

Such Stuff podcast
Season 2, Episode 8: The Fun of the Fair

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

As we head into the Bank Holiday weekend, all the fun of the fair is about to arrive in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. Bartholomew Fair by Ben Jonson is an extraordinary play charting the interlinking lives of a group of Londoner's.

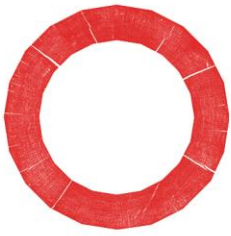
For centuries Bartholomew Fair was held on the 24 August in the heart of London. It was Bartholomew Fair that Londoner's flocked to visit on what is now the Bank Holiday weekend, and lawlessness, depravity and general merriment abounded.

So this week on the podcast, we go behind the scenes with the Bartholomew Fair company to ask... what was Bartholomew Fair and what happened to it? Who are the Londoners we meet at the fair, then and now, in this reworked version of the play? And how much has really changed since Jonson's Londoners partied in the streets of Smithfield?

First up... I caught up with our very own Dr Will Tosh to find out more about Bartholomew Fair...

IG: So, Will, in the lead up to the Bank Holiday, can you tell me a little bit about Bartholomew Fair, the event itself rather than the play?

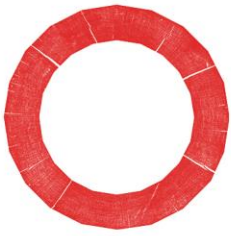
Will Tosh: So Bartholomew Fair was a central part of London life for centuries until the 19th century. It starts out in the 12th century as a fair, a kind of annual market, an annual mart, associated with the priory of St Bartholomew near Smithfield, north west of the city. The priory get a licence to hold a massive cloth and cattle fair on their ground every summer, every August. So you have merchants



travelling round the country going to different fairs, all over the land, at different kind of points in the year and all of these fairs exist on a sort of annual schedule, an annual kind of sequence. And Bartholomew Fair is the main one for cloth and also for cattle. So alongside this huge wholesale fair, you get an additional sort of ad hoc retail fair that gets set up alongside it, catering to the thousands of people who are passing through London especially for Bartholomew Fair. And this ad hoc retail fair becomes - by the sort of 16th, 17th century - the kind of annual opportunity for non-essential purchase, for toys and puppets and the kind of food that people want to eat on kind of fair occasions, primarily roast pork. So it becomes this kind of orgy of kind of summer consumption which Londoner's get very excited about.

IG: Brilliant. So not wholly dissimilar from today's bank holiday revelry, there was a lawbreaking aspect to the fair, the heart of London revelry. Can you tell me about the Court of Piepowders? Is that how it's...?

WT: Yeah, that's actually how it's pronounced. Bartholomew Fair takes place in Smithfield, which is already a kind of quite lawless part of London, and every summer, every August when Bartholomew Fair hits, the kind of raffish quality of the neighbourhood goes through the roof and it becomes somewhere that's sort of known for pickpocketing, for rowdiness, for prostitution, for kind of a general sense of the city cutting loose and going a bit wild. It has that reputation just partly because that is kind of what happened at fair time, but also it has that reputation because the city authorities and the land owning authorities just don't really like the idea of large numbers of people coming and having a nice time. There's a kind of suspicion of it as an area of real criminality as well as sort of the truth of it being kind of rowdy every August. But there is an attempt made to provide some kind of policing or judicial element to what goes on in the fair, which takes the form of the countries most chaotic and ad hoc form of law courts which are courts established temporarily in fairs. And these courts are known as the Court of Piepowders. Everything to do with Bartholomew Fair seems to have a kind of food related name and this is nothing to do

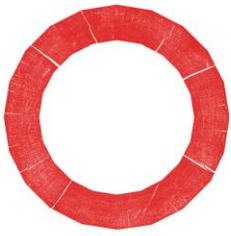


with pie. It's a word that comes from the old French meaning dusty footed, *pié poudré*, and that refers to the itinerant merchants, who kind of walked around - generally on foot - the country selling their wares. So the Court of Piepowders, the court of the dusty footed is a court that's set up specifically to resolve disputes between itinerant merchants who might not be in one town from one week to the next.

IG: As the fair and its wild reputation grew, in a sort of gentrifying move, things started to shift and change. What happened?

