

*Henry V* in 1972: Learning from Ngaio Marsh

NZHA Virtual Conference

November 25 2021

Mark Houlahan

University of Waikato

My aim in this paper is to describe the production of *Henry V* (1) Ngaio Marsh staged to open the James Hay Theatre in the Christchurch Town Hall in October, 1972. I have a long-standing interest in the assimilation and adaptation of Shakespeare to New Zealand conditions, a story that stretches as far back as the *Endeavour* voyage when a copy of Shakespeare's complete works sailed on the ship. So one question I want to understand is what kind of Shakespeare experience did this production offer? Here I will link that question with a newer interest in exploring ways we can use archives, both physical and digital, to create fresher, more nuanced forms of theatrical and cultural history, as a successful performance does not stand alone but resonates with the wider culture from which it comes.

In the case of *Henry V* the archive is, substantially, physical; as I'll be drawing on the large Ngaio Marsh archive housed in the Turnbull Library, along with published reviews of the production and Marsh's own recollection of the event published in the revised version of her autobiography, *Black Beech and Honeydew*. Biographers have made use of Marsh's papers; and recently the script for Marsh's 1943 *Hamlet* has been published. The published proceedings of a conference held in the centennial year of Marsh's birth (1995) combine useful biographical, personal and analytical perspectives. Nevertheless the Marsh archive is an underutilized resource, and so I will share here some details from it.

## **The Venue**

(2) So the opening of the Christchurch Town Hall in 1972 was a big event. This shot is of the exterior of the building with its fountain, and the river Avon flowing below: you can see the punt plying tourists on the river. (3). The town hall's larger venue is renowned for its dynamic sound and all-surrounding seating. (4) In this shot, taken from the souvenir programme from 1972 you can see the design of the larger space on the right and on the left, across the large atrium style foyer space, the James Hay Theatre. This seats 1308 people, and was designed by Miles Warren with a deeply recessed proscenium with a stage that thrust into the audience. (5) (6). There is a central seating block with two angled bays on either side. The concept is that with the stage coming out into the audience, and the audience effectively wrapped around the stage, then audience and performers can be in close contact with each other. In his review in the *Listener* in October 1972, Bruce Mason praised the theatre's "most accommodating and welcoming intimacy." (Mason p. 13)

The Town Hall complex was extensively damaged in the Christchurch earthquake of February 2011 and has been expensively restored as a fulcrum space in the new "northern frame" for the outskirts of the Christchurch downtown. Ian Lochhead's 2019 collection, *A Vision Renewed* is a sumptuously illustrated and authoritative guide to the design principles underpinning the original design and its 21st century earthquake-proofed refit. I was never in the Town Hall before 2011, but earlier this year I heard Marlon Williams sing in the James Hay Theatre and experienced the closeness between performer and audience the venue offers.

### **The Production**

Ngaio Marsh was asked in March, 1972 to stage a play for the new theatre. Initially it was planned to open with a production of the late medieval play *Everyman* directed by the famous English director Tyrone Guthrie who was renowned for designing and exploiting the staging possibilities of a thrust space, but this could not travel to Christchurch. By 1972, Marsh had

been directing Shakespeare since 1943 and her company had performed throughout New Zealand and in Australia. Her three decades of productions set a benchmark for Shakespeare performance in New Zealand; and gave early chances for some notable performers, including Sam Neill and James Laurenson. Marsh decided on *Henry V*. This was to be the last of her stage Shakespeares and used the largest cast she had ever directed, with around 100 performers on stage. The dynamism of the production Mason notes then arose out of the choreographic skill with which the well drilled cast moved from one location to the next. The kinesthetic impact of that many actual bodies in synch on stage would always be hugely impressive.

In November 1972, Marsh donated her papers concerning the production to the Turnbull and this is the basis for analysing it, as we can access the promptbook (the stage manager's copy of the play with performance cues and staging detail), reviews, posters, staging photos and other associated ephemera. A very small sampling of Marsh-related images are digitised on the National Library website. I could not present this paper, however, without being able to visit the Turnbull itself which I was able to do in between level shifts earlier this year.

