**‘The mind goes back to the golden fairies….’**

**Granville Barker’s Choral Work**

**Philippa Burt**

Amidst the mixed and, at times, violent reaction to Harley Granville Barker’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the Savoy Theatre in February 1914, the woodland fairy scenes quickly emerged as the focal point of critical discourse.[[1]](#endnote-1) Barker and designer Norman Wilkinson’s decision to dress Oberon, Titania and the fairies from head to toe in gold, complete with gilt faces and hands, astounded the critics. While some praised these ‘elegant creatures… tall and graceful, clad in the soft metallic shimmer of their web of gold over gold armour’, others denounced them as ‘grotesque figures’.[[2]](#endnote-2) However, although critical opinion was divided with regards to the appearance of the fairies, there was almost unanimous praise of their performances and positioning on the stage, particularly for their arrival at the beginning of Act II scene i. *The Athenaeum* declared that this ‘first scene in which the fairy nation appears is a triumphantly beautiful spectacle’ and J. T. Grein described the scene, and the production as a whole, as ‘a beautiful dream… a gallery of statuesque groups… a vision of something eerie, remote, supernatural.’[[3]](#endnote-3) For A.B. Walkley, whose titular quotation has become almost synonymous with the production, the impression of the group gathered together in gold was ‘wonderfully beautiful.’[[4]](#endnote-4)

While the fairy chorus was singled out for particular acclaim, it was, in reality, one in a long line of similar experiments conducted by Barker that foregrounded the notion of the unified group, beginning with his legendary seasons at the Court Theatre between 1904 and 1907. These experiments manifested themselves, on the one hand, in a new approach to rehearsals that centred on collaborative study to establish a shared understanding of the play in question and thus a sense of ensemble amongst the actors.[[5]](#endnote-5) Barker argued that ‘co-operation was the first and last law of the theatre’, and that it was impossible for an actor to know and understand her or his part without also knowing and understanding the play as a whole, which could only be achieved with corporate study.[[6]](#endnote-6) To achieve this, he sent company members complete copies of the script, as opposed to the conventional cue scripts, so all could get a sense of the totality of the play and how each character fitted into its structure. Likewise, he dedicated time and attention in the rehearsals to every actor regardless of the size of her or his role. The result was even and balanced productions, where ‘the unity of tone, the subordination of the individual, the genuine striving for totality of effect… the abolition of the ‘star’ system – all were noteworthy features of these productions.’[[7]](#endnote-7)

On the other hand, and most pertinent to this chapter, Barker’s interest in the ensemble saw him develop new ways of presenting groups on the stage in order to create a cohesive unity that was centred on visual and aural harmony. In this, as with his work in rehearsals, Barker’s innovations went hand in glove with the introduction of the role of director, which, as Colin Chambers has already argued, was a role Barker pioneered in Britain at the time. An illustrative example is his production of Elizabeth Robins’s *Votes for Women!*, which opened at the Court on 9 April 1907. For Act Two’s famous suffragette rally in Trafalgar Square – the centre point of the play and its dramatic crescendo – Barker countered the conventions of the time and the tendency to hire in walk-on supernumeraries to simply fill the space and create an appropriate stage picture. Instead, he worked hard with experienced actors, including regular Court players, to create a crowd that comprised lifelike, recognisable and realistic individuals that spanned the spectrum of Edwardian society. This crowd responded to and interrupted the platform speakers, speaking alternately as an indiscernible group and as a cacophony of individual voices. Thus:

Old Newsvendor: It’s true, wot she says! – every word

Working Woman: You say we women ‘ave got no business servin’ on boards and thinkin’ about politics. Wot’s *politics*?

(*A decisive roar.*)

It’s just ‘ousekeepin’ on a big scale. ‘Oo among you workin’ men ‘as the most comfortable ‘omes? Those of you that gives yer wives yer wages.

(*Loud laughter and jeers.*)

Voices: That’s it!

Wantin’ our money.

Lord ‘Igh ‘Ousekeeper of England.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The critics responded enthusiastically. ‘I have never seen so good a stage crowd’, remarked the *London Daily News*. ‘Its humblest members had character, from a costermonger with his flashes of crude wit to an elderly gentleman fresh from his lunch at the club and full of pompous platitudes.’[[9]](#endnote-9) *The Times* similarly praised Barker for his ‘admirably managed “living picture” with as realistic a crowd as we have ever seen manoeuvred on the stage.’[[10]](#endnote-10)

The positioning of the crowd was also significant. Barker set the scene around the base of Nelson’s column, where the speakers, including Edith Wynne Matthison as the outspoken suffragette Vida Levering and Edmund Gwenn as Labour leader Mr Walker delivered their orations from a small platform that faced the audience. In the small space between the speakers and the auditorium was a crowd of more than forty actors, the majority of whom had their backs to the audience. The speakers therefore addressed the audience directly, giving the scene a ‘sense of reality’ and encouraging the latter group to listen carefully to the messages from the stage.[[11]](#endnote-11) As Dennis Kennedy rightly observes, this placement of the crowd in the liminal space between stage and auditorium meant that it adopted a role akin to that of the Greek chorus, commenting on the dramatic action and representing the audience on the stage.[[12]](#endnote-12) Barker’s close orchestration of the crowd was thus not solely for aesthetic reasons; it also served to foreground the political debate at the heart of the play and promote female suffrage at a time when campaigning was becoming increasingly visible and violent.

Although brief, these introductory observations highlight the need to re-evaluate Barker’s work with groups on the stage and to consider it as an integral part of his ongoing assault on the individualistic and naturalistic theatre of his time, with its emphasis on illusion, spectacle, declamation and theatrical effect. Nowhere was this penchant for illusion and spectacle more apparent than in the Shakespeare productions of the period. The common practice was to present the plays as ‘star’ vehicles, which often entailed rewriting the text to create a central lead character. [[13]](#endnote-13) The staging similarly foregrounded the individual ‘star’ actor, while the heavily decorative sets and slavish reproduction of minute everyday detail – as epitomised by the live rabbits seen hopping around the stage for Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1911 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – created productions that were overly elaborate, slow and drawn out.

By way of a response, Barker staged a series of three Shakespeare productions at the Savoy Theatre, which is the primary focus of this chapter. The tendency is to focus on the iconoclastic design of these productions, where the stripped-back minimalist sets, the use of drop curtains and the Leon Bakst-inspired costumes provided a startling antidote to the conventional emphasis on naturalistic illusion. However, the productions also introduced an entirely new way of performing Shakespeare that centred on lightness and a swift tempo, where Barker again placed precedence on the unified group working together in harmony over any single ‘star’ actor. In this, Barker sought to bring the plays back to life, encouraging the actors to listen to Shakespeare’s text and work in collaboration with him in order to communicate the plays’ meanings and make clear their relevance to a British public on the brink of war. The emphasis was on making the plays ‘true’ or ‘real’, even if not realistic in the conventional sense of the word.