WT: So then as now, city authorities love engaging in developments that make sort of wide ranging and popular activities easier to police and generally less fun. And this is what happens in the 16th and 17th centuries. So this sort of rowdy annual fair gets progressively sort of... well the city authorities try to tame it, they don't do particularly well, but you have the landowners who own the site of the old priory, which of course by Jonson's time is no longer the church. It was dissolved under Henry VIII, so it's owned by an aristocratic family who are appropriately called the Rich's, it's the Rich family. And the Rich family actually take steps to redevelop the area around Smithfield where the fair takes place, by just essentially developing a residential neighbourhood. What had been a big open space with stalls and kind of booths that lay dormant for 11 months of the year, became a built up residential neighbourhood which they called Cloth Fair, which then every August just kind of gets swamped by people. The houses that were built in this neighbourhood would often have ground floor sort of rooms or spaces that would be converted into kind of as it were booths, a bit like garages that would open to the street. And the City of London, the corporation, who is responsible for the rest of the territory around the fair did various things in the early 17th century to try and tidy up the space. They paved it, they stopped it becoming such a muddy mire, a bit like Glastonbury, and it sort of doesn't really work. So the fair continues to be this kind of influx of energy and appetite and occasional lawbreaking all the way through the 17th century.

IG: And then what happens to it?



WT: Well Bartholomew Fair actually continues well into the 17th, 18th and even the 19th centuries being what it had always been, which is a sort of centre of kind of edgy consumerism and it's not until the middle of the 19th century that the city authorities finally crack down and say this is too raucous, and it's closed.

IG: Jonson's play Bartholomew Fair... what's the play about and what parts of these traditions is it really playing on?

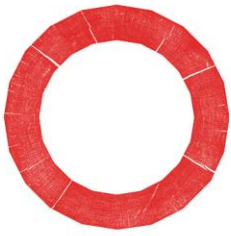
WT: So Ben Jonson's Bartholomew Fair is in many ways a sort of astonishing theatrical embodiment of what the fair is... which is kind of filled to overflowing, you know, in the way that the fair is this annual opportunity for Londoners to pour into one bit of the city and spend money like there's no tomorrow and consume, consume, consume... Jonson's play is this sort of bursting slice of life, if that's a phrase, showing kind of so many strata, different sort of levels of London life in one theatrical kind of circle. And it has any number of plot strands and individuals who are coming together and what's structuring the play is the fair itself, that's what's giving the play its coherence and structure as the various groups of characters work their way through the fair to the ultimate resolution at the end.

[Music plays]

IG: I chatted to director Blanche and some of her extraordinary company... to find out how the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse is being transformed to celebrate the kaleidoscope of contemporary London life through Jonson's dazzling comedy...

IG: Can you give me a quick overview of Jonson's play Bartholomew Fair?

Blanche McIntyre: Of course. Bartholomew Fair is a kind of giant carnival, commercial enterprise, big social mix-up festival that happened historically for centuries until the Victorians cancelled it. And the story of the fair is that a group of people - lots of different families, some friends, some workers - all go to the fair and they



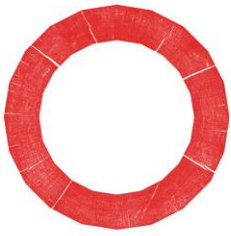
have their lives turned upside down there because that's the kind of thing a fair like that does. So some of them lose their marriages and some of them win marriages. Some of them lose their fortunes, some of them make fortunes and they all come out of it in a slightly more chastened frame of mind having gone into it quite judgy and quite prejudiced.

IG: And with all the sort of intersecting plot lines and the characters all coming together, do you think its fair to say that its sort of has the feeling of a cross-section of Jonson's London?

BM: I feel like that's the exact point of the play, to show London as a multicultural, multi-class entity that it is and to show pictures of people from every walk of life, how they handle themselves with each other and what happens to them, what their expectations are and what they can expect from a fair.

IG: What can audiences expect from this production?

