

More than a hundred years after theatre directors became an essential participant in the creative process, their artistic autonomy is still regularly challenged. One of the most common objections to their contribution to theatre productions is that their interpretations of classical plays deliberately deviate from their authors' explicit instructions. Yet performances of classics have failed to maintain the degree of respect for the original that their audiences often demand even well before directorial concepts became the convenient scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in a production. Using memetics as its methodological tool and productions of Shakespeare's plays as its case study, this article argues that a departure from the traditional staging practices and readings may actually be essential for the long-term survival of a play. It suggests that a play's continued success depends much more on its ability to adjust to the changed historical circumstances than to its fidelity to the original. In this sense, the director should not be seen as an inherent danger to the great masterpieces but rather as a person who ensures that the mutations of the source text will keep its meanings fresh and ready for the changes in historical, cultural or political circumstances.

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Till Director Does Them Part: Theatre and Fidelity Discourse

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On 4 May 2013, a new production of Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* opened in the Deutsche Oper am Rhein in Düsseldorf. It was conducted by Axel Kober, directed by Burkhard C. Kosminski, and featured Daniel Frank in the leading role. A production of Wagner in a German opera house is, on its own, a routine occurrence and, in terms of its newsworthiness, a non-event. Yet, within a few days, this particular production made it to the Arts and Entertainment pages of a number of major newspapers and news websites around the world. The main reason for this was the very vocal protest of the Düsseldorf audience which was seriously disturbed by the graphic representation of the Holocaust on the Rheinoper stage that included, among other things, a "scene [which] showed a family having their heads shaved and then being shot" (Vasagar). According to the media reports, up to twelve spectators sought medical help to cope with the shock of what they had witnessed in the theatre. The rest apparently "booed and banged the doors when they left the opera house in protest" (qtd. in Evans). By 8 May, the management decided to stop the regular run of the production and offer their subscribers a concert performance of Wagner's opera instead. "[I]t's with great regret that we now react to the fact that some scenes, in particular the very realistically portrayed shooting scene, caused such strong psychological and physical reactions in some visitors that some of them had to be taken into medical care," the management of the theatre wrote in its explanation of the cancellation (qtd. in Connolly). Though, according to the company's artistic director Christoph Meyer, the production's intention was to "mourn, not mock" concentration camp victims (qtd. in Connolly), the Deutsche Oper am Rhein eventually came "to the conclusion that [they could not] justify such an extreme impact of [their] artistic work" (qtd. in Evans) and determined that it was best to avoid any further controversy.

That relocating the events in an opera by Wagner to a Nazi concentration camp would be problematic should not have surprised anyone. After all, Wagner was a well-known anti-Semite who not only published the essay *Judaism in Music*, a scathing and racist attack on the work of several Jewish composers, but also once allegedly said to his wife Cosima that "one should burn all the Jews at a performance of *Nathan*

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the Wise" (qtd. in Katz 91). Most music lovers know that Wagner was Adolf Hitler's favourite composer and that his music is still unofficially banned from Israeli stages and concert halls (compare Curtis 87). In this light, the decisions to move the action of *Tannhäuser* from the legendary medieval Thuringia into twentieth-century Germany, to dress Tannhäuser as an SS-officer, and to begin the production with a very realistic execution of what appears to be a Jewish family are at least questionable choices, if not an outright provocation. What is more surprising is that a number of detractors objected not only to the offensiveness of this particular staging but to the mere notion of the director's right to intervene in the original and thus, indirectly, to the artistic legitimacy of what is usually called "the director's concept" (Homan 16). Michael Szentei-Heise, a leader of Düsseldorf's Jewish community, for instance, "told German media that the production had strayed so far from the original intentions of Wagner, who wrote it as a romantic opera in the 1840s and set it in the Middle Ages, that it was implausible" (qtd. in Connolly). Opera buffs are perhaps used to North American critics and audiences objecting to radical concepts, for example, to Robert Lepage's abstract and technologically driven staging of the *Ring* cycle at New York's Metropolitan Opera or to Christopher Alden's interpretation of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* at the Canadian Opera Company, but it is obvious that even in Europe the director's freedom of interpretation is regularly questioned (see Dundjerović 94).

