Polly Findlay's *Arden of Faversham*: Gestural Space, Actors and Cuts[1]

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บทความเรื่องนี้มุ่งวิจารณ์ละครเวที*อาร์เดน ออฟ ฟาเวอร์แชม*ของพอลลี ฟินลีย์ ซึ่งเปิดการแสดง ณ โรงละครสวอน เมืองสตราตฟอร์ด อัพออน เอเวิน ในค.ศ.2014 เนื่องจาก *อาร์เดน ออฟ ฟาเวอร์แชม* ถูกจัดให้เป็นโศกนาฏกรรมครอบครัว นักวิจารณ์จึงมักมุ่งศึกษาความสำคัญของพื้นที่ในบทอ่าน อย่างไรก็ตาม เมื่อฟินลีย์นำบทละครเรื่องนี้มาแสดง องค์ประกอบสามอย่างที่มีอิทธิพลมากในการสื่อความหมายกลับมิใช่พื้นที่ในบทอ่าน หากแต่เป็นพื้นที่ที่เกิดจากอากัปกริยา นักแสดงและการตัดบท บทความเรื่องนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าองค์ประกอบต่าง ๆ ที่กล่าวมามีผลอย่างไรต่อการเปลี่ยนบทละครโศกนาฏกรรมที่สะเทือนใจให้กลายเป็นบทละครสุขนาฏกรรมที่ไม่น่าประทับใจ

Abstract

This article reviews the production of Polly Findlay's *Arden of Faversham* at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon in 2014. Grouping it as a domestic tragedy, critics tend to focus their criticisms on the significance of the play's spaces. However, in the performance, it was not the spaces in the text but the gestural space, actors and cuts that played an important role in meaning-making. This article explores how the aforementioned elements changed a disturbing tragic play into a forgettable comedy.

[1] The author attended this production on 10 July 2014.

1. Introduction

From 30 April to 2 October 2014, a production of *Arden of Faversham*, directed by Polly Findlay, was performed at the Swan Theatre, a small theatre belonging to the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford-upon-Avon. This anonymous play tells the story of a notorious murder in 1555, in which, a woman named Alice, her lover named Mosbie and a number of associates plotted to kill her husband. The play entered the Register's Station in 1592 and, in 1831,John Collier labeled it and a number of other early modern plays "for their affinities to some eighteenth-century French plays […] tragedies 'domestique[s] et bourgeois[s]'" (Orlin, 2002, p. 369-370).Thereafter, *Arden of Faversham* is known as a domestic tragedy.

Having been labeled as a domestic tragedy, it is not surprising that space becomes an issue in *Arden of Faversham* being much discussed. Catherine Richardson maintains that the play "insists upon the significance of its locations, pointedly naming places and linguistically producing spaces on the stage. The place in which events occur generates, shapes, affects or complicates action" (Richardson, 2006, p. 104). In the same way, Jacqueline Pearson claims that "Alice Arden's transgression of the boundaries of wifely obedience is enacted by the play's constant allusions to boundaries and their transgression in the form of doors, walls, rooms and houses" (Pearson, 2003, p. 171).

These arguments are reasonable. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that this play was written to be performed on the stage and, in a performance, it is not only verbal allusions but also stages that create spaces. Early modern plays were usually performed at various venues, such as at the court or at a small city hall and, undoubtedly, these venues must have "generate[d], shape[d], affect[ed] or complicate[d] action" in different ways.

Focusing on the significance of the spaces in the text also influences critics' explanations of the success and failures of murder plots. Throughout the play, the conspirators devise many plans to kill Arden but they repeatedly fail. For example, Black Will and Shakebag, two assassins, cannot kill Arden on his way back to Faversham because, unexpectedly, Lord Cheney and his men arrive and accompany Arden to a safe place. They also fail to kill him on a riverbank because the mist is too thick. It is in his own house that Arden is murdered. Gina Bloom maintains that the

early “plots fail because murder, like backgammon, is a spatial practice” and the murderers cannot control “unpredictable variables” (Bloom, 2012, p. 14). Richardson also believes that “[t]he successful plans which are set out for th[e] last attempt demonstrate the domestic as an environment easier to manipulate because familiar and clearly understood” (Richardson, 2006, p. 122).