### (7)

There are surviving prompt books or production scripts for eleven of Marsh's Shakespeares, and they share many common features. The *Henry V* script must originally have been kept in a ring binder (the punch holes are clearly visible). Each two- page opening makes an A3 or Folio size space. The script has been taken from two broken up copies of the Pelican paperback Shakespeare, pasted onto the right side of the leaf. Cuts are physically marked with a strike through on the pages. These were quite extensive, and mirror the cuts marked in a script for an earlier production of the play. Marsh was keen never to wear out her audience,

so always cut vigorously. “Coaches at 10.30” was her maxim, that being the time when she knew her Christchurch audience would want to head home.

On the left side of each opening of the promptbook is crowded with arresting detail. Here are vivid sketches of stage groupings, often accompanied by meticulous numbering of the phases of action within each scene. Her tendency was to block out each scene in advance of rehearsal; she had trained as a painter and always retained a strong visual sense, which is mark also of set pieces in her novels. The image here shows the layout for 2.3, with Mistress Quickly downstage centre, surrounded in tableau by Nym, boy, Pistol and Bardolph. These are non-historical comic characters Shakespeare invented in the two plays before *Henry V*, *Henry IV I and II*. These evoke the reign of Henry’s father, Henry Bolingbroke, when Henry V was a time wasting, over-drinking rascal. Shakespeare fills out the picture of dynastic quarrels with glimpses of how the underclass coped with the politics of war. It makes the play world more human.

A famous sequence of the play are the linking Chorus speeches at the beginning of each act, which guide the audience back in time to the reign of Henry V, 200 years before the play was first staged in the Globe theatre, London in 1599. “He sets the scene; he fans the flames” notes Marsh [at I.3 of her version]. The popular imaginary of late medieval history in the play is then something like the version of the Napoleonic wars in Europe you get in writers like Bernard Cornwell and Patrick O’Brian.

**(8)** For the role of Chorus, Marsh was using Jonathan Elsom, an actor who had begun acting in her productions and who had been working as a professional actor in London for about 10 years. She kept as an opening night surprise the presentation of the Chorus as if it were

spoken by Shakespeare himself. In this slide you can see Elsom on the left with the ruff collar, and recessed hairline taken as a close simulation of the image of Shakespeare on the right, the most recognisable icon of Shakespeare we have from his Complete Works of 1623.

The first night started about 15 minutes late, as the safety curtain got stuck; when it opened, through a fog of blue light and dry ice high on a scaffold at the rear of the stage could be seen Elsom as Shakespeare, reciting the Chorus: “Oh for a Muse of fire”. (9) This blurry image is the best in the archive of this moment. The promptbook calls this the “vision”, the idea, well received by reviewers Howard McNaughton and Bruce Mason, of being cast back in the mists of time to 1599. The Chorus then reappeared frequently, at points guiding actors in setting up the next sequence, and closing the play with panache, moving through the final ensemble of characters at the end of Act 5 to speak the epilogue, which closes the play and looks forward to the much less happy reign of Henry’s son, Henry VI.

(10) In 21st century Shakespeare production the common practice is to update the setting of a play, using modern clothing, deploying video screens and cell phones-the tech affects that are so much part of our world. Though her first Shakespeare (the *Hamlet* of 1943) was the first modern dress Shakespeare staged in New Zealand, in *Henry V* we can see Marsh taking a more traditional approach, evoking instead a neo-medieval, neo-Renaissance past. This is evident in this image of the stage flats for the wall of the city of Harfleur in northern France. The English army besieges the town and the governor surrenders. This is one of the two main set pieces in the play, the other being the battle of Agincourt, where the French cavalry is undone by the English archers who could shoot their arrows further than the French.

In this image we can see the production team building the city wall, two to three times higher than they are. The key thing is that no New Zealand city or town has ever looked like this.

Just as the costuming of the Chorus was designed to shift the audience back from 1972 to 1599 so the evocation of the townscape seems to evoke a kind of generic, neo-medieval picturesque. In itself, this was impressive. On October 4, 1972, Bruce Mason wrote to Marsh, expanding the praise for her stage spectacle he had not been allowed space for in his published review: “one seemed many times not to be in a theatre at all but in the midst of some endless unfolding panorama of life and history”. Days after witnessing the premiere, he was still rapt in awe at “the heraldic ebb and flow of it, and the sense of space and distance.” He was beglamoured by the evocation both of the Elizabethan and late medieval past.

