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THOMAS TALLIS

BY JESSICA SWALE



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PRODUCTION ENQUIRIES
UNITED KINGDOM AND WORLD
EXCLUDING NORTH AMERICA**
plays@SamuelFrench-London.co.uk
020 7255 4302/01
UNITED STATES AND CANADA
info@SamuelFrench.com

1-866-598-8449

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This text went to press during the rehearsal period and may differ slightly from what is presented on stage.

Thomas Tallis Programme Notes

'Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and turn my back to loneliness.' Maya Angelou

Music has always been a source of solace, a means of transcending the everyday and escaping life's turbulence. And rarely has life in Britain been more turbulent than it was during the lifetime of Thomas Tallis. The composer, who lived under six Tudor monarchs, witnessed the country catapulting between religious factions, as monasteries burned and protestors were sent to their deaths. Rarely can there have been such a desire for eternal peace. And rarely has a composer succeeded in creating music quite as fittingly transcendent as Tallis.

Tallis' life is, for the most part, a mystery. Composers in his day were considered workmen, not artists; they enjoyed none of the celebrity of Beethoven and his contemporaries, they were simply craftsmen, like wheelwrights or farriers. Consequentially the details of their lives were never recorded. What lives on, of course, is their music, and that is where I began when I embarked on this journey.

Whilst writing about a man of whom we know so little might seem like a conundrum, it is precisely that mystery that appealed to me. Writers like the gaps in history; they allow us both to delve deeper and to invent. We like to curl up in libraries, sifting through old manuscripts for glimmers of character or conversation, and then assemble our pickings magpie-like and filling in the gaps ourselves. And there is no shortage of delicious first hand accounts of Tudor life. In the gruesome *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* I came across Mrs Prest, an outspoken protestant who left her idol-worshipping family to cause destruction in Catholic churches, before Mary had her burnt to death. Then, in recordings of Dr Dee's 'Conversations with Angels', encounters reveal the power of the occult in the Elizabethan Court. The question was not what to write, but what not to write. And the result is not so much a story as a tapestry, a piece which weaves together imagined scenarios and real encounters in an attempt to capture the flavour of life in Tallis' time, a little fact, a little fiction.

The play follows the parallel lives of Tallis and a priest from Waltham Abbey. Along the journey we wash up with an array of characters, from a lowly plasterer and Tallis' wife to the young Edward VI, each of whom felt the effects of political wheels turning beyond their control.

We begin in Henry's court, as the young King is squaring up to the Pope. Whilst Henry is competing with Rome and Wolsey for the best choir, in nearby Waltham, Thomas Tallis is composing for the Abbey. It wasn't long before Henry's feud with the Pope exploded, and Waltham Abbey fell victim to the dissolution, leaving its community reeling in its wake. Tallis, however, was lucky. He was to write for the King.

At Henry's death, the young Edward VI took the throne, and imposed Protestantism with revived strength. In addition to instituting the Book of Common Prayer and throwing Latin out of the church, Edward insisted that religious music had "too many notes." Ornate music, he believed, was the work of the devil and had no place in his new church. Tallis was forced to move away from beautiful polyphony and write to Edward's stringent demands for a simpler plainsong, a single word for a single note.

Later, when Edward died unexpectedly, Mary I reinstated Catholicism in the bloodiest possible way. Church music was again to be richer, Latin returned and Tallis was asked to write choral music to reflect majesty and glory.

In his final years Tallis wrote for Elizabeth I, who, though she outwardly returned the nation to Protestantism, kept a very different style of worship in her own private chapel, where she enjoyed all the grand decoration of ceremonial Catholicism. Music in her Chapel Royal must not only be ornate, she insisted, it must be glorious.

Tallis, who was most likely deeply Catholic himself, succeeded in bending his quill to the demands of each monarch. Unlike his student William Byrd, there is no evidence that Tallis protested against any of these impositions. One might ask whether, in being so willing to write to their will, he sacrifice his artistic and religious integrity, whilst others stood up for their beliefs. Yet, perhaps it was a position of strength. Perhaps he made it his mission to provide the people with sacred music, at all costs.

One might easily assume that being forced to write simple protestant tunes must have been a burden to a man capable of creating such complex polyphonic harmonies. But perhaps the challenge to write simply requires equal genius. What is remarkable is that his protestant tunes are as beautiful and often more haunting than the rich Catholic music he is best known for. I have found that it's often his simplest tunes which have haunted me as I've been writing. As da Vinci said, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

Thomas Tallis is the first new play written for the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, and it has been a fascinating to discover how to tell a story in that space. It is completely unlike writing for the outdoor space. The open air stage is a gloriously blank canvas on which words are everything. There the actors can transform the space with a simple declaration welcoming us to the forest of Arden, tossing us on board a ship or transporting to the Holy lands. The outdoor space begs for bold characterisation, political landscapes, crowd scenes and statement.