Nevertheless, the first attempt also occurs in Arden’s house but it fails. Therefore, ‘the domestic’ is clearly not the most important factor that makes the last plan successful. In fact, when one takes the theatrical practices into account, there are less speculative explanations why the last attempt is successful while the others are not. Firstly, when the play was first published in 1592, its full title on the cover is as follows:

> The lamentable and true tragedie of M. Arden of Feuersham in Kent. Who was most wickedlye murdered, by the meanes of his disloyall and wanton wyfe, who for the loue she bare to one Mosbie, hyred two desperat ruffins Blackwill and Shakbag, to kill him. Wherin is shewed the great malice and discimulation of a wicked woman, the vnsatiable desire of filthie lust and the shamefull end of all murderers (Anonymous, 1592).

To a large extent, this play retells the “true” account of the murder recorded in Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1577) and, according to Holinshed, the early attempts failed and it was in his own house that Arden was stabbed to death. Hence, to be “true”, the playwright(s) had no choice but to have Arden killed in his house. The dramatist(s) also could not let Alice succeed in the first attempt since he had, to borrow a phrase from *Romeo and Juliet*’s Prologue, “two hours’ traffic” to run the story.

Moreover, when discussing the spaces in ‘the form of doors, walls, rooms and houses’, it is easy to overlook other kinds of space and see only an “objective” space, which Patrice Pavis defines as the space that is ‘visible’ and ‘can be filled and described’ (Pavis, 2003, p. 151). However, for Pavis, in a performance, apart from the “objective, external space”, there is also the “gestural space”: “the space created by the presence, stage position, and movements of the performers” (Pavis, 2003, p. 152). Since early modern plays, including *Arden of Faversham*, were written for relatively bare stages, in theatres, the “gestural space” played an important role.

Being at Shakespeare's Globe, a simulacrum of the early modern Globe, one hardly noticed the "objective" space since they rarely changed it. On the contrary, the position of the actor was very important. We felt connected to the actor who frequently stayed downstage and addressed us.

2. Gestural Space in Findlay's *Arden of Faversham*

The gestural space also played an important role in Findlay's modern dress production at the Swan. Apart from the first scene and the murder scene, the stage was almost bare. Rather than "objective" spaces "in the form of doors, walls, rooms and houses", it was "the presence, stage position, and movements of the performers" which usually generated meaning. With its deep apron, the most powerful spot at the Swan was, unsurprisingly, at the centre of the stage. When a character was on this spot, the audience had an impression that he or she was dominating the performance space.

Through the "gestural space", Findlay cleverly signified the characters' struggle for power. Before the beginning of the show, the audience entered the auditorium to find the stage transformed into a warehouse. Ian Redford's Arden sat at a table at the centre, surrounded by his workers in green overalls, while Elspeth Brodie's Susan cleaned the floor upstage. This established Arden's status as the most powerful man in the warehouse and signified the marginalized status of Susan. For a long time, Arden sat still at the centre while his workers packed waving lucky cats for dispatch and walked around in silence. This gave a false impression of the stability of his position.

Nonetheless, his precarious situation was quickly revealed. Considering Franklin's invitation to London, Arden left the table and walked upstage. At this moment, Sharon Small's Alice came to the table. This "gestural space" signified that, in his absence, Arden's position would have been taken over. It was Keir Charles' Mosby who replaced him. The image of Mosby sitting and sliding Arden's chair around the stage undermined the seemingly fixed and stable authority of Arden suggested in the first scene. During his soliloquy, "Disturbed thoughts drive me from

company" (Findlay and Svendsen, 2014, p. 42)[2], in scene 8.1, Mosby also sat at Arden's table.

Mosby's domination over the space downplayed the rebellious spirit of Alice. During the quarrel scene, most of the time, Mosby stood at the centre, shouting at her, while Alice walked around the edge of the stage. At her "Nay, hear me speak, Mosby, a word or two" (8.2. 45), she went to an exit. It looked like she was ready to surrender. If this were meant to be her cunning move to appease Mosby, not many spectators would have noticed it. For me, she seemed to be under his control. Even when Arden returned from London, in the murder scene, it was Mosby who sat at the centre of the stage. In terms of space, he was, as Alice maintained, "the master of the house" (1.6. 27).

