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Coda. Trying Things On – Costuming Edward's Boys

Propos recueillis par Sophie Chiari et Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise

Perry Mills

- 1 For more than a decade Edward's Boys, the all-boy theatre company from King Edward VI School, Stratford-upon-Avon,¹ have produced plays by Beaumont, Dekker, Webster, Ford, Jonson, Lyly, Marlowe, Marston, Middleton and Nashe – among others. Unique in the world of the performance of early modern drama, Edward's Boys have inevitably attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. Specialists have hailed the company's work as “recapturing what it must have been like to see the plays as they were intended to be performed”² and predicted that the company's work “really will rewrite the academic theatre history books”.³ In this article Perry Mills, the company's director, attempts to encapsulate a conversation with Sophie Chiari and Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise, which formed part of the “Strange Habits” Conference (21-22 January 2021).
- 2 **Sophie Chiari & Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise:**
How do you decide on costumes? Do you have a designer?
- 3 **Perry Mills:**
Before you asked the question it never occurred to me that I give costumes much thought. They just seem to appear (!) However, on reflection, that is of course disingenuous.
- 4 Decisions concerning the choice of costumes are always made as a result of close textual scrutiny. That is equally true for everything – period, props, accents, movement, music, set, wigs, “blocking” – everything stems from our understanding of the text and what we decide to highlight. Any choice we make must allow us to “tell the story”!
- 5 We don't have a “designer”. A colleague or parent or a senior student may co-ordinate and organise the costumes as they come in, but not always. The actual selection process is instinctive: when the actor and I agree on our understanding of the character and

their function in the play, the choices become “obvious” – at least to us. And it’s highly collaborative: me, inevitably; the co-ordinator, if there is one; the boy himself; the company more widely; even their families! Consequently, having been involved in the process, the boy has a real stake in what he’s wearing.

- 6 Our first attempt at one of these plays was Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan* (2008). As we were discussing social status in an early rehearsal, I recall Alex saying that Freevill and his friends reminded him of P. G. Wodehouse’s “Hooray-Henries”, Bertie Wooster et al. We immediately decided to set the production in the 1920s – stripey jackets, straw boaters, “flapper” dresses and the rest.
- 7 For *Dido Queen of Carthage* (2013) by Marlowe, we elected to adopt gym kit and cricket whites for Æneas and his sailors. This was in part a result of the boys creating the set by using their bodies, like gymnasts or acrobats.

Figure 1: Æneas and Dido from Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (2013).



- 8 It was also suggested by the fact that the music for the show mainly featured choral singing from Britten’s *Friday Afternoons*. This sequence of songs was originally written for a preparatory school choir, and Britten was of course fascinated by boys, and indeed by sport. Helen Osborne describes the effect well in her review:

The performance space, the sports hall of King Edward’s School, initially seemed a grimly institutional environment, even laid out [...] with long banqueting tables, around a raised central platform. However, from the opening moments of the play it was clear that the director had recognised this, and dealt with it with good humour and a savvy nod to the particular nature of his players; boys “playing” at love and war. The entry of Jupiter and Ganymede was heralded by a whistle, and the former appeared dressed as a high-school sports teacher, with Ganymede his diminutive pupil, who passed the time in humorously meta-theatrical play with two bare-chested Action Man dolls. Æneas made a commanding entrance in cricket whites that contrasted starkly with that of Dido in an Elizabethan style dress of burgundy velvet. Dido and Æneas were here the helpless puppets of whimsical gods, driven through the tragedy by immortals whose high camp performance style highlighted their careless disinterest in the lives of their mortal instruments. Juno

and Venus were a formidable pair, the former dressed as a forbiddingly strict schoolmarm in angled glasses, tight bun and tweed skirt suit, and the latter in a tight red dress and fluffy blonde Marilyn Monroe wig.⁴

- 9 That's how we work. We mine the text for clues to a period and location in which it would make sense for this story to happen. If it serves to illuminate the play for us, there's a chance it will do so for the audience as well. For Lyly's *The Woman in the Moon* (2018), a court pastoral celebrating the magical power of love, we readily hit upon 1967 and the "Summer of Love": the magical influence of flower power – and the magical influence of "grass".

