

# Listening most precisely on the event

**David Crystal** provided the Globe Theatre Company's transcription of *Romeo and Juliet* in original pronunciation. In the second of two articles on this experiment, he looks back on three remarkable days at the Globe.



Illustration Belle Mellor

Well, they did it. For three days at the end of June the resonances of Elizabethan English were heard again on a stage in Southwark, for the first time in 400 years. And afterwards, the 'original pronunciation (OP) experiment' – for experiment it was – was judged to have been an outstanding success.

The OP took everyone by surprise, because they were expecting it to be totally different from present-day English. The buzz in the yard before each performance – I was walking around, eavesdropping – was 'Will we understand it?' Everyone worried about this. The Globe had worried about it, when the idea was first mooted by the Master of Play Tim Carroll - which is why they dipped only a three-day toe into the linguistic water. Tim himself had worried about it. And the actors certainly did. After all, they had less than a month to learn something that they had never heard before. Although OP contains echoes of many modern accents, it is like none of them. James Garnon (Mercutio) expressed a general opinion: 'Learning it was trickier than any other accent I have encountered... it had no tune to grab hold of.'

They were all pleasantly surprised. OP is in fact no more different from modern English 'received pronunciation' (RP) than, say, present-day Scots is. And when the cast heard me read the opening scene of the play, in their first rehearsal, I could see the relief in their faces. It wasn't my imagination. They told me so afterwards. As Rhys Meredith (Benvolio) recalled: 'I was amazed that I understood every word, and followed it so easily, and indeed, how natural it sounded. It was a single accent. Despite all the sounds that you could hear from all the different regions, it held together.' And Bette Bourne (Nurse) commented: 'We were all suddenly "earthed" in the play. It unified us by the old sound of it; it was "a time before". That was exciting.'

Notwithstanding the similarities with today, the accumulated differences in the vowels, consonants, and syllable lengths made for a dramatically distinctive effect. What was fascinating was to see it influencing other aspects of the production. Glynn MacDonald, Master of Movement, noted how much more fluent the actors' movements were. And the overall pace was increased, as James Garnon recalled: 'The show went much quicker. Timings within scenes went awry because the OP moves quicker. All the *mi's* and *bi's* for *my* and *by* and all the shorter vowels and elisions shaved moments off speeches, so dances timed to last as long as other character's exchanges were suddenly too long – in the case of the Capulets, party, far too long. The whole thing was more exciting somehow. Words felt like fireworks again. Little ones, it's true, but fireworks none the less.' The end result was that the OP performances were about ten minutes

shorter than those using modern pronunciation.

All the actors found themselves rethinking their characters – or, at least, their on-stage behaviour. For Bette Bourne, the Nurse 'became a totally different woman', tougher and more direct. For James Garnon, 'Mercutio felt more brilliant for the OP. The long, easy passages of wit directed at Romeo and Benvolio somehow felt more extraordinary coming out of this earthier accent.' For Rhys Meredith, 'the OP felt more "driven". The speed of the compressed words encouraged me to go for my actions a lot more strongly.' Everyone I spoke to had similar reactions.

I was very impressed at how well the actors assimilated the OP. Admittedly, they had the best possible help in the form of dialect coach Charmian Hoare, but she was only able to fit in some 2–3 hours work per actor in the time available. I provided a recording of the whole play for the actors to listen to, and that helped too. (It gave Tom Burke (Romeo), who fell asleep one night while listening to it, a nightmare!) But apart from the opening session, they had only 28 days to prepare, only three opportunities to go through the whole play together in its OP form, and only one chance of going through it on the big stage – and that was without costumes or accoutrements. As every voice coach knows, it is one thing to speak lines well; it is another to speak them in a tight-fitting Elizabethan costume and wearing a sword. Or, as Bette Bourne remarked: the problem was 'how to unify me voice with me body and me corsets.'

All of this, we must remember, was taking place while the company was still performing the play in its standard form. They were doing it 14 times during the OP rehearsal period, including the Midnight Matinee performance. They had to keep two versions in their heads simultaneously. Has any such thing happened before, in the history of theatre? The high level of phonetic consistency they achieved in these circumstances was, I felt, truly remarkable.

The OP didn't affect the humour. I had a test case which I listened out for. One of the best jokes in the play is when the Nurse, having been baited by Mercutio, says to Peter (2.4.151): 'And thou must stand by too, and suffer every knave to use me at his pleasure?' And Peter replies, 'I saw no man use you at his pleasure'. It gets a huge laugh in modern pronunciation. Would it, in OP, with pleasure pronounced so differently – as 'plez – uhr'? It made not the slightest difference. At each performance, the audience roared.