One of the most common popular objections to productions of classical works is that contemporary interpretations deliberately deviate from their authors' explicit instructions. Robert Harris in the *Globe and Mail* review of the 2013 Toronto production of Mozart's *opera seria*, for instance, writes that "[b]y and large, there were two *La Clemenzas di Tito* presented on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre on Sunday afternoon – the one Mozart and his librettist, Caterino Mazzola, wrote; and the one that Christopher Alden directed" (L5). As Szentei-Heise and Harris's reactions indicate, both audiences and critics are regularly disturbed by non-traditional casting, by the cuts to famous monologues, by the elimination of minor characters, and by transpositions of action from one historical era or geographical environment to another. Though such reservations are often justified by pointing out the inevitable inconsistencies of radical reinterpretations – reducing Wagner's Wotan from a Norse god of fury to "the C.E.O. of the Valhalla Corporation" (Tommasini) may make his ambition and greed plausible, but requires all kinds of mental contortions to accept his ability to conjure fire – we cannot ignore the fact that similar protests are just as frequently rooted in a staunch desire for fidelity to the original. It is almost as if the affiliation between the source text and its production were a contractual relationship based on respect and trust. As long as Valkyries are riding to Wagner's music, the fans of what Peter Brook calls the "Deadly Theatre" (11) expect them to follow the performative traditions of early

Bayreuth productions. In other words, they have to wear horned helmets and forget about helicopters.

The person who is most likely to be blamed for any hermeneutic infidelity is the director. No matter how controversial an operatic production is, the singers, the orchestra and the conductor usually escape the brunt of the criticism, at least in part because the decisions about the nuances of musical and theatrical interpretations are strictly separated. The reviews of Lepage's 2010–2012 *Ring* cycle, for instance, differed widely in their opinions on his concept, but were virtually unanimous in praising the "particularly sensitive performance" of the MET Orchestra under the guidance of James Levine and even suggested that "[m]oments of tenderness came welling out of the pit, spacious and full of feeling, as if Mr. Levine were trying to tell the stage, in all its bleakness, what this opera is about" (Waleson). In the Düsseldorf production of *Tannhäuser*, too, the management in its press release informed the public that they tried to convince Kosminski to make changes to his staging but felt compelled to add that once "he refused to do this for artistic reasons," they had no choice but "to respect – ... also for legal reasons – the artistic freedom of the director" (qtd. in Evans). Because the directors are the ones who have the final say on all crucial dramaturgical decisions, they are the ones assigned the objective responsibility for the deepening chasm between the source text, be it libretto or a play, and its theatrical realisation. And they are the ones who are held accountable when productions stray from what is considered a traditional interpretation and defy their playwrights' or librettists' written wishes (that is, stage directions) or even their implied instructions (that is, the relevant stage conventions). Since for more than two thousand years theatrical productions were staged successfully without the help of directors, their influence on the art form is sometimes seen as little more than an ultimately unnecessary but unfortunately inevitable by-product of late nineteenth-century reforms of theatrical practice (see Pavis 104–05).

Yet, the director is not the only cause of interpretive infidelity. Even before the appearance of the profession of the director and the experimental approaches advocated by Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, productions of classical works, both plays and operas, were much less faithful to the explicit and implicit requirements of the source text and original staging practices than many contemporary avant-garde interpretations of today. Even Wagner himself did not always slavishly adhere to his original vision. Take, for example, the early productions of *Tannhäuser* itself. The world première of this opera took place on 19 October 1845 in the Königliches Hoftheater in Dresden, but since it was not as successful as Wagner would have liked it to be, he immediately returned to his score and libretto and started to modify them (see Westernhagen 1:78). By the time of the 1861 Paris production, which was meant to be a litmus test of *Tannhäuser's* success, he made a number of significant changes

to the original: he modified the overture; extended the scene between Tannhäuser and Venus; added a ballet sequence in the first act (not for any of his own reasons but simply in order to meet the Paris Opéra's expectations); and he made several other minor alterations that, had they been suggested by a contemporary director, say Kosminski or Lepage, might not have been accepted as justified. Despite his intensive involvement in the production, however, the Paris *Tannhäuser* failed miserably (290). Just as Kosminski's production, it too was heckled and disrupted, this time by the members of the Jockey Club, who disliked Wagner's decision to place the ballet sequence in Act One rather than in Act Two. Wagner eventually gave up and, in a curious portent of 2013, asked the minister responsible after the third performance "to withdraw his score as the only means of protecting his work" (292).

