

DRAMA IN PEMBROKE 1963-70

Hugh Mellor (1956)

If I missed out on one golden age of Pembroke drama as an undergraduate in the late 1950s, I made up for it as a research student and Fellow from 1963 to 1970. My most practical contribution then was turning the Old Reader into a fine little theatre, unlike the New Cellars to which the Pembroke Players were later banished, even if overcoming the latter's myriad defects has stimulated their first golden age of the new millennium.

In my time, however, the Old Reader's facilities attracted productions, not only by the home team, but also by the Cambridge University Players. This company, founded in 1960 by graduates of Queens to stage summer productions in Cornwall's open-air Minack Theatre, made Pembroke its Cambridge home until it decamped to Churchill in 1972. Its Old Reader productions included Frisch's *Count Oederland*, Ayckbourn's *Mr Whatnot*, Henry Livings's *Eh?*, Jonson's *The Alchemist*, the UK premiere of Havel's *The Memorandum* and Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. These may not have been Pembroke Players productions in name or financing, but their casts and crews came from the same University-wide pool of talent that the latter's productions have always exploited. Then, as now, the distinction between Pembroke Players and other productions in Pembroke was always more formal than substantial; college drama in Cambridge has never been as parochially competitive as other college sports.

If Pembroke facilitated productions nominally by other companies in the sixties, the converse was also true, most obviously in the Pembroke Smokers that I and Clive James ran from 1965 to 1968 for the benefit of the Pembroke Players. In all but name, finance and organization, these were Footlights Smokers, the same trial runs for that year's summer revues that are now performed as late-night shows in the ADC. They were not of course the first such smokers to be held in Pembroke, a venue whose choice reflected the College's contribution to the Footlights, from Peter Cook in the fifties to Tim Brooke-Taylor in the early sixties and, in my time, Clive James and Eric Idle. But Pembroke can hardly claim all the credit for the success of Smokers that also featured such non-Pembroke stars as Pete Atkin, Rob Buckman, Julie Covington, Dai (now Russell) Davies, Germaine Greer, Jonathan James-Moore and Robert Orledge.

Yet the Pembroke Players proper have never been inhibited by competition from more cosmopolitan companies. In my time the Old Reader saw many good home-grown productions, from Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, Büchner's *Woyzeck* and Christopher Fry's *The Lady's Not for Burning* in 1966 to Molière's *The Misanthrope* in 1972. But perhaps the dramatic highlight of those years was a revival in 1969 of the Pembroke Players' German tour with Robin Little's superb production of *Measure for Measure*. Although the tour took place under what Meredith Dewey claimed in his next Easter letter was 'a secret reparations clause in the Treaty of Versailles', the only complaint I ever heard of came from an officer commanding some British troops whose German girlfriends seem (reading between the military lines) to have been distracted by the civilian charms of Pembroke's actors.

Finally, I should note that, even in Pembroke, not all the on-stage drama of the 1960s took place in the Old Reader. I recall a few small-scale productions in the Old Library, while drama formed part of at least three of the Music Society's May Week Concerts in the Hall. The 1969 Concert featured a semi-staged performance of Beethoven's opus 91, *Wellington's Victory or The Battle of Vittoria*, directed by Bert Parnaby and conducted by Hugh Macdonald. In 1970 it included Laurence Houseman's *Victoria Regina*, with a memorable performance – in Persian – by John Mattock as a visiting Shah of Persia. While 1970's May Week Concert saw the first of several performances of Charles Cudworth's *Or if to Musick ...*, 'a musical entertainment in honour of the bicentenary of Thomas Gray', narrated by Charles Cudworth and again conducted by Hugh Macdonald, which gave me the pleasure, in the part of Gray, of reading both his *Elegy in a Country Churchyard* and – which was even more fun – his *Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes*.