

**Playing with materials:
performing effect on the indoor Jacobean stage**

Jane Collins

The opening of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in London in January 2014, designed to “invoke a version of the indoor playhouse Shakespeare’s company occupied from 1609 to 1642” (Gurr and Karim-Cooper 2014, 1) has inspired early modern theatre scholars and historians to not only revisit the plays performed indoors during the winter months but also reconsider the social, economic and *material* conditions of their production. Until recently, studies of early modern drama have primarily focused on these plays from a literary perspective or, when considering them in performance, discussions of acting styles, costume and architecture have in the main concentrated on the larger outdoor amphitheatres such as The Globe. This renewed interest in the staging of Jacobean and Caroline plays in the more intimate environment of the indoor playhouses has shifted the focus away from what had been generally accepted as “an actor’s and playwright’s theatre” (Sturges 1987: 37) towards a more nuanced understanding of the actor as just one component in a complex matrix of elements that constitute the performance event as well as re-thinking the notion of a single authorial vision. Thus the emphasis of scholarly attention expands from actor presence and authorial intent to embrace wider considerations of the spatial, visual, acoustic and olfactory conditions that pertained in the indoor playhouses as well as the social status and expectations of the audiences who attended performances there; in effect a “turn” towards scenography.

In the editorial of the inaugural issue of the journal *Theatre and Performance Design* Arnold Aronson and I argue that scenography “...is reframing debates and changing perceptions and, as such, emerging as a significant challenge to established epistemologies in theatre and performance discourse...” (2015:1). This position is supported by Farah Karim-Cooper and Will Tosh in the program for the Winter Season 2015-2016 at The Sam Wanamaker Playhouse who ask us to consider: “How did the specific conditions of the indoor theatres affect the plays that dramatists produced for them?”¹ In other words what new ways of expressing the social, political and philosophical preoccupations of the times were afforded to the playwrights and actors by the visual, spatial and acoustic conditions of the indoor venues?

One of the most profound philosophical debates of the early modern period, sparked by renewed interest in the ideas of Plato, concerned the relative merits of words and images as the purveyors of *truth*. A contemporary disquiet about the reliability of the senses, particularly sight is one of the themes common to many of Shakespeare's later plays, what Karim-Cooper describes as "a continuous interrogation of the idea that what you see is what you get"² (2014:198). The "turn" towards scenography in early modern scholarship extends our understanding of how these themes, identified in the surviving folios might have been worked through in performance.

Theatre enacts the dialectic of showing and concealing that underpins the tension between epistemology (that which is shown is true) and metaphysics (that which is concealed is true). And it questions the testimony of eye and ear through deception and illusion: theatrical narratives often turn upon whether we can trust the evidence of our senses – what we see what we hear, what we are told. (Till: 2015:111)

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, produced by the King's Men, in the early years of the winter move into their indoor home in the Blackfriars Playhouse has become something of a touchstone for early modern scholars analyzing the changes instituted by the move indoors. Most scholars agree that Webster probably wrote *The Duchess of Malfi* with the indoor playhouse in mind and it is significant because, among its many themes, it explores this "contemporary disquiet" by playing on theatre's capacity to destabilize the relationship between seeing, hearing and knowing.

The spatial conditions of the smaller, intimate indoor playhouses, combined with the potential to control light and sound made these venues ideally suited for playwrights and actors to explore these ideas through practical experiment with materials and through play. This essay will discuss some of the ways the special effects made possible by the move indoors may have contributed to the realization of the thematic preoccupations of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*.

There is no clear evidence of what the Blackfriars³ indoor playhouse may have looked like. It was, as the name suggests an adaptation of the upper floors of an old monastery situated "inside the city and close to St Paul's Cathedral" (Gurr and Karim-Cooper 2014:3). A set of architectural drawings discovered in Worcester College, Oxford in the 1960s and thought to

be designs by stage designer and architect Inigo Jones for an early playhouse were revealed in the 1990s to have been made much later, probably in the Restoration, by Jones' ex-student John Webb. The drawings however displayed a number of architectural features associated with the earlier Jacobean period and they therefore became the basis for the design of the Sam Wanamaker playhouse, a simulacrum of The Blackfriars, adjacent to London's Globe⁴. One of these features, noted as significant by Gurr and Karim-Cooper is "...the priority it may give to hearing over seeing the plays (though this positioning does allow for privileged viewing), since nearly a third of the seats are positioned at the sides or rear of the stage in order to give the best proximity for hearing" (2014:2). It is generally accepted "that the Blackfriars stage was about half the size of the Globe stage" (Ichikawa 2014:80) and the playing space was further reduced by the presence of "gallants" seated on stage on either side of the acting area. Many of the actual and symbolic features—the heavens above and hell below—of the outdoor spaces were replicated on a smaller scale indoors, not surprising given that a company's repertoire often moved between the two spaces in the different seasons. As Ichikawa elaborates, "the requirements of plays performed at the Blackfriars suggest that its stage had two doors in the façade, a discovery space between them, a balcony above, a trapdoor to the space below and a descent machine" (ibid.). It would seem then, initially at least, that many of the staging practices of the outdoor theatres were transferred to the indoor venues with some modifications. There is evidence for instance that entrance and exit speeches were trimmed possibly to accommodate the reduction in distance from the doors in the upstage façade to the downstage playing area. (See Ichikawa 2014, 79-94.) However, as I discuss below, this assumes that the spatial conventions of the outside theatres were replicated indoors and this may not have been the case.

