'No country for old men'? Shakespeare, the public sphere, and the gerontological turn in theatre.

Michael Mangan

Professor of Drama, Loughborough University

Introductions and high concepts

This essay is an attempt to weave together two main themes: it will offer a consideration of a particular production of a Shakespeare play in its contemporary theatrical and cultural context; and it will explore some larger questions of theatre – particularly Shakespearean theatre - and the public sphere, with particular reference to discourse around what the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs describes as 'one of the most significant social transformations of the twenty-first century' (2015:1)

The play was Mark Rylance's 2013 Old Vic production of *Much Ado About Nothing* starring James Earl Jones and Vanessa Redgrave as Shakespeare's iconic rom-com double act Beatrice and Benedick: the squabbling pair who finally become lovers, against a background of other love-narratives, with all the usual plotting, counter-plotting, accusations, counter-accusations and near-disasters. Usually played by actors in their 20s, 30s or 40s at most, *this* Beatrice and Benedick made headlines because they were played by two performers who not only had international superstar status, but who were also aged 76 and 81 respectively.

In his introduction to this volume of essays, editor Nigel Wood asks a simple but pertinent question about the extent to which it might prove possible to 'promote a Shakespeare that retains a pedagogic and political vitality in our own culture' (page reference to be supplied when known). It is a question which

cuts through some of the more abstruse debates about the exact meaning and contemporary relevance of Habermas's term *Öffentlichkeit*. This term (most frequently rendered into English, of course, as 'public sphere') was coined in the nineteen-sixties to describe what Habermas identified as a shift in public discourse and a concomitant evolution of political consciousness, located as taking place between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. Public sphere theory can get quite inward-looking and anxious, especially if we become transfixed by Habermas' chronology or definitions. We may ask, 'Is it even possible to apply public sphere theory to a contemporary production of an early modern play, since neither the one nor the other have much connection to the eighteenth century, the time which Habermas saw as embodying the essential iteration of a public sphere?' But, as Jeffrey Doty has argued, it is possible to take a pragmatic approach to the fact that 'publichood existed long before eighteenth-century writers began to explicitly reference the authority of "the public"' (Doty, 2016:19); and conversely, it is worth considering whether perhaps the internet provides a more fully realized model of public discourse than the eighteenth-century coffee-house. With this in mind, I would like to work within the spirit of Wood's introductory focus on the question of 'promoting a Shakespeare that retains a pedagogic and political vitality in our own culture'.

So let me start with a couple of very simple notions. Firstly: in the public and political discourse of the first couple of decades of the twenty-first century one can see various thematic strands – often interlinked – which are characteristic of, if not unique to, our own age. Concern about natural resources (energy, water, ozone) and their depletion; a revival of the post-Enlightenment confrontation between religious belief (especially so-called fundamentalist belief) and scientific method; concerns about national borders and national identity... the list can be extended, but not indefinitely. Secondly, that, as one might expect, many artists – theatre-makers among them – have responded to these 'themes'. Thirdly, that ever since Shakespeare's death, his plays have been repeatedly revived and re-imagined in ways that address the concerns of the society of the time.

Let me take these two last points first. If a novelist or a poet, a painter or a photographer, a playwright or a film –maker, feels the need to engage in a broader cultural discourse about something they feel is important, they might do so by creating an original work of art, one which takes as its subject matter one or more of that society's concerns. They may write *Absalom and Achitophel* or *Blasted*; produce *Guernica* or the depression-era images of Dorothea Lange, *Cathy Come Home* or *The Hurt Locker*. If a theatre company or a theatre practitioner such as a director or designer whose main body of work relates to re-staging of classic texts written hundreds of years ago, wishes to engage in this kind of broader cultural discourse, they may take a more indirect route through what is sometimes called 'high-concept' directing. This involves staging the play in such a way as to challenge its more recognisably 'conventional' meanings; this can be done by, for example, setting it in a particular historical period, or by making radical and meaningful choices about design, casting, or other aspects of the production. High-concept directing need not always be radical, didactic or political in its intentions: it may be driven by a love of exploration and experimentation - which some will see as 'novelty for novelty's sake'; or by commercial imperative – such as a belief that setting *The Merchant of Venice* in a glitzy Las Vegas casino will attract that all-important school-age audience; or by a desperate need to prove the 'relevance' of Shakespeare. But whatever its motivation, high-concept directing generally seeks to illuminate both the original text and the concept which is brought to bear on it.

And so the Shakespearean stage in the past fifty years or so has seen many a Romeo and Juliet torn apart by 'ancient' enmities which have reflected recognisably contemporary racial or sectarian conflicts; it has seen Calibans who assert ownership of the island in the face of Prosperos who are clearly complicit not only in the colonial project but also in the slave trade that underpinned it; and Katarinas whose dominance by loutish Petruchios is not based in comic banter but is the forerunner of out-and-out bloody patriarchal abuse. By means of set, costume, lighting and other visual references, high-concept directing highlights the interpretive frame which the director imposes upon a play, and emphasizes the director as co-creator with the dead playwright from Stratford.