In fact I didn't notice any joke being missed, because of the OP, nor could the actors recall any, when I asked them later. Perhaps more importantly, the OP didn't seem to be interfering with the specially dramatic moments, such as



Juliet's 'Gallop apace' speech (3.2), or the two monologues in the vault at the end of the play. This was where I had always located my worst fears – that the 'rustic' resonances of the accents would perhaps pull the mind away from the moment. They were groundless. Perhaps it was because the ears had attuned to the speech by then: in the talkback sessions, several people said they had 'got into' the OP by the end of the first couple of scenes. Or perhaps it was the impression the accent gave of being more 'down to earth'. OP seemed to reduce the psychological distance between speaker and listener, and presented a more immediate opportunity to access the speaker's thought. For 'rustic' read 'honest', 'open', or 'direct'. Far from pulling the mind away from the moment, OP seemed to help to focus it.

The weekend, when it arrived, wasn't without its difficulties. I prayed for fine weather and no helicopters. Heavy rain on groundling plastic macs and hoods is not the best acoustic for an OP performance. Nor is an intrusive flying machine. Neither prayer was answered, except on the Friday. It poured during the first part of the Sunday evening. And on the Saturday the God of Sport defeated the God of Theatre soundly, for he arranged for the Olympic torch to arrive at the Millennium Bridge just after the beginning of the performance, thus ensuring that two – two! – security helicopters were circling continuously right overhead for half an hour. The audience lost a great deal of the auditory impact of Act 1, as a result.

Despite the problems, reactions on the ground were as enthusiastic and as positive as anyone would want. There was a definite atmosphere, which the cast noticed. Actors can always tell when an audience is paying real attention – as indeed, can any teacher or lecturer. It is difficult to define, but there is something about the lack of random movement, the concentrated focus, which tells you – as the phrase goes – that they are 'in your pocket'. It is something which actors have a special sensitivity to, at the Globe, with groundlings all around their feet, a few inches away. 'Boy, but they listened', said James Garnon, 'there was a robustness in the listening in those shows.' And the consensus was that the OP audiences were totally engaged.

The litmus test for engagement, I always think, is the kids. The Globe yard can be full of youngsters, usually school parties of secondary-school age. They can give the stewards a terrible time. Some of them are there for the show. Some of them are there for the talent. There is a lot of inattention and moving about. The actors see it all. And the most interesting comment they made to me afterwards was how this behaviour was absent, on the OP days. The kids listened too.

When I heard this, after the Friday performance, I made a point of asking some of the youngsters the next day,

during the interval, how they were finding it. They knew about the OP. Their teacher had told them. So what did you think? 'Cool.' 'Wicked.' Why? One 15-year-old lad, in a strong south London accent, piped up. 'Well, they're talking like us.' They weren't, of course. None of the actors had anything remotely like a Cockney accent. But I knew what he meant. The actors were talking in a way that they could identify with. Had they been to other theatre shows before? Yes. And what did they think of the voices then? 'Actors always sound posh,' said one. There was a chorus of assent. 'But not here,' chipped in another. RP nil, OP one.

There was one other question on my mind, as the OP weekend came to a close. Would the actors be able to wean themselves away from an accent which they had all come to love? There was some see-sawing, indeed, and when I saw the play again three weeks later, it still contained several echoes of the OP. The pace seemed to have been retained. There were many shortened grammatical words, and individual pronunciations were still occasionally coming through. Bill Stewart, who played Capulet in an energetic, clipped style, was so enamoured of the staccato rhythm resulting from sequences of shortened forms that he retained several of them in his later performances – 'mi hearts'... 'mi house'... And the sound of the Scots *-r* in the natural accent of Kananu Kirimi (Juliet) was a permanent reminder of what had been.

Most members of the company seemed to have regrets about returning to a modern sound. They had, after all, come on quite a journey from those early moments of worry to a position of ownership and confident exploitation. 'I found it quite difficult going back to RP, when the three shows were done', said Bette Bourne. 'It seemed suddenly a bit prissy. We'd gone back to the modern sense of class.' Whatever their final feelings about the experiment, all the actors were aware, I think, that they had participated in something rather special. Several told me that the end-of-show applause was more enthusiastic, and went on much longer, than on previous days.

The audience felt it too. It had been a historic moment. So, at the end of the talkback sessions which followed the Saturday and Sunday shows, I asked the people present whether they would like to see the experiment repeated with another play, but perhaps for a whole season next time. There was a resounding YES.

David Crystal has written a book telling the story of the June weekend. Called *The Original Pronunciation Experiment*, it will be published by Cambridge University Press in time for the next Globe Theatre Season.