Figure 2: Lyly's *The Woman in the Moon* (2018)



- 10 *Wit and Science* (2019) by John Redford is a delightful and irreverent satire on teaching – and teachers! – performed, of course, by boys. It didn't take a leap of the imagination to realise that what was required was the boys' own school uniforms with various items added to indicate character, the more ridiculous the better.

Figure 3: John Redford's *Wit and Science* (2019)

- 11 Although we always perform at school (we are a *school* theatre company, after all), Edward's Boys is also a touring company, usually to Oxford and London, but we have visited other UK venues – and even travelled to Italy and France. However, we have to tour on the cheap. Costumes are carried in their suitcases or holdalls, and the boys have to take personal responsibility for them. That means they have even more of a stake in it. We are a state-funded secondary school, and consequently almost all of our money has to come from ticket sales. Consequently, we generally use little in the way of set for the simple reason that we cannot afford to transport sets around. Often the costumes ARE the set!

A gymnastic structure of boys balanced on each others' shoulders made a cave for Dido and Aeneas to disappear into, and Dido's funeral pyre was formed in a similar fashion by black-robed actors wearing flickering red lights.⁵

- 12 **SC & AMMB:**

Are your costumes made for a specific play? Where do they come from?

- 13 **PM:**

Sometimes items of costumes are made specially. For Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (2017), for example, Summer's crown and Christmas' head-dress were stunning creations by my friend and colleague, David Troughton, a retired teacher of Art. Sometimes the costumes are hired. That is perhaps inevitable when, as for the 1580s *Galatea* (2014) and the 1630s *The Lady's Trial* (2015), we decide to set a production "in period". It always depends on the demands of – or the opportunities offered by – the text. But mainly, the boys find the costumes themselves. If they don't pull things out of wardrobes and from under beds, then they rifle through charity or second-hand shops. Consequently, costumes are frequently "found objects". It's almost embarrassing to admit how often the cry, "That'll do!" is given in response to an offering.

- 14 The process of discovery through rehearsal and discussion is the reason why everything is/can be/must be left so "late". Arriving at the first rehearsal with a set of costume designs would make no sense to Edward's Boys.

- 15 However, you can take “leaving it to the last minute” too far. With *Summer's Last Will and Testament* I nearly fell on my face! I had deferred the selection of costumes for almost all of the allegorical figures later and later... and then realised that we were opening in seven days' time and characters such as Summer, Winter, the jester Will Summers, Spring, Harvest, Orion, etc. were unlikely to wear costumes that anyone would find in the back of anyone's wardrobe. So I arranged to visit the RSC Hire Wardrobe (on the other side of Stratford-upon-Avon) the next day. For just over an hour, I ran up and down aisles with a series of shopping trolleys plucking from the rails a variety of items reflecting many different periods and styles. “That'll *have* to do!” was the cry that afternoon. Remarkably, the eclectic mix that resulted somehow worked together so well that the costumes for that show have been highlighted for praise more than any other Edward's Boys production. Completely undeserved – and that really is embarrassing.

Figures 4 a, b, c, d: Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament* (2017)







16 **SC & AMMB:**

To what extent does character determine costume – and vice versa?

17 **PM:**

Intimately and inextricably. Costumes can determine how you stand, sit and move, for example. More importantly, what you wear onstage can help you to discover how you feel about your character, and is crucial in creating the impression you want to make upon the audience. It deftly helps to suggest the illusion of gender, of course. I remember my wife patiently explaining to me, following the first performance, that the boy playing Tellus, the female love interest in Lyly's *Endymion* (2009), really needed some more assistance to make his/her story clear to the audience. Earrings, necklaces and a brooch did the job the next day.

18 Costume also makes status clearer. Indication of relative status is always helpful, but especially so when we are in the potentially confusing world of early modern city comedy. By inhabiting 1950s "Little Italy" or 1970s "Glam Rock" or "Punk" or even the City of London in 2012 or Genoa in 2019, the audience (and the cast) find it much easier to recognise characters' backgrounds and the power dynamics between them. Costumes also provide, more broadly, a style, a sense of identity, and relationships of all kinds. They suggest a "world" in which it makes sense for the story to unfold.

19 And they give you added confidence. I think of the young boys who have played Cupid across different plays: a metre or two of chiffon, a bow and arrow and golden wings – and the boy is ready to entrance an audience with his audacious sense of mischief.

