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REVIEW



## Reviews of Shakespeare's *Othello* (Directed by Emma Harding), BBC Radio 3, 19 April 2020 and *Henry IV, Part 1* (Directed by Sally Avens), BBC Radio 3, 26 April 2020

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Unlike other forms of Shakespearean performance, radio has no visuals to convey action and reaction. While this can pose problems (such as how to make the highly visual comprehensible), the fact that radio relies on words means it naturally puts more emphasis on the text than any other medium, concentrating attention on the rhythm and poetry of the plays. As one radio producer put it: 'In radio, the spoken word is in close focus'.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true of BBC productions, which have historically made little intervention in the presentation of Shakespeare's work. Over the last century, productions of the plays have taken one of two routes to the airwaves: the majority of producers choose to leave the texts virtually untouched and create what was once described as 'a Shakespeare reading on a luxurious scale'.<sup>2</sup> Others fully adapt the work, making adjustments and additions. These alternate styles are reflected in the two most recent BBC productions, *Othello* and *Henry IV, Part 1*.

Almost from the BBC's inception, Shakespeare's plays were an integral part of its output. Producer Cecil Lewis wrote in 1924 that the playwright's 'amazing beauty lies almost entirely in the spoken word as a means of presenting character and situation. No better plays for broadcasting could have been written'.<sup>3</sup> For decades the beauty of Shakespeare's poetry was the primary concern of critics and was frequently referred to in reviews, especially when it was deemed to be inadequately delivered. In assessing a 1935 production, Grace Wyndham Goldie complained that while radio's purpose 'must surely be to concentrate on the fine speaking of his [Shakespeare's] poetry ... in last Sunday's version of "Macbeth" nobody seemed to be bothering very much

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<sup>1</sup>McWhinnie, *Art of Radio*, 48.

<sup>2</sup>W. A. D., 'Godfrey Tearle and Flora Robson', 10.

<sup>3</sup>Lewis, *Broadcasting From Within*, 61–62.

about the verse'.<sup>4</sup> The desire for 'fine speaking' may be at least part of the reason for John Gielgud's success on radio. (It may also have helped that his brother, Val, was head of radio drama for more than thirty years). Over a sixty-five-year radio drama career, John Gielgud appeared in more than twenty Shakespeare plays, including the most celebrated of them all, his 1948 *Hamlet*. A preview for a repeat of the play in 1959 was headlined 'The Best Hamlet of Our Time', with Peter Forster stating that: 'Here in excelsis are all Sir John's supreme qualities – the pathos, the Terry voice, the poetry'.<sup>5</sup> Producers were not always as convinced about the idea of prioritising poetry over drama. In the same year as that review, producer Donald McWhinnie complained of 'the misguided school of Shakespearian study' that perpetuated 'the myth that what is really important in Shakespeare is the poetry'.<sup>6</sup> However, for reviewers, it remained the key aspect. On occasions they even liked what they heard. Writing about a 1964 production of 2 *Henry IV*, P. N. Furbank stated that the 'verse-speaking reached an excellent general level'.<sup>7</sup> And well into the twenty-first century, much emphasis continues to be put on the delivery of the text, with the witches in the 2015 production of *Macbeth* being described as sounding 'as if reciting a recipe for jam', while another reviewer complained more generally about a lack of variety in 'pace, intonation and rhythm'.<sup>8</sup>

The opposite position on presenting radio Shakespeare was to regard it as audio drama. Instead of emphasising the beauty of the poetry, the aim was to create a piece of entertainment. This was much more common in American radio: in 1937 Columbia produced a series of Shakespeare plays, each only an hour long, featuring Hollywood actors such as Tallulah Bankhead, Edward G. Robinson, Claude Rains and Raymond Massey. Producers also had no reservations about taking liberties with the text, with one production combining 1 and 2 *Henry IV* into a single play. In the UK, the BBC came under attack from drama critic and Shakespearean scholar Herbert Farjeon for daring to cut *Henry V* down to two hours. Val Gielgud responded that 'The average listener is, in my view, not prepared to listen for hours at a time to Shakespeare – not because Shakespeare is poor stuff, but because any listening to the spoken word is a business demanding acute attention and concentration'.<sup>9</sup> But while Gielgud might have outwardly been in favour of story over poetry, verse-speaking remained of the uppermost importance in the majority of productions. Even in the twenty-first century, literary and radio critics have continued to prefer the purity of Shakespeare's verse to adaptations that aim to make the most of radio's ability to tell a story through music, sound effects and sound manipulation, such as vocal distortion. Gillian

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<sup>4</sup>Wyndham Goldie, 'Profit and Loss on the Air', 658.

