

For Merriment and Delight

For her latest recording, singer Lucie Skeaping rediscovered a form of bawdy musical comedy popular in Shakespeare's day

Today we think of a jig as simply a dance but in late 16th- and early 17th-century England the word was used to describe a short musical farce featuring songs, dancing and slapstick comedy. By Shakespeare's time, jigs were established in the London theatres as the standard afterpiece to more serious theatrical fare. They could be satirical, sentimental, libellous or riotous, and often downright obscene, offering a shameless and subversive antidote to the plays that preceded them.

The Elizabethan poet and dramatist Thomas Dekker wrote: "I have often seene after the finishing of some worthy tradgedy or catastrophe in the open theatres, that the scene after the epilogue hath bene more blacke about a nasty bawdy jigge, than the most horrid scene in the play was."

The origins of the stage jig are probably to be found in the oral tradition, in the dancing, clowning and misrule of the carnivals, May Games and festivals held in rural communities from earliest times. As these local entertainments moved into professional hands, the term was used to describe anything from a solo song, dialogue, ballad or dance to a full-blown mini-drama.

Cuckolded husbands, adulterous wives, milkmaids, whores, city wide-boys, muggers and thieves – the same stock characters turn up again and again. We also meet lecherous soldiers, fishwives and a variety of street traders who, as they call out their wares, get drawn into the plot. One of the most popular characters, and often the unwitting hero of the piece, was the gullible bumpkin who, with his country dialect, was a constant butt of ridicule for urban audiences.

The two most celebrated performers of jigs were strongly associated with the folk tradition. Richard Tarlton (1530-1588) was, perhaps, the most famous clown of his era and a favourite of Elizabeth I. He often made his stage entrance "attired in russet with a buttoned cap at his head" playing the pipe and tabor, instruments characteristic of a folk dancer.

Although none of Tarlton's jigs survive, those of his successor Will Kemp have fared better. Kemp, a clown in Shakespeare's company, was one of the 26 actors named in the First Folio, and the original interpreter of such comic parts as Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*. He described himself as one "that hath spent his life in mad jigs and merry jests".

With their delight in innuendo and rude gestures, jigs seem to have been a source of continual trouble to the authorities and disapproval from the literary world. Shakespeare's rival, the playwright Ben Jonson, loathed the "concupiscence of jigs and dances", believing they prevented audiences from appreciating plays; Hamlet, after expounding some particularly vulgar dialogue, calls himself "your only jig-maker". A contemporary satirical poet, Edward Guilpin, dismissed the "whores, bedles, bawds and sergeants" who "filthily chant Kemp's Jigge", noting how "many a cold grey-beard citizen", on leaving the playhouse fired up with lust, would sneak into "some other



WILLIAM KEMP DANCING THE MORRIS.
Kemp's "Nine Daies Wonder," 1600.
Jusserand, "English Novel."

Clowns Of the two most celebrated authors and performers of jigs Will Kemp, p. (above right) won enduring fame for his Shakespearean roles, but Richard Tarlton (below, in an illuminated capital letter T) was more famous in his own era

Mary Evans

By 1612, jig performances began to attract so many criminals and disorderly crowds – who often visited the theatre for the jig alone with no intention of seeing the main play – that "an order for suppressing of jiggs at the ende of playes" was issued, with instructions to arrest any players who "do persist in these outrages". But the effect was temporary. Audiences, educated and ignorant alike, still demanded their jigs and during the years of the Interregnum (1649-1660), when Oliver Cromwell declared the performance of plays illegal and ordered the closure of the theatres, the jig came into its own (music and dance acts were not covered by this law), drawing riotous holiday crowds to the makeshift stages at fairs and the temporary booths at Bankside.

The jigs were set to popular tunes of the day and, apart from the few short sections of spoken text, one can assume that most were through-sung. We can never know for certain when the actors might have ignored the tunes altogether and simply spoken the words over the music, and at certain points in the scripts we find the instruction "the Tune Changet".

When I began my research for the new recording with The

City Waites, our group specialising in the broadside ballads of 17th-century England, it was frustrating that only about half the surviving jigs print any specific tune titles. Yet the texts can offer clues: a scene that opens with the words "As ye came from Walsingham" must surely have been sung to the popular Elizabethan tune known as "Walsingham". Elsewhere the repetition of the words "jog on" suggests an accompaniment of the old ballad tune of that name (also referred to in *The Winter's Tale*), while the refrain "which nobody can deny" is the title of a version of "Greensleeves" that fits the jig text perfectly. Where no tune connections could be made, I researched suitable tunes from contemporary collections,

including Playford's *The English Dancing Master*, the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* and various lute and viol anthologies.

For the choice of instruments I looked to those commonly heard in the theatre, tavern and village green of the period. Parts for cittern (a kind of Elizabethan banjo, popular in barbers' shops), recorder and bass viol for a "Tarlton's Jigge" are found in the Cambridge University Library, and I also made use of Tarlton's famous pipe and tabor.



An account of an English troupe performing in Germany in 1599 describes them playing lutes, citterns, fiddles and pipes, while my choice of percussion was partly inspired by Shakespeare's Bottom the Weaver in *Midsummer Night's Dream*: "I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs and the bones." Certainly the many references to dancing suggest a band large enough to make a lusty sound, especially if we take into account a noisy audience and an open-air environment. In our recording, the five instrumentalists of The City Waites play not only lutes and citterns but curtal, recorders, three-hole pipe and tabor, hurdy-gurdy, bagpipes, fiddle and bass viol. Eight singers – early music specialists, actors and folk artists – provide the voices.

After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, when the theatres were at last reopened, jigs found a place at civic functions and livery feasts, and occasionally between acts in the indoor theatres. But by the end of the 17th century, under the censure of moral respectability, they had fallen into decline. Nevertheless, the influence of this peculiarly English style of music-theatre continued to reverberate in Purcell's semi-operas and John Rich's pantomimes and ballad operas. Theatre managers such as actor David Garrick in the 18th century customarily propped up a faltering play with a popular afterpiece, and the spirit of the jig can still be perceived in today's Christmas pantomimes with their stock characters, dancing and slapstick.

Fewer than a dozen English jig texts have come down to us, some damaged or incomplete. More have survived in Dutch and German, almost certainly translations or adaptations of English jigs exported by travelling players. During the 1580s, Kemp and his colleagues toured the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark where their repertoire had a powerful influence on continental Singspiel.

The jig texts are laden with period references, innuendo and contemporary underworld cant. What went on between the lines, though – the bawdy gestures, dance steps, instrumental interludes and improvised spoken asides – belonged to each individual performer, much like the ornamentation of baroque concertos. With so little surviving information, we can only guess.

The English Stage Jig: Musical Comedies from the 16th and 17th Centuries for the Merriment and Delight of Wise Men and the Ignorant' by The City Waites is released on Hyperion on April 1
www.hyperion-records.co.uk