This same goal of resuscitation underpinned Barker’s work on Greek tragedy, which is a secondary concern of this chapter. Gilbert Murray’s recent translations of Euripides’s tragedies demonstrated to Barker the timeliness of the plays, and he saw their potential as a means of identifying and examining the problems that beset Edwardian society. The plays quickly became a trope of his work as a director and featured in the repertoire of each of his ventures into theatre management, where they sat alongside such leading proponents of the New Drama as George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and St John Hankin.[[14]](#endnote-14) His production of *Hippolytus* inaugurated the Court Theatre seasons in October 1904 – a production that was first staged for William Archer and Elizabeth Robins’s New Century Theatre five months earlier – while his 1915 *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *The Trojan Women*, staged at various university stadia on the east coast of the United States, were among his last practical work on the stage. The Euripidean productions also marked Barker’s significant contribution to the field of theatre: the 1904 *Hippolytus* was the first professional staging of a Greek play in Britain and brought a new interest in the work, thus laying the groundwork for William Poel’s production of *The Bacchae* and Max Reinhardt’s 1912 *Oedipus Rex* at Covent Garden. Yet, despite the clear significance that these plays had for Barker, little scholarly attention has been placed on this aspect of his oeuvre. Noel Thomas noted in 1955 the overwhelming tendency to remember Barker as a director of Shakespeare and Shaw at the expense of Euripides, and it is a tendency that is still adhered to today.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The aim, as Barker explained in 1932, was not to present Euripides’s plays as antiquarian artefacts, but, rather, ‘to take a play which was a living thing two thousand years ago and provide for its interpreting as a living thing to an audience of to-day.’[[16]](#endnote-16) In order to avoid any accusation of museum theatre, there needed to an emotional connection established between the audience and the performers, and Barker acknowledged the integral role played by the Chorus in securing this connection. Its speech, song and movement provided the necessary counterpoint to the action of the protagonists, becoming, in Euripides’s plays, ‘an instrument with which to weave music of the most subtle and exquisite rhythm’.[[17]](#endnote-17) The Chorus correspondingly became the central concern of Barker’s productions, where the challenge of creating unified ensemble on the stage without reducing the individual actors into a homogenised mass was emblematic of his whole quest for – and struggle with – the notion of ensemble theatre.

**Barker in Context**

In order to understand fully Barker’s innovations in group work on the stage and the development of what I term his choric aesthetic, it is necessary to consider it in the context of his wider ideas on the theatre and, in particular, the deep-rooted conventions that he was challenging. Barker’s arrival on the British theatre scene at the turn of the twentieth century came at a time when the long-standing domination of the actor-managers was being threatened. Such managers as Henry Irving, Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Charles Wyndham continued to occupy positions at the pinnacle of the British theatre hierarchy, which they had won by staging sentimental melodramas that appealed to large crowds and by avoiding work that was experimental or commercially risky. However, the Independent or Free Theatre Movement that was spreading across continental Europe saw the emergence in Britain of new theatre groups and societies to challenge these positions. These included J. T. Grein’s Independent Theatre Society (founded in 1891), the New Century Theatre (1897), the Stage Society (1899), and, slightly later, the Actresses’ Franchise League (1908) and the Pioneer Players (1911).

The overriding aim was to provide an alternative to the commercial, ‘assembly-line’ and ‘star’-oriented productions that ‘treated plays as commodities and audiences as consumers of products’. [[18]](#endnote-18) These groups sought to use the theatre to expose the problems facing British society by providing a platform for new experimental drama that would simultaneously bring the British theatre into touch with developments happening across the continent. Thus, Archer and Robins founded their New Century Theatre with the aim to stage plays ‘of intrinsic interest which find no place on the stage’, while the Franchise League and Edith Craig’s Pioneer Players produced plays that foregrounded women’s suffrage.[[19]](#endnote-19) It is not within the remit of this chapter to detail the activities of each group, but it is illuminating to note the atmosphere of change and progress that surrounded Barker and into which he was immersed. He was himself a member of the Stage Society, directed plays for the New Century Theatre, as noted above, and his first wife Lillah McCarthy was a member of the Franchise League. It is also worth noting, as I have done elsewhere, Barker’s political position as a member of the Fabian Society, which placed him at the centre of the growing socialist concern in Britain.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Among the many criticisms levelled against the actor-managers, Barker was most vocal in his critique of their unwavering adherence to the two central components of the Victorian theatre: the long run and, in particular, the ‘star’ system. The latter was integral to a theatre establishment that, much like the commercial theatre in Britain today, worshipped ‘star’ names and famous faces. This system created a hierarchy amongst actors and foregrounded the ‘star’ personality in a production at the expense of the other elements. Managers such as Irving and Tree embodied this system and organized their companies with a substantial level of self-promotion, placing their own interests ahead of the rest of the company. Edwardian author Leonard Merrick, writing under the pseudonym Stanley Jones, criticized such actor-managers, who did not ‘allow the members of his company to increase their experience, to improve their reputation, to become his own possible rivals.’ The first concern of the actor-manager, by contrast, was to ‘find a play in which he shall had a good part, and the second to look to it that nobody else shall have so good a part as himself.’[[21]](#endnote-21) With the emphasis placed on the ‘star’ actor, there was little more for the supporting actors to do than fit around him. These actors became mere props or ‘“sticks”, whose ignorance and stupidity serve to bring the star into prominence.’[[22]](#endnote-22)

The tendency to perceive the other actors as mere wallpaper to act against influenced how they were treated in rehearsals, where they were either overlooked entirely, save for some more general comments on blocking, or they were closely drilled in set movements, with little consideration for character development or interpretation.[[23]](#endnote-23) Irving was a prominent proponent of the latter approach, and would coach his actors to fulfil his vision for the play in question. He dedicated the first rehearsal to reading the play aloud to the assembled company, playing each role and setting the template of what he wanted the actors to reproduce:

He acted every part in the piece he read, and in his mind the tones of his actors’ voices, the moves of the characters, the processions, and the order of the crowd scenes was already set. All the actors had to do was to come up to the expectations which lay in his mind.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Irving’s aim was to create a pictorial ensemble, where the various visual elements worked in harmony with each other: ‘It is important that an actor should learn that he is figure in a stage picture, and that the least exaggeration destroys the harmony of a composition’.[[25]](#endnote-25) In this sense he transcended the practices of his time and was, at least, attempting to create cohesion on the stage. However, the purpose of this ensemble was to provide an appropriate background that would accentuate more keenly his ‘star’ role. Indeed, he developed his own performance in isolation, which meant that there was no room for dialogue between the ‘star’ character and the supporting parts. The focus was, again, on the individual and so was far from the ensemble that Barker sought.

The prioritisation of individual actors engendered by the ‘star’ system was a necessary consequence of the economic state of the British theatre. Without the security of a permanent, subsidised company or a regular income, actors were subject to the pressures of the free market and the principles of *laissez-faire* capitalism, and so their futures were determined by public taste and their ability to meet its demands. Michael Baker explains:

Alone among artists, the actor was now obliged to present his work to a mass audience, which paid for his services directly and in cash; his livelihood and his success or failure became dependent upon the immediate reactions of this audience.[[26]](#endnote-26)

This dependence on the reactions of the audience encouraged a strong sense of competition between actors, who developed distinctive personalities and promoted their own celebrity in order to make themselves recognisable and memorable. Hence the ‘star’ system, where those at the apex were actors who successfully individualised themselves and became synonymous with, and indispensable to, the British theatre and its audience and so were able to reap the economic rewards.

Barker condemned the ‘dog-eat-dog’ attitude of survival that this system cultivated, where actors were encouraged to perform ‘star’ turns regardless of the demands of the play. This attitude, along with the practice of limiting rehearsal periods as much as possible to reduce overheads – a practice that remains all too common in the British theatre – made actors untrusting and violently protective of any previously acquired symbolic power. He warned:

To surrender this personal power to whatever unity of effect can be gained in three weeks’ work or so among a strange company might be to lose it all together, and to get nothing in exchange – so thinks the theatre-wise actor.