High-concept directing is most effective with classic texts when the familiarity of the 'original' brings into sharp relief the radicalism of the new concept. And in many cases, high-concept productions of classical plays emerge when a director or a theatre company feels the need to engage directly with the concerns of the public sphere.

For liberal Western society as a whole, one of the most urgent of these concerns is generated by the simple fact that more people are living longer. Indeed, population ageing on a global level is unprecedented, pervasive, profound, and enduring. This is, in many respects, a 'good-news' story. It reflects many of the positive changes associated with economic and social development: for many people around the world it is the result of significant improvements in medical knowledge and practice; greater understanding of public health issues; more widespread access to education; changing work patterns, including less physically wearing employment opportunities; increased gender equality; reduced child mortality rates; improved living conditions. But population ageing also offers a variety of challenges, and raises a variety of questions concerning citizenship, intergenerational conflict, resource allocation and public and private morality. It was particularly interesting, then, to see advertised a production of *Much Ado* which promised to look at Shakespeare's romantic comedy through the eyes of the elderly.

Feedback loops and public spheres

In his influential study of theatre and the public sphere, Christopher Balme questions the nature and efficacy of the theatre as a constituent part of the public sphere, both now and in past centuries. He expresses a concern about the 'increasing social and political marginalization of theatrical performance as part of the wider public sphere' (Balme, 2014: Introduction, loc. 464) and he explores ways in which this might be addressed.

Central to Balme's argument book is the proposition

that the theatrical public sphere today cannot be coterminous with the audience attending a performance ... The heuristic value of the distinction between audience and public sphere requires scholars to investigate the dynamics of theatre outside the *hic et nunc* of performance. (Balme 2014: Introduction, loc. 415)

This means that in order to understand the way in which a performance might intervene in (or contribute to) the public sphere, we may need to take account, not just of the performance-text, but also of elements such as a theatre's advance publicity material, which both sells a show and also creates a frame of meaning for those who see the show – and indeed for some people who do not. Semiotics has long recognized the importance of such framing devices, of course; but what distinguishes Balme's approach from that of earlier semioticians of theatre is an over-riding concern with the way in which a theatre performance can become part of a wider cultural discourse. And while semiotics has traditionally focused on an analysis of the thing itself, be that 'thing' a literary text, a performance, an item of clothing or a photograph, the cultural discourse that Balme describes in is one in which many people who have never seen the performance itself may participate. This wider circle of discourse includes such traditional modes as formal theatre criticism, which is articulated by designated professionals known as 'theatre critics' and which appears in newspapers and journals, and on radio and television. More recently, though, it also includes the more varied – and less controlled – world of social media, online discussion boards, blogs, and video platforms such as YouTube, with their attendant comments and debates. A performance event is neither as self-contained nor as transient as it once was: to quote Balme again:

The endeavour of creating a public and attracting an audience needs to be seen as a process consisting of a series of 'articulations' in the double sense of the word: as verbal utterances but also in the sense of connections at joints or points, where the internal (the potential performances in the building) and the external (the sphere of communication and exchange outside but focused on the particular

institution) meet in reciprocal although sometimes conflictual relationships and cultural practices. (Balme 2014: Introduction, loc. 517)

It is with this in mind that I will be considering Rylance's *Much Ado*.

'Played a bit more elderly': Rylance's *Much Ado* in the Public Sphere

The auspices were good for the production. In 2013 Rylance's theatrical reputation was very high. His tenure as Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe had ended eight years earlier, but what he had achieved there was generally remembered as exciting, insightful and innovative (Purcell, 2017); and while latterly his espousal of the Baconian cause had raised some eyebrows within both the academic and the theatrical Shakespearean establishments, his recent award-winning success in Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* had been hailed almost universally as a *tour de force* (Brown, 2010). So it was not surprising that there was a sense of excitement about the production of *Much Ado* before it opened. For example, the high-profile blog-cum-listings website *CultureWhisper* described the upcoming production as 'iconic', and helped to fuel the sense of expectation:

Since the reluctant lovers are usually played by much younger actors, it will be most interesting to see how Redgrave, at 76, and Earl Jones, 82, portray a more mature incarnation of Shakespeare's sparring couple. As Artistic Director Kevin Spacey has commented, '*Much Ado* covers love, betrayal and friendship, all themes that mean a lot to those who are older. This will be an exciting interpretation.' (Anon/*CultureWhisper*, 2013)

To add to the buzz was the fact that this *Much Ado* had its roots in a previous highly-successful West End partnership between Redgrave and Earl Jones.

I went to a play that Vanessa and James were playing in, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and went round afterwards and said I'd enjoyed it, and just in

passing I said to them 'It's a shame you two never played Benedick and Beatrice', and Vanessa, for whom anything is possible said 'Do you think we could?' (Rylance, 2013: 'Staging')

Months later Rylance was asked to follow up on his off-the-cuff suggestion, and after a read-through in New York which established that he, Redgrave and Earl Jones were indeed enthusiastic about making the project a reality, he was invited by Kevin Spacey to stage the production at the Old Vic. And what was particularly exciting about this production, at least *in potentia*, was not just the gathering of talent that it promised, but also its timeliness in terms of exploring issues of ageing in the theatre.