Scenographic innovations and experiments adapted from painting by Italian theatre designers like the architect Baldessare Peruzzi in the sixteenth century had been widely disseminated in the writings of Sebastiano Serlio as early as 1545. In England, these ideas were celebrated by Inigo Jones in the court masques, but in the Jacobean mind according to Keith Sturges there was a clear delineation between a play and a masque and "[s]hows" were for masques and masques were not plays" (1987:38). Sturges attributes this lack of scenic display to a "deep conservatism" (ibid) as well as the expense involved and the demands of turning round a huge repertoire. Sturges equates "design" with costly decoration and although this was clearly "not a scene-painter's theatre" (1987:37), examined through a scenographic lens early

modern plays like the *Duchess of Malfi* demonstrate a complex stage-craft as visual as it is aural that attests to a highly sophisticated understanding of space and materials.

The discussion around the relative merits of words (hearing) and images (seeing) a play, identified as a characteristic of the Jacobean era erupted in the Caroline era in 1631 into the famously public argument between the playwright Ben Jonson and stage architect Inigo Jones. They had maintained a long and successful partnership dating back to 1605 staging highly elaborate court masques. The argument centered around who should be credited as the “primary “inventor”” of their collaborations. Jonson habitually assumed this designation for himself and finally Jones challenged him. As Nicholas Till explains:

Jonson hit back with a series of vicious ripostes...mock[ing] the pretensions of Jones’s increasingly grandiose settings for their court masques, complaining that “design” has now become “omnipotent” and intends to make poetry redundant. (2010:154)⁵

Jonson came down emphatically on the side of words vehemently asserting that “the spectator must seek beyond the spectacle which is being presented for the meaning that lies within...”(ibid.,156). Paul Menzer warns against the oversimplification that the Kings Men, under the pernicious influence of Jones and his foreign ideas, eventually shifted the balance “to fantastic visual scenery that appealed to the eye over verbal scenery that spoke to the mind’s eye” (2014:180) when the company moved indoors. He argues that “the bareness of the ‘bare’ platform of the early modern amphitheatre is greatly overstated” and that “[we] know the outdoor theatres to have been, themselves, invested in wonder”(ibid.). He also points out that this “fabled” shift is often associated with a kind of “loss” in the way it is presented by many theatre historians as if they too support the iconophobia of Jonson. However, underlying the egotistical rivalry between Jonson and Jones we can discern the philosophical argument about artifice and truth being played out across Europe.

Plato’s philosophy is based upon an innate distrust of the outer body of material reality as being no more than an ephemeral simulacrum of the real metaphysical truth beyond. During the Renaissance there was a fierce debate among neo-Platonists as to whether images or words offered a more immediate way of representing the essential Platonic form. Were images lesser because they were sensory, or were they superior

because they more directly represented the pure form of the thing existing prior to the mediated sign system of language. (Till 2010: 156)

John Webster also privileged language when he complained about the lack of appreciation of the first performance of his tragedy *The White Devil*⁶. Staged at the Red Bull, an outside playhouse, it was performed on a dull afternoon—most likely in February or March 1612—so people couldn't properly see it but more importantly they couldn't hear it, or, they weren't listening attentively and therefore did not understand it.

... since it was acted, in so dull a time of winter, presented in so open and black a theatre, that it wanted (that which is the only grace and setting out of a tragedy) a full and understanding auditory... (1998:5)

Two years after the very unsatisfactory reception of *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* was staged at the Blackfriars in the autumn of 1614. Martin White identifies that “many features of staging implied by the text ... are clearly designed for indoor performance” (2014:132). These features include not only the potential for more focused light and sound but also exploitation of new technologies in the form wax figures, as well as the spatial opportunities offered to performers to *play* in more intimate and colluding ways with the audience. I have argued elsewhere that “[t]he explicit theatricality of Jacobean stage convention with its sensationalist effects, tricks, and fakery appears to demand an exuberant performance style” (2012:57). Bridget Escolme makes the point that “in performance, these dramatic texts are dependent for their effects of subjectivity upon the potential for direct encounter between performer and spectator...” (2006:8).

