



**BRAVE SPIRITS THEATRE  
ARCHIVE**

DRAMATURGY: PERFORMANCE HISTORY  
*Doctor Faustus*  
2017

**Director:** Paul Reisman  
**Dramaturg:** Claire Kimball

**Artistic Director:** Charlene V. Smith  
**Resident Dramaturg:** Claire Kimball

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## Doctor Faustus: Performance History Overview

*Doctor Faustus* played at the Rose with the Admiral's Men in 1594 (though possibly earlier). Phillip Henslowe commissioned additions from Birde and Rowley in 1602.

During the Restoration, *Doctor Faustus* became an adapted comedy: a farce version of the play was performed at the Red Bull and a Harlequin version was staged a few decades later. Documented audience reactions during this time usually made mention of the production's devils. At the end of the nineteenth century, the London Lyceum combined some of the play with Goethe's *Faust*.

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* was finally staged again in 1896 for the Elizabethan Stage Society. The play has appeared across Europe and America since then and has been the most frequently produced early modern play by amateur and student theatre groups. *Doctor Faustus* has appeared at the Old Vic, the Young Vic, at the RSC, the Swan, the Red Bull, and the Blackfriars Playhouse, as well as multiple university and college campuses. Some productions have been filmed. The RSC presented a conflation of the A and B texts in its highly cited 1974 production directed by John Barton.

### Notable Past Productions:

- 1946 Stratford-upon-Avon used towers, stairways, and separate set levels for heaven and hell; Faustus' finale was staged up on a platform in the sky that allowed an elevated descent into the 'pit'
- 1950 Orson Welles' revival of his 1936 WPA production in New York; Eartha Kitt played Helen; music by Duke Ellington
- 1963 In Poland, Grotowski used the text as pieced-together montage and staged the story as a flashback; female Mephistopheles's entered as "a soaring angel," singing out lines with a choir; Mephistopheles also played each of the Seven Deadly Sins
- 1966 Richard Burton played Faustus for the Oxford University Dramatic Society; this production was later filmed with Elizabeth Taylor as Helen; Burton used passages from *Edward II* for Lechery, *The Jew of Malta* for Avarice, and *Tamburlaine* for Pride
- 1968 Porter's production at the RSC staged a nude Helen with gold body paint; at the play's conclusion, Faustus paused for the final bell toll to find nothing had happened – he then began to laugh and relax just before the back wall of the stage fell reveal a glowing chasm or hell mouth (with teeth) as skeletal devils with the Seven Deadly Sins spewed forth to surround Faustus and carry him off, shrieking, as the back wall of Faustus' study closed behind them
- 1974 John Barton at the RSC (Barton's first non-Shakespeare; Ian McKellen as Faustus in RSC debut); set the play "entirely in Faustus's study" and the story takes place within his head; the book-cluttered set "suggested the interior of a skull"; psychological emphasis on mental illusion;

Seven Deadly Sins were life-size *Bunraku*-type puppets; Good and Bad Angels were black voodoo and white Christmas cherub mannequins held by McKellen with some ventriloquist voice-throwing; Helen was a silent wigged mask with a chiffon nightgown carried to Faustus' bed after a "dance of death"; Faustus begins the first half of the show neatly dressed, shaved, and combed, but after the interval (covering the span of 24 years) he appears haggard and grizzled with a beard; conflated A & B text also contained source material from *History of the Damnable Life of Dr. Faustus*; Lucifer spoke the prologue and Devils spoke some lines from the Chorus of Learned Doctors

- 1980 Lyric production in a black box space with white gauze curtain upstage; all male cast (Helen appeared in trouser suit)
- 1981 Noble production featured angels of Good and Evil dressed in black; Faustus' request for a wife produced a figure in white gown and veil that turned out to have a simian face underneath; Noble rearranged the Robin & Dick scene to take place immediately after Faustus' encounter with the "hot whore" for clearer juxtaposition; Lechery pushed Sloth along in a stroller during the Deadly Sins procession; Mephistopheles became involved in the "low" comedy scenes as he helped Robin with word pronunciations and whispered in his ear
- 1989 RSC at the Swan followed the theme of "defiled sanctity": Faustus collected blood in a chalice, used the 'Sanctus,' used the Pieta posture, Mephistopheles appeared as Christ with stigmata and crown, and Faustus descended to hell in a "cruciform cage." An all male Chorus entered from below to open the play, served as Faustus' students, acted out a gesture-interpretive Seven Deadly Sins pageant, groaned at utterances of "God" or "heaven"; the seven actors formed "a scrum-like entity, with one emerging from the corporate body to characterize each individual sin"; the young, vigorous Faustus was often physically close to the aging, saturnine Mephistopheles

