

# STAGING THE HENRICIAN COURT

## AN IMPACT CASE STUDY



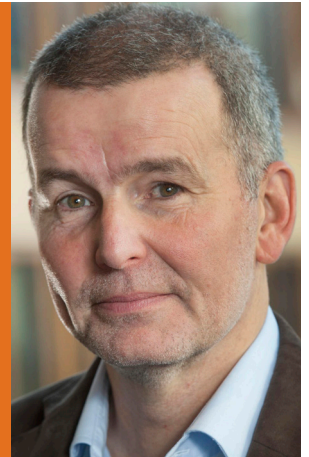
In 2009, as part of the 500th anniversary of the accession of Henry VIII, Professor Greg Walker (University of Edinburgh) and Professor Tom Betteridge (then Oxford Brookes University) restaged a Tudor interlude, John Heywood's *Play of the Weather*, at Hampton Court Palace's Great Hall, in collaboration with Historic Royal Palaces (HRP), and Schtanhaus Theatre Company.

The Great Hall at Hampton Court appears to the modern eye as a large empty space. But during the Henrician period it was marked with invisible but powerful symbolic boundaries. Who sat or stood where, who was allowed close to the king and who was kept at a distance, were matters of great importance, revealing who was in favour and who was not.

Staging Heywood's *Play of the Weather* (c.1532/33), with its elaborate social codes and satirical approach to social class, enabled public audiences to Hampton Court to experience the Great Hall as the centre of political and social power that it once was, and it allowed them to engage imaginatively with the drama of Henry VIII's court. The project team, with the involvement of the general public, was able to test academic theories about the management of space in Henry's court.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The project was based upon Professor Greg Walker's pioneering research into the social and political contexts of Tudor drama and employed the text published in his *Medieval Drama: An Anthology* (2000).



Walker's publications also include: *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (2008), *The Politics of Performance in Early Renaissance Drama* (1998) and numerous articles.



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Audiences of 140 heritage professionals and the public attended the productions in 2009 and 2010, and thousands of visitors passed through the Hall during rehearsals. HRP estimate that 2009 saw an increase of 43% (115,287) in visitor numbers, far in excess of their targeted 10% increase.

The pioneering approach to performance-based research convinced HRP of the value of using creative means to present cultural heritage. Michael Day, CEO of HRP acknowledged that Staging played “a pivotal role” in motivating and informing HRP’s new research strategy.

The audience was further extended via films of the performances on the project website, interviews with researchers and participants, and a wiki. It is now cited in the scholarly literature as a model of how to stage a research-led, historically accurate revival of a Tudor interlude.

The collaborations created synergies between hitherto separate departments at Hampton Court. Curators gained insights into how interpretative staff might inform their research practice and interpreters began to understand how their work might both be informed by and enable performance research. As Day confirms, these insights ‘will continue to inform HRP’s planning and policies with respect to the relationship between research and the visitor experience’.

## FURTHER IMPACT

The project’s impact was extended further by Walker and Betteridge’s involvement in Staging and Representing the Scottish Renaissance Court. In June 2013, they used the same collaborative principles to perform the ‘lost’ version of David Lyndsay’s *A Satire of the Three Estates* (first performed 1540) in its original setting in Linlithgow Palace.

The then First Minister Alex Salmond said this project raised important questions about “the role of the popular voice in Scottish politics, the nature of Scottish civic, national and religious identity, and the moral fabric of civil society.”



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