The actor worked separately and developed her or his own performance that demonstrated this power or ‘personal charm’, ‘exercising it, though, as often as not directly upon the audience rather than primarily on the play.’[[27]](#endnote-27)

**The ‘Star’ System on the Stage**

The emphasis on the individual during rehearsals manifested itself on the stage in a number of related ways. The need to maintain a carefully cultivated personality, for example, determined how an actor interpreted a particular role, regardless of the intentions of the playwright. Max Beerbohm observed to readers of *The Saturday Review* in 1901 that a great actor made little attempt to become a new, unrecognisable character, but, rather, tried

merely to absorb the part into himself – to reveal himself through it… [A great actress] may play tragedy one night, and comedy the next, and be equally fine in both; but in both she will be frankly the same woman, seen from different angles of herself.[[28]](#endnote-28)

As usual, Shaw did not pull any punches in his critique of such practices, especially when it came to Irving. ‘A prodigious deal of nonsense has been written about Sir Henry Irving’s conception of this, that, and the other Shakespearean character,’ he told readers of *The Saturday Review* in 1896. ‘The truth is that he has never in his life conceived or interpreted the characters of any author except himself… There was no question of a bad Shylock or a good Shylock: he was simply not Shylock at all’.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The stage design was, again, oriented around the individual ‘star’ actor, where the lighting, costume and positioning of the other actors on the stage all served the purpose of focusing the audience’s attention on this ‘star’. Christopher Innes recounts Irving’s decision to dress himself in flaming scarlet for his 1886 production of *Faust* to ensure that he stood out from the rest of the actors and the other design elements, which were all in a grey-green colour. Likewise, when rehearsing a duel scene for *The Corsican Brothers*, his sparring partner stopped to ask whether he would share part of his limelight: ‘Don’t you think, Guv’nor, a few rays of moon might fall on me – it shines equally on the just and the unjust.’[[30]](#endnote-30)

Other actor-managers insisted on maintaining a certain amount of stage space between themselves and the supporting actors as a way of enforcing their authority and asserting their status and distinction from the crowd. In such companies, ‘the magic circle around the star was not to be violated with impunity by a lesser actor.’[[31]](#endnote-31) Again, the lot of the supporting actor was simply to provide a backdrop and avoid becoming too obtrusive. Cathleen Nesbitt, Perdita in Barker’s 1912 production of *The Winter’s Tale*, recalled the common experience of working under an actor-manager: ‘One never ‘marked’ anything, we just kept out of each other’s way. If there wasn’t an empty space you sat on the nearest chair.’[[32]](#endnote-32) It was such practices and the perception of supporting actors as inferior that saw crowds on the stage being presented as homogenous masses whose function was to fill the space, as epitomised by Tree’s *Henry VIII* in 1910, where cardboard cut outs were used for many of the extras.

The effect of all of the above was inconsistent and dissonant productions. George Moore complained that the unevenness in the acting and incongruity of the production elements engendered by this approach succeeded only in distorting the meaning of the play, leaving it ‘mutilated and disfigured *as a musical work would be if the musicians did not play in tune.*’ [[33]](#endnote-33) The surprised tone with which critics greeted the ensemble playing of Barker’s actors at the Court indicate the extent to which they had become used to the usual fare of top-heavy ‘star’ productions. Max Beerbohm, again, noted that ‘acting at the Court seems so infinitely better than in so many other theatres where the same mimes are to be seen,’ explaining that this was due to Barker’s insistence that his actors play as an ensemble and follow closely the intentions of the playwright:

[The] mimes at the Court are very carefully stage-managed, every one of them being kept in such relation to his fellows as is demanded by the relation in which the various parts stand to one another – no one mime getting more, or less, of a chance that the playwright has intended him to have.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Desmond MacCarthy similarly argued that the success of Barker’s ensemble highlighted the flaws of the ‘star’ system and showed the London theatregoing public that an alternative was possible:

When will other London managers learn that the dramatist who is worth his salt needs the co-operation of every part, however small, in order to drive his meaning home; that we want to see plays, not to have our attention riveted perpetually on the same personality for three hours at a stretch?[[35]](#endnote-35)

As these observations suggest, Barker positioned his productions and his whole approach to theatre making in direct opposition to the ‘star’ system and its associated conventions and practices. The *New York Times* summarised this position accurately in 1915:

He is against the star system. He is against the ‘long run’ system. He is against what he calls the ‘rampant individualism’ of the ordinary commercial system of play producing… the theatre, to Granville Barker, is perhaps the most important of all possible agencies as a social expression and a social instrument.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Warning of the potentially destructive force of a dominant individual – ‘Much could be learned, no doubt from seeing a theatre glorified and destroyed by an individual genius’ – Barker argued that it was only by acting as an ensemble that the actors could remain true to the intentions of the playwright.[[37]](#endnote-37) This suspicion of the ‘individual genius’ extended to the director. Barker was adamant that the role of the director was not to command or dictate, but to work with his actors as a committee to achieve the unity of effect to which all plays strove. By giving the actors the space to develop their own performances in relation to each other, as opposed to competing with each other or merely following the orders of an overbearing director, the resulting performance would be organic and would help to keep the production ‘a healthy living body’.[[38]](#endnote-38) It was for this reason that he sought a co-operative approach to rehearsals, as alluded to briefly at the beginning of this chapter.

The security offered by a long-standing ensemble company would similarly facilitate a sense of trust amongst actors, elevating them from the demoralising position of causal labourer and the need to compete on the free market of the commercial theatre. At the same time, it provided an alternative to the long run, where the need to perform the same role repeatedly for months on end could easily turn an actor into an automaton, stripping away any sense of truth or spontaneity from the performance. Despite not being able to establish such a long-standing company, Barker created this sense of trust and communality amongst the nucleus of actors with whom he worked regularly at the Court Theatre. Speaking in 1907, Mathinson observed that ‘there have been no rancours, no jealousies, no groans of the ill-paid and sweated in our midst’. There was instead ‘a very real and a very precious sense of human brotherhood and sympathy, firmly based on economic equity and artistic opportunity’.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Lillah McCarthy gave a similar account two decades later, explaining how the absence of the hierarchy that prioritised the ‘star’ role made the Court one of the only theatres in London where actors were willing to perform in smaller roles:

Any of us would cheerfully take a small role, for we knew that even so we would not have to be subservient, negative or obsequious to the stars – for, as I have said, there were no stars. We were members of a theatrical House of Lords: all equal and all Lords.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Barker’s method of treating the entire company as part of a composite whole limited the competitive tension between actors who felt the need to vie for the director’s attention, and so encouraged actors to work together and to serve the play as opposed to any individual. Not only did this mean that actors were willing to perform in smaller roles, but it also encouraged them to work as a group on the stage, as will become clear in the discussion of his Shakespeare and Euripides productions below.

Barker was, of course, far from alone in Europe in his quest for unified productions performed by an ensemble of actors. The influence of the Meiningen Ensemble was felt across the continent during the 1880s and 1890s, where its unity of expression, its close attention to historical accuracy and its meticulously organised large-scale crowd scenes inspired a range of actors and directors, including Irving, Otto Brahm, Andre Antoine and Konstantin Stanislavsky. The latter’s influence on Barker was more direct, although the pair only met towards the end of Barker’s directorial career, when he travelled to the Moscow Art Theatre in 1914. Barker spent a week in Moscow, where he attended performances of *The Cherry Orchard*, *Three Sisters* and *The Blue Bird*, among others, and discussed rehearsal techniques and actor training with Stanislavsky. The experience was revelatory for the British director, and the company became a major point of reference in his subsequent writings on the theatre and a model to be followed.[[41]](#endnote-41)

What impressed Barker most was the sense of synthesis and spontaneity with which the ensemble performed, where productions that had been in the repertoire for a number of years still had the feeling of being fresh and alive. He described the acting as ‘operatic’ in the sense that ‘it was harmonized as fine music is into a unity of effect by which the themes and players are given not less value but more and more meaning, not less, as parts of an ordered whole.’[[42]](#endnote-42) Stanislavsky was able to achieve this due to the familiarity and shared understanding that came from working with a permanent group of actors and his insistence on allowing each production to develop organically through extensive rehearsal periods:

It is because plays are produced there when they are ready – are born, not aborted as Stanislawsky [sic] says – that they are living things, that their power over the audiences (such audiences sitting to such fare) is the amazing power of interpreted life.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Barker argued that it was this insistence on theatre as the expression or interpretation of life, and not, therefore, separate from it, that distinguished Stanislavsky from directors like Reinhardt.