This sense of positive energy dominated what Balme calls the 'series of "articulations"' (Balme 2014: Introduction, loc. 517) concerning the Old Vic *Much Ado*, much of which took place online. A pre-show interview between Rylance and the BBC arts correspondent Rebecca Jones was published as a series of YouTube clips as part of the play's audience-building strategy, and in it Rylance explained much of the background to the show. One key impetus behind the production was Rylance's personal desire to work more with two actors whom he had seen working together and whom he describes as having 'a wonderful ... stage chemistry - like Spencer Tracy & Katherine Hepburn' (Rylance, 2013: 'Casting'). Beyond this there was a sense of the production being an opportunity to make a positive intervention regarding gender and age equality. The production seemed grounded in a belief that cultural forms such as literature and theatre have a capacity to make a contribution to the public good, to promote empathy and to contribute to a culture of what, in another context, Mark's namesake, Rick Rylance, has called a 'literary humanitarianism' (R. Rylance 2016:199). Rick Rylance does not offer a strict definition of this notion of 'literary humanitarianism'; rather, he offers it as a way of approaching culture which acknowledges the power and influence of imaginative literature as a force for societal good, without necessarily buying into all the traditional values of 'soft-centred "liberal humanism"' (R. Rylance 2016:200).

Mark Rylance's literary/theatrical humanitarianism is pragmatic rather than ideological or didactic. It involves both cultural attitudes towards ageing and also equality of employment opportunities:

I certainly feel it's particularly a shame for actresses that there aren't enough great parts for them as they get older.... For the fantastic actresses that we have here in England and in America there just aren't so many parts, so it has been an interest of mine for some time to see which parts could be played a bit more elderly. (Rylance, 2013: 'Casting').

He also saw the decision to cast older actors as Beatrice and Benedick as having aesthetic benefits for the balance of the play as whole:

I think you'll find when you hear this production that what's very nice is that, now the age difference is closer to forty years or so, the young couple [Hero and Claudio] have much more room for *their* story in the play than sometimes happens ... [Whereas when] Beatrice and Benedick are of a similar age to Claudio and Hero they can more easily overwhelm those two. I'm very pleased that it's not only revealed things about Beatrice and Benedick, having them played elderly, but it's also actually made more space around other aspects of the play too. (Rylance, 2013: 'Casting').

And indeed, Rylance specifically disavowed having anything programmatic about his own high-concept choices, characterizing his own style of directing in terms which combine the serious and the playful.

I'm not trying to sell any particular theme or idea. The thing I'm keen for the actors to do ... is to *play* the play... I'm very keen that they're always speaking to try and affect the other person, to try and change their world, either by affecting what the other person is doing or wants them to do or by releasing something that's pent up in themselves which needs to be expressed. But they're never saying anything to illuminate *you* [i.e. the audience] about 'Ooh! That's a big theme!' or 'That's what the play is

about'. It's a play. It's a play and should be played at some level like a sport is played. (Rylance, 2013: 'Approaching'. (My italics))

But high-concept directing generates its own logic and its own terms, and these can outstrip the conscious intentions of the director. 'Age,' as Lee Tomlinson put it in *Time Out* 'is the theme and the big talking point at the Old Vic' (Tomlinson, 2013) and the choice of having Beatrice and Benedick played by Redgrave and Earl Jones inevitably meant that age and romance became a 'big theme' of the production, whether Rylance intended it as such or not. And that it should do so was almost inevitable, given the extent to which early twentieth-century British theatre culture had already begun to show an intense interest in issues of ageing. It was in the context of this 'gerontological turn' in theatre that Rylance's experiment was undertaken, and it is important to understand something of this context when considering what was taking place at the Old Vic.

Age concerns and theatrical contexts

Art forms – plays, paintings, novels, songs, films, sculpture, poems, stories - exist not only for pleasure but also as one of the ways in which we come to understand ourselves and our relationships to each other and to the world at large. To try to understand these cultural activities is to try to understand something about what makes us 'us'. Each of these art forms has its peculiarities – and one of the peculiarities of theatre is that it is more inextricably bound up with age ideology than is the case with most art forms. The primary medium of theatrical performance, after all, is the human body; and the human body is always of a specific age – whether that be old or young. The specificity of that age becomes part of the meaning of the theatrical experience as a whole. Moreover, what Margaret Morganroth Gullette has termed the 'master narrative of decline' (Gullette, 2004: 130) has frequently found that the fictions of theatrical performance offer it a particularly convivial home. Theatre is, among other things, a sign-system; but it is a sign-system which necessarily refers to and draws on a range of other sign-systems. In particular, it draws on and quotes the signifiers, codes and modalities of everyday life. If the master narrative of decline

is indeed, as Gullette suggests, 'omnipresent' (2004: 130) in the discourses which dominate our lives, then it is to be expected that it will find frequent expression in plays and performances.

