



PROJECT MUSE®

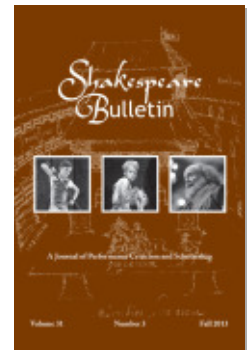
Mankind (review)

Elizabeth E. Tavares

Shakespeare Bulletin, Volume 31, Number 3, Fall 2013, pp. 558-562 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2013.0054>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/520947>

he wasn't seeking, or able, to restore Denmark to political health. This was a task for a Fortinbras—a doer, not an invader, to whom Hamlet's voice was genuinely given. Horatio's lot was to square the painful moral circle of his love for Hamlet, the will of the Ghost and the health of the state: a role ridden with ambiguity and guilt.

Visually, the muted ending was conspicuously triangulated. High up on the backstage screen, Hamlet had become a legend in an unreachable, insubstantial beyond. Sitting on the line between this image and the gate from which the Ghost first emerged, Horatio, friend and traitor, looked at and beyond us. Dejected, Fortinbras sat off-center. Was there hope for Denmark in all this? Was this the answer to the call for revenge, shouted by a fourteen-year-old (!) Ghost (Konstantin Stanchev)? After so much loss, was there a hope for justice and peace for an angry, betrayed, abused teenage generation? Or would the world remain a messy playground for revenge and self-destruction? As the lights went up, many more questions hung in the air, unresolved and with potentially different answers.

Alexander Shurbanov's fine new translation was the characteristic choice for a director who sought to create *Hamlet* anew by taking the audience out of the comfort zone of received expectations and making it listen to a Shakespeare who had never been more precisely rendered into Bulgarian. Running at slightly over three and a half hours, with outstanding performances from Leonid Yovchev, Marius Kurkinski and Vesela Babinova, Javor Gardev's breathtaking production of spectacular synoptic imagination and intellectually alluring depths courageously stood for the honor of the individual and for theater as a place of release, truth and reflection whose very fragility and butterfly vulnerability have a power to move and uplift, even in the teeth of an unbearable life.



Mankind

Presented by the **University of Illinois Program in Medieval Studies**, with the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, at the **Levis Faculty Center**, Champaign, Illinois. April 19, 2013. Directed by Kimberly Fonzo and Ann Hubert. Costumes by Erin McQuiston, Chris Hampson, Cara Adams, and the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. With Erin Chandler (*Mankind*), C.J. DeVevitis (*Nought*), Ella Lubienski (*Newguise*), Nick Stanko (*Mercy/Titivillus*), Stephanie Svarz (*Mischief*) and Michelle Zacarias (*Nowadays*).

ELIZABETH E. TAVARES, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

It was a battle with temptation from the moment we stepped in the door. The smell of roast meat and potatoes greeted the guests upon entering the open, glassed upper floor of the Levis Faculty Center, and a slice of dessert—a sweet, creamy cheesecake—already marked each individual place setting. As a play that dramatizes the Christian concept of *psychomachia*, the battle for the soul, the medieval morality drama *Mankind* represents humanity's ongoing struggle to choose between good and evil. We playgoers were immediately placed in a similar subject position to that of its eponymous character, Mankind. Thanks to its status as dinner theater, the performance was framed by gluttony. Faced with a decision between the rigors of labor or the ease of carousing, Mankind struggled to decipher the rhetorics enticing her to travel down righteous or sinful paths—just as we struggled with how many times it would be appropriate to visit the open bar while sitting in the midst of leading medieval performance scholars.

The one-night-only performance concluded the planning stage of a pilot project, "Performing the Middle Ages," funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities' "Humanities Without Walls" initiative. Broadly, the initiative aims to cultivate an extensive consortium of humanities institutes across the Midwest, with this particular project bringing together medieval performance specialists from the Universities of Illinois, Notre Dame, Chicago, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio State, and Purdue. The immediate implication of this framework for this particular performance was that the academic audience, while attentive and appreciative, was less willing to disrupt the action than had been anticipated by its directors. Not one Latin pun went without a guffaw, however, especially with the hand-held dry erase boards as visual aides.