BM: Oooh, I hope speaking broadly, audiences can expect to see a whole of lot of people that they recognise going through some pretty extreme events. That is, certainly that was the point of the play originally and I think that in order to make that happen, we have had to make some pretty drastic choices. Like, for example, in order to make the characters, we've had to clothe them in modern dress. Because if you, for example, if you see someone in a Hawaiian shirt... we haven't got a Hawaiian shirt in the play, but if you did... you would be able to judge them for all kinds of things, taste probably, class probably, depending on what sort of shirt it was, education, character... if you see someone in a doublet and hose, you can make a few deductions about their wealth or a little bit about their taste, whether it's fancy or plain, but you don't have access to the same kind of immediate, unthinking breadth of reference that you do whenever you see someone walk down the street, just an ordinary person. We call on that every day and the whole point about Bartholomew Fair, which is a city comedy, is it relies on those kind of very fine, immediate judgements, in fact it makes a point about those judgements within the play itself. So in



order to really make sure that we take care of that element of the play, we've had to bounce the whole thing into 2019.

IG: How do you take a play, which is centuries old, and bring it into 2019?

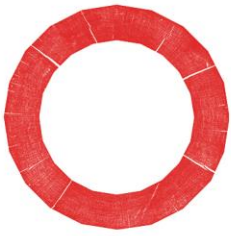
BM: Well it depends on the play but the joy of Bartholomew Fair is it feels like it could have been written yesterday, with one or two weirdly phrased Jacobean idioms. People speak pretty much as they speak today and so one of the huge pleasures about digging into it has been finding it feels almost verbatim, it feels naturalistic, the characters express themselves like ordinary people. They don't always make sense and sometimes they have a new idea happen halfway through the sentence so they change what they're saying. Sometimes they argue in a really inarticulate way, sometimes they make terrible jokes. All of these things are incredibly rich and I find that you almost never find them in a Jacobean comedy, or in any kind of Elizabethan or Jacobean play, a sense of the absolute texture of real life. And one of the joys of working on the play has been discovering that London real life, at least according to what Jonson wrote, simply hasn't changed in all those centuries.

[Music plays]

Zach Wyatt: It's loads of snippets of life at Bartholomew Fair but like a mix of social classes and a mix of ethnicities and accents and whatnot. I suppose the one thing that unites them is the fair and everything that kind of goes wrong for everybody. You get to see that evolve over the course of just loads of different scenes. It's like taking a slice of like one day at the fair and how it just messes up everything for everybody at the fair.

Josh Lacey: It's almost kind of verbatim, it's almost modern, you know, how Blanche has adapted it as well, you can speak it, it's just how it flows, it really does sound quite modern.

Richard Katz: These people are still there, there are still people trying it on in a market, there are still people trying to make a living,



there are still people trying to get off with each other. These are your people, these are still your people, you know, you can look at yourself up there, and actually the setting, a lot of the audience are going to sit in the action, you know there's a sort of a blurring between the stage and the audience which I think is another way of saying this is you, you know, this is not some sort of piece of history, it's there, it's us and I think that that's a really nice thing.

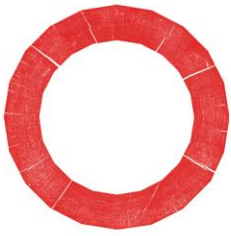
JL: I think everyone will find a piece of everyone in it, you'll know people.

[Rehearsal room extract]

IG: And you can sort of introduce us to a few of those characters?

BM: Yes of course. For example, you have John Littlewit the Proctor who... Josh won't thank me for this, but he's got a sense of humour a bit like David Brent from The Office and some unthinking tinned-ness towards his wife. He has a couple of friends who are arrogant, Oxbridge, red trouser types, who come in, drop where they went to uni, use his name aggressively... 'John, John, hey John, what do you think about that John?'. All this kind of thing. A really passive aggressive guy who looks after a rich idiot, the rich idiot is very sweet, he just chucks his money around because he has no idea of the value of money. And his poor guy who is his sort of PA, nanny, tutor is trying to pick up after him, look after him, deal like an adult with all the messes he creates, and he's the most passive aggressive man I've ever met! His lines are literally like that. So they're all wonderful characters, and they're all deeply, deeply flawed. You have to get to know them, a little bit like you get to know people that you meet. I think the actors have had an interesting time trying to work out from the little clues what the iceberg underlying the characters is. You have to approach it in a really different way as an actor, and that's been really fun but also a bit of a kind of mind bender.