<sup>5</sup>Forster, 'The Best Hamlet of Our Time', 7.

<sup>6</sup>McWhinnie, *Art of Radio*, 46.

<sup>7</sup>Furbank, 'Radio Drama', 287.

<sup>8</sup>Petty, 'Macbeth'; Hoyle, 'Radio Choice', 19.

<sup>9</sup>Gielgud, 'Must Shakespeare Be Butchered', 9.

Reynolds, in her review of the 2018 *Merchant of Venice*, which updated the play to the financial crash of 2008, sums up attitudes still common in many reviews:

Beware the update ... Directorial nudgings towards contemporary relevance (such as when the text says 'trumpet', but you hear a car horn) may amuse but, more probably, distract. Shakespeare gave Lorenzo and Jessica one of literature's lushest love duets. Every word of it should sing. That didn't happen here. The verse never really shone.<sup>10</sup>

Almost a century after radio first broadcast a Shakespeare play, the same attitudes prevail about how it should be presented: beautiful delivery of the verse first and foremost, entertainment very much second.

For the last three decades, up until the pandemic, BBC radio had been producing, on average, two or three new Shakespeare plays a year. *Othello* and *Henry IV, Part 1* were the last productions to be recorded before Covid. And although they were aired just a week apart, their treatment of their source material could not be more different. *Othello* was broadcast first and was directed and adapted by the same woman whose production of *The Merchant of Venice* drew such ire from Reynolds, Emma Harding. Like her previous production, *Othello* is brought into the twenty-first century, with the *Radio Times* stating it is set in 'an imagined near future'.<sup>11</sup> Harding does this in a number of ways. Firstly, she does not open with Shakespeare's text: instead she begins with the sound of missiles and electronic rock music. Then there is a news bulletin, setting the scene of 'a recent escalation in the number of Turkish jets violating Greek airspace' with two newsreaders and two voices of 'actuality', in this case actors portraying a Turkish minister and an EU official. Next, listeners hear the voice of a priest solemnising a wedding. This is followed by the first piece of Shakespearean text: Desdemona and Othello's exchange on his arrival in Cyprus (2.1.185–89; all references are to the *Norton 3E* version). Next, the play moves to the beginning of act one, scene three with a condensed version of the Duke discussing the situation in Cyprus with Senators (1.3.1–43). Finally there is the sound of a party and a crowd shouting 'First dance, first dance'. After this, the production returns to the play's opening text between Roderigo and Iago. Harding's choices here do two things. Firstly, they make good use of many of the tools available in a radio studio, such as music, sound effects and non-verbal sounds (for example, cheering or applause), to set up the world of the play in the way that on stage might be reflected by set, music and perhaps programme notes. Secondly, by doing this, Harding is immediately juxtaposing the conflict abroad with the happy occasion of Othello and Desdemona's marriage. From the outset it is clear that the military world of the play will impinge on the love story at its heart.

<sup>10</sup>Reynolds, 'Radio Review'.

<sup>11</sup>*Radio Times*, 'Drama on 3: Othello', 116.

Throughout the production, Harding makes many alterations to the text. These range from simple cuts, of which there are around two hundred, to the moving of text and the reallocation of lines. The Herald's speech, which takes up the whole of act two, scene two, is transformed into a news report, with the opening delivered by a news anchor, the middle section by a reporter on the scene, and the final part back to the anchor again. In doing so Harding maintains Shakespeare's text while adapting it to a modern-day situation. Her updating also includes adding the sounds of a bombing raid between acts one and two, with additional dialogue of airmen in flight. And sound effects suggest Desdemona and Othello arrive in Cyprus by helicopter, while Iago and Roderigo sometimes talk by mobile phone. In all cases, Harding's choices seem to fit quite reasonably with the text and help to reiterate the setting she has chosen for the story: something quite familiar on stage and screen, but much rarer in audio Shakespeare.