A similar trend of a cavalier approach to the source text, especially when it cannot be treated as just another draft of an author's work, can be observed throughout history and is particularly noticeable in productions of canonical works. Even in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, well before directorial concepts become the convenient scapegoat for everything that goes wrong in a production, performances of classics regularly failed to maintain the degree of respect for the original that their audiences often demanded in their yearning for aesthetic predictability. In the continuation of my article, I will, therefore, try to demonstrate how little fidelity matters in theatre and, later on, to examine the reasons why we are so reluctant to admit this. Unlike this introduction, however, my analysis will focus on productions of Shakespeare's plays rather than Wagner's operas. There are two reasons for this choice: first, because the essential role of music in opera and the affiliated precarious equilibrium between the director's and the conductor's creative autonomy substantially complicate the discussion; and second, because Shakespeare is the most commonly performed classical author on our stages and as such lends himself particularly well to this kind of approach. Memetics as a theory developed in order to account for issues of reproduction and fidelity will provide the methodological and terminological framework for my inquiry.

Measure for Measure is one of Shakespeare's most enigmatic plays, and consequently also one of those that are most in need of a clear interpretation if the performers want their audiences to enjoy it. With its unusual balance of tragic and comic elements, as well as with its dependence on the decidedly unsavoury central theme of sexual extortion, *Measure for Measure* has historically posed a great challenge, but also offers a great opportunity for its interpreters. In the last hundred years in particular, it has been a yardstick by which the originality of Shakespearean directors has been assessed. Peter Brook's 1950 production, for example, was his first major success and set him on the path to fame two decades before his ground-breaking interpretation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

In 2011, the Royal Shakespeare Company staged a new production of *Measure for Measure*, this time under the guidance of its then associate director Roxana Silbert. The starting point for her interpretation of the play were Isabella's lines from Act Two, Scene Four: "Th' impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies, / And strip myself to death, as to a bed / That, longing, have been sick for, ere I'd yield / My body up to shame" (Shakespeare, *MM* 2.4.101–04). As the director herself explains in an interview for the RSC's website, she saw sadomasochism as the best equivalent of the licentiousness to which Duke Vincentio refers before he leaves Vienna to its own vices. Here is Peter Kirwan's description of how this dramaturgical concept was translated into theatrical practice:

The Vienna of this production had structures of sexual control built into its very fabric. The Duke and Angelo both wore strap-on leather corsets as part of their daily costume, and the Duke was attended by French maids and dominatrices [sic]. The set included living props: two women in S&M gear stood either side of the stage with spiked lampshades on their heads, departing at the click of a finger when their absence was required. Upstage, hundreds of straightened whips hung from the ceiling, providing a translucent curtain behind which could be concealed the play's various eavesdroppers, as well as silence scenes of Vienna's underworld sex scene. And in noisy sequences, Lucio, Pompey and their fellows engaged in a series of submission and domination games, playing out collective fantasies of control. (Kirwan)

The Vienna underworld in Silbert's production clearly owes more to Sigmund Freud and his older contemporary Leopold von Sacher-Masoch than to any location in Shakespeare's time. It is a place of a distinctly contemporary, tabloid-inspired hypocrisy rather than the vaguely Austrian city where Shakespeare's sex-trade workers lurk. But inasmuch as many critics hailed the production for its "intelligent" and "bold" concept (Gardner and Mountford), others objected to its disloyalty to the original, arguing that its only result is the oversimplification of Shakespeare's complexities and treated it as a tribute to *Fifty Shades of Gray* (James) rather than to the Bard. The *Daily Telegraph's* theatre critic Charles Spencer thus begins his review of the production by suggesting "that the RSC should change its name to the Really Sadistic Company" and then goes on to systematically ridicule most of Silbert's directorial interventions. Though he agrees that it "is the sexual charge that usually makes the play so compelling," his understanding of the moralistic Lord Angelo's duplicity, which in the RSC's production expresses itself in his propensity for sexual deviancy under the guise of middle-class respectability, goes well beyond Silbert's easy solution to dress everyone in titillating costumes (Spencer, "Measure"). In this light, even Michael Boyd's 1998 production – which Spencer, coincidentally, also shredded to pieces ("Dispiriting") – that was conceived as a satire on the uncanny ability of John Major's Conservative politicians to get caught with their pants down seems a relatively respectable choice. "[B]oth director and cast," Spencer complains

