outlines what a Monsterist play might look like":

A Monsterist play would *show* the story, not *tell* the story. This means the action is in the present tense and dramatic. It is then up to the audience to interpret meaning from the action as opposed to being told by the author what to think, which is the case in the monologue. A Monsterist play would be unlikely to be polemical, though it would inevitably be political if it was dealing with big themes. The world would be presented as it is, a mucky, complex mess.

The manifesto also calls for a "moratorium on Shakespeare in 2008" to encourage the production of new plays by living playwrights. *Days of Significance* suggests that Williams's loyalties lie chiefly with the Monsterists, not with a sustained exploration of *Much Ado About Nothing* or any other Shakespeare play. The play ticks all the boxes outlined in the Monsterist manifesto, leaving its spectators with a "mucky, complex mess" of moral dilemmas about the war in Iraq, the state's duty to educate its citizens, and the nature of modern love, among others. The larger question, in this context, is whether the RSC should be subsidizing a member of a group explicitly antithetical to Shakespeare. *Days of Significance* is undoubtedly an important modern play, and future generations will find in it a record of the linguistic and moral impoverishment of early twenty-first century popular culture no less than a testament to the strong anti-war feeling among Britain's creative minds. Williams accurately reflects the way some of us speak, and the way some of us live, in 2007. It is an important contribution to the Monsterist repertoire and to Williams's award-winning body of work. If it is less a thoughtful response to Shakespeare than a further manifestation of ongoing interest in urban youth culture, nobody at the RSC has given any public indication that the institution is even slightly bovvered.

Online Resources

The BBC's ShakespeaRe-Told series. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/shakespeare/tvdramas.shtml> [cited 7 May, 2007].

References

Williams, Roy. 2007. "Days of Significance." London: Methuen Drama.

Monsterists. 2007. "Monsters." <http://www.monsterists.com/pages/MONSstandard.htm> [cited 23 April , 2007].