However, Harding does not just use sound to indicate setting. She also uses it to help establish character, especially in the case of Iago. His motives for targeting Othello and Desdemona vary throughout the text, but Harding suggests that his primary fixation is sexual. His soliloquy in act two, scene one (2.1.269–95) is preceded by the sound of happy people cheering in the street. But as his speech unfolds, and Iago declares he loves Desdemona, the audience hears footsteps as if Iago is moving away from the group, and the sound of many people in the background becomes that of just two, having sex and finally reaching climax. Iago, played by Matthew Needham, seems unaffected or unaware of what is going on around him. However, the lines 'I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leap'd into my seat' and 'Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife' (2.1.278–79, 282) become particularly prominent with such background sounds. Later, when Emilia gives Iago the stolen handkerchief, she pants very heavily and moans, as if Iago is, at the very least, kissing her passionately. However, simultaneous with this, his speech about leaving the napkin in Cassio's lodging is delivered in a cold and heartless tone. In both cases, Iago's lines are presented as thoughts in his head. This is achieved by Needham speaking very quietly and closely into the microphone: it is repeated for his other soliloquies and asides, creating an uneasy conspiratorial feeling with the audience in a much more intimate way than might be presented on stage (although not unlike voiceover in film). Iago's sexual obsession is given an almost homoerotic edge by Needham's intense delivery of Iago's description of Cassio's dream about Desdemona, especially when he inserts a pause between 'kiss me' and 'hard' (3.3.418), which he almost shouts. Needham's delivery throughout could not be described as beautiful in the mould of Gielgud, or perhaps even truthful, as it varies hugely from situation to situation and is often exaggerated, but his understanding of the text is clear and he sticks to the rhythm that listeners familiar with it might expect.

However, Khalid Abdalla, as Othello, is much more flexible. Sometimes he maintains the conventional rhythm, such as ‘unhousèd free condition’ (1.2.26), but later when he speaks of the ‘circumcisèd dog’ (5.2.348), it loses its final syllable and becomes ‘circumcis’d’.<sup>12</sup> He also adds pauses into lines: ‘Her father loved me, oft [*pause*] invited me’ (1.3.128) and ‘I [*pause*] loved [*pause*] her’ (1.3.168). Changes such as these add great emotion to the lines, although they do disrupt the usual rhythm given to iambic pentameter: a far cry from the highly musical twentieth-century radio Othellos, ranging from Henry Ainley to Paul Scofield, all of whom emphasise the delivery of the poetry over characterisation.

Abdalla is the BBC’s first Othello of Arab heritage, and an introduction before the play by Islam Issa sets out the historical context for this choice and the possibility that the character is, or has been, Muslim. Harding accentuates this possibility in the play during the drinking scene (act two, scene three). Instead of Iago singing a song about King Stephen (2.3.76–84), Harding has a group of squaddies bawl out a song that begins ‘Ali Khan’s a Muslim’. Together with the sound of the drunken men, this sets an intimidating scene for anyone not Christian and translates the issue of racism inherent in the text into one of Islamophobia.

One of the most notable cuts is Desdemona’s Willow Song (4.3.38–48). Harding says she felt ‘it didn’t sit with the world we were creating’ (personal email, 26 August 2021). It can be played as a very wistful moment, but this was not a characteristic of Cassie Layton’s portrayal. The killing of Desdemona is brutal, maybe more so because it is in sound only. Lasting almost a full minute without words, there are sounds of her struggling, choking, gasping and slapping Othello, with Abdalla sounding exhausted and emotional at the end. This Desdemona shows no ‘submissiveness bordering on suicide’ as Walter Cohen has suggested (*Norton 3E* 2073): Harding also cuts Desdemona’s brief recovery and therefore her final lines taking her death upon herself. There can be no conclusion other than this was a brutal murder, rather than an act ‘all in honour’ (5.2.288), another line Harding cuts from the play.

Overall, the text is frequently reordered in this production, as well as being cut, and there are numerous additions of both script and sound effects to bring the play into the twenty-first century. However, it is unlikely that the changes Harding introduces would be considered unusual in contemporary stage productions, the emphasis on a modern military backdrop being notably similar to Nicholas Hytner’s 2013 *Othello* at the National Theatre. Harding’s production places emphasis on creating a truly audio drama, rather than poetic delivery, in contrast to the following production.

The week after *Othello* was broadcast, BBC Radio 3 aired their last new production to date, *Henry IV, Part 1*. This was in an altogether different style.

<sup>12</sup>Rhythm as given in *Norton 3E*.