In contrast, the Wanamaker is anything but blank; it exudes personality. Designed for Jacobean revenge tragedies, the candlelight, the smell of the wood, the gold, burnt umber and rich reds in the paint all transport us immediately into a dark and almost sacred space. In contrast to the public statement in the yard, inside performance feels so intimate they could almost be confidential. The audience are invited to listen to the minute cadences in every line. Here silence is powerful and, possibly most surprisingly, image becomes all important. It's akin to writing for film. Image is vital, and words are simply one aural tool, alongside music and silence. And unlike any other theatre space, here you can achieve a close up. A candle is like a camera; it guides our eye. A letter surreptitiously dropped on the floor will only be seen by the audience when the person discovering it shines their light upon it. Here a character can stand on stage and not be seen until he chooses to reveal himself. And like a close up, light defines tone and reveals thought. A malevolent plotter will light his own face, whilst two lovers, desperate to gaze at each other, will light the others' visages. And of course, like any good film, the effect of any image is amplified ten fold by music. We are so lucky to collaborate with *The Sixteen* on this piece. It is the perfect space for choral work and a wonderful backdrop for a play about religion. It has been a privilege to go on this journey and I do hope you enjoy it as much as I have.

Jessica Swale
October 2015

Thomas Tallis was originally performed in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse
at Shakespeare's Globe in 2014 with the following cast:

Brendan O'Hea Thomas Tallis/Bishop/Guard

Susie Trayling Elizabeth I/Queen Catherine/The Commisioner/
Joan/ Bethan/ Mrs Prest/Mary

Simon Harrison Henry VIII/The Priest/The Pasterer/Mr Prest

Guy Amos King Edward VI

Choir 'The Sixteen' featuring : **Kirsty Hopkins, Alexandra Kidgell,
William Purefoy, Jeremy Budd, Tom Raskin, Ben Davies**

Arngeir Hauksson Lute

After a sell out run, it was revived in October 2015
with the following cast:

Brendan O'Hea Thomas Tallis/Bishop/Guard

Katy Stephens Elizabeth I/Queen Catherine/The Commissioner/Joan/
Bethan/Mrs Prest/Mary

Simon Harrison Henry VIII/The Priest/The Pasterer/Mr Prest

Guy Amos King Edward VI

The Sixteen : **Kirsty Hopkins, Alexandra Kidgell, William Purefoy, Jeremy
Budd, Tom Raskin, Ben Davies**

Arngeir Hauksson Lute

Writer **Jessica Swale**

Director **Adele Thomas**

Designer **Hannah Clark**

Creative Music Consultant **Harry Christophers**

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A NOTE ON THE MUSIC

Throughout the text there are music choices from Tallis' choral canon suggested for each scene. They are the songs we included in the original production, but they are not essential to performance. You could choose alternatives or cut the music as required.

Ideally, the play would be staged with a choir performing the music, but it could also be staged with recorded music.

Please note that although the music of Thomas Tallis is out of copyright, the arrangement is still in copyright, so please check permissions.

If you require information about the arrangements used in the original production please contact Samuel French.

Other work by Jessica Swale
published by Samuel French:

The Secret Garden
Sense and Sensibility
Far from the Madding Crowd

JESSICA SWALE



Jessica Swale is a writer and director. She is Artistic Director of Red Handed Theatre Company and a returning playwright at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

Plays include *Nell Gwynn* (winner of the Egerton Foundation New Play Award 2015), *All's Will that Ends Will* (Bremen Shakespeare Company) and adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Watermill) and *The Secret Garden* (Grosvenor Park, Chester). Her first play *Blue Stockings* (Shakespeare's Globe) is now a GCSE set text. She is currently writing a new play, *The Mission*, about illegal adoptions in the 1920s. In 2012 she won a BAFTA JJ Screenwriting Bursary and has just completed an original screenplay, *Summerland*.

As director, credits include *Fallen Angels* (Salisbury Playhouse), *Bedlam* (Shakespeare's Globe); *The Belle's Stratagem* (Evening Standard Best Director 2012 nomination), *The Busy Body*, *The Rivals*, *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (Southwark Playhouse); *The School for Scandal* (Park Theatre); *Palace of the End* (Arcola), *Winter* (Theatre Newfoundland, Canada) and *Sleuth*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Watermill Theatre).

Jessica has also directed a number of Shakespeare plays in the Balkans and the Marshall Islands for the NGO Youth Bridge Global. She is author of a best-selling series of drama games books, published by Nick Hern. She trained at Central School of Speech and Drama and Exeter University.

