

A close-up photograph of a woman and a man. The woman, in the upper half, wears a highly ornate headdress made of gold threads, blue beads, and a large blue feather. She has her eyes closed and a serene expression. The man, in the lower half, is looking upwards with a similar expression. He is wearing a costume with a prominent peacock feather pattern in gold and blue. The background is dark, making the costumes stand out.

# **UPSTAGED BY PEACOCKS**

**Anecdotes of Touring Shakespeare  
in Open-air Heritage Sites**

**WENDY JEAN MACPHEE**





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# Preface



The International, Professional Theatre Set-Up company (see [www.ts-u.co.uk](http://www.ts-u.co.uk)), survived the vicissitudes of touring mostly outdoor performances of Shakespeare in heritage sites from 1976 to 2011, performing throughout the UK from 1979 and in mainland Europe from 1993. From 1983 onwards its performances were presented in the light of the plays' secret meanings, researched in my PhD at the Shakespeare Institute of The University of Birmingham (for details see my book *Secret Meanings in Shakespeare Applied to Stage Performance*). Venues and gear were transferred to The Festival Players in 2011.

Its tours in 1979, 1980 and 1981 pioneered the genre, a species of theatre which has since then proliferated, providing many actors with paid employment and heritage sites with performances of plays presented conveniently with the minimum of fuss, cost and accoutrements. The company was financially independent of government grants, paying all costs from ticket sales, fees and donations. The casts were employed initially on British Equity/ITC contracts, but on private legal contracts which enshrined those terms and conditions in later years. It was formed in the likeness of Shakespeare's own company, The King's Men, in its touring mould, except that instead of casting boys to perform the plays' female roles, actresses were hired. In order to limit the number of actors employed, a strategy needed to curtail cost, some of the male roles were often taken by female players. This also saw me playing many



male as well as older female roles over the years, doubling as the plays' musician.

Close interaction was always kept up with members of the audience who insisted that I write up the stories that emerged from the unusual circumstances of a theatre company not performing in regular theatres, and I do so in the following account of many of the adventures we encountered on our travels. I draw a veil over the many romances that were engendered between the actors during the months of the tours, noting with pleasure one successful marriage resulting from actors touring during the 1992 season and another between an actor and an employee of a venue in 2008. In the early years of the company's tours, there was often such misery resulting from unhappy affairs between the actors that I subsequently learned to arrange the schedules and accommodation in such a way that these disasters became minimal!

The experience of acting in difficult outdoor venues in all weathers benefitted the actors, most of whom went on to enjoy successful careers in the theatre, radio, television and film businesses and in areas associated with theatre such as teaching and drama therapy. Sadly some of them have died but their work lives on, not only in the memories of audiences who enjoyed their acting, but in the recordings of their television and film performances. I substitute my own name by that of my double called "Anne" in order to avoid any hint of being narcissistic.



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# CHAPTER 1

## “WHEN BIRDS DO SING...”



### BIRDS

On a balmy summer's evening in the gardens of the Cornish mansion, Trevarno, while an entranced audience watched the performance of a Shakespearean play beneath a magnificent tree, a peacock firmly took up his position between the play and the audience. Spreading his magnificent feathers to their utmost height and width he posed triumphantly,

“Don't look at them, look at me,” his posture proclaimed, “I am really worth looking at!”

Of course he won and the audience ignored the actors who were trying to continue with the play. It was the culmination of a long-held contest between actors and peacocks for possession of the site. In fact the tree held the roosts of the peacocks who wished to go there to sleep long before the plays presented each year there had come to the end of their fifth acts. Loud peacock shrieks of protest throughout the performances had always accompanied the well-resonated voices of certain actors, destroying the hauteur of their stage presence. Anne, who ran the company, played its music and performed small roles in it, was secretly pleased at the ability of the peacocks to put down these actors whose conceit she found irritating. She herself was fairly soft voiced and when she played the musical instruments which accompanied the play, the



peacocks seemed to be soothed, so she considered them to be on her side.

Much to Anne's secret pleasure, in 1980 peacocks objected strongly to other arrogant male actors' voices in a performance of *As You Like It* in the theatre in Holland Park, London, screeching their protests in competition with the dialogue. However one of these same peacocks became enamoured of the blue-coloured car of one of the loud-voiced actors, continuously circling it in a loving rotation. It was assumed that the colour blue was the source of this misplaced adoration and that the peacock hoped that the car would ultimately transform itself and reveal its true identity as a female of the species.

Peacocks continued to upstage Theatre Set-Up performances in the grounds of Kirby Hall, Nottinghamshire. In response to Anne's surprise at the intelligent interest that one of the peacocks there was showing in the company's setting up of the play, the custodian instructed her that all creatures have different personalities and levels of intelligence and that this particular peacock was very sociable, greeting most visitors to the sight and showing an alert interest in everything that was going on. This interest continued throughout the performance, the peacock taking up a stance at the side of the stage area and providing a continuous shrill commentary on the stage action. Another peacock hen supplied a rival diversion by encouraging her chicks to climb up a small mound to the side of the stage area. They had little success in doing this and their falls back down the slope caused considerable anxiety to the watching members of the audience.