Barker stopped in Berlin on his way to Moscow to see Reinhardt and his Deutsches Theater. While his experience of the Art Theatre had made all other companies pale in comparison – ‘Moscow is nearer to me now than Berlin will ever be’ – the German director had been a presence in his life for a number of years.[[44]](#endnote-44) Barker travelled to Berlin in 1906 and again in 1910 to see Reinhardt’s work, attending rehearsals during the latter visit. He was also among the audience of Reinhardt’s productions in London, and, in the case of *Oedipus*, attended rehearsals in order to provide McCarthy with copious detailed notes for her performance in the role of Jocasta. The extent to which Reinhardt influenced Barker and his choreography of group scenes in more closely below, as is the undeniable influence of a figure who was pioneering the role of the director in Britain at the same time as Barker: Edward Gordon Craig.

**Group Work at the Savoy**

In order to achieve his quest to discover the true meaning of Shakespeare’s plays and to bring them to life for a contemporary audience, Barker had to remove from the plays the layers of sediment that had built up over the previous decades. This entailed stripping away the conventions of romanticism and illusion in which they and their characters had become entrenched. He was, to all intents and purposes, successful in this quest and helped the audience to look again at Shakespeare’s plays: ‘It was as if I had been looking at a wax figure in a glass case, when Barker came and whisked away the glass to show me that what I had mistaken for a cleverly moulded dummy was in fact a living and breathing man’.[[45]](#endnote-45) He continued this quest in the pages of his influential *Prefaces to Shakespeare* long after he ceased staging productions himself.

The intention was for the Savoy productions to mark the beginning of a sustained experiment in staging Shakespeare, and while the outbreak of World War One in August 1914 put paid to such plans, they indicate clearly the direction in which Barker was headed. His choice of plays with which to begin this experiment was both deliberate and calculated. Shakespeare’s own break with realism in *The Winter’s Tale* – complete with appearing and disappearing bears, rapid jumps in time, space and genre, and the climactic ‘resurrection’ of Hermione twenty years after her death – afforded Barker an ideal opportunity to push the boundaries of stage naturalism and verisimilitude. *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, on the other hand, were staples of the actor-managers’ repertoires and had become heavily steeped in the Victorian traditions of romantic sentimentalism and over-played comedy. Barker used the plays to demonstrate clearly his challenge to such conventions and to the expectations of the audience, calling for a total re-appreciation of Shakespeare’s plays and, in particular, his comedies.

This desired break from illusion and spectacle was, of course, signified in the visual aesthetics and design of each production. In labelling Barker’s *The Winter’s Tale* ‘Post-Impressionist Shakespeare’, Walkley identified accurately the director’s alignment with the modernist experiments and his predilection for creating an impression or atmosphere over the reproduction of the minutiae of a particular scene.[[46]](#endnote-46) While Colin Chambers has already discussed the innovative aesthetics of these productions in the preceding chapter, it is useful to draw brief attention to one example that has particular pertinence for the present subject matter. In his reform of stage lighting, Barker replaced the conventional footlights with spotlights that hung from the dress circle in full view of the audience below. He was not, of course, the first to use such an approach, but, as Kennedy explains, it allowed him to challenge the priority placed on the individual ‘star’ performer by creating a lighting scheme that was more egalitarian and ‘made supers seem as visually important as stars.’[[47]](#endnote-47)

A commitment to truth also underpinned how Barker’s actors delivered Shakespeare’s text. He stressed the centrality of verse and argued that Shakespeare used it as the primary means of emotional expression. However, he rejected the common practice of speaking the verse in a slow, overstretched and rhetorical manner as if it were a piece of literature, where soliloquies became little more than displays of the ‘star’ actor’s elocutionary prowess. Barker taught his actors to treat the texts as pieces of living theatre and perform the dialogue truthfully. When rehearsing Nesbitt in the role of Perdita, for example, Barker warned her repeatedly: ‘Remember – be not poetical. Be *honest*, always. Don’t ever let yourself sing.’ His final piece of advice to her, which took the form of a note on her dressing-room mirror, echoed the sentiment: ‘Be swift, be swift, be not poetical.’[[48]](#endnote-48)

The centrality given to the verse indicates the teachings of William Poel, whose Elizabethan Stage Society was a fellow combatant in the fight against the Victorian approach to Shakespeare playing and who was a major influence on Barker during his formative years. However, where Poel drilled his actors to ensure that they mastered the precise elocution, rhythm and melody of the verse – in keeping with his objective to recreate as closely as possible the Elizabethan methods of staging Shakespeare – Barker believed it was more important to communicate the emotion of the lines than the exact meaning of each word. He identified in the speeches of Leontes, for example, a certain confusion of thought and intricacy of language that was dramatically justified given the character’s emotional state. ‘Shakespeare is picturing a genuinely jealous man… in the grip of mental epilepsy,’ he argued. ‘We parse the passage and dispute its sense; spoken, as it was meant to be, in a choking torrent of passion, probably a modicum of sense slipped through, and its first hearers did not find it a mere rigmarole.’[[49]](#endnote-49) Bearing this reading of Shakespeare in mind, it is not surprising that he advised Henry Ainley in the role of Leontes: ‘[The audience] don’t have to understand you with their ears, just with their guts. You are really just babbling in a rage and anguish, it’s a primitive emotion. You can accelerate and accelerate, just sounding vowels.’[[50]](#endnote-50) Such instructions restored a sense of pace and ‘liveness’ to the plays and made clear their relevance for contemporary audiences.

Barker’s close attention to the actors’ vocal performances was also to ensure that they achieved the required vocal unity and harmony, where the individual voices came together as a symphony. In his preface to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Barker discussed at length the need to be mindful of the different voices, notes and harmonies that Shakespeare weaves into his text, where, for example, the cheerful ‘chirping’ of Hermia is offset perfectly by the ‘wistful, troubled’ and ‘defeated silence’ of Helena, acting as an antiphony. ‘If the scene is sung to the wrong tunes,’ Barker warned, ‘if the time is not adjusted, if the discords and harmonies are not valued, its essential character will be obscured and lost.’[[51]](#endnote-51) This marks another point of departure from Poel’s more dogmatic approach. He, too, believed in the need to achieve a vocal harmony but allowed it to determine his casting choices, where he placed more weight the vocal quality of the actor than her or his performance ability. Barker warned of any attempt to push the analogy of music too far, and focused on bringing the voices together organically through rehearsal as opposed to forcing the actors to follow a pre-determined score.[[52]](#endnote-52)

The need for each voice to contribute to the overriding harmony of the play was indicative of Barker’s approach to acting and characterisation in his Shakespeare productions in general. Nesbitt’s account of *The Winter’s Tale* rehearsals confirms Barker’s commitment to working with all the actors and involving them in the process, as opposed to focusing his attention on the ‘star’ roles. Having introduced all the actors to each other in the first rehearsal, he encouraged them to work together, which took the form of long rehearsals with the entire company on the Savoy stage, often until the early hours of the morning.[[53]](#endnote-53) Such practices encouraged the actors to see themselves as a group working together towards the same goal.