For my Dad
To whom I owe my love of music
and a great deal more.

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

Prologue	Thomas Alone (<i>early in HENRY VIII's reign</i>)
Scene One	The Italian Descant (<i>mid HENRY VIII's reign</i>)
Scene Two	The Dissolution (<i>mid HENRY VIII's reign</i>)
Scene Three	A Single Word on a Single Line (<i>as EDWARD VI takes the throne</i>)
Scene Four	The Peddler's Box (<i>under EDWARD's anti-Catholic reign</i>)
Scene Five	Noses out of joint (<i>under MARY's bloody anti-Protestant reign</i>)
Scene Six	Dr Dee (<i>as ELIZABETH prepares to take the throne</i>)
Scene Seven	Doubt (<i>at the height of ELIZABETH's reign</i>)
Scene Eight	Incarceration (<i>as ELIZABETH punishes the Catholic traitors</i>)

COMPANY

The play can be performed with four actors doubling, as below, or with a bigger company as desired. There are eighteen roles.

Actor 1 – **THOMAS TALLIS**, the **BISHOP**, **DR DEE**, the **GUARD**.

Actor 2 – **QUEEN CATHERINE**, the **COMMISSIONER**, **JOAN**, **BETHAN**,
MRS PREST, **ELIZABETH I**, **MARY**.

Actor 3 – **HENRY VIII**, the **PRIEST**, **EDWARD's ATTENDANT**, the
PLASTERER, **MR PREST**.

Actor 4 – The Boy King (**EDWARD**)

The **GIRL** and the **SINGER** in Scene Two can be played by **SINGERS** or
members of the company.

PROLOGUE

Thomas Alone

In the early years of HENRY VIII's reign.

THOMAS TALLIS *walks onto stage. He holds a candle and looks at the audience.*

THOMAS Listen.

Silence.

Listen.

He closes his eyes.

What do you hear? Silence.

He opens his eyes.

Silence – but for one sound.

This voice of mine. It lands so flat and dull.

And like a hammer, knocks upon the ear.

What voice is this to praise the Lord, my God?

What good is man with mortal voice of lead,

That treads flat foot across the realms of sound?

Where is the God in him? That voice is dead.

If this, my speech, so corpulent and cold,

Was all we had to say His name aloud,

Better no sound than that.

Better no sound.

Listen.

Silence.

Listen.

THOMAS *closes his eyes.*

A single voice sings an undecorated Amen. Then a more ornate Allelujah.

A sound divine.

A voice in song can flee the mortal man

And leave him shadowed lowly in his wake.

A note being sung will leave its host below.

And fly towards the gentle hands above.

So what think you of this – my simple thought.

That, if one boy in song may sound divine,

What if one son is coupled with his kin,

With son, and son, until they form a choir?

What better way have we to send our prayers

From churches, poor house, palace, monast'ry,

Where King in ermine bends his head in prayer

And pauper like him stoops upon his knee.

What better shape for worship can there be

Than song and choir to reach divinity?

We hear a choir sing (perhaps Videte Miraculum). It is glorious.

Scene One

The Italian Descant

In the early years of HENRY VIII's reign.

A young (not yet rotund) HENRY VIII is seated in his boudoir in night attire – a white billowing robe. A GIRL attentively rubs oil into his feet. A solo musician might play for his entertainment. The QUEEN (CATHERINE of Aragon) enters.

QUEEN How was the hunt?

HENRY I tired three horses. We coursed thirty miles before we caught the stag. He was magnificent. So much so I almost let him go.

QUEEN You are becoming soft, Henry.

The QUEEN eyes the GIRL suspiciously.

(dismissing the GIRL) Leave us.

HENRY She does no harm.

The QUEEN gives him a look.

(to the GIRL) Fetch me the boy from the chapel.

GIRL Sire. *(exits)*

HENRY *notices the QUEEN's snide look.*

HENRY My boots were rubbing.

The QUEEN kneels down and continues his foot massage. She's playing a game.

QUEEN How's this? Better?

HENRY Somewhat.

She rubs harder.

Gently. I wish you'd seen the beast. So noble. He bent upon his knees before he died, like he was stooped in prayer – and looked at me.

QUEEN You sent for a boy. Who is he?

HENRY He's come from Rome. A castrato. They say he's touched by God.

QUEEN Who says?

HENRY Wolsey. The Pope was boasting that he had an Angel in his choir. So Wolsey sent to Italy, to fetch him for himself. So I have been sent to Hampton Court, to fetch him from Wolsey. His maze is better than mine, he cannot have a finer choir as well.

QUEEN Wolsey is ambitious. You should take him in hand.

HENRY (*on the massage – she rubs too hard*) Ow!

QUEEN He has an eye on Archbishop.