about the later production, “have entirely failed to comprehend almost everything that matters about this fascinating and perplexing play, contenting themselves instead with fatuous comedy and dodgy sex toys” (“Measure”).

An even more radical departure from Shakespeare’s original was the Pig Iron Theatre Company’s take on *Measure for Measure* entitled *Isabella* which they premièred at the 2007 Live Arts Festival in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This production was set in a mortuary, with a mortician rather than the Duke, as in the RSC’s version, metaphorically pulling all the strings of the marionettes that were once Shakespeare’s characters. The starting point for their reading was also a speech from Act Two, Scene Four of *Measure for Measure*, from one of Angelo’s soliloquies – “When I would pray and think, I think and pray / To several subjects. Heaven hath my empty words / While my invention, hearing not my tongue / Anchors on Isabel” (2.4.1–4) – except that this time, Shakespeare’s words were merely a vehicle to narrate a strange, borderline necrophiliac story, with all the actors on the stage naked for much of the play. The overall effect of the production was comic, in part “to release any awkwardness we feel in watching nude people move around onstage, but [the audience] also laugh[ed] because [it was] relieved that the tension in the work space [could] be diffused by the presence of others and that [the spectators would] be spared a spectacle of sexual violation” (Steffy 5). Yet, in order to get the comedy across, “Pig Iron cut all auxiliary characters, including Mistress Overdone, Pompey, Elbow, Master Froth, and Abhorson the executioner. Escalus, Barnardine, and Mariana do not appear onstage as discrete characters, but some of their lines survive, as when, for example, Angelo voices lines that *Measure* assigns to the legal clerk...” (Steffy 7). In other words, the stripping down of the actors was mirrored by the stripping down of Shakespeare’s text.

An adaptation such as *Isabella* is, of course, by the very definition of the term a step further removed from the original than an interpretation (compare Hutcheon 18). One could, therefore, argue that its departures from its source text should be treated with a more flexible attitude and not automatically assessed according to their fidelity to the original. Yet in theatrical practice the lines between what constitutes an interpretation and when an interpretation becomes an adaptation are blurred. Almost every production of a classical play cuts some of the lines from the original: how does this differ – other than in scale – from an adaptation that adds no new lines or characters and maintains whatever is left of the source in its original order? As Linda Hutcheon points out in one of the sections in her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, the question of the author’s intentions remains no matter the extent of changes (105–11; see also Homan 15–25).

As one-sided as Silbert’s interpretation and as drastic as the Pig Iron Theatre Company’s reading of *Measure for Measure* are – I could also add to this list Charles Marowitz’s

political variations on the play published in the collection *The Marowitz Shakespeare* – they are not substantially less faithful to Shakespeare’s original than Sir William Davenant’s reworking that was first performed at the Lincoln’s Inn Fields in 1662 by the Duke’s Company. Davenant’s adaptation, entitled informatively *The Law Against Lovers*, tries to brighten the dark atmosphere in the corrupt Vienna by importing into the play Beatrice and Benedick, the witty central heroes of Shakespeare’s comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. In his first attempt to reintroduce Shakespeare’s problem play on the English stages, Davenant, whose contribution to the actual production would have been vaguely comparable to some of the contemporary director’s responsibilities, made the wicked Angelo and the clever Benedick brothers and, just like the Pig Iron Theatre Company, entirely eliminated the comic subplot involving constable Elbow and clown Pompey. In *The Law Against Lovers*, Angelo’s pass at Isabella is merely a test of her virtue, while Beatrice has a younger sister Viola, who in Act Three, Scene One even sings a song (Davenant 5:152–53). Unlike contemporary audiences that frequently object to interventions in classical texts, Davenant’s peers seem to have been more forgiving. “I went to the Opera, and saw *The Law against Lovers*,” the Restoration diarist Samuel Pepys writes in his entry on 18 February 1662, “a good play and well performed, especially the little girl’s [sic] (whom I never saw act before), dancing and singing...” (117). Though Davenant produced the play under his own name and omitted any reference to Shakespeare’s authorship, the 1700 adaptation of Davenant’s adaptation by Charles Gildon not only acknowledges Shakespeare’s authorship but also restores the original title, albeit with a new subtitle (*Beauty, the Best Advocate*). It also gets rid of Beatrice and Benedick, but adds a masque about Dido and Aeneas and an epilogue spoken by a ghost.