20 Such delight in display can be mistaken for attention-seeking. We have even explicitly performed on a traverse stage at times, deliberately reflecting the fashion catwalk, demanding scrutiny from the audience in close proximity. Self-conscious display takes a great deal of courage, particularly if you are an adolescent boy. You have to be prepared to "play", akin to playing with a child's dressing-up box. However, once you do that and go with it you can exploit it outrageously. It's no coincidence that they were called "players" in the early modern period. Let's pretend! It's all about

performance and (dis)play. Trying things out and trying things on. Ex-members of the company like George get it, of course, and are very proud of it:

A Trick was an amazing production and one only Edward's Boys could have delivered. The punk theme worked superbly, and was carried off not only by the music (what an amazing band!), brilliant set-design and costume, but also by the energy, mischief and sense of playfulness present in each of the boys' performances. An adult company would not have been able to create such a rebellious and entertaining piece. They simply could not perform these plays whilst having as much fun as we do. That, at its heart, is why they are so great to experience, both onstage and as an audience.⁶

Figure 5: Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*



21 **SC & AMMB:**

Do you adopt a different approach when costuming allegorical characters/gods and goddesses?

22 **PM:**

Not really. It's still simply another form of "visual shorthand" for the audience. But it's fair to say that the signals are probably bigger and bolder for the gods and goddesses. For example, we exploited the powerful associations of primary colours in Lyly's *The Woman in the Moon*. Mars – red; Jupiter – orange; Mercury – blue; Sol – yellow; and so on. There was little subtlety in terms of costumes in *Summer's Last Will and Testament* either. We needed to exploit stereotypes to let the audience in on the "story" of the allegorical and more obscure figures. (Vertumnus, anybody? Solstitium?) Harvest wore a suit made of wheat; Spring was festooned in all the colours of the rainbow and many, many flowers; Orion in hunting pink and jodhpurs – and those hounds! Will Summers in the motley of the Henrician court jester; Winter in long black Elizabethan scholar's gown and cap, a puritan to chill the heart; Autumn in brown corduroy trousers, tweed jacket and leather brogues. I remember fondly how, as the performance wore on, he took dried leaves from his pockets and casually tossed them onto the stage floor, increasingly marking the territory as his season took hold.

Figure 6: Autumn conducting in Nashe's *Summer's Last Will and Testament*.



- 23 Summer was referred to as “King Lear”. A great king who is seen to crumble over the course of the play. It was an in-joke largely between me and Rory who played Summer. Not a particularly funny joke, but another useful *shorthand* reference. Although this play was written about fifteen years before Shakespeare’s great tragedy, we agreed that Rory’s costume and manner should reflect the “standard” portrayal – which for us basically meant a long gown, a voluminous cloak, a straggly wig, a beard, and a crown – which was naturally made of wheat!
- 24 Sometimes our costume choice might reflect an eclectic mix of styles and periods, but that mix is always for a good reason. In order to distinguish between human beings and gods, for example. So in *Dido*, there was sports kit alongside a rich, velvet Elizabethan-style dress (AND Marilyn Monroe!?) which allowed us to bounce playfully between mockery and tragedy. In *The Woman in the Moon*, different costumes helped both to satirise the young shepherd lovers and to emphasise the transformative nature of Love. In *The Malcontent* (2019), we attempted to encapsulate the fashion cat-walk in 2019 Genoa and celebrate Marston’s meta-theatrical trickery by alternately filling the traverse stage with characters stylishly sashaying up and down and then treating the same space as a backstage area where characters could don different costumes and wigs prior to their next “performance”. Such a mixed palette allows us to tell or suggest different stories or perspectives almost at the same time.
- 25 I’m reminded that, once, when consecutive productions of different plays both featured Venus and Cupid, both characters were actually played by the same two boys, the performances and therefore the costumes were different. In part, of course, that was because the characters had different functions in each play, but it was also because we wished to emphasise different aspects of those characters. In addition, the character of

Ganymede appears in both *Dido* (2013) and *The Woman in the Moon* (2018). However, the performance was distinctly more sexually provocative in the later production.

