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Rule of Threes: Stylistic Choices in *The Tempest* at Shakespeare's Globe

In the opening scene of *The Tempest*, as performed at Shakespeare's Globe in London during the summer of 2005, three dancers dragged a carpet out from the tiring house bearing a hunched figure: Prospero, played by then artistic director Mark Rylance. Dressed in full Elizabethan garb, complete with doublet, hat, and cloak, Rylance played the action of the opening storm with a chessboard. He performed all of the roles using the chess pieces while making sound effects, like a Prospero controlling the storm. At times he swung the board around, at times he slipped in and out of character voices, at times he yelled himself hoarse. The effect was simultaneously comic and tragic, marked by the contrast between genuine cries of drowning sailors and one or more chess pieces vomiting over the side of the chessboard.

Rylance ended the storm with a great, heaving bellow of "We split!" at which point the dancers pulled apart his costume and scattered the chess pieces. Rylance's cry elicited loud replies from his fellow actors backstage. The echoing cry of "We split" signified two important things about the production. First, that the performance would be split amongst a small cast. While Rylance bellowed, the dancers took pieces of his costume and gave them to the other two actors: a frock to Edward Hogg, who played Ariel, Miranda, Trinculo, and Antonio; and a doublet to Alex Hassell, who portrayed Caliban, Ferdinand, and Gonzalo. In addition to Prospero, Rylance played Stephano, Sebastian, and King Alonso. His cry of "We split" indicated the splitting of his costume and the splitting of control to three performers.

The second point of significance of “We split” reveals the driving concept behind the production. According to the program, the Globe production was inspired by the book *Prospero’s Island* by the psychologist Noel Cobb. Cobb examines the play “through Carl Jung’s psychological interpretation of the renaissance philosophy of alchemy, as it is manifested in Shakespeare’s play” (18). The central ideas quoted in the program state that Prospero is Shakespeare’s stand-in for the idea of wholeness. The powerful magician must learn to balance air and earth, heaven and hell, spirit and flesh, masculine and feminine. These two poles – triangulated by Prospero balancing in between – led to a rule of threes.

The production obeyed this rule, first, through the performers. The entire play was performed with three actors, three dancers, and six (or two times three) musicians. The three actors handled all speaking parts, the dancers served as various spirits and set pieces, and the musicians sung.

Immediately following the storm, as the dancers left a bedraggled Prospero crumpled on the floor, the audience received its first taste of the difficult balance Prospero must attain. This is a Prospero divided, whose grasp on his magical powers, and thus his control of the island, is slipping. This Prospero was apprehensive and pursued. As he told Miranda the story of her life, actor Alex Hassell, who played both Caliban and Ferdinand, hounded him. When Miranda and Ferdinand first met, Prospero repeatedly stepped between them, as if holding apart earth and air, flesh and spirit.

The setting further indicated Prospero’s tenuous grip on the island. The scenery reflected the Globe’s tendency toward simple settings and creative use of the performance space. Small set pieces such as a table, chairs, and a rug filled most scenes, while all throughout the play a single rope hung from the heavens. The end of the rope was tied in a large loop – large enough for an

actor to stick his body through – and hung one or two feet above the stage. Throughout the play this rope operated on a number of levels. Prospero hung onto it, almost as a symbol of his magical powers. At the end of the play, as he cast aside his books and prepared to leave, he tugged on the rope and it fell, coiling into a pile at his feet. Many other characters sought the rope as a means of wielding power, perhaps of controlling the wild island. King Alonso trudged in it following the shipwreck, or hung there drowned in Ferdinand’s imagination. Stephano wanted it when establishing his domain on the island. Ariel was bound in service by it. And Caliban seized it in one of the most gleefully unexpected moments of the play, when in his joy over Stephano’s and Trinculo’s pledge to kill Prospero and bring more wine, he grabbed the rope and began swinging wildly out over the audience. Indeed, in the realm of the play, the rope held the power to change personalities, as actors shifted characters by speaking through it, stepping around it, or even crawling into it.

Apart from Prospero, all three of Rylance’s other characters lingered in between the extremes of earth and air. Rylance played King Alonso as one defeated and accepting his fate, resigning himself to the loss of his son in the shipwreck. Sebastian was the relatively spineless enabler of Antonio’s plot against Alonso. And as the drunken butler Stephano, Rylance received the most critical kudos and the largest laughs, particularly in his first encounter with Trinculo and Caliban on the island. Yet all three of them – Alonso, Sebastian, and Stephano – had something to do with the establishment or downfall of a kingdom. Alonso lamented his broken bloodline after marrying off his daughter and losing his son. Sebastian aided and abetted Antonio’s plot for the kingship of Naples. And Stephano drew grandiose plans for his new realm on the island, complete with titles for Trinculo and Caliban. Like his Prospero, all three of

Rylance's other characters grasped at power. They all grabbed for the rope in the center of the stage at one time or another, in an attempt to find balance like Prospero.