HENRY Are you interfering?

QUEEN No. Just... gently massaging.

HENRY Good.

*The **GIRL** comes back in with the **SINGER**.*

GIRL Sire.

HENRY Ah. The entertainment. Your reputation precedes you.

SINGER Your highness.

HENRY They say you are the finest Singer in Italy, is that right?

SINGER I believe so, Sire.

HENRY Well well. And in England? Who has the finest voice in my country? Do you think.

Is this a test? The SINGER isn't sure.

SINGER I...

You do, your Grace.

HENRY You speak the truth. But you may please me, before you return to Rome. Italy is the home of the sonnet. Dante. Petrarch. Tell me, do all your countrymen have such poetic souls?

SINGER Pardon me?

HENRY Lord knows mine don't. The English are far too busy spying on their neighbours and praying to idols to have time for poetry. What is it about Italy?

SINGER My Lord?

QUEEN Answer the King.

SINGER I cannot say. Perhaps it is the sun.

HENRY The sun?

SINGER We like to lie in the grasses. In the afternoons when it is too hot to work. Italians like to watch the sky. It is tradition.

HENRY Hm. You cannot lie in the grass in England. You get wet. Or bitten by an adder. Or mauled by peasants. Still, it's not all bad. We have a King. And no Pope. You sang in the Papal choir?

SINGER Yes, Sire.

HENRY How is the old bastard?

The SINGER looks confused.

Do you love him?

The SINGER doesn't know what to say. He does love the Pope.

Well? Do you?

A dangerous silence.

SINGER I...

No Sire.

HENRY Good. He is a traitor to God. Though we must thank him for parting with you; he must be very fond of you.

SINGER Yes.

HENRY I heard you were his favourite.

Dangerous pause. HENRY thinks then pours a glass of wine.

Well. Enough talk, you must sing for us, for what is life without music? Though first we must drink – to you.

HENRY offers the SINGER a chalice of wine. The SINGER is reluctant, suspicious.

Take it.

He takes it.

You will drink.

SINGER My Lord.

HENRY Go on. A toast. To Italy.

All eyes on the SINGER. He raises the chalice to his lips and drinks the smallest sip.

It is the very finest claret. Don't you like it?

The SINGER drinks reluctantly. Is it poisoned? He waits a moment. Nothing happens.

SINGER It is delicious.

HENRY Salute! And now, a song. What do you have for us?

SINGER A tune by Thomas Tallis, Sir.

HENRY Play on.

The SINGER sings a TALLIS song (perhaps Like a Doleful Dove).

Tallis, you say?

SINGER Yes, Sir.

HENRY Thomas Tallis. Is he an English man?

*The SINGER nods weakly. He is beginning to feel odd.
The poison's done its work.*

You don't look well. Are you sick?

SINGER I...

The SINGER dies. HENRY watches. CATHERINE looks on in horror.

HENRY Take him away.

The SINGER is taken out. HENRY and CATHERINE are left alone. CATHERINE is winded by watching the SINGER's demise, but she won't show it.

What? *(pause)* Didn't you like the song? I found it rather charming.

CATHERINE My Lord.

HENRY I should eat. It's hours since I ate. Are you hungry?

CATHERINE No. *(pause)* No.

HENRY I shall dine. And then perhaps you might satisfy me.

*He leaves. She watches him go. Perhaps we hear music
(TALLIS'E'en like the Hunted).*

Scene Two

The Dissolution

*In the middle years of **HENRY VIII**'s reign.*

*We are at Waltham Abbey. Choral music plays (perhaps **TALLIS**' *Videte Miraculum*). It is glorious, big, Catholic. **THOMAS TALLIS** is conducting the choir. A **PRIEST** is performing a Catholic ceremony in Latin. Incense. Crosses. Candelabras.*

*Over the end of the music, a **ROYAL COMMISSIONER** (**COMM**) arrives, a representative of **HENRY**'s court. He (or she) is collecting information for the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, the summary of the church's property which **HENRY** is reclaiming for the crown. As the **COMMISSIONER** speaks, the **PRIEST** ceases his ceremony and listens. The music may well continue underneath.*

COMM One Abbey church and buildings on its grounds:

A nave, two pairs of transepts, Holy Rood,
One Lady Chapel, one small Eastern apse,
Cloisters, manor house and gate house too.

Four out-buildings, cellars, orchards, herb gardens and
grazing fields. Farm land, 16 acres, from the Abbey to
Waltham Holy Cross.

An annual income of one thousand and seventy-nine
pounds, twelve shillings and one penny.

I hereby reclaim the buildings and all their contents
under the orders of Henry the Eighth, by the Grace of
God, King of England, France and Ireland, Defender
of the Faith and of the Church of England.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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