

ONCE MORE UNTO THE OP, ONCE MORE...

Original Pronunciation returns to the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse this July.

David Crystal looks forward to the particular challenges of *Henry V*.



Illustration Belle Mellor

It never ceases to amaze me how the initiative to mount a production of Shakespeare in 'original pronunciation' (OP), introduced by the Globe in 2004, has become a worldwide movement. I reflect on the events of just one year, between July 2014, when the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse saw a series of OP performances culminating in a 'Read Not Dead' *Macbeth* with Ben Crystal's Shakespeare Ensemble, and July 2015, with the same company back in the Playhouse to present *Henry V* in the same way.

The interest in the sell-out *Macbeth* was so great that the Ensemble reprised the production, off-book this time, in the Tanner Street theatre for two nights in December, with full houses again. Then, at the beginning of January, Ben and two members of his Ensemble were across the Atlantic – first to the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Theatre Association in San Francisco, where he led a workshop on OP that was enthusiastically received by theatre people from all over the US and Canada, and then to Vancouver for another workshop and associated talk. At the end of January, that was capped by an electrifying staging of an OP *Pericles* at the Berwaldhallen in Stockholm, underscored by Max Richter's reworking of Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' and played live by the Trondheim Soloists with solo violinist Daniel Hope. The production was acclaimed a huge success by Sweden's leading theatre critics, who all turned up for the occasion, part of the 2015 Interplay series initiated by maestro Daniel Harding. Meanwhile, The Shakespeare Factory theatre in Baltimore was preparing to produce an OP *Merchant of Venice* in March. I prepared their script and recording, along the same lines as I did for the Globe productions a decade ago, and Ben went over to work with the company in the weeks before the run. It was a busy few months.

And next: *Henry V*.

The fascinating thing about OP, to my mind, is the way each new play produced in this genre throws up fresh challenges and reveals new insights. In this article, I'll talk about the main challenges, and when it's over, in the next issue of *Around the Globe*, report what we discovered.

The biggest challenge will be to work out, for the first time, what to do with the multilingualism in the play. We have a bit of Latin, a lot of French, and a language we might as well simply call Pistolian. Fortunately, the history of French pronunciation has been studied in some depth, and there have been

performances of literature from the 17th century in French OP. The differences between then and now are not so great as in the case of English, but there are some noticeable contrasts with present-day French. Words like *moi* are pronounced like 'mwe' rather than 'mwa'. The uvular 'r' sound we know in French today hadn't yet developed, so that words using 'r' sounded much more like the English 'r' of the time. And the 'e' at the ends

of words was regularly sounded – *porte* as 'port-uh'. It will be interesting to see what happens when we import these effects into the play, and to make them work along with the mistakes made by Katherine and her maid, Pistol, and Henry himself when they try to communicate using the two languages.

The other big challenge is that, for the first time, we encounter English regional accents on a large scale, in the form of an Englishman, Irishman, Scotsman, and Welshman. Those who saw the first OP event in the July 2014 series will recall that this contained one of the scenes in which the four captains interacted. The distinctive spellings were used as a guide to the regional pronunciations Shakespeare must have had in mind, and the actors supplemented these cues with effects from present-day English, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh accents. It seemed to work very well, and so we'll extend this approach to the other scenes in the play.

But the thing I'm most looking forward to is to hearing Henry's speech before Harfleur, which in modern English produces one of those rhyming let-downs that OP eliminates. It's a speech in which the hugely evocative pronunciation of *war*, with an open vowel (rhyming with *star*) turns up repeatedly = 'blast of war... fathers of war-proof ... teach them how to war', with the same resonant vowel culminating in the famous rhyming couplet:

Follow your spirit, and upon this charge,
Cry, God for Harry, England, and Saint George.

The effect is a bit anti-climactic when *George* is pronounced as it is today (to rhyme with *forge*). But not when it rhymes with *charge*.

David Crystal OBE is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. His books include *Shakespeare's Words* (with Ben Crystal) and its accompanying website www.shakespeareswords.com, *Pronouncing Shakespeare* and *Think on My Words: Exploring Shakespeare's Language*.