They want the audience to listen to them, notice them, approve their performance, ignore others on stage for their sake. The objectives of these figures are bound up with the fact that they know you're there (ibid.,16).

The indoor venues were ideal for this kind of direct address but also enabled more intimate asides that could draw the audience into the orbit of the protagonists. In the early stages of the play Bosola, who is paid to spy on the Duchess by her brother, is able to make jokes with the audience at her expense in the public environment of the court, with no less than four asides in a very short exchange as he tries to find out whether she is pregnant (II.ii). As the

plot progresses this form of “playing” has the potential to further embroil the audience in the reprehensible actions of the characters and the moral ambiguities of Webster’s world.

Scenographic thinking argues that a separation of sound and space is impossible positing instead “that sound and space must be understood dialectically (Till 2015, 111) and certainly the changed acoustic environment of the smaller more intimate indoor spaces opened up the possibilities for a more nuanced and subtle style of playing. “The whispering that characterizes court intrigue, and of which the Duchess complains in IV.ii.218-19, well suited the ambiance of the Blackfriars” (Brennan 1993: xxxiii) This also begs the question how did actors actually use the space? Did they seek out the best positions from which to address the audience? Did they speak behind them or take advantage of the architectural features of the building, the pillars for instance to make sudden appearances. Did they enter from downstage through the audience, breaking the convention of the upstage façade? The stage entrances of important personages, Maria Ichikawa tells us, were announced with fanfares using “quieter musical instruments such as cornets and recorders” as “trumpets would have been too loud in the smaller, roofed theatre” (2014: 88). She evidences this by a close reading of the stage directions of plays written specifically for these indoor spaces that call for “‘*still*’, ‘*soft*’, ‘*sad*’ or ‘*solemn*’ music” (ibid.; author’s italics).

The *Duchess of Malfi* is a play that undermines our perceptual confidence by suggesting that if we can’t trust what we hear, we can’t trust what we see either. Did the performers experiment with the effect of a single candle suddenly appearing in total darkness? Certainly thematically and in material terms lightness and darkness are played on throughout. Scott Palmer suggests that for lighting effects indoors, “[b]randed chandeliers with candles...[and] The closing of shutters on windows was on occasion part of the action, creating a cross fade from daylight to night” (2013: 47). Particularly associated with tragedies this technique was in use in the private playhouses before the Kings Men moved into the Blackfriars. Palmer cites Thomas Dekker, a contemporary of Webster who makes the comparison with “the city of London as shuttered... ‘like a private playhouse, when the windows are clapt down, as if some Nocturnal or dismal tragedy were presently acted” (Dekker, in Palmer ibid.).

It seems inconceivable that the playwrights would not have structured their texts with these effects in mind or that experimenting in the space they would not have adapted their ideas in response to the available technology. Martin White discusses this in relation to *The Duchess of Malfi* and his analysis of Act IV Scene 1 is worth quoting at length as he illustrates just how integral lighting “effects” were to the actual plot of the play.

...with the fourth act beginning at roughly 3.45p.m. on a winter afternoon, the daylight outside would already be fading. The act opens with the servant, Bosola, reporting to the Duchess’s mad brother, Ferdinand, who has come to visit her. He has, however, vowed never to *see* her and he exits as the Duchess enters. The servant, Bosola, informs her that her brother has ordered that ‘neither torch nor taper/ Shine in your chamber’ (25-6), and removes what lighting there is: his own torch and her taper, and probably extinguishes the candles in the sconces either side of the stage. The stage will now not only appear, but actually *be*, darker than at any point in the play so far, and her exchange with her brother – ‘FERDINAND: Where are you? DUCHESS: Here sir. / Ferdinand: This darkness suits you well’ (29-30) - will be played ...with the audience able to see as little as the characters. (2014: 134)

What follows is a macabre sequence where Webster exploits this “natural” darkness to maximum affect.

Ferdinand:

I come to seal my peace with you: here’s a hand,

Gives her a dead man’s hand. (43)

The Duchess recoiling from the coldness of the hand calls for lights. Ferdinand exits ordering Bosola “Let her have lights enough” (53). As the servants enter with lights the Duchess and the audience see the severed hand she is holding. Almost immediately Bosola draws back the curtain at the rear of the stage to reveal the bodies of her husband and child.

–Here is discover’d, behind a traverse, the artificial figures of ANTONIO and his child; appearing as if they were dead.