And historically this has tended to be the case. One of the ways in which ageism is articulated and perpetuated is through stereotypes; and theatre and performance has always made extensive use of stereotypes and stock characters. The latter term, indeed, derives from nineteenth-century theatrical 'stock companies'. The stock company comprised a tightly-defined group of actors, each of whom specialized in a certain type of character: typical stock characters included the Leading Man (or Tragedian), the Juvenile Lead, the Heavy Lead (often a villain), the Leading Lady, the Low Comedian – and The Old Man and the Old Woman. But these nineteenth-century companies simply formalized theatrical custom and practice which had been going on for hundreds of years: the masks of the sixteenth-century *commedia dell'arte* companies were similarly stylized and stereotyped, with Pantalone in particular as the caricatured Old Man. Caricatures and stereotypes such as these were regularly exploited by Shakespeare's theatre, and they continue to appear in contemporary performance culture. Shakespeare's own narratives are frequently underpinned by generational conflict; and while he is not unsympathetic towards the elderly, more often than not these narratives are driven by the values of youth, and the potential for redemption is located in the younger generation: in Hal rather than old Henry, in Perdita rather than Leontes, in Romeo and Juliet rather than the elder Capulets and Montagues, in the young Hamlet rather than the old... In Shakespeare the old rarely come out of things well.

Yet if theatre is inherently complicit in the contradictions and complexities of a culture and its ideologies, this is not to say that it can do nothing but repeat the prejudices of society at large. On the contrary, it may question them, critique them or contradict them or subvert and resist them. And in fact both mainstream and fringe/community theatre in Britain between 2010 and 2013 had been showing a great interest in doing just that.

By the second decade of the twenty-first century it had become generally recognized that population ageing is one of the great social challenges currently faced by the Western world. The Population Division of the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs puts this succinctly in its report on *World Population Ageing*:

The world's population is ageing: virtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in the number and proportion of older persons in their population. Population ageing—the increasing share of older persons in the population—is poised to become one of the most significant social transformations of the twenty-first century, with implications for nearly all sectors of society, including labour and financial markets, the demand for goods and services, such as housing, transportation and social protection, as well as family structures and intergenerational ties. Preparing for the economic and social shifts associated with an ageing population is thus essential to ensure progress in development... (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015:1)

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that theatre-makers – like many other artists – had begun to explore with increased urgency issues of ageing. Thus in the UK, for example, the early twentieth century saw a growth in the number of theatre companies that specialized in Reminiscence Theatre. Originally a form of verbatim theatre which draws material from interviews with old people and stages it in ways that deliberately validate and celebrate the elderly and their life experiences, Reminiscence Theatre spans many theatrical contexts. It can operate as therapeutic intervention in the care home or day centre; it can be a socially activist applied theatre mode which seeks to build community identity; it can turn into commercial performances on the fringe or on the mainstream. One of the most interesting of these latter was Fevered Sleep's *On Ageing*, premiered in 2010 at the neighbouring Young Vic Theatre. *On Ageing* was an effective 'cross-over' piece, playing to 98% capacity houses. It applied verbatim techniques in ways which appealed both to the core audiences of Fevered Sleep

and the Young Vic (primarily audiences drawn to the more avant-garde end of the contemporary theatre scene) and to a wider mainstream audience. An interesting twist was given by the casting: all the actors were *very* young. Aged between seven and thirteen, they spoke the words of the eighty-year-old interviewees without ever “acting old”. Memories were brought into the present tense, but the child actors remained “themselves” on stage, and the result was a fascinating disjunction between the thoughts of the old and the bodies of the young, a disjunction which continuously kept the audience slightly off-balance, never quite certain to whom one was listening. Throughout the performance the stage filled up with objects - furniture, toys, books, ornaments, telephones, televisions – and became transformed from a bare performance space into a cluttered attic, full of all the memorabilia of these characters’ lives.

Another seminal performance from 2010 was the Barbican revival of Pina Bausch’s *Tanztheater* piece, *Kontakthof*. This stayed more securely in the context of the contemporary *avant-garde* with which Bausch has always been associated. The performance juxtaposed two versions of the same narrative of erotic encounters, in which men and women repeatedly seek, but fail to find, tenderness and intimacy. One version featured a cast of teenagers, the youngest being only fourteen years old (young even by the standards of professional dance companies). The other comprised a dance company of the over-sixty-fives (shockingly old by the standards of professional dance companies). The meaning of the production as a whole was generated by the relationship – the contrasts and the similarities – between the two age-specific versions of the “same” stories, and issues of age and ageing lay at the centre of the performance.

Hot on the heels of *Kontakthof* came *Lovesong* (2011) Abi Morgan’s collaboration with the experimental theatre company Frantic Assembly. Together, Morgan and the company had

come to the conclusion that we wanted to make a show about an age group older and an age group younger, so they're the people we might become and the people we forgot we once were, because we feel that

there's a fascinating gap between those two generations... (Hoggett and Graham, 2011)

Accordingly, the play presented simultaneous versions of the old and young selves of two lovers. The four-hander (double-cast with actors in their twenties and in their seventies playing the two parts) showed scenes from a love story which shifted back and forward between the present day and the nineteen-sixties. The content of *Lovesong* challenged any lazy assumptions about age and sexuality, but beyond that, its form, like that of *Kontakthof*, was equally subversive of societal expectations about the ageing body. The effectiveness of the performance lay not only in its verbal text but also in its physicality: dialogue was intercut with beautifully choreographed dance sequences in which both generations of actors performed a series of highly demanding lifts, kicks and carries.