In general, Restoration theatre is well known for its modifications of Shakespeare’s original texts. Very few of his plays were performed without major changes to the text left to us by the editors of the various Quartos and Folios. In most cases, Restoration interpretations are today treated as adaptations, but from the period’s own point of view they were simply concepts that enabled the plays to stay alive on an indoor proscenium stage equipped with winged scenery, and that helped them relate to a new, more spectacle-hungry audience. The most notorious of the Restoration infidelities is Nahum Tate’s 1681 *The History of King Lear*, in which King Lear not only does not die but actually resumes his rule while Cordelia ends up marrying Edgar, but there was no shortage of other, similarly creative productions of Shakespeare’s plays on late seventeenth-century stages. *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, regularly survive and, in Thomas Otway’s adaptation *The History and Fall of Caius Marius*, even move from Verona to ancient Rome, while the hugely successful Davenant’s and John Dryden’s *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island* embellishes Shakespeare’s original by adding siblings both to Miranda and Caliban, and a foster son to Prospero.

It is usually argued that the respect for Shakespeare's originals is only recovered in the English theatre with the work of the famous eighteenth-century actor David Garrick (compare Cunningham 5). His ability to understand Shakespeare is considered legendary, and he was the first actor who could truly inhabit Shakespeare's characters rather than merely reproduce their words and actions. According to George Winchester Stone, Jr., before Garrick's era only seven of Shakespeare's plays that were regularly performed "can be said to have escaped the pens of the improvers (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, *The Merry Wives* and *Henry VIII*)" (186–87). "On the other hand," Stone continues, "for the thirty-five years of Garrick's connection with the stage, 1,448 performances of twenty-seven Shakespeare plays were given at his theatre alone, of which only eight can be said to have undergone serious alteration" (187). This shift clearly demonstrates a new attitude towards classical texts and could make Garrick into a poster boy for interpretive fidelity, except for one significant hiccup: the eight plays where he "both committed and permitted certain tamperings with [Shakespeare's] texts" (Stone 187). As faithful to the original as many of his productions were, Garrick remained pragmatic and only returned back to the source texts when this made for a more relevant theatre. When, conversely, he believed that his spectators would not be able to understand the originals, he calmly stuck with the tried Restoration adaptations or even provided his own, equally distanced from Shakespeare.

Garrick's character research in preparation for his performance of *King Lear* is regularly quoted as the predecessor of Konstantin Stanislavski's realistic acting technique (compare Auburn 164), yet it is just as often overlooked that Garrick "began his career with the Nahum Tate version of Shakespeare's tragedy" (A. Harris 57). He also meticulously purged *Romeo and Juliet* of all bawdy lines and, in a strange counterpoint to the Interregnum drolls that reduced *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the play-within-the-play, ignored Shakespeare's critique of amateur acting and adapted his comedy into a sentimental fairy play without the mechanicals. Even in productions where he did not intervene in Shakespeare's originals, Garrick still allowed himself substantial leeway. His productions were what we could call today modern-dress stagings and did not use a thrust stage. My favourite example of Garrick's poetic licence, however, comes from his approach to *Hamlet*. In order to frighten his audiences more convincingly, Garrick commissioned the wigmaker Perkins to install into his fashionable powdered wig a small air pump (Roach 58). When the so-equipped melancholy Danish prince encountered the Ghost for the first time in Act One, Scene Four of the play, his hair literally stood on its ends in horror. If we can trust the eyewitness accounts, the "fright wig" definitely achieved its effect (Roach 60), but it could hardly be considered historically accurate and true to the spirit of the original.