The group rehearsals also helped to instil in the actors the understanding that each made a vital contribution to the production regardless of the size of her or his role. Barker used such tactics to restore a sense of balance to plays that had long been performed as top-heavy ‘star’ vehicles. He similarly engaged established actors to play small roles that were often overlooked, in direct contrast to the ‘star’ system. Nigel Playfair, for example, played Paulina’s Steward in *The Winter’s Tale*, having been assured by Barker that ‘you will find the part worth it’.[[54]](#endnote-54) Such actors were given the space and opportunity to create three-dimensional characters and to bring new significance that scenes were usually ignored entirely. Christine Dymkowski discusses the way in which Barker used the actors’ physical performances in *Twelfth Night* – including their positions on the stage, gestures, entrances and exits, and so on – to the same end. Such seemingly small gestures as a nudge or exchanged glances between Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Fabian in Act III, scene ii not only established a more complex relationship between the three characters, but also showed them to be more lifelike and human, in contrast to the practice of playing them as one-dimensional caricatures.[[55]](#endnote-55) The cohesive ensemble pictures that Barker created on the stage were thus given nuance and inflection by a collective of individual characters developed in relation to each other.

**The Fairy Chorus**

The quest for unity in Shakespeare manifested itself most clearly in Barker’s production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. He dispensed with a number of the conventions traditionally associated with the play, including the tendency to present the three main groups of characters – Theseus, Hippolyta and the lovers; the fairies; and the mechanics – as reduced caricatures that were distinct from each other. The result of such an approach was something of a hotchpotch of styles that was far from the harmony Barker desired. He instead focused on drawing links between the three groups, acknowledging and celebrating their differences, but encouraging his spectators to see the parallels between them.

There are countless instances that could be quoted from the production’s promptbook to illustrate his handling of the acting group and the central position afforded to it. The positioning of the mechanics in Act I scene ii, for example, is indicative of the group dynamic that Barker was trying to relay, placing Bottom deliberately between Quince and the majority of the company so as to increase the efficacy of his interjections. Small movements were also used to indicate the relations between characters and bring the dialogue to life in much the same way as in *Twelfth Night*. Thus, when Quince tells Bottom ‘You can play no part but Pyramus’ in response to his request to play the Lion, Barker gave the following direction: ‘All look at Bottom except Quince who has turned towards Snug; he sees Snug’s expression and turns back to placate Bottom.’[[56]](#endnote-56) Not only did this direction provide motivation for Quince’s subsequent dialogue, but it also provided the audience with an insight into the inner workings of this group and the diplomatic ‘handling’ of Bottom that was a ubiquitous feature of life.

The arrival of the fairies at the beginning of Act II scene i is a moment of particular interest, and brings me back to the point on which this chapter began. This meeting of Oberon and Titania mirrored closely the arrival on stage of Theseus and Hippolyta at the beginning of the play, and thus physicalized the parallel Barker drew between the mortal and fairy world. The first scene’s emphasis on rigid formality and courtly procession was echoed in its fairy counterpart both aurally and visually: the same trumpet call marked the beginning of each scene, while the actors adopted similar positions on the stage, creating clean, straight and uniform lines. The formality of these two stage pictures was further reinforced by the informality of the mechanics scene that sat between them. There were, of course, no trumpets to herald the arrival of Quince and company, and their grouping on the stage embodied their lower-class status in much the same way as their use of prose did. The clean, straight and formal lines of the respective courts were replaced by figures huddled in a loose semi-circle, with Snout sitting casually on the steps and looking out to the audience.

With the exception of the mechanics’ scenes, Barker adhered closely to the rules of symmetry when directing his actors. This was, in part, to create a sense of order, but, more importantly, it allowed him to tease out and explore Shakespeare’s own preoccupation with binary oppositions in the play – man and woman; love and hate; the fairy and mortal world, and so on – and the consequences that arise when they are challenged, blurred and confused. Theseus’s court, for example, was organised on strict symmetrical lines: Theseus and Hippolyta occupied thrones in the centre of the stage facing the audience and were flanked by four Amazonian women, positioned downstage right of Hippolyta and facing left, and four male courtiers, positioned downstage left of Theses and facing right. The picture was completed by two pairs of stewards, standing on either side of the stage, and Philostrate, who took his place to the left of Theseus’s throne.[[57]](#endnote-57)

This symmetry was echoed in Oberon’s meeting with Titania. Entering from stage left, Oberon took his position at the centre of the stage, followed by six male trainbearers and other members of his court. Titania did the same from the right, positioning herself face to face with Oberon, with her six female trainbearers lined neatly behind her in pairs, creating another spatial gender binary. Each had a further entourage of six fairies, who took largely corresponding positions in the appropriate half of the stage. Puck, for example, stood on a seat on the far left of the stage, while a member of Titania’s court, whom Barker named Old Man Fairy, sat in the seat on the far right of the stage. The four smallest fairies – Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Mustard and Moth – positioned themselves democratically on the floor in the middle of the stage, directly in front of Oberon and Titania. As well as highlighting the oppositional relations at the heart of the play – creating what John Palmer called ‘a battlefield’ – this staging allowed Barker to utilize every area of the stage space.[[58]](#endnote-58) It also served to make clear the significance of every single figure in the final cohesive and co-ordinated stage picture. The surviving photographs of the production are striking in this respect, capturing the importance placed on the group and Barker’s unwillingness to isolate any figure in it. This was particularly true of Titania’s bower in Act II scene ii, where her attendants formed a unified chorus, first distributing themselves across the playing area in lines of three and then encircling the mound on which Titania slept and dancing around it.[[59]](#endnote-59)

It is useful to pause here and consider briefly the influence of Reinhardt on the creation of such a stage picture. Critics were quick to draw comparisons between Barker’s Shakespeare productions and the work staged by the German director in London during the preceding years.[[60]](#endnote-60) In its review of *The Winter’s Tale*, for example, *The Daily Express* claimed that Barker had ‘killed Shakespeare as completely as Herr Reinhardt killed Sophocles in the production of *Oedipus Rex* at Covent Garden.’[[61]](#endnote-61) J. T. Grein made similar accusations against Barker’s ‘Reinhardtised Shakespeare’.[[62]](#endnote-62) While Barker denied any influence, there are certain points of convergence that are worth noting. Reinhardt was, of course, in the process of developing and maintaining his own ensemble company at the time, and, like Stanislavsky, provided Barker with a model to emulate.

Likewise, the meticulous precision with which Reinhardt rehearsed his company and his desire to create unified group pictures on the stage resonated with the British director. Walkley made the connection between Barker’s *The Winter’s Tale* and Reinhardt’s work in London in 1911: ‘Squads of supers have symmetrical automaton-like movements which show the influence of *Sumurun*’.[[63]](#endnote-63) Such comments were echoed in relation to Barker’s fairies, who ‘pose themselves in “tableaux vivants” fashion and group themselves in awkward attitudes… more often [giving] the impression of lifeless automata than of the airy, graceful folk of fairyland.’[[64]](#endnote-64)

Although bringing a similar level of precision to the orchestration of his scenes, Barker had, in fact, worked hard to avoid any sense of the automata or any attempt to replicate Reinhardt’s treatment of the group as ‘a seething mass that spoke as one.’[[65]](#endnote-65) His aim was, instead, to show the individuality of each member of the group. To return to the arrival of the fairies, Barker orchestrated an elaborate and comic sequence of movements that took each fairy to her or his final stylised position in the procession. These movements served to counterbalance the formality of Oberon and Titania’s subsequent exchange, to distinguish the fairy woodland from the rigidity of Theseus’s court, highlighting the frivolity of the former, and, as Dymkowski argues, to prevent the action from becoming too uniform or artificial.[[66]](#endnote-66) Barker’s stage directions in the Promptbook give a sense of the atmosphere created on the stage:

The Major and 3 Small Fairies [Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed] rush on simultaneously [from left and right, respectively]. They meet at the centre, and the Major frightens them with his sword; they run right and meet Peaseblossom at the Right Prosc[enium] Seat.