British theatre at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, then, is keen to engage with questions of ageing. And if Reminiscence Theatre and experimental devised physical theatre made a strong contribution to this emerging theatrical discourse on ageing, another important strand was provided by main-stage productions of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare's plays provide a particularly rich area for considering the relationship between the theatre and the contemporary public sphere – partly because of Shakespeare's unique cultural position. Because so many of his plays are 'known' to audiences, varying productions of them inevitably produce varying interpretations which can bring out nuances of meaning, demanding that an audience engage with new political or social meanings. The tension between the comparative stability of the text (however we might problematize that) and the inevitable instability and multiplicity of interpretive productions is able to generate a discourse around each play which enables it to become a site of contested meanings. In this way productions of Shakespeare's plays have become particularly rich and fertile ground for exploring contemporary issues.

King Lear, of course, deals centrally with issues of ageing - although it is only very recently that theatre-makers and critics have begun to talk routinely about clinical dementia in connection with the play. There are powerful narratives of ageing, too, in the late plays, while *Henry IV Parts One and Two* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* derive much of their comic energy from stereotypes of old age. But in more recent years there have been several theatre productions which have explored old age through the medium of plays which are more usually associated with celebrating the values associated with youth and youthfulness, exploiting a tension between the traditional assumptions and an oppositional 'gerontological' reading. For example, within twelve months of each other in 2009-10, two plays had been produced by major British theatres both of which used *Romeo and Juliet* as a basis for an exploration of love, intimacy and sexuality in later life: Ben Power's *A Tender Thing* (RSC, 2009; revived at Stratford in 2012), and the Bristol Old Vic's 2010 production of *Juliet and Her Romeo* - a play whose subtitle on the rehearsal script appeared as '*A geriatric Romeo & Juliet. Adapted by Sean O'Connor & Tom Morris (with apologies to Shakespeare)*'. O'Connor and Morris imagined Romeo, Juliet, Tybalt and Mercutio not as young adults, but as octogenarians living out their twilight years in the Verona Nursing Home, their circumstances controlled not only by the oppressive regime of the nursing home itself but also by the self-centred and self-serving actions of the younger members of their families. The usual values of age and youth which *Romeo and Juliet* articulates were reversed in this production: family opposition to the love of Juliet and her Romeo came from the younger generation, from the children, not the parents, and these younger Capulets and Montagues were portrayed as being every bit as rigid, as selfish and as self-serving as are the older generation of the feuding families in traditional productions of *Romeo and Juliet*. And, as in more traditional versions of the story, the Capulets came off particularly badly: post-Thatcherite opportunists, marrying off their aged mother in order to cement a financially-advantageous corporate liaison, whose plans are upset by the unexpected irruption of love and passion into their mum's life. *A Tender Thing* (which played much more fast and loose with the original Shakespearean text) and *Juliet and Her Romeo* both generated meaning through a constant tension between the 'geriatric' narrative,

and the phantom presence of that 'other' narrative which we know we are also seeing – Western culture's iconic tragedy of young love's struggle to try to assert itself in the face of ancient enmity.

The reception of Rylance's *Much Ado*.

It appeared, then, as if Rylance's *Much Ado* promised to offer a contribution to an emerging twenty-first-century theatrical discourse which seemed particularly intent on subverting and resisting conventional age ideology. Just as earlier generations of theatre-makers had been at the forefront of resistance to patriarchal, homophobic and racist ideologies, so in the early twentieth century many theatre-makers were beginning to explore more positive images of ageing, and this was the theatrical and cultural discourse which framed the Old Vic production. It was a discourse in which theatre-makers were repeatedly asking audiences to reconsider ageing (and in particular those aspects of ageing which related to love and sexuality); and it was a discourse in which high-concept juxtapositions of youth and age had already been exploited to generate new meanings from classic stories.

Moreover, *Much Ado* looked like a good choice of play through which these themes might be explored. After all, Beatrice and Benedick are not the youngest of Shakespeare's lovers – not like the barely pubescent Juliet or the immature Romeo. They certainly seem to have the history of an unhappy love affair behind them: 'Marry, once before he won [my heart] of me, with false dice,' says Beatrice (Shakespeare, ed. Wells and Taylor 1986: 617 [*Much Ado* 2.1.262]). Besides, even in the most traditional of productions of the play there is usually, as Rylance pointed out, some implied age gap between Beatrice and Benedick on the one hand and the younger and more naïve pair of Hero and Claudio on the other (Rylance, 2013: 'Casting'). The Old Vic production simply extended that gap. So it was, perhaps, not surprising that what Balme calls the 'series of "articulations"' surrounding the production in the months before it opened created an unusually high sense of excitement about the event.