Bosola

Look you: here's the piece from which 'twas tane. (56)

As I have shown elsewhere⁷ David M. Bergeron suggests that the lifelike quality of the figures would have been the result of advances in wax molding techniques and this convinces the Duchess that they are “true substantial bodies” (114). Sturgess argues that the company would not have gone to trouble and expense of providing wax work dummies “when the actors themselves might act them at no cost and very well” (1987:112). This assumes that the companies were penny pinching in terms of what they would spend on special effects but there is no evidence to suggest this. We know that higher admission prices for the indoor venues changed the status of the audience from the socially diverse mix of the larger outdoor venues to a wealthier elite patronage indoors who perhaps demanded more sophisticated production standards. Penny Woods traces “a performance practice of stillness,” perhaps instigated by more focused lighting in which “...dead bodies, sleeping bodies or wax figures interact with the space and social dynamics in deliberate and precise ways” (2014:157). Bergeron further “...speculates that the Jacobean audience would have recognised the figures with which the Duchess is tormented as wax funereal effigies popular with high ranking people at the time. In this sense, the stage illusion or special effect would have had a symbolic as well as a dramatic impact” (Collins 2012:63). However the effect was achieved, the illusion was easier to sustain in a dimly lit theatre and Webster takes full advantage of this “to raise the stakes of horror and the grotesque”(ibid., 63) as Ferdinand informs the audience that the bodies are “fakes” but allows the Duchess to continue in her belief that her husband and child are in fact dead.

(IV.i)

Excellent; as I would wish: She's plagued in art.

These presentations are but framed in wax... (110-111)

Art and artifice play tricks on the eye of the beholder. At an earlier point when Ferdinand, looking at the Duchess, asks, “Virtue where art thou hid?” (III.ii) he is voicing another neo-platonic idea that “a woman's virtue would create a luminescence that would naturally be visible on the cheeks”(Karim-Cooper 2014:187). On stage this “naturalness” was of course artificially constructed using all the latest technologies:

[C]osmetic spectacle was crucial to theatrical performance in this period; indeed, it was an essential technology of theatre production as it enabled boys to play women, actors to play ghosts and witches and could be deployed in a variety of ways to achieve the illusions upon which early modern theatre traded.” (2014:189)

“Self-fashioning”⁸, the process of constructing one’s identity and public persona was characteristic of the moneyed classes at this time and audiences went to the new indoor playhouses to see and be seen. “Sartorial display was an indicator of social and economic status in the 17th century. Male and female clothing was rich and elaborate – the padding, starch and drapes of varying textures from velvet through to lace obscured the body” (Entwistle, 2006:94). Costume and make-up constituted a major proportion of the materials budget of the early modern companies. In the indoor playhouses bejeweled and sumptuously dressed audiences surrounded performers clothed in equally extravagant costumes, the whole atmosphere enhanced by candlelight. Karim-Cooper suggests that “some plays performed at the Blackfriars highlight at times not only the luxurious materiality of costume, jewels and candle light but cosmetic ingredients as well” (2014:194). In plays like *Duchess of Malfi* “the thematic preoccupation with female chastity and beauty is registered through this material referencing visually and textually” (Ibid.) coalescing with themes of “seeing and believing” that so troubled the Jacobean mind.

In their introduction to *Shakespeare’s Theatres and the Effects of Performance* the editors state:

...for Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights, there was no binary between the materiality of the theatre and the emotional, metaphorical and poetic registers of the plays themselves...the written word is a kind of technology: perhaps as much a technology as stage architecture or the actor’s voice. (Karim-Cooper and Stern 2013:3)

Consideration of the material aspects of production is shedding new light on the processes through which plays were realized in performance in the early modern period. The imaginative ways contemporary writers, performers, makers and technicians exploited the opportunities offered by the indoor spaces and worked together to enhance theatrical effect has broadened the discussion of dramaturgy and aesthetics to include recognition of the way

materials make meaning. The move by the King's Men into the Blackfriars, according to Menzer, "... struck the death knell ... for a theatrical norm of outside theatre that was nearly two thousand years old" (2014:171). The physical proximity of performer and audience in the indoor theatres heralded the beginning of "a transition in the sensory norm of theatrical presentation and attendance" (ibid., 174). Scenography is crucial to understanding how these changes were wrought; theoretically this places scenographic research at the center of this new scholarly enquiry and in practical terms for those currently working in the field it will inform their practice and open up new possibilities for playing with sound, light, space and materials. As scenographer Pamela Howard succinctly puts it, "To imagine what can be done, we have to know what has been done" (2010: xxiii) .

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¹ The Indoor Performance Project, Farah Karim-Cooper and Will Tosh, Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, Winter Season, October 2015-April 2016.

² See *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest* as examples of Shakespeare’s later works that play with these themes.

³ Also referred to as the Second Blackfriars as “... there had been a playhouse in the precinct, a first Blackfriars playhouse constructed in 1576, which was also an indoors conversion of an existing building” (Sturgess 1987, 2).

⁴ There is also a Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, Virginia, USA.

⁵ For a full account of this argument see Nicholas Till, “Oh, to make boardes speak!” in Collins and Nisbet 2010, 154-61.

⁶ See his preface to the printed edition.

⁷ See Collins 2012.

⁸ A term introduced by Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).