The Twins enter together, meet the Major L[eft] C[entre] as he is going down. He twists them round and they continue whirling to the lower entrance left. Major to Left Prosc. Seat above Puck….

Old Man Fairy to Children at Right Prosc. Seat. He frightens them to Centre lower stage, where they crouch in tiny groups on the steps.[[67]](#endnote-67)

It is important to note first Barker’s decision to name the fairies and with it give them a specific character and a purpose in the world of the play. Included in Oberon’s party, for example, were The Major, The Professor and the Doctor, while Titania counted Duenna and Old Man Fairy among her followers. Rejecting the usual habit of treating the fairies as a non-descript mass, Barker used the names to assert, again, the individuality of each fairy. Just as the vocal harmony was created through the variation and juxtaposition of notes, so he needed to demonstrate to the audience the variety of personalities within the fairy group in order to make it more lifelike, truthful and harmonious.

These distinct personalities were communicated to the audience by the fairies’ movements on the stage and their relation to each other. The Major’s threatening movements towards the smaller fairies noted above, for example, indicated his role in Oberon’s entourage, where he was something of a protector or guardian. This was further corroborated during the fairies’ departure from the stage, which was also choreographed carefully:

Old Man and Duenna up to Oberon and make a mocking bow; Oberon stamps his foot and motions to the Major who rushes across the stage, left to right, flourishing his sword; Duenna and Old Man hurry off right.[[68]](#endnote-68)

Such small moments and actions succeeded in transforming *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* into what the *New York Times* called ‘a no-star performance with all its pieces as nicely adjusted as bits in a mosaic.’[[69]](#endnote-69) They also brought the whole fairy world to life, giving it variety and a sense of spontaneity, demonstrating Barker’s desire to bring a sense of informal, everyday movement to the play.

Although these movements were carefully rehearsed, he wanted to give the impression that they were improvised. Further, the rehearsal of such sequences was far from the rigorous drilling used by Irving and others. As Nesbitt recalled: ‘He was not one of those directors who does a lot of homework with a set of puppets, and then says to the actors “I have you standing stage left on that line and moving stage centre on this.” He worked *with* his actors.’[[70]](#endnote-70) It is therefore highly likely that Barker choreographed such sequences in response to the discoveries and experiments of the actors in rehearsals.

Much has already been written about Barker’s decision to forego the traditional cherubic child fairies in wings and replace them with adults in Eastern-inspired dress, making any further exposition here redundant.[[71]](#endnote-71) It is, however, important to note that the choice of costume was not solely to startle audience members or reinforce the fairies’ position as ‘otherworldly’. It also served the purpose of unifying the fairies as a group and distinguishing them from both the group of lovers, whose costumes were based loosely on Grecian designs, and the mechanics, in their informal working clothes in which ‘it does not seem as if they would be strangers, quite, in Stratford market-place.’[[72]](#endnote-72)

Puck’s costume, on the other hand, marked him as an anomaly in the fairy group. Dressed in flaming scarlet, he stood out like the veritable sore thumb in a fairy woodland coloured almost exclusively in hues of gold, bronze, copper and mauve. Yet, the use of scarlet was not to distinguish Puck as the ‘star’ character, as it had been with Irving twenty-eight years earlier, but to highlight his liminal position between the fairy and the mortal worlds. ‘Puck accounts himself a fairy,’ Barker explained, yet his behaviour and style of speech suggested ‘that he is at least of another and inferior breed.’[[73]](#endnote-73) Where Barker saw the other fairies to be undoubtedly foreign and exotic, seemingly ‘at home in India’, he believed Puck to be characteristically English and dressed him accordingly in a doublet and breeches. Kennedy details how Donald Calthorp’s performance as Puck corresponded to this costume, playing him as a hobgoblin from English folklore and, above all else, a prankster.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Barker’s break with sentimental illusion in the costumes was again mirrored by the actors’ performances. In what was perhaps the most acute demonstration of his embrace of the modernist challenge to illusion and naturalism, he dispensed with any attempt to suspend disbelief and convince the audience of Oberon’s invisibility in Act III scene ii. It was enough for Dennis Neilson-Terry to state plainly: ‘I am invisible’. This allowed Barker to keep Oberon, Puck and a small group of other fairies on stage and in plain sight for the rest of the scene. Desmond MacCarthy recalled: ‘The group themselves motionless about the stage, and the lovers move between them and past them as casually as if they were stocks of stones. It is without effort we believe these quaintly gorgeous metallic creatures are invisible to human eyes.’[[75]](#endnote-75) The presence of the fairies on the stage, and the need for the mortals to move around them, illustrated physically the interpolation of the two worlds, as well as the central role played by the fairies – and, indeed, the group in general – in the play.

The performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in Act V scene i provided Barker with a final opportunity to use the group to focus and direct the audience’s attention. He positioned Theseus, Hippolyta and their guests reclining on sofas at the front of the stage with their backs to the audience, offering a delicate counterpoint to the formality of the production’s opening scene and suggesting a new relaxed intimacy and camaraderie between the survivors of the night in the woods. The actor-mechanics delivered their performance directly to the audience, which served to increase its immediacy and theatricality, and to further blur the lines between the play and the play-within-the-play. The court audience played a crucial role in this: its liminal position between the stage and the auditorium saw it adopt the role of the chorus in much the same way as the crowd in *Votes for Women!*, as noted at the beginning of this chapter. This position again brought the scene to life, and was singled out by Walkley for praise: ‘Theseus’s courtly lead in the applause, the whispered comments of Demetrius and Lysander, the lively interest of the courtiers. It was all alive, this scene, and the high-watermark of excitement.’[[76]](#endnote-76)

The audience were encouraged to align themselves with the wedding party, who were, incidentally, presented as much more sympathetic and understanding to the mechanics’ intentions and whose light-hearted interjections and exclamations could easily represent the audience’s own attitudes towards the theatre. Further, the lovers’ willingness to laugh at the mechanics, oblivious to the fact that they were themselves the subject of the fairies’ mirth a few hours earlier, suggested, albeit gently, the need for the audience to pause and consider their own willingness to laugh at the action on stage. As Dymkowski explains, ‘the court laughs at the mechanicals, the fairies at the court, each group blind to its own ridiculousness.’[[77]](#endnote-77) Barker, it seems was asking his audience to start to contemplate their own action and behaviour.

***Iphigenia* in the United States**

A brief examination of Barker’s work on Euripides’s tragedies provides a useful expansion on – and a coda to – my discussion of his work with groups in Shakespeare. It was, after all, in these plays that Barker first experimented with different ways of presenting the group on the stage, developing many of the techniques and strategies that he used so effectively in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. At the same time, he brought his experience of staging Shakespeare at the Savoy to bear on his subsequent Greek productions in order to find solutions to the problem posed by the chorus. A particular problem that preoccupied him was preoccupied by the question of how to make the chorus appear relevant and alive to a contemporary audience

His production of *Iphigenia in Tauris* is of particular significance, since it signified something of a breakthrough in Barker’s struggles with the chorus. He first staged the play in March 1912 as part of his Kingsway Theatre season with Lillah McCarthy, before presenting a reworked version of it alongside *The Trojan Women* during his tour of the east coast of North America in 1915. Barker had crossed the Atlantic following an invitation from the New York Stage Society to direct a season of work at the Wallack’s Theatre, a move that, as the legend goes, was encouraged by H. H. Asquith as part of the war effort.[[78]](#endnote-78) This season comprised productions of Shaw’s *Androcles and the Lion* and *The Doctor’s Dilemma*, Anatole France’s *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*, and his production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for which he had an entirely new and local company, with the exception of McCarthy as Helena. It was during a visit to the Yale Bowl in New Haven that Barker was struck by the opportunity such a space offered for the presentation of Greek plays, and he soon arranged a tour of *Iphigenia* and *The Trojan Women* to the stadia at Yale, Harvard, Princeton, the City College of New York and the University of Pennsylvania.