While also making many cuts to the text, and using music and sound effects, this did not update Shakespeare's work. In fact, it did not feel very different to the 1964 production. This may be because it is a history play: so far the BBC's radio productions of Shakespeare's histories have never attempted to set them in a more modern era or use diverse casting in their leading roles, with the single exception of the 1990 *King John*. Radio critics from Farjeon in the 1930s to Reynolds in the 2020s have consistently been resistant to productions which interpret Shakespeare's plays in new ways, which may go some way to explaining this conservatism.

Before the play begins, there is an introduction. However, unlike with *Othello*, this is not given by an academic, but by an actor: Toby Jones, who plays Falstaff in this production. And the choices made by adaptor and director Sally Avens in the opening scenes add more emphasis to this being Falstaff's play, rather than the titular king's. When the production begins, the audience is greeted by comic music and the sound of Falstaff snoring, before a hunting horn blares and the tavern gang laugh. The dialogue then picks up at act one, scene two. This runs almost to the end, before the action cuts back to act one, scene one, but without the opening speeches on the state of the country, beginning instead at the discussion over the contrast between Hal and Hotspur. This rearrangement of the text, and the introduction, make clear that Avens sees this play's theme as being what S. C. Sen Gupta describes as 'the Fortunes of Falstaff'.<sup>13</sup>

After the court scene, the play returns to the end of act one, scene two. There is the sound of stumbling drunks and then Hal's soliloquy (1.2.170–92). In the 1964 version, Robert Hardy presents Hal as someone ill at ease with his behaviour. However, Luke Thompson's Hal in this production has no such qualms. He delivers the speech with warmth and confidence, and while not 'musical' in the same way as earlier actors, it still has a lyrical quality in keeping with previous generations of radio Shakespeareans and beloved of critics. His performance is also aided by Avens's choice of music at this point, which is reminiscent of a romantic theme from a feature film. Hal's music throughout adds to his air of innocence: he is continually portrayed as uncomplicated and fun-loving. The Gadshill robbery is presented entirely as a practical joke: act two, scene one with the carriers is cut, as is much of scene two, which is replaced with a shout of 'Stand!' and some of Falstaff's choicest exclamations from 2.2.74–81, including 'whoreson caterpillars', 'bacon-fed knaves' and 'gorbellied knaves'. There is much shouting and giggling and pacey drum music but little text. All this paints a comic audio picture. Similarly, when Hal and Poins pounce, there is much exaggerated wailing, fading out as the gang runs away, accompanied by giggling, more drumming and finally the return of the comic theme from the beginning of the play.

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<sup>13</sup>Sen Gupta, *Shakespeare's Historical Plays*, 127.



Like Hal's soliloquy, the tavern scene where Hal and Falstaff take turns to act out playing king and prince has little emotional depth. During the early part of the scene, as might be expected, there is a lot of laughter from the rest of the gang. They also 'oh' and 'ah' and even join in with Falstaff as the king, saying 'his name is Falstaff' (2.4.386), shouting the last word. The group are not clearly defined as individuals in this production. This is in part because their lines are severely cut: the scene with the drawer Francis is removed, along with many of Bardolph's and Peto's lines and, without these or any visuals, they become a homogenised group rather than distinct individuals. This is acknowledged to some extent in Jones's introduction, as he describes them as 'less developed characters'.<sup>14</sup> Avens's cutting seems to focus on reducing the prose in the play, maybe because these scenes can easily be conveyed purely in sound, such as the Gadshill robbery. It is also much easier to cut prose than verse: maintaining the rhythm of verse over enjambed lines is not always possible with alterations or additions. However, these cuts also mean the production seems more verse-heavy than the full text. In turn, this places more emphasis on the characters speaking with Received Pronunciation ('RP'), rather than those with regional accents or from the lower classes.

Thompson does deliver Hal's diatribe on Falstaff (2.4.405–22) very harshly, but Jones does not react to this. While it is less easy to convey reaction without text on radio, when an actor's face and body language cannot be read, it is still possible to give some indication through vocal tone and non-verbal noises, such as sighs, moans or even whimpers. Instead, the audience is left with the impression that Falstaff sees it all as one big game. After Falstaff's 'Banish plump Jack and banish all the world', Hal's final response of 'I do; I will' (2.4.437–38) seems to be just another joke, having no effect on either character. Perhaps presenting just *Part 1* removes the threat of Hal's change of heart over Falstaff, but prioritising the comedy over the emotional undertones feels like an omission.

