

Rehearsing in Shakespeare's Theatre: Cue Scripts



Historical Context

It is thought that the 18 or so actors who formed the Lord Chamberlain's Men and then the King's Men after the accession of King James I were never given a full script for the plays they acted in. Instead each actor was given his so called cue script – which contained just his own lines and his speaking cues. This means that previous to the first few rehearsals none of the actors would have understood the context in which their lines were spoken.

Much of our knowledge about how plays were put together comes from the plays themselves. The use of cue scripts is clearly described in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when the hapless company manager Peter Quince distributes the actors' 'parts' and asks that they 'con' [learn] them by tomorrow when they will meet for their first rehearsal. He asks that they be perfect.

QUINCE

But, masters, here
are your parts: and I am to entreat you, request
you and desire you, to con them by to-morrow night;
and meet me in the palace wood, a mile without the
town, by moonlight; there will we rehearse.

Here is an extract from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which a group of actors are rehearsing from cue scripts. Quince is the company manager, Bottom is playing Pryamus and Flute the young man is playing the lady Thisby (even though he says he is too old to play the women and has a beard growing). Can you see the mistakes they make as they rehearse?

QUINCE

Come, sit down,
every mother's son, and rehearse your parts.
Pyramus, you begin: when you have spoken your
speech, enter into that brake: and so everyone
according to his cue.

BOTTOM (speaking as Pyramus)

Thisby, the flowers of odious savours sweet,--

QUINCE

Odours, odours.

BOTTOM

--odours savours sweet:
So hath thy breath, my dearest Thisby dear.
But hark, a voice! stay thou but here awhile,
And by and by I will to thee appear.
Exit

FLUTE

Must I speak now?

QUINCE

Ay, marry, must you; for you must understand he goes
but to see a noise that he heard, and is to come again.

FLUTE (as Thisby)

Most radiant Pyramus, most lily-white of hue,
Of colour like the red rose on triumphant brier,
Most brisky juvenal and eke most lovely Jew,
As true as truest horse that yet would never tire,
I'll meet thee, Pyramus, at Ninny's tomb.

QUINCE

'Ninus' tomb,' man: why, you must not speak that
yet; that you answer to Pyramus: you speak all your
part at once, cues and all Pyramus enter: your cue
is past; it is, 'never tire.'

If some of the actors have trouble with the cue script it is possible to make it easier for them by re-wording the script to include their character name. It looks like Shakespeare sometimes had to do this for his actors as some of them are almost always cued by name – i.e. by lines like “what says Polonius?”. Shakespeare knew his actors very well and so he probably knew who would struggle with his lines and might need an extra or easy cue.