- 26 The “mix” was particularly effective in our production of *Henry V* (2013). You might be wondering why we did Shakespeare at all since he didn't write for the boys' companies. In 1913, King Edward VI School had staged the play at the request of Sir Frank Benson of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. I was asked to direct a centenary production with Edward's Boys for 2013 which was to be performed at the RSC Swan Theatre. I accepted the invitation, mainly to avoid appearing ungracious, but I admit that during the months of preparation I frequently pondered the question, “Why am I doing this play with boys?” Eventually, I realised the reason. The entire cast of the 1913 production went on to fight in the First World War (another war fought in France) and seven of them died. In effect, they were just schoolboys.

Figure 7: Shakespeare's *Henry V* at the Swan Theatre (2013)



Figure 8: Shakespeare's *Henry V* at Big School (2013)

- 27 We juxtaposed costumes from three different historical periods: 1415 – or what theatre thinks is “medieval”, which always includes knitted chainmail; 1914-18 – costumes from the First World War; 2013 – modern-day school uniform and sports kit (again!). Indeed, here we laid even greater emphasis on the importance of sport in terms of props, staging and costume. English schools of a certain type put a great focus on sport. And at the start of the “Great War” at least, some thought it was just a game. Furthermore, we used both the original Vaughan Williams music from the 1913 production and many hymns by Vaughan Williams from the same period. Many of these hymns are still used in English schools today. We also made explicit references to aspects of the English way of commemorating the First World War via Remembrance Day (11th November every year). So we used red poppies and a bugler playing the Last Post, for example. I quote from Carol Rutter’s review:

(The) Chorus [...] was vintage, 1920-something, a beaky schoolmaster, in wire-rims and black academic gown [...] busily marking copybooks, groaning, slashing a pen across exercises; a single look freezing into slow motion the bumptious boys in caps and blazers who dashed through his schoolroom. When these lads returned as soldiers, they’d be armed with cricket bats [...]. Here, then, classroom and playing field were held in tension, *ludus literarius* v. games [...]. “Play up, play up...!” Visually, Mills kept these ideas in perspective by constantly putting past and present on stage together. Jeremy Franklin’s King Harry turned up to the prelates’ speech (1.2) in 21st century business suit; but set off to the French campaign in 15th century heraldic surcoat. Half his soldiers were in tabards and chain mail, the other, in today’s camouflage fatigues or WW1 great coats. Katharine wore a period gown; Alice was a version of Dame Edna in twin set and handbag. The Boar’s Head low-lifers were skinheads in football shirts and cheap trainers (Pistol and Nym) or in down-and-out Elizabethan doublet and slack hose (Bardolph) [...]. As the lights went down [...] I’ve rarely heard a theatre so silent.⁸

28 Carol describes both the intention and the effect brilliantly. Boys can do a lot more than simply pastiche and parody.

29 **SC & AMMB:**

How do the costumes help to perform gender?

30 **PM:**

When the boy is trying to perform gender, costumes are helpful, both to the boy and to the audience. However, once again the approach we choose to take when costuming the female roles depends on the play. We don't always employ dresses or wigs or make-up. I have never asked a boy to adopt a high voice. It's very rare that we decide to use false breasts. We did for some of the female characters in *Westward Ho!* (2012) because it felt to me that that play was pretty smutty and obsessed with sexual innuendo throughout.

31 At post-performance Q&As, a regular question is: what's it like playing a woman? And the regular answer, according to the Edward's Boys Script, is: not a problem at all! One of our early productions was Middleton's *A Mad World, My Masters* (2009) and I like to think that Follywit's casual approach to cross-dressing reveals a lot about the contemporary boys' attitudes – "Just stick a dress on!" Although what he actually says is: "Come, come, thou shalt see a woman quickly made up here" (3.3.87-88). The boys always assert that there is no real difference between performing genders. They are not soldiers or kings or murderers either. They're not adult males either. It's not actually any easier to play a boy – and there are many of those in these plays. For obvious reasons.