It seems then that a departure from the original is the rule rather than the exception in theatre. In fact, in the opinion of a number of contemporary scholars it may actually be essential for the survival of a play. In their article entitled “On the Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Fidelity Discourse and ‘Success’ – Biologically”, two Canadian scholars, the biologist Gary R. Bortolotti and the literary critic Linda Hutcheon, offer an interesting alternative to “the theoretical impasse ... represented by the continuing dominance of what is usually referred to as ‘fidelity discourse’” (444). Though their hypotheses deal with film adaptations of classical plays rather than the challenges posed by attempts to stage them, their memetic methodology can also be easily applied to theatre and to the question of the fidelity of theatrical interpretations. The central premise of Bortolotti’s and Hutcheon’s argument is that the “success” of a narrative is determined by its ability to adjust to the changed historical circumstances and not by its fidelity to the original. The classical phenotype does not owe its reputation to its fidelity to the literary genotype but to its interpretive pliability. There is no reproduction without adaptation. Just as the main role of genes is to replicate themselves through DNA and in this way ensure a transfer of hereditary characteristics regardless of the mutations that might happen along the way, so memes as the basic “unit[s] of cultural transmission” (Dawkins 192) are responsible for the long-term preservation of cultural patterns. The secret of the historical continuity of a play is not in the exact repetition of the original but in its regular replication. From this point of view, the countless conceptual abuses of texts such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet* or *Tartuffe* are not a symptom of the theatre’s lack of respect but an indication of the inner strength of the plays’ dramatic DNA (see also Fortier 90).

Bortolotti and Hutcheon suggest in their article that the “replicator’s (narrative’s) success is measured by its survival in the form of long-lived copies and versions of itself: that is, by its persistence, abundance, and diversity” (452). If this logic is applied to theatre, a play can be considered successful when its productions manage to stay on the repertoires, when they are popular with their audiences, and when they survive a variety of readings and stagings. Sophocles’ *Oedipus* is better than Seneca’s because it is still being performed and not just translated; Edmond de Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* is more successful than his *L’Aiglon* because it is seen on stages throughout the world and not just in France; and Shakespeare’s Mediterranean comedies have endured better than Thomas Dekker’s and Ben Jonson’s city comedies because they can be transposed from one environment to another without noticeable structural damage and do not require a detailed knowledge of London’s geography in order to be appreciated. This also means that the director is not a virus which decays the original but a catalyst of its continued replication. The director is the person who ensures that the mutations of the source text will keep its meanings fresh and ready for the changes in historical, cultural or political circumstances.

Where then does the audiences' latent desire for the preservation of the literary genotype originate? Or, in other words, what makes so many unhappy, but well-read, spectators and critics yearn for high-fidelity reproductions? This question is best answered if we return to the inventor of the concept of "meme", the English evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, and his book *The Selfish Gene*. He claims in his study that the historical transfer of cultural information is, in principle, a conservative process, in a similar fashion as is essentially conservative the inheriting of the genetic materials. In the last chapter of his book, Dawkins defines a replicator as the main carrier of the transfer of memetic information with the following words: "memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (192). Because the main objective of cultural evolution is the dissemination of memes, the desire for a faithful reproduction of the original is of crucial significance for art as a historical phenomenon. The audience generally wants to see the exact copies of memes because they are what constitute its cultural identity. The spectators are not interested in mutations and innovations since these threaten them; instead, they want to see their own value systems preserved well into the future (see also Hutcheon 114–20).