This tour provided Barker with the chance to realise his long-time ambition of staging Euripides’s plays outside. He was himself aware of the artificial limitations that the proscenium arch placed on such plays, having been forced to struggle with it in his earlier productions. ‘The mere transference from outdoors in will prove deadening,’ he warned.

And no one who has ever sat in a Greek theatre, and felt how the choric movements, patterned in the circle of the orchestra, both relieve and enhance by contrast the dignity of the individual action uplifted against the proscenium, will easily be reconciled to the disfiguring of all this behind footlights.[[79]](#endnote-79)

The open-air stadium, by contrast, brought a sense of freedom and gave Barker the space to experiment with his chorus, creating elaborate movement patterns in order to make clear their central role in the performance. The larger space also gave him room to have a chorus of twenty individuals plus the leader as opposed to the eight or ten with which he usually had to settle due to the confines of the proscenium space. It likewise turned the performances into huge community events, bringing an average audience of between 5,000 and 8,000 people comprising a range of ages and professions. Indeed, the size of the audience at each performance was a distinctive feature of the productions, and it was estimated that around 60,000 people saw the plays over the course of the tour.[[80]](#endnote-80)

Barker ensured that the performances were not lost in the mammoth stadia through his use of the stage space and set, which was, again, designed by Norman Wilkinson and reflected Barker’s modernist and non-naturalist style. Drawing on the traditional spatial arrangements of Greek theatre, Barker included a *skene*, or stage, at the back of the space, which comprised a large wooden building with three large golden doors and a narrow platform on which the actors performed, which was lifted five steps from the ground. Between the *skene* and the audience lay the *orchestra*, the large circular space in which the chorus danced, sang and spoke to the audience directly. It was one hundred foot in diameter with a raised altar in the centre, and was made of white canvas with a series of interlocking geometric squares and circles. This was one of the ways that Barker ensured audience members could see the staging regardless of where they sat in the stadium.

The geometric design both determined and accentuated the movements of the chorus, as was noted by some of the critics.[[81]](#endnote-81) For their first entrance into the performance space, the chorus, divided into two groups of ten, marched down either side of the *skene* in pairs and crossed in front of it, meeting in the middle with Alma Kruger, the Leader of the Chorus, in the centre. Symmetry was, again, a guiding principle for Barker. Having delivered the first section of their speech from this position, the group then walked forward before positioning themselves around the largest circle on the ground cloth whilst delivering the line: ‘The wells and the garden/And the seats where our fathers sate.’[[82]](#endnote-82) Kruger maintained her central position, this time at the top of the circle, while the chorus members were placed evenly around its circumference. Later in the play, when Iphigenia entered the temple to prepare for the arrival of the two latest sacrifices, Kruger moved to a standing position directly in front of the altar within the smallest square on the ground cloth, with a chorus member positioned in each corner of the square. The rest of the chorus was positioned around the slightly larger square, which was rotated to form a diamond shape. A chorus member stood at each of the points, while a further three stood along each side.[[83]](#endnote-83)

These examples demonstrate how the ground cloth was used to plot the movements of the chorus as they completed the various formal ceremonial patterns, as well as marking the positions at which each member needed to arrive. However, by following these lines and arranging themselves accordingly, the chorus drew attention to the various shapes and forms woven into the intricate design and, further, brought to life the various geometric possibilities that were on offer. In this sense, Barker used the chorus to explore the dynamics of space and to create coherent pictures where the whole space was used, in much the same way as he did in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream.*

The above examples also indicate the intricacy and precision of the choreography. The detailed notes in the Chorus Promptbook show that each chorus member was given a number from one to twenty so that she could know where she needed to be and at what times. This was particularly important as the production progressed and the patterns became increasingly complex. Indeed, there was a great deal of movement throughout the performance, where the chorus were continually changing positions and creating new formations and new shapes on the stage. As Iphigenia left the stage to make her escape with Orestes and Pylades, for example, the sequence of movements performed by the Chorus was as follows:

12, 1, 11, 9 continue reciting

7, 19, 13, 2, 8, 15 } walk to centre of circles

18, 6, 17, 5, 8, 5

7, 19, 13, 2, 8, 15 } face right hand inward and form “star”

18, 6, 17, 5, 8, 5

7, 19, 13, 2, 8, 15 } wheel in “star” formation[[84]](#endnote-84)

18, 6, 17, 5, 8, 5

Having held this position for little more than three lines of dialogue, the Chorus returned to the larger circle before fragmenting again into different groups and a more complex variation of the star formation.

The precision with which Barker choreographed and rehearsed his Chorus once again led critics to draw comparisons between him and Reinhardt. While there is certainly weight to such claims, one can also see traces of the influence of Edward Gordon Craig and, in particular, his work with the Purcell Operatic Society. Craig started the amateur society with Martin Fallas Shaw in 1900, and during its two-year existence they staged four productions: *Dido and Aeneas*, *The Masque of Love*, *Acis and Galatea* and *Bethlehem*. While the latter was staged after the demise of the Society, it included a large number of former members in its company.

Craig directed the movement in the production, where he trained the company rigorously to develop their flexibility, co-ordination and to encourage them to work together as a unified group as opposed to a collection of individuals. His intention was to capture the atmosphere of Purcell’s operas as opposed to any precise meaning, and he reduced elements and gestures down to an almost archetypal level. To achieve this, he developed detailed system of notation from which to rehearse them and choreographed slow movements to be performed in synchrony that were, as Christopher Innes argues, more in line with a Greek chorus than a corps de ballet.[[85]](#endnote-85) It is possible to see this approach reflected in Barker’s own method of working with actors, particularly with regards his Euripidean productions. He was certainly aware of what Craig was doing: he was a subscribed supporter of the Society and no doubt attended the few productions that it staged.[[86]](#endnote-86) He also acknowledged publicly that *Bethlehem* had been a formative influence for him at a time when he was denying that a similar debt was owed to Reinhardt.[[87]](#endnote-87)

However, the motive behind each director’s quest for a unified group of actors was very different. In keeping with the ideas outlined in his controversial 1908 essay ‘The Actor and the Über-marionette’, Craig’s aim was to transcend the individual personality of the actor and subordinate her or him to the overall design of the production. This entailed reducing the actors on stage to an indiscernible mass of abstract bodies. In *Acis and Galatea*, for example, he used the same strips of ribbon for the chorus’s costumes as those used for the scenery, making it almost impossible to distinguish the performers from each other and from the scenic design. Barker used a similar device in his Greek productions, where he often dressed the Chorus in dark colours so he ‘could bring them into the prominence when required, but could avoid the awkwardness of eleven unoccupied ladies hindering sightlines when the action resumed.’[[88]](#endnote-88) Yet, this was, for Barker, more a question of logistics and an attempt to ingratiate the Chorus in his production more organically than a desire to silence and dominate the actor. As has already been seen, his aim was to embrace the individuality of each performer and character, and to bring them into dialogue with each other as part of a composite whole.

Barker used the same techniques he exercised on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* on *Iphigenia* so as to avoid the indistinct mass put forward by both Reinhardt and Craig, albeit with some necessary adjustments. The stylised nature of Greek tragedy, for instance, precluded him from introducing the spontaneous fun of the fairies, but he found other, more subtle ways to achieve this. He used the voice, for example, to create a sense of aural variety on the stage, dividing the text into sections and distributing it amongst the group. This meant that Barker could alternate between the group chanting, speaking or singing in unison and solo or duet voices taking up the refrain, and thus avoid too strong a sense of repetition or uniformity. He also varied from where the voices and sounds were coming, having voices singing together from opposites sides of stage, or splitting a particular song between a group downstage left and one upstage right, as he did with the Chorus’s song that followed *Iphigenia*’s recognition scene.[[89]](#endnote-89) Similarly, his choreographed movements were not necessarily to be performed in unison and instead included a range of gestures that suggested variation within the chorus.

