

Singing Simpkin and other Bawdy Jigs: Musical Comedy on the Shakespearean Stage, by Roger Clegg and Lucie Skeaping with an appendix of dance instruction by Anne Daye. University of Exeter Press, 2014, ISBN 9780859898782, Paperback, 352 pages (also available as EPUB and PDF)

In March 2013 the Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society held a Study Forum at Goldsmith's College at which the authors presented a paper and workshop on the material contained in their soon to be published book: *Singing Simpkin and other Bawdy Jigs*. Their presentation and workshop was entitled *Recuperating the Song-and-Dance Comedies on the Shakespearean Stage* and the present reviewer was honoured to have been asked to help with some of the music, playing pipe & tabor alongside Lucie Skeaping's violin – perhaps in somewhat feeble imitation of Richard Tarleton, the great 16th century comedian. Later Lucie presented the work as a talk to the Institute of Music Research at Senate House. Having now read the text and attempted to implement the ideas in the creation of a 'jig' for a recent Mummers Festival performance (Gloucester 2014) the present reviewer is confident in his assertion that the subject is certainly deserving of serious consideration and that the re-creation of a successful jig is by no means a trivial or easy thing to do!

The trouble with some words is that they can mean many different things! An example is the word 'jig', which can mean a dance, a musical form, a contraption for holding a piece of wood or metal for working on, etc., etc.. This ambiguity has bedevilled our understanding of what it means in the context of theatre. Even there it can have several meanings, including that of a dance for the whole company at the end of the play (as used frequently to end a production at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in present-day London, for which examples may be seen on YouTube) or a simple dance to accompany a song.

In the book reviewed here, however, it has a quite specific meaning: In the Elizabethan theatre it was a common practice for the comedians to put together a short play-let, usually on some bawdy theme, composed entirely in song and with accompanying dances. This was the 'jig' that frequently followed the main play in the Globe of Shakespeare's time (and was quite different from that to be seen there today).

The texts of these play-lets, for which relatively few complete scripts survive, were collected and analysed in exhaustive detail several decades ago in Charles Read Baskervill's magisterial (though rather indigestible) volume: *The Elizabethan Jig*. Yet despite its attempt to collect all the available material that remained of this somewhat ephemeral art form, it failed to provide any working model from which the jigs themselves might be re-created, for there was no attempt to include the music or any plausible indication of choreography for the dances.

The present volume by Roger Clegg and Lucie Skeaping attempts to make amends for this by giving well-reasoned suggestions for which tunes might plausibly have been used to accompany the sung dialogue, along with suggestions as to what dances from those known to be current at that time might be suitable to accompany the action. Lucie Skeaping is well-known for her work on the popular street songs of 17th century England (*Broadside Ballads*, Faber) and Anne Daye is a recognised authority on the contemporary dance forms. The result is intended to provide a text, together with musical 'score' and choreographic suggestions from which a plausible recreation of the Elizabethan stage jig may be made. To what extent it is successful in this aim will really

only become apparent when theatre companies attempt to use it to produce actual stage works. At present we have so little experience of this to go on that it is very difficult even to get a general idea of what such a reconstruction might look like. Lucie's own company, The City Waits, has produced several very entertaining examples, while a student group from Exeter that I believe is associated with her co-author Roger Clegg has a recorded version viewable on YouTube that gives a rough idea of what a 'stage jig' might have looked like. But from these rare examples it is difficult to gain any very great insight into what must have been in Shakespeare's time an all-pervasive form of theatre. The famous clowns of that period – Richard Tarlton, Will Kemp, and others – were known to have been expert in the creation and performance of jigs (although Kemp's famous 'jig' from London to Norwich clearly does not fall into the category of 'stage jig'). But exactly what they did is much more difficult to ascertain.

As a blueprint and guide for the creation or re-creation of the stage jig, however, the book is invaluable. Its suggestions for tunes are based largely on the rhythmic or metrical structure of the song texts, along with plausible narrative associations. From these it is possible to make a guess as to the original tune that may have been used. Tunes were not of course unique to a particular song-text, but were used and re-used for many different ballads. The links to specific dance choreographies or dance types are, however, somewhat more tenuous. While we know the form of many of the contemporary dance types – coranto, almain, galliard, etc. – and even the detailed choreographies of several that may have been current, this knowledge is primarily limited to the 'social' dances that were practised by the upper classes, even when performed in a theatrical context. What we do not know is how the comedians themselves danced, for this may well have been of a much more elaborate and virtuosic nature. Contemporary accounts indicate that such actors were as much renowned for their gymnastic feats as for their verbal dexterity and we can be certain that the jig provided the perfect vehicle for the display of such talent!

The book makes some suggestions as to the link between the stage jig and other minor theatrical forms, such as the droll, the folk play, the morris, or the pantomime. The ballad opera, as in John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, might also be viewed as an extended stage jig. The simple formula of taking some existing tunes and writing words to fit a new narrative is both appealing and plausible. Why bother to try to invent new ones if tunes are regarded as common property? On this basis it should be possible to create new 'jigs' at will, both of an 'Elizabethan' kind, or thoroughly modern. This may in fact be the most valuable contribution of the book. By detailing the steps that need to be taken in the recreation of the original stage jig, a blueprint is provided for the construction of new versions of these old narrative forms. Much as the basic form of the 'folk play' or 'mummers play' lends itself to reinterpretation or the inclusion of contemporary themes, so too does the stage jig provide a model that might well be applied to a wide range of theatrical story-telling.

There remains one conundrum, however, and that is the problem of reconciling the stage jig, as represented here,

with its role on the Elizabethan stage as a concluding farce or after-piece to the performance of the main play: "Dramatic jigs were thoroughly established as the usual sequel to plays, both comedies and tragedies. Their customary placing in the afternoon's entertainment is confirmed by innumerable contemporary references." (p25) When the re-creation of Shakespeare's theatre in the modern reconstructed Globe was first attempted some years ago, the plays were occasionally, I believe, followed by a 'jig' of the kind described in the present volume, much to the bemusement and even disapproval of the audience. To follow a tragedy such as *Hamlet* with a bawdy jig such as *Singing Simpkin*, seems now so incongruous and irreverent that it is little

surprise that this idea was quickly abandoned in favour of their present practise of having an elaborately choreographed curtain call in which all the company dances: a 'jig' of a very different kind, even though much-loved by today's audience. The unanswered question is why Shakespeare's audience was so different. Perhaps if this book leads to the rediscovery of how to present the stage jig as a highly skilled dramatic form, executed by professional performers, then we may be in a better position to understand its attractions to the original audience.

Bill Tuck