#### Some Recent Productions:

- 2002 Young Vic production starring Jude Law mixed period with modern dress; set featured a high catwalk and blue vault with planets for the heavens; actors would toss props into a ditch which stood for hell; highlighted the idea of Faustus' "delusion" by staging Helen only as a reflection in a mirror; gave "life to the central scenes of coarse slapstick by suggesting they are the reverse side of the coin from medieval piety" (e.g., Faustus shoves a pie in a Pope's face); Faustus progressed from fully dressed in a black doublet to a loose white shirt and jeans by the end; portrayed Faustus' final damnation as mental, existential, and isolationist rather than physical – he laughed with relief after the final chorus, only to see the scholars enter and declare him "gone," followed by Mephistopheles offering Faustus a book which he contemplated "in solitude as the lights fell"

- 2011 Globe outdoor production; period dress; Wagner delivered the Prologue; Faustus changed his black scholar's garb and cap to match Mephistopheles' clothes (sable doublet with burgundy leather cap and black cloak); Mephistopheles later changed to all red garb and Faustus richly clothed in gold; Mephistopheles entered from discovery behind an enormous ram/goat's skull which split apart once Faustus bade him change his "monstrous shape"; armored Romanesque warrior Good and Evil angels; Faustus' conjured masked Georgian-dressed dancers holding orbs to discuss the heavens; Lucifer appeared horned with long beard and two boar's head companions, while Beelzebub used a whip to command the Sins; Seven Deadly Sins appeared individually from below as a chorus of similarly dressed actors (black and red garb referencing Mephistopheles and Faustus with the same burgundy cap) and props that distinguished their roles; the masked Georgian figures joined together under flowing white fabric to form a large "Helen" figured topped with a large Grecian mask – upon Faustus' request to have her, a woman in Grecian dress stepped out from under the fabric; hell appeared in the discovery space as smoke, masked/tattered/bloody Furies holding bloody entrails/shrunken heads; Faustus was carried off through the discovery space and Lucifer remained to receive large triumphant wings from the Chorus as a final tableau; Wagner delivered the Epilogue
- 2014 Blackfriars Playhouse original practices indoor staging produced sounds effects with musical instruments, vocals, and percussion; devils were gesturing actors covered in tightly fitted maroon sheets; emphasis on the magical elements: blood turned to flame in a bowl, flaming book, magically appearing arm tattoo; 19<sup>th</sup> century dress but Mephistopheles and Lucifer wore modern; seductive female Mephistopheles turned herself into Helen by changing from a red mini-dress/cloak/black boots in a "striptease" to reveal a white Grecian gown underneath; for Faustus' descent into hell, the sheet-covered demons surround Faustus as he screamed – they dispersed and Faustus appeared to have vanished (having been covered with one of the demonic sheets and exiting with the rest) *Note: the 2010 Ren Season production at the ASC featured a Mephistopheles dressed with goat legs & horns*
- 2014 Classical Theatre Co in Houston featured one actress portraying each of the Seven Deadly Sins; curled edges of the set floorboards created a study that seemed "pushed up from the depth of hell" (or a hell pushing into Faustus' space); doors opened and closed by themselves; general Victorian dress with flashes of damnation and death: red socks on Faustus, "exposed ribs and vertebrae on the jackets of the chorus," arteries on Mephistopheles' gloves and burns on his jacket; masks and puppets aided the heavy doubling
- 2015 Gallaudet University's sign and dialogue-free "steampunk staging" emphasized the futuristic and fantastical elements: clockwork set, android-like Mephistopheles, aerial motion photography created the appearance of an elevating stage space; actors assembled the Lucifer puppet on stage; Faustus wore a keypad on his arm which he used to invoke magic
- 2016 London production starring Kit Harrington; set in modern era (studious Faustus read from his laptop); female Mephistopheles and Wagner; sexual violence, blood, and dung; Lucifer,

devils, and others appeared in underwear; “middle section” of text rewritten; one actor played the Seven Deadly Sins; “It ends ... not with damnation, but with a hug”

Consulted Sources for the above:

*Doctor Faustus*, edited by Bevington and Rasmussen

*Doctor Faustus: A critical guide*, Sara Munson Deats

*Marlowe: Doctor Faustus*, edited by James N. Loehlin

*Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus: Globe Theatre On Screen*, directed by Paul Wills

*Performing Early Modern Drama*, edited by Aebischer and Prince

The New York Times, The Telegraph, The Guardian, The Independent, Variety, BWW Reviews: Houston, RoyalShakespeareCompany.com, Shakespeareances.com, IanMcKellen.com, DCMetroTheaterArts.com