Unlike her brother, Susan Mosby was often spatially marginalized. While Clarke (Christopher Middleton) and her brother negotiated his reward for poisoning Arden, Susan was rubbing the floor under the table and she was "horrified" when Mosby declared that "Clarke, here's my hand; my sister shall be thine" (1.3. 14). Her position under Arden's table, which was full of waving lucky cats, signified her underprivileged status. In the patriarchal, capitalist society, women were not human beings but commodities. The image of Clarke holding and dragging Susan around as if she were a doll also signified her lack of freedom. Under Clarke's control, Susan was deprived of a chance to create the "gestural space" at her will.

Nevertheless, Findlay found a powerful female character in Lizzie Hopley's Mistress Reede. The director substituted her for Mr. Reede and expanded the role. In the original text, she is in just one scene but, in this production, she was presented in three scenes to discuss with Arden "the plot of ground" which Arden "wrongfully" took away from her family (12. 58). In their last meeting, Arden refused to listen to her plea and went downstage. At this point, Mistress Reede went to the centre of the stage and cursed him from that powerful spot:

[2]The subsequent quotations from or references to the prompt book will be to Findlay, P., and Svendsen, Z. (2014). Prompt Book, *Arden of Faversham*. London: Nick Hern.The scene number and the page number of the quotations or references will be indicated in parentheses.

> That plot of ground which thou detains from me –
> I speak it in an agony of spirit –
> Be ruinous and fatal unto thee!
>
> (12. 58)

The fact that this scene was relocated to be immediately before the murder scene would have made it easier for the audience to see the connection between her curse and Arden's death. In the end, his body was buried in that "plot of ground". Hence, it was understandable why Franklin and Arden called her the "bitter witch" and "the railingest witch" (12. 58), respectively. Undoubtedly, her position on the stage also empowered her curse.

Throughout the show, one rarely saw the significance of spaces "in the form of doors, walls, rooms and houses". On the contrary, the "gestural space" made a minor character like Mistress Reede memorable. This production was part of the RSC "Roaring Girls" season, an allusion to Moll, a daring heroine in *The Roaring Girl*, who loves smoking and fighting. In Findlay's production, it was Hopley's Mistress Reede who represented the spirit of the "Roaring Girls".

3. Findlay's *Arden of Faversham*: Characters and Actors

Attending a performance is different from reading a text because of the presence of actors which, in turn, influences how one receives a character. According to Martin Esslin, the actor can signify three signifieds:

> An actor appearing on the stage or screen is, in the first place, himself, the "real" person that he is with his physical characteristics, his voice and temperament; he is, secondly, himself, transformed, disguised, by costume, make-up, an assumed voice, a mental attitude derived from the study of and empathy with the fictional character he is playing: this is the "stage-figure" […], the physical simulacrum of the character; but, thirdly, and most importantly there is the "fiction" itself, for which he stands, and which ultimately will emerge in the mind of the individual spectator watching the play or film. […] And that fictional figure, in turn, may […] also stand for a

> whole category or class of individuals, may assume general human meaning (Esslin, 1987, p. 58).

These layers of signifieds influence one another. That, in Findlay's production, Arden was not the hero was clearly signified by the "physical characteristics" of Redford. The first impression of him was that of a pot-bellied, old man in a bright blue suit, sitting among cheap golden waving cats. With this image, his insatiable greed was well-established. Thus, it is unlikely that many spectators would have identified with him. Being in a colorful shirt, a tight mini-skirt and ludicrous high heels, one also found it difficult to take Small's Alice seriously. Val Harris noted that her skirt was so tight that she "(irritatingly) keeps having to pull [it] down over her (irritatingly) tiny hips" (Harris, Good Review, 2014). The idea of her struggling for independence never crossed one's mind. In a sense, both Arden and Alice were the stereotypes of materialist beings.

Findlay also simplified Mosby. There is no obvious suggestion in the text that Mosby does not dress or behave as a gentleman. In fact, other characters often call him master. Charles, however, played him as a vulgar man in skinny jeans with chewing gum, golden necklace and disheveled hair. For Charles Spencer, this Mosby was a thug (Spencer, Telegraph, 2014). He was also a liar. He spoke his lines, such as "A woman's love is as the lighting flame" (1.3. 12) so deliberately that one sensed he did not mean them. In this way, it was understandable why Arden found an urge to call him "goodman butcher" (1.4. 16). By emphasizing his "ungentlemanly" manners, Arden's insult made more sense and his class bias was downplayed.