Such small and simple strategies helped Barker to achieve with this production something that had evaded him on previous attempts, namely, to integrate the Chorus into the production and to eradicate from it and the play in general accusations of anachronism. In short, he wanted his Chorus appear realistic and truthful, just as he wanted his fairies to appear alive on the stage. Even when repeating carefully rehearsed movements, they had a sense of being live and responding to the events on stage. Thus, the direction for the Chorus to ‘rush to groups of four’ on the arrival of the Messenger bearing news of Iphigenia’s escape suggested a real sense of fear amongst the group and the need to pull together physically to defend the coming onslaught. The effect on the audience was palpable, where

with a growing and horrifying war as the backdrop, and a pacifist mood at large in America, Euripides may have spoken more directly than at any time since the defeat of Athens. To gather 10,000 people at a single performance of a play in the twentieth century is itself an accomplishment; to have them also feel the power of an ancient poet is almost unheard of.[[90]](#endnote-90)

Once again, Barker innovative presentation of the group on the stage succeeded in cutting through centuries of conventions and expectations to speak to his audience directly.

1. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* opened on 6 February 1914 and followed Barker’s production of *The Winter’s Tale* in September 1912 and *Twelfth Night* in November 1912. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. An Ordinary Playgoer, ‘Gilt Faces: The Pit and Shakespeare Lovers’, *Daily Mail*, 10 February 1914; ‘The Theatre: “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” at the Savoy’, *The People*, 8 February 1914. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. ‘‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ at the Savoy’, *The Athenaeum*, 14 February 1914; J. T. Grein, ‘At the Sign of the “Rose”: Granville Barker Produces “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” at the Savoy’, *Financial News*, 7 February 1914. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A.B. Walkley, ‘“A Midsummer Night’s Dream”: Mr Barker’s Production’, *The Times*, 7 February 1914. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lewis Casson provides a detailed account of Barker’s approach to rehearsals at the Court Theatre in Anthony Jackson, ‘Harley Granville Barker as Director at the Royal Court Theatre, 1904-1907’, *Theatre Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1972), pp. 132-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Harley Granville Barker, ‘Hints on Rehearsing a Play’, Unpublished Article, Harley Granville Barker Collection, Victoria and Albert Archive, London (no date), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Works* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1911), p. 368. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Elizabeth Robins, *Votes for Women!* (London: Mills and Boon Limited, 1909), p. 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. E.A.B., “Votes for Women!” A Suffragette Tract. Trafalgar Square on the Stage’, *London Daily News*, 10 April 1907. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘“Votes for Women!” A Dramatic Tract in Three Acts’, *The Times*, 10 April 1907. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. E.A.B., ‘“Votes for Women!”’. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Dennis Kennedy, *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Christine Dymkowski gives the example of Henry Irving’s *Romeo and Juliet*, where he removed scenes that established the Capulet-Montague feud and important crowd scenes in order to centralise the two titular characters. Dymkowski, *Harley Granville Barker: A Preface to Modern Shakespeare* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1986), p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. As part of his Court Theatre seasons, Barker staged *Hippolytus* (1904), *The Trojan Women* (1905), *Electra* (1906) and *Hippolytus*, again (also 1906). He then staged *Medea* in 1907 at the Savoy Theatre, *Iphigenia in Tauris* at the Kingsway in 1912, and then *Iphigenia* and *The Trojan Women* in the United States in 1915. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Noel K. Thomas, ‘Harley Granville-Barker and the Greek Drama’, *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (December 1955), p. 294. The notable exception is Kennedy’s *Granville Barker and the Dream of Theatre*, whic includes detailed discussion of Barker’s work with Attic tragedy. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Harley Granville Barker, ‘On Translating Greek Tragedy’ in J. A. K. Thomson, ed., *Essays in Honour of Gilbert Murray*, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1936), p. 243. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Harley Granville Barker, Handwritten programme note for William Poel’s production of *The Bacchae* at the Court Theatre in November 1908, Harley Granville-Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, np. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Dennis Kennedy, ‘The New Drama and the new audience’ in Booth, Michael R. and Joel H. Kaplan, *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Programme of the Provisional Committee for the New Century Theatre cited in James Woodfield, *English Theatre in Transition, 1881-1914* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Philippa Burt, ‘Granville Barker’s Ensemble as a Model of Fabian Theatre’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (November 2012), pp. 307-24. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Stanley Jones [Leonard Merrick], *The Actor and His Art: Some Considerations on the Present State of the Stage* (London: Downey and Company, 1899), p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. George Moore, *Impressions and Opinions* (London: David Nutt, 1913), p. 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For a detailed account of common rehearsal practices throughout the Victorian period, see Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 104-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Madeline Bingham, *Henry Irving and the Victorian Theatre* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p. 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
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26. Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Harley Granville Barker, *The Exemplary Theatre* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1922), p. 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968 [1924]), p. 159. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. George Bernard Shaw, *Our Theatre in the Nineties, Vol. 2* (London: Constable and Company Limited, 1932), p. 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig: A Vision of Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age*, p. 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Cathleen Nesbitt, *A Little Love and Good Company* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
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42. Barker, ‘At the Moscow Art Theatre’, p. 660. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
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56. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Stage Manager’s Book, Harley Granville-Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. These positions were reproduced carefully in the above prompt book. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. John Palmer cited in Dymkowski, *Harley Granville Barker*, p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *A Midsummer*, Stage Manager’s Book, n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. For a detailed discussion of Reinhardt’s supposed influence on Barker, see Nicholas John Dekker, *The Modern Catalyst: German Influences on the British Stage, 1890-1918*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Ohio State University (2007), pp. 87-138. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
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66. Dymkowski, *Harley Granville Barker*, p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. *A Midsummer*, Stage Manager’s Book, n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. ‘A Glimpse of Mr Barker from Behind the Scenes’, *New York Times*, 21 February 1915. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Nesbitt, *A Little Love*, p. 62; original emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. See, Barker, *Prefaces*, pp. 55-6; Dymkowski, *Harley Granville Barker*, pp. 60-5; Christopher McCullough, ‘Harley Granville Barker’ in Brown, ed., *Routledge Companion*, pp. 105-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
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78. Charles B. Purdom, *Harley Granville Barker: Man of Theatre, Dramatist and Scholar* (London: Rockliff, 1955), p. 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Barker, ‘On Translating’, p. 240. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Nearly all of the national and regional newspapers reporting on the productions centred their attention on the size of the audience. See, for example, ‘Greek Play Delights a Big Audience at Harvard Stadium’, *Boston Post*, 19 May 1915; ‘Euripides’ Work at the Stadium. “The Trojan Women” Effectively Produced – Large Audience Enjoys Play’, *Boston Herald*,20 May 1915; ‘Lewishohn Stadium, Modelled on the Coliseum, is Opened with Greek Play’, *The Sun*, 30 May 1915. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. ‘At the Stadium. “Iphigenia in Tauris” Acted by Granville Barker’s Players’, *Boston Evening Transcript*, 19 May 1915. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Chorus Promptbook, Harley Granville-Barker Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid., p. 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., p. 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig*, p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Barker is included on Shaw’s 1902 list of subscribers, which is held at Eton College Library, Berkshire. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. Barker in *The Daily Mail*, 26 September 1912. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Kennedy, *Granville Barker*, p. 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. *Iphigenia*, p. 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. Kennedy, *Granville Barker*, p. 185.

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