The production ran for 10 consecutive nights, each of which sold out. Selling over 13000 seats is a considerable achievement, comparable to the success of the Pop-up Globe in Auckland from 2016-2020. However, praise for the show was not universal. Reviewers noted some unevenness in performances (perhaps inevitable with the combining of amateur and professional actors), and some felt that David Hindin was not quite martial enough to be convincing as the king (in their widely available films, for example, Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh give quite heroic interpretations of the part). In the second half of the show the commitment to spectacle and framing the ensemble seems to have become rather static. A visiting American literary scholar, Herbert Bogart, spending the year at the University of Canterbury on a Fulbright Scholarship, registered his qualified disappointment:

But finally what I witnessed was a safe cultural event guaranteed to offend no one, put on by a sincere, hard working semi-amateurish company. I had hoped for a complex, thoughtful, artistic experience, professionally executed. (Bogart 168)

Here Bogart notes the paradox of this “significant” cultural event. On the one hand the production was part of the inaugurations for a world-class, cutting-edge performance venue, and on the other the production cast a backward glance. This was a summation of Marsh’s

directorial practice: articulate, with evocative, panoramic sets, with the space of the stage often strewn with impressive tableaux. And the production was, in a sense, in flight from New Zealand; and that too is of a piece with Marsh's career long ambivalence around being a New Zealander. She worked hard to sustain "high" culture in New Zealand, along European lines. She hated the New Zealand accent, which she considered flat and nasal, grotesquely unsuited to the rhetorical demands of a major Shakespearean text (her imitation of this in recorded lectures is very funny). She coaxed her actors out of their 'natural' voices.

So a distinction I would make is that this was a largely successful production of *Henry V* in New Zealand but that, by design there was nothing *of* contemporary New Zealand on stage. By 1972 New Zealand soldiers had for several years been supporting American troops in Vietnam and throughout the country violent protests had been staged against this support for a foreign war. An opportunity was clearly lost to register this in Shakespeare's most war-soaked play, the one that evokes in the most detail a panoramic experience of war for combatants, followers, victors and the vanquished. Making such direct links from the Shakespeare text on stage to the world elsewhere outside the theatre was never Marsh's aim.

### **Coda**

In the year 2000 Auckland University staged *Henry V* directed by Sam Trubridge, now an innovative, professional director. I saw this twice, once on the loading bay at the rear of Auckland University's School of Architecture and then at a mini-Shakespeare festival in Stratford, Taranaki, where all the streets are named from Shakespeare and where the head of Shakespeare sits atop a clock in the main street. There is a scene where a Welshman forces a boastful Englishman to eat a leek. Here the large raw leek was violently shoved down the throat, visceral and highly discomforting to watch. [11] The venue, which you can see in my

final slide, was the Malone Gates, Stratford's memorial to Colonel William Malone, who led troops gallantly at Gallipoli and who died there during the Chunuk Bair offensive in August, 2015. In the chill of an early autumn morning, the production emphasized the pitiless, inglorious aspect of war, with ruling factions exploiting minorities, underclasses and women for their own ends. It was passionate, heartfelt and disturbing. If there is still a space for performing Shakespeare in Aotearoa/New Zealand, that is the kind of Shakespeare we need to see.