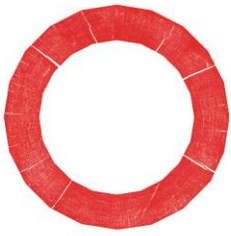
IG: What are the female characters in the play like?



BM: The female characters are brilliant but often stuck. There are glass ceilings and there are difficulties for them. So for example, one of the female characters is apparently a pillar of the church, she's really tough, she's a mum, she kicks ass, but she is running a whole load of dirty businesses out of the side, which her pillar of the church nature disguises but she's got to do it secretly. There's a woman who's wardship has been bought... that is that she's underage and the right to dispose of her and her assets has been bought by the latin speaking judge. And she's stuck. She has to marry whoever he wants. So it's a little bit like as though her passport had been taken. And so we have reimaged her a Russian whose passport has literally been taken by this guy, because that's the position that she's in, she's almost been trafficked. And there are a couple of women who are... one of them is very rich but very, very naive. And the other one is terribly young and married to the David Brent style John Littlewit and they're squashed and their voices are not heard. And they're talked over, aggressed and I don't want to talk about what happens to them at the end of the play because spoilers, but one of the things I think, just to make a broader point, is that in a carnival atmosphere which is what Bartholomew Fair is, the thing that happens is that boundaries come down. So for the first couple of acts this is absolutely delightful, it's freeing, you can fancy who you like, you can get drunk, you can party, it's wonderful, you take your tie off and your high heels off and you get down and have a wonderful time. As the boundaries continue to come down, then you start having people start to get predated, and it's almost always women who suffer, because they are seen as... we are seen as less powerful, less articulate, we don't have the muscle, we often can't outrun, and so unscrupulous people start to take advantage and that is one of the things that happens in this play and so it becomes very dark and that's to do with behavioural boundaries coming down.

[Rehearsal extract]

IG: So there's this sort of beautiful window in which everything turns upside down...



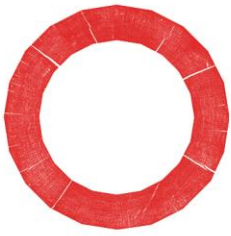
BM: Yes.

IG: Looking at you know the characters in the play and everything sort of turns dark at the end and it twists and turns upside down... if those characters continued to live after the end of the play, do you think that would stick?

BM: It's a really good question. I think you need a broader change to make it stick. You're right that there is a wonderful turning upside down in the first couple of acts of the play and what there is is a sort of early set of just deserts. But it's based also on the fact that the fair workers, who you also meet in the play, tend to be living on nothing, very much hungrier, struggling to pay rent and that they have to predate because of the economic forces that are pushing them into these places. When you get to the end of it, it's very well to say yes we all have to not judge, we all need to live more humanely, but until those forces are fixed or neutralised, then it's going to be very hard not to repeat that pattern.

[Rehearsal extract]

BM: The framework of it is that you get judged according to your class, which is absolutely still present day the unfortunate truth of how people get judged, that we have a matrix for accent, for behaviour, for entitlement, for confidence, I mean god, look at all the Etonians in government. And people are still, when they step into a room, judged according to a set of expectations that we all collectively make. I think that within that, it's about the masks that we assume for ourselves and the masks that other people assume for us. And we can't really... we should change and we are trying to change, all of us collectively I think, the masks that people assume for us, especially if we belong to a category which is disadvantaged in some way. One of the things about the play is some of people of course like the masks they have because they come with a certain amount of baggage that works for them as opposed to against them. Some people are not self aware enough to know what their masks are doing, some people are but they are very, very few but



they tend to be selfish rather than altruistic in the way that they operate. I guess that the experience of a fair when it isn't making people feel vulnerable by taking boundaries down, is that it strips off the outside mask and so you're only left with the inside mask and you have to re-evaluate that. And what I mean by that is if you are, for example, a young rich kid and you go into the fair expecting that you will sail through it and have a lovely time because historically that's what's happened to you, and then you discover that your money goes, your clothes go, the deference that's afforded to you goes, you stop knowing who you are and that is a really salutary thing because then you have to fall back on a much deeper sense of yourself, and you can from there, start to forge an identity which isn't based on outward show and that's a thing that we should all really be working towards.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us, but you can catch Bartholomew Fair in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse until the 12th October.

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