32 Gordon McMullan's comments inevitably explain it far better than I can:

What we see when we attend an Edward's Boys production is living history, proof that, yes, a bunch of lads, when effectively corralled by someone with the confidence and skill to get them to look beyond the huge social hurdle involved in half of them having to wear dresses and adopt the gestures of femininity (I can categorically state that no teacher at my own boys' school had remotely the authority to get us to put dresses and high heels on, which was behaviour strictly confined to rugby first-team parties) can indeed produce superb performances of difficult plays in a version of English that is by no means naturally comprehensible.⁹

33 No Edward's Boy has ever found wearing a dress a problem. It's just a role, after all. And the general feeling is that it's both fun and an opportunity for asserting a degree of power over the audience. That's how we approach it anyway. Several boys have described it as a "rite of passage". "Trust", like "Play", is another important word for what we do. (And so is "Loyalty"). Some boys have even become remarkably proprietorial! James, who played a teenage prostitute in 2011 wearing a patent leather mini-dress, returned to watch a different production in 2019. The same dress was worn by Will for a similar purpose. After the show, James asked me, "Who was that kid wearing my dress?"

34 Shoes, however, are always a challenge for the older boys who are cast as female characters. Acting talent and a readiness to "play" can hide a lot of things but NOT the size of your feet. By the time most boys get to about 14 years old their feet become large. It's really hard to find feminine shoes in size 13! Believe me, I've tried. In *A Mad World, My Masters*, the boy who played the Courtesan was 18 years old. We agreed that he would wear high heels, and he offered to find the shoes himself. It was only AFTER the production that I discovered that he had forced his size 12 feet into size 9 shoes. There's commitment for you!

35 **SC & AMMB:**

Does it work in a similar way when the boys play old men and women?

36 **PM:**

Precisely. Age is performed as much as gender. Just as younger boys with unbroken voices don't always play the female roles, so the old characters are not invariably played by the senior members of the cast. Sometimes they are – Joe and Rory in *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (2017) – but sometimes it's an 11 year-old – Jamie in the same show. Again, it depends on the particular effect we want to achieve. Affection and sympathy. Satire and mockery. Comedy and tragedy. Different effects require different approaches.

Figure 9: Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*



37 A disturbing development, in the director's opinion, is the increasing use of his own wardrobe as a source for costumes for the older (male) characters. This trend now seems to be irreversible.

38 To be serious, all characters are "performed", even the young men and boys.

39 **SC & AMMB:**

So you base your costume choices on common associations and cultural constructs, working from your understanding of an audience's expectations?

40 **PM:**

Exactly. It's a kind of cultural "shorthand" as well. "Roaring boys" as "punks"; silly shepherds who think they are great lovers as "hippies"; corrupt duke's court as the "Mafia".

Figure 10: Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Woman Hater* at La Maison des Chœurs

- 41 The use of school uniform can simply signify a “blank canvas”, a non-costume, something upon which we can paint an effect. Choristers’ robes can perform a similar function. But both sets of clothing continue to remind the audience that they are “just” boys. Peter Kirwan identified some of the different resonances in his review:

Continuing the foregrounding of the identity of King Edward VI School that characterised *Henry V*, here a sporting motif suggested a combat that always lay beneath the overtures of peace. The play began with a whistle and Jupiter emerged as a tracksuited P.E. teacher, picking up and *playing with* Ganymede, wearing P.E. kit and playing with two bare-torsoed Action Men dolls.¹⁰

- 42 The term “playing with” (my italics) is a powerfully resonant example of what I’m trying to explain. They are “playing” as sports teacher and pupil, and – if the audience wants to see it in that sense – as Jupiter “dandles” Ganymede “upon his knee” in the opening stage direction of *Dido Queen of Carthage*. And as actors. This slipping between modes or sending out different messages is one of our great advantages, neatly expressed by Peter J. Smith in his review:

The production relished its institutional setting. In a gymnasium, peopled with teachers and proud parents, the show was percolated with a self-conscious sense of its being a school production. Costumes were either muddied vests and shorts from a tiring cross-country run or cricket whites. In the former case, the exhaustion of Æneas’ protracted journeys was neatly suggested and in the latter, there was an insistence on the importance of the team – the Trojans were in this together. There was more than a hint, both visually from the costumes and emotionally from the strong sense of company playing, of *Chariots of Fire*. In its attention to youthful passion, camaraderie and courage, the production seemed to teeter on the brink of The Great War.¹¹ (Kirwan 2013)

43 Sometimes the school uniform can be a “blank” and sometimes, *almost* at the same time, so much more. And I have to admit that, for us, school uniforms are really easy to get hold of.