In 1983 a beautiful white peacock at Sudeley Castle, near Cheltenham was very surprised to see a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* being performed by the carp pond in the castle gardens. In order to satisfy its curiosity it stepped confidently through the audience to the edge of the



pond, watched the play for a while and then strode contemptuously off.

However the loudest bird commentaries on the action of Theatre Set-Up's performances were made by the seagulls perched on the ruined walls of the Peel Castle and Cathedral where the company played on the Isle of Man. Fortified by fish from the adjacent sea and its fishing fleet, these birds screeched resonant disapproval of the unusual evening presence of people near their nesting sites crowded on top of the ancient buildings. These protests were followed by more physical bullying and many of the birds would continuously swoop low over the audience, spraying them with guano. It became a characteristic of the performances there and the regular audience members would come prepared with protective clothing!

One year a young bird which had fallen from its nest high on the ruined tower of Peel Cathedral became convinced that Anne, dressed in grey and in role as the harp-playing musician at the side of the performance area, was its mother. It attached itself to Anne's feet and pecked constantly at her shoes, expecting them to yield pre-digested herring.

"It thinks I'm its mother," Anne explained to be-mused nearby audience members. When, in spite of the chick's constant pecking, Anne's shoes failed to yield food, the chick wandered off through the audience, hopefully pecking at their shoes. It was a difficult situation for the people in the audience who wanted to give food to the chick but knew that only the pre-digested fish was suitable for such a young bird!

A bird also pestered the audience for food at Scotney Castle, Kent, which was beside water, filled with ducks. In 1981, during a performance of *Much Ado about Nothing*, one of these decided to beg for food from both actors on the stage and members of the audience. Its demands were unrelenting throughout the play, very vocal and focused on



the person it was begging from. No shooing away would make it cease as it almost brought the play to a halt. Everyone was laughing at its persistence and boldness, its upstaging of the play equal to that of the peacock at Trevarno.

A mother duck and her ducklings effectively upstaged a performance in The Temple Amphitheatre in the grounds of Chiswick House, London in a performance of *The Tempest* in 2002. In the centre of the amphitheatre was a pond upon which the duck was happily paddling away with her family. Suddenly she decided that they should all get out of the water and she scrambled up the steep bank of the pond, calling to her ducklings to follow. However the slope was too steep for them and to the distress of the audience, by now ignoring the play, they kept falling back into the pond. The Theatre Set-Up stage manager decided to intervene and provide a ramp for the ducklings to climb. He found one of the company's sign boards and placed it from the edge of the bank into the water, the mother duck encouraging her family to ascend to safety. This was accomplished, the audience applauded the stage manager and the play continued without further interruptions. From that day onwards the cast understood the true meaning of the term "duck boards", their use, and their signage boards should the need arise, which could provide a substitute for them.

At Kirby Muxloe Castle, Leicestershire, in 1997, it was the smell of birds which upstaged the play's performance of *Twelfth Night*. The wind was blowing the odours from an adjacent nearby poultry farm right across the performance site. However the company manager tried to convince the audience that this was not a bad thing:

"Here we have the perfume "Eau de Poulet", she announced.

The most positive contribution of birds made to performances of the company's plays were the demonstrations of falconry at Dilston Hall, given every



evening before the beginning of *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1999. Audiences were delighted at this stunning extra entertainment given by local people as a welcome to Theatre Set-Up newly playing in the grounds of the college to its audiences in Northumberland. The beautiful birds, soaring above the audience against a pale evening sky, gave the actors and the audience a thrill which energised the performance and predisposed the audience to enjoy the play.

## **SEALS**

In another part of the Peel Castle site, surrounded in its St Patrick's Isle location by water on three sides, at least some of the wildlife appreciated the performances every year. The company always had songs incorporated into the performances, often to provide a costume quick-change bridge for actors between adjacent scenes in which they were playing different characters. The singers naturally needed to "warm up" their voices, and they did this facing the seas behind the castle which flowed between the Isle of Man and Ireland. Seals loved this music and each year they would come up close to the water lapping against the castle to listen to it. "Singing to seals" became an annual feature which the company's singers looked forward to in the theatre season's tours.

## **BATS**

Bats sometimes featured in the company's performances. As bats lived in the rafters of the Medieval Old Hall of Tatton Park, they inevitably became part of the events put on there. The theatre company had to wait for the fire in the middle of the floor to be doused before they could enter the Hall to prepare for the play. In the early days of Theatre Set-Up's performances there this preparation was necessarily