The tension between the desire to adhere to original practices and the rifts that anachronism might present to authenticity did not go unaccounted for by the directors, Kimberly Fonzo and Anne Hubert, both doctoral candidates at the University of Illinois. Considering that the play includes characters with names like Nowadays, compelling material compromises were struck that productively addressed the contextual temporal layers between the fifteenth and twenty-first centuries. For example, the youthfully petulant Newguise (Ella Lubienski), Nowadays (Michelle Zacarias) and Nought (C.J. DeDevitis) wore blended costumes that seemed stuck out of time, mixing present and period signifiers. Drumsticks, cell phones, denim and low-top chucks were placed alongside doublets and hose. These were also the performers most willing to break down barriers

between character and audience. Dinner rolls were often grabbed from diners' plates to be nibbled and left on another table, thrown at Mercy, or off-handedly lobbed across the room. By localizing the conditions of the performance in costuming and libation, the directors gave the play's larger themes of sin and salvation exigency and temporal purchase.

This is not to say that the production conditions didn't adequately estrange the audience through conventions that suggested the mental furniture of medieval habits of mind. While the promises of scatological humor provide the initial hook of such a play (and the poop jokes were many, including prop feces indelicately wiped off onto a patron's chair), couching the comedy was the exploration of the competing sermon rhetorics deployed by the rival preachers Mercy (Nick Stanko) and Mischief (Stephanie Svarz). Mercy and Mischief wore simple parallel white costumes that helped visually to reinforce their opposing positions in the battle for Mankind's soul. Mercy, the quintessential cleric, provided helpful parables to promote spiritual understanding in a dry, Latinate, and too-rhythmic pace that risked alienating us in comparison to Mischief's clever puns and wry physicality. How could we not suffer at Mercy's dictums, including "the world is but a vanity," "beware yourselves of excess," and "measure is treasure," when the food coma induced by red wine and heavy starches had just begun to set in?

The literal and figurative selling point of the play—I think in teaching as much as in performance—is the collection scene. In this production, *Newguise* and *Nowadays*, accompanied by Nought's lute music, came to each of the large banquet tables full of food and guests, looking for monetary contributions that would persuade them to bring out the play's main attraction, the Vice Titivillus. Most attendees seemed to have come prepared, as their collection baskets were quickly filled with singles. It was a smart choice to double Nick Stanko as both Mercy and Titivillus not only for his sheer size, but also to recreate the original casting practices of doubling likely used by touring companies—a strategy that in part aided in negotiating the play's view of temptation (i.e., consider the notion that it would be easier to convince an actor to play the dour role of Mercy if that part was sweetened with the inclusion of the deliciously villainous Titivillus role). Combining vocal projection and height, his Mercy towered over the room. The Titivillus costume was that of an enormous green monster with long claws, a dramatically textured and shimmering body suit, and a giant headpiece whose gaping mouth, wide eyes and horned ears easily added another foot to Stanko. The high production value of this costume in contrast to those of other, more cobbled



Fig. 19. Erin Chandler as Mankind and Nick Stanko as Titivillus in the University of Illinois's 2013 production of *Mankind*, directed by Kimberly Fonzo and Ann Hubert. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth E. Tavares.

costuming choices reinforced the audience's sense of being co-opted into the moral arc of the narrative, having been well repaid for the few dollars tossed into the kitty.

But these elements might have all been for naught if Mankind wasn't someone for whom we could root. The part was played by Erin Chandler, also a doctoral candidate with the English department at the University of Illinois in the Medieval Studies program, and her period and linguistic expertise in Old English and Latin proved assets to her performance choices. While no one was paid for his or her work, it would be hard to call this production amateur; I believed in Mankind's struggle, suffering, cynicism, and eventual redemption even when I missed the precise nuance of the Latinate language. Chandler understood and conveyed meaning beyond a recitation of text, especially in the display of exasperation and remorse in her body language. The room, with its large bay windows and high ceilings, seemed to crush Mankind, suggesting her frailty and susceptibility not only to vice but to her material surroundings. Brandishing her small trowel against the covertly placed wooden plank impeding her from virtuously sewing her crop, her incarnation of Mankind paired

comic physicality with a lucid conveyance of the script, exploring the potential ineffectiveness of the sermon form that failed to captivate her and us in the same way that sin does. To further buoy *Mankind's* clarity, the ensemble thoroughly engaged with the difficult performance style required by the morality play, where emblematically symbolic and genderless figures do their work on us as concepts rather than characters. After a final full-bodied applause, my tablemates and I seemed to take a collective pause, considering longer than we might ordinarily have done a first bite of the cheesecake that had been with us, silently tempting and waiting patiently, all along.