44 It may be worth explaining a little about our audiences. Inevitably, the early audiences were primarily a mixture of the school community (parents, students and staff) and intrigued academics from the world of early modern drama. Over the years that group has grown substantially as the company has attracted greater interest and developed a following, particularly in Stratford-upon-Avon, Oxford and London which are our most common touring venues. The boys always relish the challenge of winning over new audiences, mainly since it gives them the opportunity to shock. In the early days, there was distinct sense of edginess surrounding what we were doing. Over time, our audiences have come to know what to expect. It's amusing to me to hear the boys saying to one another, “This is what it must have been like back in the day”, when back in the day means perhaps three or four years previously. As we have started to tour abroad (France and Italy) that challenge has become ever more exciting, not least because all-boy performance is even more unusual in those countries. And, of course, a school uniform probably has a different resonance when worn in France or Italy where a school uniform is less of an accepted “norm”.

45 **SC & AMMB:**

Most of your costumes are recycled clothing. What effects do the clothes' previous “lives” have on the actor, the performance, and the audience?

46 **PM:**

In one way, such items of clothing are not costumes at all, they are “real”, much in the same way as they would have been in the early modern period. They have weight, heft. Indeed, they are “worn” in more than one sense. Especially if they are provided by parents or grandparents, they come with a “history”. In our production of Marston's *The Dutch Courtesan*, Mistress Mulligrub was played by eleven year-old David. At his first appearance, his father was heard to whisper audibly, “My goodness, he looks like his grandmother!” to the great amusement of those seated close by – although David was less pleased. A few years later in Beaumont's *The Woman Hater* (2016), the Hater of Women, Gondarino, was played by Dan Wilkinson. His mother wrote to me afterwards: “Dan in corduroy trousers, check shirt and silk dressing gown, looking half-yourself and half-his-father will be a memory to last a lifetime!”¹²

47 So the effect is complex. There is recognition, obviously, and often amusement. And affection... empathy... and maybe, for want of a better word, a certain kind of “truth”.

48 With each choice we strive to discover the item that speaks *directly* to the audience. I am reminded of an experience when I was directing a play called *The Curse of the Werewolf* at the start of my career at a different school. It was around 1987, decades before Edward's Boys, and had a mixed cast. The play was a comedy-horror show by Ken Hill who had worked under Joan Littlewood at Stratford East in its heyday. It is a terrific, fun piece of theatre. At a dress rehearsal, one of the cast was double-booked and arrived late. As soon as he arrived, he ran through the auditorium, leapt onto the stage and joined the scene. He had driven across on his motor bike and was in leathers. The scene was the secret night-time burial of a victim of the werewolf. He was playing one of the coffin bearers. The rest were dressed as monks with hoods. In his leathers, he stood out brilliantly. Instead of a jokey period piece, it suddenly became *real*, deeply

disturbing, like some satanic ritual taking place in the depths of the countryside TODAY. I have never forgotten its powerful effect on me. Not on the audience, of course, because for the performance he wore the “correct” costume. That’s what I mean about the way in which a particular costume (or prop) can sometimes “leap” out and tell a story. I specifically aimed for something similarly disturbing with our production of *Antonio’s Revenge* (2011), a blood-bath of a revenge tragedy with close links to *Hamlet*. Almost the entire company wore boiler suits of different colours, Antonio himself wore bright orange. The effect created was of killing carried out by a team of “mechanics” on an industrial scale. *Revenge* set in an abattoir.

49 **SC & AMMB:**

Does a costume “shield” the actor?

50 **PM:**

It can, certainly. As I mentioned earlier, costume can provide “cover”, and a degree of confidence, but not always in the way one might expect. Frankly, a boy often finds it “easier” to play a female role than when he first has to assay a man. Hiding behind a female persona can be less exposing, and it sometimes takes a production or two for the boy to feel comfortable with “performing” his own sex. I can certainly recall musicians, initially disinclined when told that I wanted them to perform onstage, who subsequently gained enormous confidence when I suggested costumes and even make-up. The punk band (Teenage TriKES) in *A Trick to Catch the Old One* became increasingly extreme in the garb they adopted with each performance and particularly during the tour.