In this production, it was the comic characters who took the limelight. Joana Matthews called it a "black comedy" (Matthews, What's On Stage, 2014). Middleton's thick-glassed, stuttering Clarke looked too stupid to be a real threat. It never occurred to one that his poisons would do the trick. The audience also enjoyed the performances of Jay Simpson's Black Will and Tony Jayawardena's Shakebag. In his first entrance, Will immediately made a contact with the audience by touching a spectator's head. Being in a black leather jacket and jeans, he looked at first like a professional killer but, after many amateurish mistakes, the audience knew that he was a fool. Jayawardena's huge physique and his crowbar looked threatening.

Nevertheless, for those who remembered that last night he played Mr. Openwork, a lovely family man, in Jo Davies's *The Roaring Girl*, it was hard to be convinced that this time he was going to prove a cruel man. In short, the bodies of these actors told one that this was not going to be a serious night. One felt detached from them. One laughed at them but did not feel sorry for them.

4. Findlay's *Arden of Faversham*: Cuts and Influences

In this production, Findlay and Svendsen so heavily cut the text that the show's running time was only one hour and forty-five minutes. It is obvious that they wanted to have a fast-paced production. This intention had a strong effect on the story. In the original text, the first time that Arden's death is mentioned is in 1.14 (Anonymous, 2002, p. 488).[3] Not long after that, in 1. 283, the first attempt to kill him is initiated. Nonetheless, Arden's death is long delayed. In scene 14, he is still safe and the plot keeps repeating itself. A murder plan is devised and fails. Then, another plan is created and fails again, to the point that the story seems to reach an impasse. Therefore, Julie Schutzman calls "the span of [Arden's] life" a "state of suspension" (Schutzman, 1996, p. 291). As long as he lives, the plot cannot develop. Out of curiosity, when reading the text, one could not help but secretly wish for Arden's death, in order that the story could reach its conclusion.

With its massive cuts, however, Findlay's production went so fast that one hardly felt the "state of suspension". Since things kept happening in such a fast pace, the audience did not feel that they were waiting for Arden's death: as Ian Shuttleworth maintained, "it is always events that carry us on" (Shuttleworth, Financial Times, 2014). Moreover, Findlay did not use a fantastic device of the play, false foreshadowing. She cut the scene in which, on their way back to Faversham, Franklin feels sick and complains, "So fierce a qualm yet ne'ver assailed me" (9. 68). This seems to be a bad omen and, since the reader knows that Will and Shakebag are ambushing, one expects bad things to happen to Franklin and Arden. However, this

[3] The subsequent cuts will refer to Bevington, D. and others (eds.) (2002), *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*. New York: W. W. Norton, pp. 421-481. The scene number and the line number of the cuts will be indicated in parentheses.

murder plot fails. In a sense, the tragic power of this play works through the way that it deceives the reader into thinking a human life is disposable. Unlike the text, the production failed to do so. It is more likely that the audience wanted Arden to stay alive because it was fun to laugh at Will and Shakebag's stupidity.

Another curious issue is that, despite the fact that it was part of the "Roaring Girls" season, this production was uncontroversial. In the prompt book, Findlay and Svendsen emphasize the wickedness of Arden, thus, in the production, his murder was less troublesome. According to the original text, in the London scene, being alone, Franklin mourns the misery of Arden, the "gentle gentleman" who "so inly charged with woe, / Was never any lived and bare it so" (4. 43, 54-55). In the prompt book, this heartfelt soliloquy is cut. Therefore, the production lost a means to make the audience sympathize with Arden. They also cut Michael's soliloquy regarding his decision to be a conspirator:

> Thus feeds the lamb securely on the down,
> Whilst through the thicket of an arbour brake
> The hunger-bitten wolf o'erpries his haunt
> And takes advantage for to eat him up.
> Ah, harmless Arden, how hast thou misdone,
> That thus thy gentle life is levelled at?
> The many good turns that thou hast done to me.
> Now must I quittance with betraying thee.
> I that should take the weapon in my hand
> And buckler thee from ill-intending foes.
> Do lead thee with a wicked fraudful smile,
> As unsuspected, to the slaughter-house.
>
> (3. 191-202)

Apart from depicting the state of household chaos due to his betrayal of his master, this is the most convincing positive characterization of Arden. According to Michael, Arden is innocent, "harmless" and "gentle" like a "lamb". Franklin and Alice also say nice things about Arden but one should treat their comments with caution. Franklin is Arden's best friend, thus, he is prone to be biased, while Alice tends to lie. On the

other hand, during this soliloquy, Michael is alone and he is about to cooperate in killing his master, therefore, he has no reason to lie.

