

## Again! Again!

It is a refrain familiar to parents who read bedtime stories to their children. A familiar story can never be heard often enough and must be told as nearly as possible in the same way as it was the last time.

It is the same with music as we grow older, listening to the same old songs, the same old symphonies. The more they are the same, the more we enjoy them. A cover version or a new arrangement rarely satisfies. Interesting perhaps, but not the same. It has to be the way we first heard it, on that first LP, or CD, or download.

It all goes back to the importance of repetition. Again! Again! Encore! Encore!

When children can read for themselves, no longer needing or even wanting an adult to read to them, they keep on reading their favourite books again and again. My favourites, which I never tired of reading, were Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*, A.A.Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* and any of the numerous *William* books by Richmal Crompton that I kept in my bedroom.

It doesn't seem to matter that you know what's going to happen. In fact, knowing seems to increase the pleasure. The funny bits are just as funny, the frightening bits just as frightening. Anticipating a pleasure is part of the pleasure. You know what you have to look forward to and enjoy it just as much when it comes.

As adults, especially at times like the present when we must spend more time on our own and the libraries are closed, reading an old book again reminds us that, though the words don't change, we do. Reading *William the Outlaw* today brings back happy memories, but the child's reading can never be recaptured by the adult the child has become. It belongs with Proust's madeleine.

We read the words differently now, with the regretful detachment that seems to be a necessary part of being grown up. On the other hand, re-reading the works of Dickens or Hardy or Conrad or, for that matter, Proust, often brings more pleasure, not less. The words don't change, but the deeper understanding that, with luck, comes with age, reveals new meanings.

So it's a matter of regret that when I go to see a play by Shakespeare, one that I know as well, for example, as a symphony by Beethoven, the words I remember are rarely the words I hear. A script to a director is not the same as a score to a conductor.

We can enjoy the same old books, the same old music, the same old masters hanging on gallery walls, but rarely can we enjoy the same old plays. They are re-imagined for us. Instead of telling me a story, as my father used to do at bedtime, the director interprets it for me. The only way to be sure of enjoying an old play as the playwright intended is to read it.

Shakespeare's advice to directors would, I imagine, have been the same as the advice he put into the mouth of Hamlet when he gathers the Players round him before the performance of *The Mousetrap* with which he hopes to 'catch the conscience of the king'.

*Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently: for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness.*

He was speaking to the actors, not the director, because there were no directors then, only actors and playwrights. As a playwright (Hamlet is the playwright here, as well as Shakespeare) all he asks of the actors is that they 'speak the speech' with no unnecessary embellishment or distraction. The possibility that the words themselves might be changed or the scenes rearranged, or some of them left out altogether, would not have occurred to him.

The only plays that can be relied on to be the same every time you see them are pantomimes. A re-imagined pantomime would be a flop. A pantomime must tell a story that everyone knows, with characters that everyone recognises and dialogue that everyone has heard before (or how would the audience know what to say when they get their cue?) and it must never change.

A pantomime has no need of a director. The actors know how to do it, as they once knew how to perform the plays that playwrights wrote for them. It was their job. They were actors, not town-criers. Some of them were better than others, naturally, and reform was sometimes necessary, as Hamlet reminded the Players.

*O, reform it altogether. And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them: for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too; though, in the meantime, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that's villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.*

Once there were playwrights and actors, then there were playwrights and actors and actor-managers, then there were directors and assistant directors and designers (set designers, costume designers, lighting designers, sound designers) and stage managers and assistant stage managers. Actors too of course and sometimes, but not always, playwrights.

Once upon a time, actors knew how to put on a play in the same way that musicians know how to make music. A violinist and a pianist rehearse a sonata together and perform without a conductor, as do quartets and sextets and groups of musicians in all but the largest ensembles. Actors were once, and could be once again, artisans who know their craft well enough to turn a script into a performance.

The only help they need comes from playwrights who, like Shakespeare, know their craft well enough to write scripts that can be performed like music, note for note, enjoyed like books, word for word, just as we remember them, again and again and again.

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