



**David Crystal** looks back on last summer's *Troilus and Cressida*, the Globe's second experiment in Original Pronunciation.

## Were you on your auditory mettle?

What does one get out of an OP (original pronunciation) performance? Several thousand Globegoers now know, and I have asked a fair number of them what they felt. There seem to be three big pay-offs.

First there is the original *frisson* which comes from hearing the accent for the first time – or (for those who saw *Romeo* in 2004) renewing a connection with it. The effect doesn't happen straight away. The impact of the opening lines is usually minimal, as people take a few minutes to tune their ears to what is going on. It's a bit like turning the dial on a radio to find a channel; you go backwards and forwards hearing distorted speech until, bingo, the words come through loud and clear. It is a magic moment.

This year, in *Troilus and Cressida*, that moment happened very quickly. Sam Alexander, as Prologue, gave the usual

Globe instructions to the audience, but incorporated them iambic pentametrically into the text: 'I tell you now, switch off your mobile phones...' It got a huge laugh each time. Everyone immediately relaxed, realizing that OP wasn't going to be so difficult after all. Sam's little textual addition ended three lines later with 'Attune your ears to Shakespeare's way of sounding'. It was an almost redundant recommendation. People already had.

But OP, like any accent, comes in a thousand forms. Or, at least, with the fourteen members of the *Troilus* company, in fourteen forms. On the original Globe stage the audience would have heard the varied accents of the actors, who came from different parts of England, and it is the same today. No effort should ever be made to make all the actors speak OP in the same way. Nor did they,

in this production. And so we heard OP tinged with Lancashire, the Midlands, and elsewhere.

And OP comes in a thousand dramatic forms. So even after the linguistic acclimatization provided by the Prologue, the audience got a bit of an auditory shock as they encountered the rapid cross-fire of *Troilus* (David Sturzaker) and Pandarus (Peter Forbes). It is the speed of OP that can take you unawares - the rapid pronunciation of words like *my* and *thy*. When *Troilus* says 'Call here my varlet', it sounds like 'mi varlet', much faster and punchier. Lines which have several such words in them go by very rapidly. If you know the text, you cope with them easily. If you don't, you are on your auditory mettle all the time. And that is one of the most noticeable things about an OP audience. The way they *listen*.

The second big thing about OP is the way it can make you hear lines in fresh ways and, ultimately, allow you to sense meanings and effects you had never thought of before. In fact, *Troilus* is not a particularly good play to 'show off' OP. OP is at its best when there are lots of rhymes and word-play which do not come across in modern English. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would be a fine example, because there the rhymes fail repeatedly in modern pronunciation, but work perfectly in OP. It would be good to see it done that way at the Globe one day. In *Troilus*, there are very few instances of nice rhymes: the main ones are *tooth* rhyming with *doth* (4.5.292-3) and *down* with *bone* (5.8.11-12).

There isn't that much OP-enhancing wordplay in *Troilus* either, though there are a few nice moments. Thersites calls Achilles a 'full dish of fool' (5.1.9): it is a perfect pun, as the vowel of *fool* would have been short, and sound like *full*. The best example is the one I talked about in the programme: the pun on *Ajax* - 'a jakes'. The company loved it, and those who had to say the name really emphasized it. Colin Hurley, who played Thersites, hugely lengthened the vowel of 'jakes' into a mocking sneer: 'this Ajayyyx, who wears his wit in his belly' (2.3.72). Nobody could have missed the joke.

So, if there is limited OP rhyming and wordplay in *Troilus*, what is there left? The third big thing about an OP performance is the way it makes the actors approach their characters. Philip Bird, who played two very different parts, Hector and Calchas, found the OP helped him make the difference, especially in the all-important first speech by a character, which he feels 'lays down a marker' for the audience as to what the character is like: 'For Hector, the 'Yorkshire o' in *Though no man*, and the *r*'s in *lesser feaves* gave me a strong, don't-mess-with-me beginning; whereas the *ow* of 'Now Princes' and 'prompts me aloud', and the

*i* of *time*, *mind* and *sight* led me towards tighter lips and a more wheedling kind of tone, sending Calchas a little in the direction of the Irish Sea.'