- Agee, James. "Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*." *Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now*, edited by James Shapiro, Library of America, 2014, pp. 459-474.
- Bogart, Herbert. "O for a Muse of Film," *Islands*, Vol 1, no. 2 Summer 1972, 166-169
- Flaherty, Kate. "Lest We Remember: Henry V and the Play of Commemorative Rhetoric on the Australian Stage." *Antipodal Shakespeare: Remembering and Forgetting in Britain, Australia and New Zealand, 1916-2016*, edited by Gordon McMullan and Philip Mead, Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 145–73.
- Hoskins, Polly, editor. *Ngaio Marsh's Hamlet: The 1943 Production Script*. Christchurch, NZ: Canterbury UP, 2019.
- Lochhead, Ian. Editor. *The Christchurch Town Hall 1965-2019: a Dream Renewed*. Christchurch, NZ: Canterbury UP, 2020.
- Mason, Bruce. Review of *Henry V*, dir. Ngaio Marsh, *New Zealand Listener*, October 23 , 1972, 13.
- McNaughton, Howard. Review of *Henry V*, dir. Ngaio Marsh, *Christchurch Star* Monday October 2, 1972.
- Norwich, John Julius. *Shakespeare's Kings: the Great Plays and the History of England in the Middle Ages: 1337-1485*. Scribner: 1999.
- Sacco, Peter. *Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle, and Drama*. Oxford UP, 1977.
- Silverstone, Catherine. *Shakespeare, Trauma and Contemporary Performance*. Routledge: 2011.

- Allmand, C. T. *Henry V*. University of California Press, 1992.
- Bogart, Herbert. "O For a Muse of Film." *Islands: A New Zealand Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2, Summer 1972, pp. 166–69.
- Dodd, Gwilym. *Henry V: New Interpretations*. Boydell & Brewer, 2013.
- Flaherty, Kate. "Lest We Remember: Henry V and the Play of Commemorative Rhetoric on the Australian Stage." *Antipodal Shakespeare: Remembering and Forgetting in Britain, Australia and New Zealand, 1916-2016*, edited by Gordon McMullan and Philip Mead, Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 145–73.
- Halliday, Jessica. "The Single Object: The Truth and Beauty of the Christchurch Town Hall's Concrete." *The Spinoff*, 22 Mar. 2021, <https://thespinoff.co.nz/partner/objectspace/22-03-2021/the-single-object-the-truth-and-beauty-of-the-christchurch-town-halls-concrete/>.
- "Henry V (1386–1422), King of England and Lord of Ireland, and Duke of Aquitaine." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12952>. Accessed 14 Nov. 2021.
- Hodgdon, Barbara, and W. B. Worthen. *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2007. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=239867>.
- Hoskins, Polly, editor. *Ngaio Marsh's Hamlet: The 1943 Production Script*. Canterbury University Press, 2019.
- Keegan, John. *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme*. Penguin, 1984.
- Keen, Maurice, and Maurice Keen. *Medieval Warfare: A History*. Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1999. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/waikato/detail.action?docID=886672>.
- Marsh, Ngaio. *Black Beech and Honeydew: An Autobiography*. 2nd ed., Collins, 1981.
- Matusiak, John. *Henry V*. Routledge, 2012.

Patterson, Ian. "The Body in the Library Is Never Our Own." *London Review of Books*, vol. 42, no. 21, Nov. 2020. *www-lrb-co-uk.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz*, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n21/ian-patterson/the-body-in-the-library-is-never-our-own>.

Prescott, Paul. "Inheriting the Globe: The Reception of Shakespearean Space and Audience in Contemporary Reviewing." *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, edited by Barbara Hodgdon and W.B. Worthen, John Wiley, 2007, pp. 359–75.

Shakespeare, William. *Henry V*. Edited by James D Mardock, Broadview, 2014. *Open WorldCat*, [https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/H5\\_FM/index.html](https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/H5_FM/index.html).

Taylor, Craig. "Henry V, Flower of Chivalry." *Henry V*, edited by Gwilym Dodd, Boydell & Brewer, 2013, pp. 217–48. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt2tt1v5.15>.

"Te Wharekura o Mauao's Head Boy Heads for Shakespeare's Globe in London." *NZ Herald*, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/kahu/te-wharekura-o-mauaos-head-boy-heads-for-shakespeares-globe-in-london/UVZUMKZO6A3JVFLUVUZDWCWTD4/>. Accessed 3 Nov. 2021.

Totaro, Rebecca. "Embedded in Shakespeare's 'Fair Verona.'" *Contagion and the Shakespearean Stage*, edited by Darryl Chalk and Mary Floyd-Wilson, Springer International Publishing, 2019, pp. 255–76. *Springer Link*, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14428-9\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14428-9_13).

Tribble, Evelyn. "Where Are the Archers in Shakespeare?" *ELH*, vol. 82, no. 3, 2015, pp. 789–814.