The audience members interviewed on the Globe's promotional first night *vox pop* video for the production sustained that sense of excitement: 'I loved it ... It was lovely seeing all the different ages on stage ... [Vanessa Redgrave] blew me away on the stage ... I thought James Earl Jones was fantastically funny and charming ... Mark Rylance is a fabulous director ... Definitely an original take on it ... A mixture of humour and pathos, really good ... A good fun night out' (Old Vic Theatre, 2013). And in one of the first formal reviews of the show, The *Huffington Post*'s Victoria Sadler enthused

Under Mark Rylance's watchful and immensely talented eye, The Old Vic has developed a wonderfully bright, witty production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, full of energy and laughs. ... Vanessa Redgrave and James Earl Jones play Benedick and Beatrice, and these legends give fantastic performances as the bickering older pair. They are both far older than actors usually cast in these roles but it was an inspired decision. (Sadler, 2013)

Opening nights, though, have their own logic and their own discourse, and promotional videos present only a very carefully constructed version of reality. Sadler's positive review - which goes on to enthuse that 'both of them have such wonderful tones to their voices as well as acting talent that you really could just listen to both of them spouting Shakespeare all day' (Sadler 2013) - was almost immediately overwhelmed by a torrent of negative criticism, as the production was repeatedly panned by professional critics and bloggers alike. Typical of the response is this from the *Daily Telegraph*'s Charles Spencer, headlined 'This production of *Much Ado About Nothing* starring pensioners Vanessa Redgrave and James Earl Jones is laborious and misguided'. Spencer goes on to describe how

This production came about when Mark Rylance saw Vanessa Redgrave and the great American actor James Earl Jones starring together in *Driving Miss Daisy* in the West End. Rylance went backstage to congratulate them and, never a slouch when it comes to oddball ideas,

suggested that they should play Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado*. Redgrave jumped at the chance so long as Rylance directed and now here are all three of them together at the Old Vic. There are moments, quite a few actually, when one wishes that Rylance had kept his big mouth shut. Beatrice and Benedick may be past the first flush of youth, but I don't think anyone until now has thought of them as old age pensioners.

James Earl Jones is 82, Vanessa Redgrave is 76. When Benedick suddenly discovers that Beatrice is in love with him and proclaims 'the world must be peopled' one can't help thinking that he must have a pretty special IVF clinic in mind. I greatly admire both these actors, but having such elderly thespians playing these characters sometimes seems cruel and unusual punishment for both them and the audience. (Spencer, 2013)

The Daily Telegraph has rarely welcomed radicalism of any kind in theatre, and it is tempting to dismiss its reviewer as simply reproducing the kind of social attitude with which that newspaper has long been associated. But Spencer's judgements were echoed by critics across the journalistic and blogging spectrum. They are worth quoting at some length in order to give a sense not only of the overwhelmingly negative reception which greeted the production, but also of the tone in which this reception was couched.

Thus, David Benedict, writing in the review section of *Variety*, describes the production as 'witless, ill-conceived [and] dismayingly bungled', with a casting choice that is an 'interesting notion that collapses in execution' arguing that 'casting actors this old renders numerous lines and situations preposterous'. He provides as an example the impression that 'Redgrave's Beatrice is old enough to be Hero's grandmother. Why do they share a bed?' Benedict is even more dismissive of Jones, referring to his 'rambling, shambling Benedick [who] looks wholly detached from all his scenes, using his bassoon-like voice more as narrator of his thoughts than as a man engaging with those around him.' (Benedict, 2013).

Peter Brown, in the *London Theatre* guide, bemoans the lack of energy between Redgrave and Jones, and complains of Jones's 'mumbling and stumbling through his lines in a way that focused one's attention not on what he was saying, but on worrying about whether he would manage to get to the end of a sentence'. (Brown, 2013). Concern about Jones's diction is also expressed by Michael Coveney in his review for *The Stage* (Coveney, 2013) and, in more understated terms, by Henry Hitchings in the *London Evening Standard*, who observes that 'his diction is not ideal and he is a fair way from being on top of his lines' (Hitchings, 2013). Simon Edge in the *Daily Express* is less tactful, complaining that Jones 'swallows so much of [the text] he could just be saying "rhubarb"' (Edge, 2013), while Quentin Letts of the *Daily Mail* deplores that Redgrave's energy levels seem low (Letts, 2013).

Redgrave's and Jones's tremendous achievements as actors across a long and distinguished career are not in doubt, and many of the critics of this production of *Much Ado* acknowledge their appreciation of those actors' work elsewhere and up to now. Some of them can even find some words of praise to say about the two veteran actors in this production as well. Coveney (2013) finds that Redgrave: 'delights sporadically'. She is 'buoyant and that familiar, penetrating voice casts its spell' (Hitchings, 2013). She has 'odd moments of unpredictable magic' (Billington, 2013) and a 'still-potent charisma' (Coghlan, 2013). She 'carries great dignity on stage' (Letts, 2013). But these are compensatory rather than enthusiastic compliments, and they damn with faint praise. Established theatre critics and informal bloggers alike agree overwhelmingly that the production simply does not work.

Conclusions? 'In which the great and noble cause of age-blind casting suffers a decisive set-back'.

