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What is Authentic Shakespeare?

For much of the last century the received wisdom among Shakespearean Scholars and Theatre Historians was that the Elizabethan Public Playhouses did not use scenery. J.L. Styan, for example, writing in 1996 asserted that “[a]n absence of scenery, with two doors set symmetrically in the façade, meant that the platform stage could virtually disappear before the eyes and the scene on the stage need not be localized” (98) and on the other hand “with their flying machinery and half-darkened stages, the private theatres especially encouraged on-stage shows, magical effects and scenic decorations (rather than scenery itself).” (92) He goes on to say that “these spectacular devices did not necessarily localize or provide scenic illusion: they were the nuts and bolts of practical performance on an empty stage.”(99) Yet scenographers who have designed any of Shakespeare’s late romances, for example, know that directors often require plenty of localizing scenery; from grottos to gardens and back—and that no stage is ever empty as it is always part of the visual narrative of the theatrical experience.

The insistence of Styan (and others) on the lack of scenery in Shakespeare’s time seems to be based on two notions—both rooted in the thinking of scholar-practitioners such as William Poel and Harley Granville-Barker who were seeking to liberate Shakespeare’s text from the burdens of 19<sup>th</sup> century pictorial scenery. The first of these notions is that the purpose of stage scenery is to localize the action and provide the illusion of authenticity to the stage picture. The second notion is that stage scenery, as opposed to stage properties and decorations, would interfere with the special actor audience relationship (or bond) enjoyed in the theatres during the period. This latter idea was promoted by Jaques Copeaux when he called for “les tréaux nues”; a stage space in which the audience, freed from distraction, can focus their entire attention on the performer. This (imagined) empty Shakespearean stage was held up as a prelapsarian ideal of theatrical perfection.

Consequently, the opening of the London Globe reconstruction in 1997 came as quite a shock to many scholars and practitioners. With its highly articulated and decorated surfaces, it is very far from the neutral space imagined by members of the Elizabethan Stage Society . Yet it represents the fruits of research of an army of scholars stretching over decades. Further, the accumulation of evidence by the Records of Early English Drama (REED) researchers suggests that English vernacular painters were employed, in the University theatres at least, to provide localizing scenery for play productions.

This paper, illustrated with some examples of the English vernacular painting of the period, will review the evidence that I have accumulated so far that calls into question received ideas about authentic staging of the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

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Patrick Neilson is an Associate Professor and Scenographer at McGill University. He started his theatrical career as an actor, but quickly moved to stage carpentry, working for many years in theatre, television, and film before joining McGill's Department of English Drama and Theatre Program. He holds an MFA in Scenic and Costume design from the University of Calgary. His current interest in English Renaissance staging practice was piqued through his design work for plays such as *The Dutchess of Malfi*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *King John*, *As You Like It*, and *Doctor Faustus*. In addition he is a collaborator with the McGill-based SSHRC funded international research group *Making Publics: Media Markets, and Association in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700* (MaPs) and the McGill Shakespeare in Performance Research Group (Sprite).