**SHAKESPEARE’s PLAYS AND TNT theatre**

**(To edit or not to edit?)**

The company has been performing Shakespeare’s works almost continuously since the summer of 2000. Over one thousand performances have taken place in some forty countries on four continents. The sequence was: MACBETH, A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM, HAMLET, ROMEO AND JULIET, KING LEAR, THE TAMING OF THE SHREW, OTHELLO, MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, THE MERCHANT OF VENICE , THE TEMPEST, TWELFTH NIGHT and JULIUS CAESAR. Most of these have been revived and developed, MACBETH, for example, being almost continuously in the company’s repertoire. This is the fifth reincarnation of TNT’s MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM, four in English and one in Mandarin. Each version is developed from the original and enjoys a long rehearsal process.

Shakespeare's texts remain the densest and richest theatrical text's we have been privileged to work upon. While the quality of the poetry and depth of theme and character are well known it is always a lesson in humility to discover the excellence of Shakespeare's theatrical craft. We often sense that Shakespeare is “on our side” in rehearsals. This is especially so when a company works as we do with resources similar to Shakespeare's own. We have a small troupe of multi-skilled actors who double roles and even swap genders as needed, we use live music and minimal set . We have to be able to perform without theatre lighting. We have to appeal to a wide audience and our greatest weapon is the imagination of that audience. The resources of a large modern theatre often impede these plays. For example Shakespeare never had slow or complex set changes between scenes, the plays should be fast and furious (how else can they fit “within the two hours traffic of our stage” to quote ROMEO AND JULIET).

We will never know if the texts printed in the famous Folio edition of Shakespeare's complete works some seven years after his death are definitive. It was thought so for many years but now the weight of scholarship suggests that the Folio may represent a literary version “written up” by Shakespeare for publication and private reading. Poetry had high status in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, theatre was low status. Indeed the theatres were to be closed within a generation of Shakespeare's death. Even in Shakespeare's lifetime poetry began to threaten popular theatre. Soon after KING LEAR was written Shakespeare's troupe moved to the Royal Court and the later, more poetic, plays lack the muscular theatricality of his earlier works. (With the honourable exception of the TEMPEST).

What is interesting is that there are alternative texts to the Folio, the so called Quartos, (names that come from the smaller sheets of paper they were printed upon). Some of these alternative texts may be corrupt, pirated copies but increasingly they are being recognised as theatrical versions of the texts. They are shorter and often more dynamic. For example, in the First Quarto of HAMLET (which TNT used as the basis for our production), there are scenes that do not exist in the longer Folio. Hamlet's mother is reintroduced at a crucial moment. The position of “To be or not to be” is different and better. These feel like amendments Shakespeare made to the script after it was first performed. Many scholars believe that the MACBETH we know is a short version of a longer play. There are no “Quarto” versions of MACBETH and it is so much more focused than the other tragedies.

In our recent for example, TWELFTH NIGHT we cut back or out some minor characters, such as the confusing Fabian, and tried to focus on Malvolio as a malevolent figure – not the bumbling fool of many productions. We changed some words so the audience may understand what Shakespeare intended: such as changing the “Great Sophie” to the “Shah of Persia”. In JULIUS CAESAR we have edited and simplified the battle scenes in Act Five, as Shakespeare seems to follow Plutarch’s complex historical account at the expense of dramatic coherence. Our aim is to clarify the narrative, and above all to elucidate the original. We hope we bring the audience closer to Shakespeare’s central intention by our editing, and to allow the audience to understand Shakespeare’s purpose.

Ultimately, we have presumed to make our own version much as an acting company in Shakespeare's own time might have adapted and cut the original. (This clearly happened when the Globe took productions on tour, as is proven by the three different versions of HAMLET that exist from Shakespeare’s time). We have tried to approach the text in the spirit of the editing so obvious in surviving quarto texts. We hope that Shakespeare's ghost will understand if not forgive.