What are we to make of this unanimous chorus of disapproval? My own first instinct, when I read the reviews, was that perhaps the failure lay in the eyes of the beholder: that perhaps the response to the play was wrong-headed, or

biased, or insufficiently sensitive to issues of ageing? This certainly is what I hoped to find when I saw the production a few weeks after it had opened. In fact, having just written a book about theatre and ageing (Mangan, 2013), I went hoping to be able to show that the negative reception of *Much Ado* was simply the product of the ageist assumptions that I was trying to counter.

After all, it is a commonplace of cultural gerontology that we still live in a society which fears and denigrates old age and the ageing process, a society which stereotypes the elderly and presumes their incompetence, and which repeatedly uses demeaning language about them and to them, repeatedly represents them through negative images and stereotypes, disadvantages them through restrictive employment practices and legislation – and perpetuates negative expectations of the elderly. Institutional and societal ageism denies the elderly not only resources and opportunities enjoyed by others, but also respect, treating them with attitudes that range ‘from well-meaning patronage to unambiguous vilification’ (Bytheway, 1995: 14). So was this not what this second wave of ‘articulations’ (Balme, 2014: loc. 513) surrounding the production amounted to?

Certainly, there were hints in the language of the reviews that suggested that there was at least a degree of residual ageism in some of the responses. For example, Charles Spencer’s *Telegraph* review, quoted above, trots out several of the tropes of ageism which are familiar to gerontologists, mockingly dismissing these ‘pensioners’ as ‘elderly thesps’ and throwing in for good measure the well-worn sexual sneer about impotence and post-menopausal sexuality. Even the urbane Michael Billington in the *Guardian*, who claims that he is ‘the last person to complain about senior citizens being given free rein’, seems unnecessarily antagonistic to the logic of the casting: ‘You can’t help wondering’, he complains, ‘why Earl Jones’s Benedick is a boon companion to the youthful Claudio or why Redgrave’s Beatrice, however youthful in spirit, appears to be older than her uncle.’ (Billington, 2013) And Quentin Letts of the *Daily Mail* sneers ‘At Wimbledon they sometimes wheel out tennis players from ancient days to lob a

few balls at one another. Down at London's Old Vic, much the same is under way', adding of Earl Jones that 'He, oh dear, is really not up to it' (Letts, 2013).

Some of the independent bloggers are even more unreconstructedly ageist in their language:

Vanessa Redgrave as Beatrice was surprisingly unattractive in all her performance aspects such as movement and voice due to the fact that she seems to instead of Beatrice being a friend to the other girls it almost feels more like a grandmother figure. This left me quite appalled...(Knowles, 2013)

The 'grandmother' jibe can also be found in some of the professional critics' writings, too. David Benedict in *Variety* complains that 'casting actors this old renders numerous lines and situations preposterous. Redgrave's Beatrice is old enough to be Hero's grandmother: Why do they share a bed?' (Benedict, 2013).

There is certainly, then, some residual ageism in the language of the critical response to the production. But to characterise it thus is to oversimplify. Elsewhere, the tone of the great majority of the reviews makes it clear that most of the writers had genuinely wanted the experiment to work, and were disappointed when it failed to come off.

I do not intend at this point to offer a first-hand eye-witness performance analysis of the Old Vic's *Much Ado*. My interest is rather with what Balme calls 'the dynamics of theatre outside the *hic et nunc* of performance' (Balme 2014: Introduction, loc. 415). But it would be disingenuous not to indicate my own position in all this. I had an emotional and academic investment in a production that promised to make a positive contribution to our cultural understanding of ageing. I went to see that production having read all the above reviews (and more) and I went to see it wanting to refute them. I went wearing my 'gerontologist's hat', and with the specific intention of presenting a paper about the production at a forthcoming conference of social and cultural gerontology, to

an audience whose professional experience and world-view led them to expect a general degree of ageism in contemporary culture in general and in the press in particular. I expected to present a paper which reinforced that world-view – a paper which, effectively, concluded that the production was a great success and that it was only the institutional ageism of our culture that prevented people from seeing this¹. And so it was with a great deal of reluctance and disappointment that I found that my own experience as an audience member supported the critical consensus that '[i]t was a great idea, but unfortunately it just hasn't translated into reality' (Anon/*The Idle Woman*, 2013).

Why did this experiment, which had initially generated so much excitement and so much goodwill, and which so many people had seemed to want to succeed, end up as such a failure? After all, it is perfectly possible to use age successfully as a meaningful signifier in a performed play: in plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* a narrative of ageing is part of the fabric of Shakespeare's text, of course, and as we have seen there have been other productions, such as *A Tender Thing* and *Juliet and her Romeo* which tackle the issue head-on by subverting age expectations. And – on a more subtle level – consider the difference between a *King Lear* in which the king is played by a fifty-year-old who portrays him as at the beginning of the play as a man in full possession of his faculties; and, alternatively, one in which he is played by an eighty-year-old actor who, even as he enters for the first time, establishes that the monarch is already in an advanced stage of dementia. To take another example: the references to parenthood in *Macbeth* take on different nuances according to whether Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are in their thirties or their sixties.

