



Eye Witness Memory

Cheek by Jowl's 1998 production of *Much Ado About Nothing*

As a teacher of English and an amateur theatricals practitioner I've spent many a summer in London hoping to upgrade my English and take in as much theatre action as possible. In the summer of 1998 I was on my seasonal prowl for good theatre. This meant choosing between whatever seemed best in NT and the productions of the plays I knew or the ones with familiar names in. Shakespeare, too, always seemed a safe bet, and *Much Ado About Nothing* with Saskia Reeves as Beatrice caught my eye. Besides, my friend, one John Russell of Beckton, who had always been there to advise me and occasionally accompany me on my visits to the theatre, approved of my choice. He put in a few good words about the company, explaining what Cheek by Jowl actually meant and why they gave such a name to the company. 'My kind of thing', I thought, and it proved to be so – the performance was a treat. It was all there: the language and the acting, the movement and the lighting, the sights and sounds to delight in. For a good hour I was completely taken in, and the part of the brain of an amateur director which automatically analyses the performance was accordingly switched off. In Messina I was.

And then it happened: I was struck by a prop falling off the stage. A flower landed on my lap! For a moment I was not just a member of the audience immersed in the action, but a guest at Leonato's watching the beauties of Messina dance. And one of them threw a flower my way. Whether it came from Hero or Beatrice, I don't know, but the feeling of bliss bestowed on me can still be recollected. Admittedly, the spell was broken at the interval, when a stage technician approached me on my way out. He offered to take the flower saying: 'Sorry about that, sir.' I had to give up my 'gift' and hand it to him, which, I freely admit, wasn't my initial intention. The flower was gone, but the magic has continued to this day.

Productions of Cheek by Jowl will no doubt remain one of the top targets during my visits to London, Saskia Reeves will always be among my favourite actresses and Sarita Choudhury takes my breath away even when she does tiger documentaries, but what Hero and Beatrice did for me is beyond dramatics. I will always be able to recall that moment of sheer bliss and that flower, albeit unseen, will always grace my lapel.

- English Teacher, Serbia