As one part of Cobb's dialectic, Edward Hogg approached Miranda, Ariel, Trinculo, and Antonio with the attribute of air. Smaller and lighter than the other two actors, Hogg used his body and voice to reflect a lighter-than-air quality. He steered his Miranda away from petty caricature by playing her with a true, believable femininity. Ariel, the spirit of the air, was likewise played with a wispy strength. At times Hogg's voice seemed as if it would slip away, he would speak so lightly. Yet he conveyed a definite power of character, too, through Trinculo's and Antonio's scheming. Hogg's costume, which consisted of an androgynous white smock and ornate neckpiece, allowed him to shift from male to female, human to spirit, quickly and effectively.

In contrast to Hogg, Alex Hassell imbued Caliban, Ferdinand, and Gonzalo with the quality of earth. His thick beard and exposed chest aided the portrayal. Caliban became the symbol for the gritty, dirty reality of the island, with a gruff voice and reaching hands. Ferdinand stood for the epitome of young masculinity, truly a fine first example of manhood for Miranda to encounter. And Hassell's Gonzalo was the wizened, weathered old man, muttering sage advice to King Alonso. Both Hogg and Hassell differentiated their characters successfully; stronger still was their ability to use each of their characters to demonstrate the differences between earth and air. Prospero's plight, therefore, was heightened by being caught between two strong poles.

According to Cobb's analysis, Prospero must learn to release the air and accept the earth. He must release Ariel by freeing him of servitude, and he must relinquish control of Miranda by allowing her to marry. Simultaneously, he must accept the reality of Caliban as true master of the island, saying in Act V, "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine." Rylance delivered this

line with resignation and kindness. In addition, Prospero must recognize Ferdinand, who represents the intruding reality of life outside of the island, as his son-in-law.

The result of this threesome of actors made this production of *The Tempest* fully Prospero's play. The audience, consequently, must view the action through the lens of Prospero's mind. Master of Play Tim Carroll noted, "If you accept the basic proposition that Prospero, as a result of a build-up of psychological pressure, has split into three people, then it is already clear that the island is not a literal place but an extension of Prospero himself. To put it another way: it is the place where Prospero must go through this process" (27). Prospero's psychological difficulties involving Ariel and Caliban are reflected in every other relationship on the island. In addition to the spirit and the savage, Prospero separates Miranda and Ferdinand. Likewise, Alonso stands between Gonzalo and Antonio, and Stephano stands between Caliban and Trinculo. When viewing the relationships as these triangles, the choice to play *The Tempest* with only three actors seems stunningly apropos.

In addition to the casting, the framing of the production provided another application of the rule of three through the intersection of three time periods in the performance: Shakespeare's words, modeling Greek actions, on the modern London stage. The six vocalists were dressed in classical garb: white togas, gilded hair coverings, and pale make-up. They sang from the balcony, the most classically inspired piece of the theatre building. Below them, on the Elizabethan stage, performed three actors speaking Shakespeare's text and dressed in the pieces of an Elizabethan costume. Weaving in and out of the action were three dancers, noted in the program as The Fates. These three women climbed up onto the stage from the pit just prior to the opening storm. They dressed in modern clothes: skin-tight jeans, black boots, and black tank tops. The modern world intruded through the open-air theatre repeatedly, and the actors accepted

it. During one performance, when Stephano and Trinculo were startled by first seeing Caliban, they ran to the edge of the stage and called to a passing plane for help.

The result of this rule of threes was a production which highlighted a number of dialectics: known and unknown, feminine and masculine (made all the more poignant by three men playing male and female characters), conscious and unconscious, spirit and soul. In the end, the story of *The Tempest*, according to psychologist Cobb, is “of the integration of Prospero’s split psyche” (19). Thus, the revelation of Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess at the play’s conclusion completed the opening image of Prospero with the chessboard. Now, earth and air are joined, symbolized by their peaceful control of the chessboard.

Still, while the poignancy of Mark Rylance playing Prospero in his final role as the Globe’s artistic director was not lost on anyone, perhaps the subtlety of Cobb’s interpretation – and the Globe’s interpretation of Cobb – was lost. A review in *Time Out* noted that Rylance and his fellow actors seemed most at home in the comedy, thus begging the question, “Why does the proselytizing Globe bother with such abstruse conceptualizing?” (146).

Yet for all the complexity of Cobb’s analysis and Carroll’s appropriation of it, the production cannot be reduced to a simple play of ideas. The technical complexity of three actors handling eleven roles, in the unique space of the Globe, complemented by skilled dancers and original music, provided pure entertainment as well. The initial meeting of Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban, led by Stephano’s drunken mistaking of the other two as a two-headed beast, provided plentiful moments of sheer mirth. Perhaps these moments – the moments of bawdy, slapstick comedy – were more telling of the overall impression of the production. Surely these moments, as played out before the audience, had a more immediate effect than all the program notes could ever achieve.

Bibliography

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