¹ In the event, that paper (whose inception owed much to Professor Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe) was delivered to the 8th International Conference on Cultural Gerontology, 10-12 April 2014, at the National University of Ireland, Galway, under the title "In which the great and noble cause of age-blind casting suffers a decisive setback...". It was the fore-runner of this current essay, and it concluded – provocatively, given the constituency of the audience – that ageism on the part of the press and public was *not* the primary cause of the high-profile failure of *Much Ado*.. This essay in its current form, however, was written specifically for this journal.

It could have been, of course, that Rylance and his creative team just had some bad days at the office. It is unrealistic to expect even the best theatre directors to get it right all the time, and the very point of risk and experiment is that sometimes it does not come off. Between actors, too, what works so well in one show is not necessarily repeatable in another, and the 'stage chemistry - like Spencer Tracy & Katherine Hepburn' (Rylance, 2013: 'Casting') that Rylance saw between Earl Jones and Redgrave in *Driving Miss Daisy* may not necessarily have been possible to re-fashion in the speech-rhythms of Shakespeare's romantic comedy. Was the production's failure due simply to human error?

Perhaps - but this hardly tells the whole story. There may be a clue to a more satisfying explanation in the way in which two critics from the liberal wing of the British press characterise the play's failure. Michael Billington in *The Guardian* delivers the judgement that 'the ultimate impression is of a weird evening, in which two great actors are left struggling to find their characters, and sometimes even their lines, and in which the great and noble cause of age-blind casting suffers a decisive set-back' (Billington, 2013). Paul Taylor in *The Independent*, concludes that this was 'a bold experiment that was always destined ... to be either a transcendent exercise in age-blind casting ... or a misconceived mess. I regret to say that it is very much the latter' (Taylor, 2013).

That phrase, 'age-blind casting' is an interesting one. In gerontology 'age-blindness' can be either positive or negative. It can mean either being free of prejudice against the aged (as with 'age-blind' CVs in ethical employment practices) or it can mean 'being insensitive to the needs of elder people'. In the theatre, 'age-blind casting' is a recent neologism which has emerged in response to the recent interest in ageing as a theatrical theme that I indicated above, and it was coined in analogy to that better-known phrase 'colour-blind casting' – casting, that is to say, without regard to an actor's ethnicity: recent high profile examples include Don Warrington's *Lear* and Paapa Essiedu's *Hamlet*. Colour-blind casting is a result of changing attitudes to race in society as a whole, and while it is not without its controversies, and while it remains debatable just how far the British theatre, or indeed British society, has come in terms of genuine

racial equality of opportunity (Gardner, 2016), it is certainly true that as a practice, colour-blind casting is now so commonplace in mainstream British Shakespearean productions - at least in terms of supporting roles - that it hardly raises an eyebrow.

And in the case of the Old Vic *Much Ado*, it may be that colour-blind casting offers a useful standpoint from which to consider age-blind casting. Because the production featured several non-white actors, including, of course, James Earl Jones, a fact that passed without any comment at all. All the discussion, all the meaning-making was focused on Earl Jones's age, on the fact that he was 82. His ethnicity, the fact that he was also black, was hardly mentioned, hardly noticed. Indeed, the casting of the play was not in the least 'age-blind', at least as far as the audience was concerned. Rather, our attention became focused upon age and its issues – to the extent that the production had more space to become more fully 'colour-blind'. The Old Vic's *Much Ado* had more to do with high-concept directing than with age-blind casting – and the problems that audiences experienced with the production have a lot to do with the fact that these two contemporary theatrical conventions tend to pull in rather different directions from each other. The former emphasises those new meanings which are made available by the non-traditional production decisions, whereas the latter encourages an audience to ignore those non-traditional elements which relate to matters of age and ageing. And because of the internal contradictions of these two theatrical conventions – ironically - a production which aimed to celebrate and validate the ageing performer had the opposite effect.

I would argue then, that the high-profile failure Rylance's *Much Ado* had more to do with the internal contradictions of two theatrical conventions than with overt ageism or gerontophobia on the part of the press and public. Having said that, it is clear that as a culture we have not yet come to grips with the implications of the enormous demographic change that an ageing population presents, and it would be foolish to underestimate the extent to which covert, low-level, or passive ageism permeate our culture's confused responses to that

change. It may be, too, that these responses run so deep that to try to deal with them head-on in a classic erotic comedy is simply taking on too much. Michael Billington describes age-blind casting as 'a great and noble cause' (Billington, 2013), and so it may prove to be: it is certainly possible that a time may come when plays may be cast without regard to actors' age, and when mainstream British theatre audiences will find a 'geriatric Romeo and Juliet' or a late-life Beatrice and Benedick perfectly unremarkable. The nature of theatre semiotics, whereby the physical body of the actor carries so much of the meaning of the performance event, may make it hard to envisage but it is nonetheless possible. The ideological dimensions of the public sphere determine what we can and cannot see, what comes into focus and what matters, and what remains at the periphery of our vision; at the same time, the public sphere is a continually-changing formation, one whose discourse is continually in development. At present, though, 'age-blind casting' remains an unstable tactic; in the case of the Old Vic's *Much Ado* it appears to have had the opposite effect from that which was intended or hoped-for.

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