Arden's excuse concerning his case with Mrs. Reede, "I dearly bought of him, / Although the rent of it was ever mine" (13. 19-20), is also removed. Hence, for the audience, the action of Redford's Arden was unjustifiable. Spencer saw him as "a heartless businessman on the make who seems thoroughly to deserve what's coming to him"(Spencer, Telegraph, 2014). The audience also laughed at his stupidity in inviting Mosby to "rather frequent [his house] more" (1.4. 17). It is not surprising that the audience did not seem to be saddened by his death in the end and the whole business did not look like a tragedy.

Furthermore, cutting lessens Alice's subversive power. This corresponds to Findlay's interpretation of her. For Findlay and Svendsen, Alice's desire is "a logical consequence of Arden's attitude to land as a commodity. Intrinsic values are reduced to market worth" (Findlay and Svendsen, 2014, p. 4).Rather than a free thinker, the director regards Alice as a woman programmed by a capitalist ideology. She wants to get rid of her old husband because her new lover seems to be more valuable. As the result, Findlay downplayed Alice's desire to be independent and powerful. Her "for what is life but love?" (10. 91) is cut. Her imagination of herself as Diana who rules "her wat'ry bower" (14. 151) and has the power to choose her own partner is also removed. This is the speech that clearly suggests her desire to be the head of household, a role usually took by men.

Moreover, Findlay and Svendsen cut the fight between Arden and Mosby as Arden sees Mosby and Alice kissing. This scene illustrates how clever she is in making an advantage from her seemingly powerless status and subtly disempowering Arden and his friend. As an excuse, she tells Arden that their kiss is merely a "friendly" gesture (13. 99). She also cunningly shifts the blame to Arden by accusing him of being overly jealous and describing herself as a "[p]oor wench abused by [his] misgovernment" (13. 113). Consequently, Arden feels guilty and asks her to "forgive this fault' since, for him, her "discontent" is like "a death" (13. 117, 120).Furthermore, when Franklin doubts her excuse, she accuses him of being one of "men of such ill spirit" who "[w]ork crosses and debates 'twixt man and wife" (13. 146-147). To this, Arden asks, "I pray thee, gentle Franklin, hold thy peace: / I know my wife counsels

me for the best" (13. 148-149). This is why, before leaving the scene, Franklin says, "Poor gentleman, how soon he is bewitched!" (13. 153). The removal of this scene obscures Alice's shrewdness and manipulative power.

In the prompt book, Alice's "unfeminine" characteristic is downplayed. Her anger towards Arden for injuring Mosby is removed:

> [F]or when I saw thee hurt,
> I could have took the weapon thou let'st fall,
> And run at Arden.
>
> (14. 82-84)

Her statement that the image of injured Mosby "[w]ill add unwonted courage to [her] thought / And make [her] the first that shall adventure on him" is also cut (14. 139-140). As a result, in the production, her "unfeminine" desire to solve the problem by violence was not illustrated. Throughout the show, one never felt that she was a threat to gender expectations or patriarchal authority. Why the director made her "Roaring Girl" that tame was left unexplained. Matthews complained that Small was "given little to do here as Alice Arden other than simper and wobble about on silly high heels"(Matthews, What's On Stage, 2014). Instead of a self-minded woman, for Spencer, Small's Alice was a woman "with the small suburban mind" (Spencer, Telegraph, 2014). Before long, many spectators would have forgotten this Alice while still clearly remembering the hilarious business of Will and Shakebag missing a chance to take Arden down because they were too busy reading a rifle instruction manual.

5. Conclusion

Findlay's *Arden of Faversham* had important signs which were not present when reading the text, namely, the "gestural space" and the presence of the actors. These elements and the cuts greatly contributed in meaning-making, including in the final scene. At the end of the show, the backdrop of Arden's house was raised to show a wall filled with large, golden lucky cats beckoning in unison. The director's intention seemed to be to criticize the inhumane nature of capitalism but, ironically, this setting was a perfect reflection of the production. The scenery of Arden's waving

cats and the production's "gestural space" assured the continuity of patriarchal authority. Its funny but flat characters prevented one from engaging with Alice's desire. It was also obscured by the cuts of important lines. Rather than a tragedy, this was a funny, flashy but shallow comedy, which ended up with an unmoving death. One laughed and left the theatre undisturbed.

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