DAMON AND PITHIAS BY RICHARD EDWARDS
at Shakespeare's Globe

Peter Happé

Inaugurating a series of productions at Shakespeare's Globe dubbed 'Rarely Played', this may well have been the first performance of Richard Edwards' play since the sixteenth century (Stationers' Register 1567, printed 1571). Originally written for boys at the Chapel Royal, it was given here at a single showing by a professional all-female cast. Of this last it should be said at once that the resourcefulness and confidence of the performance was such that within a very short while the gender of the players was virtually forgotten, and the interest which arose was primarily in the effectiveness of the 'actors' and the contrasts between their various performances. Indeed it is hard to say that having an all-female cast had any marked effect at all, other than to demonstrate that the play's the thing: it was in this respect a striking inversion of the all-male casts of the original Globe, and also an indication of the potential of such single-sex casts. This suggests that the act of impersonation which is so often at the heart of dramatic performance is more critical than is gender.

The play gives plenty of scope for theatrical invention both serious and comic. Written apparently as an educational piece, it is concerned with the demonstration of the virtue of friendship, probably deriving from Cicero, or perhaps from Elyot's *The Governor*, and one can see from many speeches where parallels are presented and where justifications are rehearsed that the author was committed to the development of situations where the art of rhetoric could be exemplified. It seemed as though there had been a directorial decision to play the moral and philosophical issues as straight as possible, and there is no doubt that this worked out well. The virtues of friendship demonstrated statically by their emphatic speeches and dynamically by the use and invention of stage business (including costume as well as movement) were manifested.

The performers made the most of the relationship between Damon (Maureen Beattie) and Pithias (Patricia Kerrigan), which was visually interesting by the contrast of physiques and voices, and by some very close playing in terms of movement and the use of the stage. At times this performance as a pair worked very well, especially in the 'execution' scene where they were kneeling face to face, each exhorting the executioner to

strike in order to preserve the other. I felt that there was a nice blend of comic and sentiment in this scene, for there was no doubt that we were being presented with a fine image of friendship, yet it was made more accessible by the comic playing. This was conveyed by the warmth and vitality with which Damon and Pithias were endowed by the performers. On the other hand, in a different style of comedy, the executioner seemed much more confident of her trade skills than her physique, costume, or voice allowed. Perhaps indeed one of the best achievements of the production was that it followed the prescription in the Prologue:

> In Commedies, the greatest Skyll is this, rightly to touche
> All thynges to the quicke: and eke to frame eche person so
> That by his common talke, you may his nature rightly know. 14–26

One might add that it is not only talk, but also movement and gesture, which helps this frame.

In contrast to this comic (but not necessarily trivial) playing, Shelley King gave to the portrayal of Dionysius, the tyrant, a brooding and remorseless air which gave substance to the Prologue's claim that this is a 'Tragicall Commedie'. Similarly Lisa Gaye Dixon gave a remarkable authority to Eubulus, whose commentary on the action is one of the flowers of the piece, important in its sense of civilised, philosophical thinking among such potentially dire events. In this respect that performance gave a marked contrast to the more egregiously farcical *Wit and Science* which was written a generation earlier. The latter is of course a brilliant play, as recent performances have demonstrated, and it is not short of serious meaning and dispute, but *Damon and Pithias* here embodied a kind of comedy which blended physical threat and comic detachment.

Though the presentation of plays on the stage of Shakespeare's Globe is still relatively new, *Damon and Pithias* gave a rich opportunity for judging some of its effects. It seems that the impact of the audience on the actors is very marked indeed, and so, by implication, is the opposite. For the most part the actors had no difficulty in being heard, providing that they spoke clearly (without the necessity of loud voice work). The horizontal distance from the back of the stage to the back of the lower gallery seems very short indeed and the carry is excellent. Similarly, this three-dimensional stage is most striking in its enormous breadth, which allows for very complex visual effects from the front, and also for the side views of the stage to have a dimension all their own. Indeed, experiencing the action from the side of

the yard or the side gallery is to make one feel very close to what is going on.

This had interesting implications for *Damon and Pithias*, a play which was written before the original Globe was invented, and one whose theatrical provenance is more likely to have been the Tudor hall in mansion or college with its convention of access through the audience and its use of such scenes on a much smaller scale than eventually became possible on the much larger Globe stage. The dramatic action demands no large set pieces and, as I have already suggested, a principal part of the action is the presentation of argument, and the exercise of the art of persuasion. There is a signal effect of this kind here when Dionysius is eventually persuaded by what he sees and hears to accept the virtues of friendship. The actress made the most of the large space available for distancing herself from the action, and for meditating the issues — but she did not really need it.

In short, one could perceive a good deal about the Globe stage precisely because *Damon and Pithias* was not written for it. It is going to be an enormous resource in terms of its physical dimensions. Perhaps one's preconceptions were that the original might have been an intimate theatre. Certainly the new Globe can work in this way, but it is also an engagingly complex theatrical space with potentially vast dimensions, and I think that playwrights and directors are likely to be attracted to its exciting versatility.

The fact that the members of the audience closest to the stage are standing also has a notable effect. It seems that the powers of concentration are somewhat different, and certainly there were times when the attention of the audience was palpable. Indeed, on the one night of performance the audience did prove a bit lively and the performers had to make allowance for this (perhaps because some of the audience were 'friends' of the cast). For example the frequency of Latin quotations — entirely desirable in the original context — did attract attention from the audience, and one of the songs was also slightly affected. However, on the whole the auditorium is eminently suitable for music, and the music composed by James Moriarly was very acceptable. At present, music is being performed from one of the five balconies at the back of the stage. As to the audience, when the New Globe is full it brings a very large number of people very close indeed to a stage which is full of possibilities.

University of Southampton