Tradition is, therefore, a fluid notion that depends more on the audience's current memetic state than on a true understanding of the historical past. As many directors specialising in the so-called Original Practice approach to Shakespeare can testify, a historically accurate reconstruction of an Elizabethan play that casts men in women's roles, does not block the actors' movements, and spends very little time on character work is just as likely to upset a contemporary spectator as certain modernist productions (compare Lopez 309–10). The British Original Practice specialist Tim Carroll, for instance, has been called "sexist, racist and reactionary" (Nestruck, "What" R4). The spectators who are unhappy with a white Othello or a blind Duke Vincentio would also be annoyed were they to notice that Cordelia and the Fool in *King Lear* are played by the same actor, especially if this actor, as was the habit in Shakespeare's own time, is an immature adolescent boy. The mainstream audience is frequently not interested in the historical accuracy of their classics but prefers the nostalgic revival of Shakespeare from our high-school textbooks that either evokes the pleasant memories of our youth or reaffirms the values of what we have been conditioned to accept as high culture. In this sense, the ideal of fidelity that pervades so much of the public's anger towards the director's interference with the original is sometimes nothing but a revival of the basic tenets of Victorian aesthetics. What so many letters to the editor after yet another controversial production of a well-loved classical play call for is not a return back to the source but a retreat to a romanticised world of our own past.

In 1823, the English actor Charles Kemble decided to take a bold risk and stage his Covent Garden production of one of Shakespeare's least known plays, the history

King John, in authentic, that is, medieval costumes. This is how his designer James Robinson Planché describes the outcome of their experiment:

The performers had no faith in me, and sulkily assumed their new and strange habiliments, in the full belief that they should be roared at by the audience. They *were* roared at; but in a much more agreeable way than they had contemplated. When the curtain rose, and discovered King John dressed as his effigy appears in Worcester Cathedral, surrounded by his barons sheathed in mail, with cylindrical helmets and correct armorial shields, and his courtiers in the long tunics and mantles of the thirteenth century, there was a roar of approbation, accompanied by four distinct rounds of applause, so general and so hearty, that the actors were astonished, and I felt amply rewarded for all the trouble, anxiety, and annoyance I had experienced during my labours. Receipts of from 400*l.* to 600*l.* nightly soon re-imbursed the management for the expense of the production and a complete reformation of dramatic costume became from that moment inevitable upon the English stage. (415–16)

Our audiences' ideal production of Shakespeare is often surprisingly similar to the antiquarian one advocated by Planché. The spectators are still hoping to see a visual spectacle that requires neither an intensive use of imagination nor too much intellectual exertion. They like the costumes colourful and rich, and the stage solid and full of props. Before the nineteenth century with its insistence on universal education as the most tangible evidence of the success of the Enlightenment project, the audience's inherent need for maintaining tradition could only rely on collective memory and not on detailed historical studies of previous centuries. Once Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière and other classics become a part of required curriculum and are taught to virtually everyone in a given cultural environment, both literary and even theatrical traditions are no longer vague, somewhat arbitrary phenomena, but perfectly verifiable and to a degree institutionalised systems of knowledge. Suddenly, every spectator has preconceived notions about how a production should look and what is, or is not, acceptable on the stage. Productions are no longer expected to replicate the performers' but rather the spectators' genotypes, while theatrical evolution has to contend with a new force that attempts to slow down its inexorable motion forward. That is why it sometimes seems as if the mainstream taste were stuck somewhere in the late 1800s. In an ironic twist of fate, the director, the profession that was invented in Saxe-Meiningen to facilitate the introduction of historicism and realism on Western stages, is now often seen as both the main opponent of the hegemony of these two styles and as the main agent of the continued development of theatre as an art form.

In his chapter "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation", the American film critic Robert Stam considers the discourse of fidelity a fundamentally misguided theoretical construct. Its main weakness is that it relies on "moralistic" language (Stam 54) and

treats fidelity as an ethical rather than a structural category. That is to say, being faithful (to the original) is seen as a value, while being unfaithful is tantamount to a betrayal of a work's integrity. But even if Stam's critique is unfair, as long as one accepts the basic premises of the discourse of fidelity, the suggestion that in theatre a production can be faithful to its source is logically flawed: the idea of fidelity assumes that the object of faith wants its subject to remain loyal. In theatre, the original has no will of its own beyond survival: the faith is always one-sided and resides with performers alone. Yet, as the controversy surrounding Kosminski's production of *Tannhäuser* shows, even Germans, despite what the *Globe and Mail's* headline to J. Kelly Nestruck's article on Thomas Ostermeier proclaims, do not always "do it better" ("Germans" L1). The director is never and nowhere entirely safe from the audiences' moralistic gaze.

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