51 But this is a game with complex rules. “Real” doesn’t always equal “truth” onstage. The “unconvincing pretence”, where the audience are invited to see the “joins”, can powerfully remind the audience they are watching theatre, kids at play. Toby, Maninder and Oliver are pretending to be hippies and punks in a band in much the same way as many of the originals were in the sixties and seventies – nice, well-brought-up boys wearing costumes.

Figure 11: Middleton’s *A Mad World My Master*



- 52 A comment from a sharp reviewer on Bilioso, the corrupt courtier in *The Malcontent*, highlights this very effect: “The function of such figures was being caricatured by a young boy clearly wearing an old man’s wig. This was in keeping probably with the play’s first performances.”¹³
- 53 The sideburns visible under the wigs, the muscular biceps under the see-through sleeves expose the fact that it’s just boys playing at it. Naturalism isn’t necessarily always the best policy.
- 54 Before it all starts to sound brilliantly successful, I must admit that we don’t always get it right with our first choices. On more than one occasion wigs have been cast aside. They simply got in the way of telling the story. We never did really work out what was supposed to be going on with Confidence in *Wit and Science* and so Ritvick ended up wearing his own clothes and a pair of silly spectacles – the last refuge of the desperate director. It was as late as the dress rehearsal when we realised that we had mis-read Gondarino, the previously mentioned (anti-)hero of *The Woman Hater*. Demonstrating extraordinary trust, Dan agreed to an almost complete change of costume – as well as details of character – hours before opening night! Consequently, since the performance photographs were taken during the dress rehearsal, there is no photographic record of what he actually wore in performance!
- 55 The effects of costume can also be highly provocative. The Welsh Whore getting ready for sex with the virginal Tim Yellowhammer in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (2010) performed a sensuous striptease, or rather casually removed her dress. Underneath, of course, Will was wearing his school uniform. We decided to present Crispinella as a “Bluestocking” in our 1920s production of *The Dutch Courtesan*. “She” was dressed in a male two-piece suit with shirt and tie, a monocle, a cigarette holder and a beauty spot. It was partly to suggest her intellectual and sexual militancy, but also in order to challenge received ideas of what a boy playing a “woman” ought to look like. I am pleased to report that this costume choice puzzled at least one critic.
- 56 The complexity, the challenge, the wit were all deftly conveyed in the performance of Maquerelle in *The Malcontent* (2019):
- The old court bawd Maquerelle, played by a young boy actor with an over-the-top French accent, bright red revealing dress (but revealing nothing because he is a boy), bright red lipstick and a rather demure but (for a boy!) outrageous wig was hilarious. Director, Perry Mills, allowed his contemporary boys’ company to put Marston’s satire into action. He gave them the freedom, thereby, to dare to articulate Marston’s outrageous theatrical vision, which the dramatist had nurtured after being banned from writing satiric and profane poetry.¹⁴

Figure 12: Maquerelle in Marston's *The Malcontent* (2019)

- 57 However, cutting-edge gender confusion can lead to difficulties on occasions. Dressed as Franceschina and minutes before his first entry, Harry was completely unsure whether he should use the gents or the ladies backstage at the Bear Gardens of Shakespeare's Globe. A few productions later, Ben had no such qualms when he confidently entered for the gents dressed as Amoretta beneath the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse – only to be hauled out by a security guard and directed to the ladies. (I should say that it is not unusual for audience members to be deceived from time to time: “But surely *that* one's a girl!”)
- 58 In all our shows, we explicitly draw attention to this highlighting of similarities and differences, what I call “Double-seeing”, slipping between worlds, moving in and out of different stories, offering different perspectives – and the discrepancy between them.
- 59 One interpretation of what Marlowe was doing, using a children's company (for the only time in his career) for *Dido Queen of Carthage*, was that he was “merely” satirising the story from Virgil's great epic poem. And I would agree that there is some evidence for him “sending it up” at times in the text. And in the 1970s and 1980s that was all some scholars thought the boys' companies were able to do, to ape the proper actors. One of the things it seems the Edward's Boys project has been able to suggest is that when they did it well, the boys were capable of more than that. Brett D. Hirsch refers to the way costumes can point in different directions in the same production:
- Also in keeping with Elizabethan conventions was the decision to dress the cast (with the exception of the female roles) in gym clothes, a nod and wink to the pretence of the drama – schoolboys literally “playing” in a sports hall – and an elegant metaphor for the competitions, in love and war, that drive the play.¹⁵
- 60 As I hope I have made clear, our costume choices – just as the other elements of the production – were there to parody or satirise the story AND to demand emotional and

