

Historical Background

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 cues and his own lines. This meant that prior 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.

This exercise explores what it would have been like for the actors using cue scripts. The idea is to listen for your cue and decide when you must speak.

Your pupils may make some of the same mistakes as Quince's company do in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

In the following extract Bottom mispronounces 'odours' as 'odious', Flute misses his cue, then speaks someone else's cue as if it were his own line, and accidentally says Ninny's instead of 'Ninus's Tomb, while Bottom misses his cue 'never tire'. One can safely assume that these are all mistakes which Shakespeare's actors made on occasion too.

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.



Richard Burbage

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 (cast as Thisby)

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.'



Richard Burbage