Penelope Beaumont, one of the four women given male roles in this production (Giles Block had to crowbar *The Winter's Tale* company into the very masculine *Troilus*), found that the OP really helped her get to grips with Ulysses: 'The thing that most surprised me was I thought that he would be a 'man apart': the schemer on the sidelines who interacts with people only when it is to his advantage. The OP made me play him much more as 'one of the lads'. He becomes more engaged - less able to comment on the action - more part of it. He is placed well within the ranks of the army and is able to use his comradeship with the others to his advantage. I'm not sure, without OP, I would have discovered that in quite the same way.'

Director Giles Block, an OP enthusiast from the outset, found it an enticing element in the story-telling: 'OP draws us in, rather than holding us off at a distance. The more visceral/emotional texture of the speech gave greater credence to the events and scale of the drama; we could sense that we were witnessing a tale that takes us back to our cultural roots.' The actors felt it too. 'It's a fabulous tool for story-telling', said Sam Alexander.

And he added: 'OP is modern.' A paradox? No, said Sam. 'It's far closer to a young, modern English than I could ever have imagined, and gave the words in my mouth a vital, youthful energy.' He went on: 'I'd left my Shakespeare voice in the locker, and this was hugely liberating.' I think the whole company would agree. Several told me that it would affect the way they approached their next Shakespearian role, whether in OP or not!

*Troilus* was the second Globe experiment with OP, boldly going where no London theatre had gone before - at least, not for 400 years. But there was a big difference with the *Romeo*, which I wrote up in my *Pronouncing Shakespeare*. In that production, the actors were already performing the play in modern pronunciation, and they had only a month to learn the OP version and keep it in their heads alongside the other. That was hard. Although they did brilliantly, the recording of the event shows a fair number of slips and inconsistencies - probably not noticed by an audience caught up in the dynamic of the play, but certainly noticed by me!

This year, the company had no competing modern English version. The rehearsals were in OP from the outset, and there was a longer period of preparation. As a result, *Troilus* produced some of the best OP I have ever heard. Most of the cast were faultless, and to my ear there were

only a few dozen erratic sounds in the whole play. As a result, it was possible to argue the case for something I have wanted from the very outset: a high-quality audio recording of OP extracts performed by the actors.

This has been so needed. You would not believe the enquiries I get from around the world about OP. The idea has caught the imagination, and several places are now trying it out, or intending to. A group at the Blackfriars in Virginia have been working on a scene from *Hamlet* in OP, under the direction of Mary Coy, who came over to the Globe this summer to learn about the way we do it. In California, the people who run the Renaissance Faires (events in which people adopt Elizabethan personas) got in touch to brush up their OP. John Barton, one of the OP pioneers, was approached to do an OP *Henry V* at the RSC next year, but unfortunately the idea fell through. My actor son Ben and I presented OP to the annual conference of teachers of speech and drama at Stratford this year. It all shows the developing interest. And invariably the request is: have you got some recordings we could have?

There are just a few places to go a-listening. I had put some extracts of my own *Romeo* reading (the one I used with the actors) on the *Shakespeare's Words* website ([www.shakespeareswords.com](http://www.shakespeareswords.com)); however, this is a pretty pedestrian reading, intended to convey the sounds but not the drama of the lines. This year the Globe put some of my reading of *Troilus* on its site: go to the GlobeLink page ([www.shakespeares-globe.org/globelink](http://www.shakespeares-globe.org/globelink)), click on Adopt An Actor, scroll down to Production Resources, go to The Green Room and you're there. But again, that lacks the power and variety of the real thing, as encountered on stage. So I was delighted when the Globe decided to make a recording of *Troilus* extracts, using some of the cast, at the end of the run. And this should be available in due course.

More OP one day? My hope is that eventually OP will stop being an experiment, and become a routine option in a company's repertoire. Just as directors now have the choice of whether to mount a production in original or modern dress, original or modern music, and so on, I hope they will be able to choose between original and modern pronunciation. Only time will tell. And to that old common arbitrator, Time, I now leave it.

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