**BRAVE SPIRITS THEATRE  
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DRAMATURGY: HELLMOUTHS  
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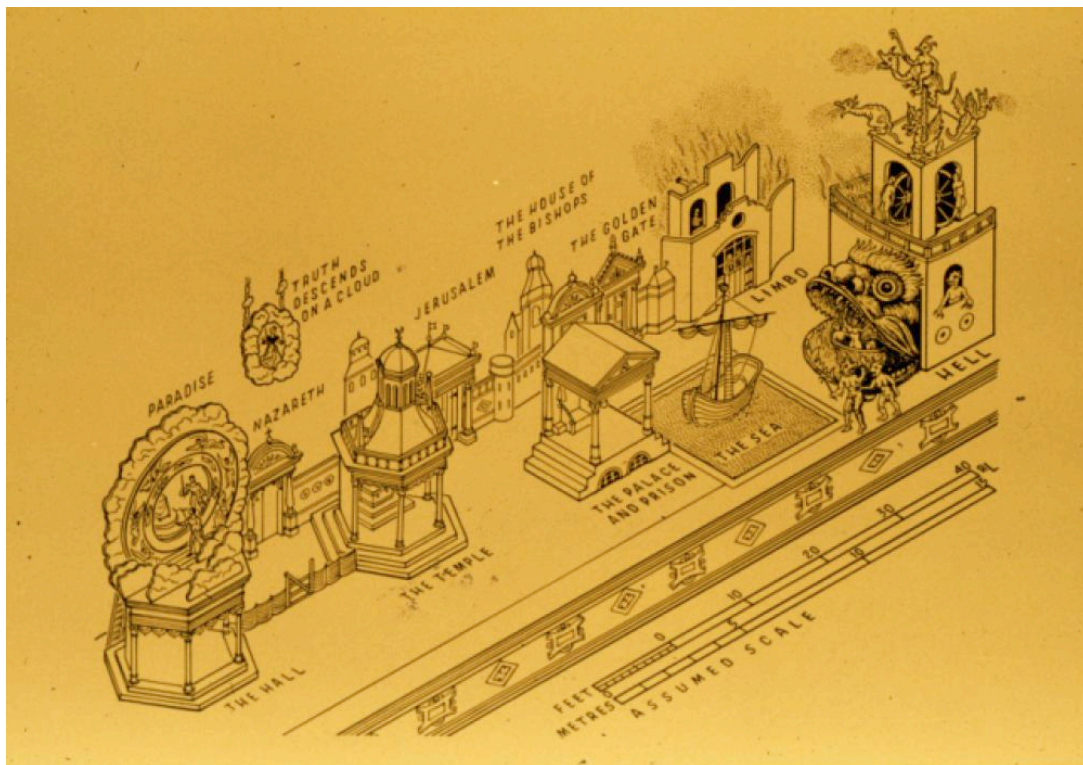
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### Doctor Faustus – Hellmouth and Trap Doors

In medieval passion plays and wagon pageants, a “hellmouth” was typically portrayed as the literal jaws of an animal (wolf, lion, dragon, etc). Some would depict fire and thunder from within the jaws and some mouths were designed to open and shut. The idea of a predatory kind of consumption or damnation was important. Such fears may have stemmed from Scandanavian mythologies and/or translated Biblical references to doors, gates, and the swallowing Leviathan.

In the English play *Tobias* (1564), the stage directions call for a hellmouth with a lower jaw. Traditionally, the evil and sinister elements of European passion plays would have been placed on the left-hand side or “path.”



*Diagram drawn from a 1547 frontispiece for a French passion play; a traditional two-tiered “hell” sits stage left with devils above and a waiting maw at the bottom*

- Marlowe’s *Faustus* would have played in the Rose playhouse before playing at the Fortune. Phillip Henslowe’s diary notes that he owned a “Hell mought” prop at the Rose in March of 1598 as well as a cauldron for *The Jew of Malta*. *Doctor Faustus* may have used either a trap door or a traditional hellmouth set piece for his descent into hell.
- Aside from a physical hellmouth, plays performed in the Rose often included simple or infrequent stage directions calling for a trap door. James J. M. O’Connell argues that current archaeological knowledge of the space would not have allowed for much room under that stage. There was a limited area for some actor movement and the simple storage of items like shoes.

Stage directions from plays performed in the Rose required little more than a hole for actors to fall into (much like a cellar door that opened downward). Doors may have been noisy as well, requiring additional sound effects to cover the racket.

- Quarto B may have been a script reworked/amended from Quarto A for Henslowe's new Fortune theatre space. The Fortune itself was modeled after the Globe, which was a playhouse that produced scripts with more elaborate and demanding uses of the trap: a possible lift system, two doors manned by actors below, plenty of space for multiple people, large props, and perhaps quieter doors.
  
- Some plays specifically mention their traps as being center stage/downstage center.

Consulted Sources for all above:

*Henslowe's Diary*, edited by R.A. Foakes

*Apocalyptic Monsters: Animal Inspirations for the Iconography of Medieval North European Devourers*, Aleks Pluskowski

*Hell is Discovered*, James J. Mainard O'Connell

*The Mouth of Hell: The Iconography of Damnation on the Medieval European Stage*, Robert Lima

*The Rose and the Globe: Excavations 1988-90*, Julian Bowsher and Pat Miller

Hekman Library Digital Archive ("Valenciennes Passion Play")





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