In contrast to the comedy and good humour of 'sweet Hal' (1.2.98), Hotspur seems to shout most of his lines. Unlike Hal, Falstaff and the King, who all speak in a broadly RP voice, Hotspur, played by Tom Glynn-Carney, has a northern accent. (Glynn-Carney uses the same voice to play the same character in the 2019 film *The King*). The combination of shouting and accent lends his verse delivery a harshness, almost an over-enunciation: quite the reverse of the older, poetic style of performance. The musical cues used for Hotspur are also very different to Hal, such as the highly dramatic music used at the end of act one after Hotspur conspires with Northumberland and Worcester. His relationship with his wife seems more like that of Petruchio and his Kate: both shout at each other and despite some aggressive kissing there is little sign of real affection. Even during the scene with Lady Mortimer singing (act

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<sup>14</sup>Jones, 'Who is Falstaff?.'



three, scene one), Hotspur and Kate are hitting each other, before sighing and kissing passionately. But there is no sense that Hotspur is going to a war or that Kate is worried about what might happen when he does. While Hal is portrayed as almost childish, playing games and being silly, Hotspur seems only to be interested in fighting and sex.

However, the battle scenes at the end of the play do change the perception of Hal. His intervention in the fight between his father and Douglas is heralded by him yelling, with the sound getting closer very quickly, suggesting he is running to his father's aid, as well as grand music that has overtones of science fiction or fantasy, making his appearance seem almost like that of a superhero. When Hal and Hotspur finally meet, there is sinister music accompanying Hotspur, whose strong northern accent seems to be used as a signifier of villainy. When Hal declares 'I am the Prince of Wales' (5.4.62) in his RP voice, the music shifts to the heroic, almost angelic. The fight itself is accompanied with dramatic music and lots of clattering of metal, as well as sounds of exertion from both Thompson and Glynn-Carney. When Hal delivers the fatal blow, the music reaches a peak and there is the sound of flowing liquid, suggesting Hotspur's blood, and Glynn-Carney delivers his final line in a struggling voice. Immediately following his death, harp music accompanies Hal's eulogy, cut to five-and-a-half lines (5.4.86–91) and delivered in a panting, almost teary voice, creating an image of a holy sacrifice. However, as Hal discovers what he believes to be Falstaff's dead body, he seems, incongruously, to almost chuckle. Perhaps this is to help prepare the audience for Falstaff's immediate reanimation. When Falstaff does revive, it is not underscored with music, although the sound of battle continues in the background, making Jones's comic delivery quite uncomfortable, and the vicious stabbing sounds as he makes 'a new wound in [Hotspur's] thigh' (5.4.125) seem particularly unpleasant. The end of this moment is also undercut by Jones making comic sounds of effort as Falstaff drags Hotspur's body, and it is accompanied by comedic music. These three interactions seem to present the characters of Hotspur, Hal and Falstaff rather simplistically as evil villain, angelic hero and broad comedian.

As much of the original text, and particularly Avens's cutting of it, is focused on Falstaff, it is perhaps not surprising that she shifts his final appearance to slightly later in the play. After the scene above, the action moves straight to the start of act five, scene five, and the King's decision to condemn Worcester and Vernon to death, accompanied by the sound of them whimpering. It then reverts to the end of the previous scene, with Jones again making comic sounds as he drags Hotspur's body and dumps it in front of Hal and John. Hal speaks to Falstaff with a smile in his voice, as a man weary of his friend's behaviour but happy to indulge it. Falstaff's last speech is given as an intimate comic soliloquy, close to the microphone and with more comic music. However, the play does not quite finish here. Avens chooses to cut back to the end of the final scene,

with the King's last speech, men cheering and finally the sound of horses riding off into the distance.

These two recent productions take different approaches to presenting Shakespeare on radio. Harding adopts a twenty-first-century setting for *Othello* and there is no sense of the actors being asked to deliver the verse 'beautifully'; instead there is emphasis on realism and personal interpretation. However, in Avens's *Henry IV, Part 1*, the edits place greater emphasis on the verse than the prose and, with most of the prominent characters speaking in RP, it is more likely to satisfy those seeking a traditional idea of how Shakespeare should be spoken. Both are valid interpretations of their texts and both will have their advocates. They also show that after nearly a century of radio Shakespeare production, the delivery of his verse remains an evolving art.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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