intellectual engagement. To highlight the “truth”, for want of a better word. Elizabethan and classical garb AND modern boys’ and teachers’ sports kit. The point is in the mix. The very discrepancy between the grand, adult, tragic, epic and the smallness, youth, vulnerability, inexperience of the boys is where the act of theatre takes place. It reveals the wit, the fragility, the love, the sheer commitment, the beauty and the pain. Indeed, it can leave the audience feeling profoundly moved, even “devastated”:

The ominous feelings of the play created by the elegiac music that accompanied it were realised as Dido, Iarbus and Anna disappeared off down the grand stairs outside the banquet hall, and were followed by the rest of the company, singing a lilting folk elegy for Dido. Wonderfully, the cast kept walking, their voices echoing back up the stone staircase and becoming gradually silent, leaving the audience simultaneously devastated and delighted. It was a fittingly large-scale close to a play that thrived on the oscillation between the intimate and the epic, and which filled a difficult space with ease.¹⁶

The final image of the production, of Juno sweeping the floor of the empty hall after the exit of the suicides and the rest of the cast, lingered as a sung elegy to Dido faded from hearing. It was a melancholy reminder of the wreckage caused by the whimsy of the gods, and suggestive of the bare stage being made ready for the next tragedy. It seemed a fitting close to this meticulous production which is to be lauded not only for the talent on display but also for its evident commitment to thoughtful engagement with Marlowe’s text.¹⁷

As the boys exited the hall, singing mournfully, their voices became quieter, more distant. A space, a distance that made me feel quite melancholy, opened up between them and us once again. Like youth, which the play celebrates and contemplates, it comes and then it goes.¹⁸

- 61 I am utterly convinced that these playwrights knew what they were doing. Marlowe, Jonson, Middleton, Marston, Lyly didn’t write for these companies because they couldn’t engage the “proper” (adult) companies. Boys were able to bring something entertaining, provocative, “truthful” and extraordinarily theatrical, in a different way from the adult companies. Not better, different. But, by all accounts, they were pretty good at it (cf. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*).¹⁹ And costumes contribute to that.

NOTES

1. <http://www.edwardsboys.org.uk/>
2. Leah Scragg, private correspondence to the director.
3. Emma Smith, private correspondence to the director.
4. Helen Osborne, *The Marlowe Society of America Newsletter* 33.2, Spring 2014, n.p..
5. Helen Osborne, *The Marlowe Society of America Newsletter* 33.2, Spring 2014, n.p..
6. George Ellingham, private correspondence to the director.
7. Venus was portrayed as a Marilyn Monroe lookalike in *Dido*. See Helen Osborne’s review, quoted above.
8. Carol Chillington Rutter, *Shakespeare Survey* 67, Cambridge University Press, 2014, 396-438, p. 417.

9. Gordon McMullan, Programme note for *The Woman Hater*, 2016, accessible online at: <https://edwardsboys.org.uk/reviews/the-woman-hater/>, last accessed 16 March 2021.
 10. Peter Kirwan, “*Dido, Queen of Carthage* (Edward’s boys) @ Christ Church Banqueting Hall, Oxford”, September 22, 2013, accessible online at: <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2013/09/22/dido-queen-of-carthage-edwards-boys-christ-church-banqueting-hall-Oxford>, last accessed 16 March 2021.
 11. Peter J. Smith, “Play Review: *Dido, Queen of Carthage*”, *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 85.1, 2014, 115-117, p. 116.
 12. Joanne Wilkinson, private correspondence to the director.
 13. Michael Scott, private correspondence to the director.
 14. Michael Scott, private correspondence to the director.
 15. Brett D. Hirsch, “Review: *Dido, Queen of Carthage*”, *The Stratfordian* (school magazine), 2014, 33-34, p. 34.
 16. Kirwan, *op. cit.*
 17. Osborne, *The Marlowe Society of America Newsletter*, *op. cit.*
 18. Harry Davies, private correspondence to the director.
 19. The famous exchange about the “little eyases”, *Hamlet*, 2.2.353-85.
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INDEX

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