Building on almost 300 productions from the last twenty-five years, Alan Dessen focuses on the playtexts used when directors stage Shakespeare’s plays: the actual words spoken, the scenes or segments omitted or transposed, and the many other adjustments that must be made – as with references to swords in a production that features handguns and grenades. Directors rescript to streamline the playscript and save running time by cutting speeches or entire scenes, as well as to eliminate obscurity, conserve on personnel, and occasionally cancel out a passage that might not fit with a particular “concept.” They rewright when they make more extensive changes, moving closer to the role of the playwright, as when the three parts of Henry VI are compressed into two plays. Rescripting can yield practical, narrative, and conceptual gains but can also involve losses or diminishions, so that Dessen calls attention to price tags and trade-offs, both the pluses and minuses of a director’s rescripting or rewrighting. He analyzes what such choices might exclude or preclude and explains the exigencies faced by actors and directors in placing before today’s audiences words targeted at players, playgoers, and playhouses that no longer exist. The results are of interest and importance as much to theatrical professionals as to theatre historians and students.

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REScripting SHAKESPEARE

The Text, the Director, and Modern Productions

ALan c. dessen

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
To Cynthia, Murph, and ACTER
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As a scholar and inveterate playgoer with no backstage or rehearsal room experience, I have benefited greatly from my contact with theatrical professionals who have been generous with their time so as to give me what limited grounding I have in matters theatrical and save me from many missteps. I would therefore like to single out at least some of the many individuals who have put up with my questions and were generous in sharing their insights and expertise. From the Oregon Shakespeare Festival where starting in 1974 I got my baptism as a frenetic playgoer: Jim Edmondson, Audrey Stanley, Pat Patton, Mimi Carr, Megan Cole, Barry Kraft, Hilary Tate, Elizabeth Huddle, Denis Arndt, Rex Rabold, Larry Paulsen, Henry Woronicz. From the *ACTER* program: Bruce Alexander, Gareth Armstrong, Jane Arden, Vivien Heilbron, David Rintoul, Michael Thomas, Patrick Stewart, Bernard Lloyd, Tony Church, Sam Dale, Annie Furl..

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Note on documentation

The chapters that follow draw upon roughly 280 of the productions I have seen over the last twenty-five years. Unless otherwise noted, references to the RSC are to productions in the two large theatres (the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, the Barbican in London) as opposed to the Swan, The Other Place, and the Pit. I do not distinguish between OSF productions at the Elizabethan Stagehouse and the Bowmer, RNT productions at the Olivier and Lyttleton, and SFC productions at the Festival Theatre and the Avon. When I supply two consecutive years for a RSC production (Richard III, 1995–96), the later date refers to a remounting at the Barbican in London or on tour which was the version I saw. With very few exceptions I sidestep cinema and television productions (a different genre and different set of problems) and only introduce stage productions I have actually seen. See the appendix for a list of productions cited.
Abbreviations

DC    The Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, DC
ESC   The English Shakespeare Company marathon of history plays in Chicago 1988
Globe The Globe Theatre, London
OSF   The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Ashland, Oregon
PRC   The Playmakers Repertory Company, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
RNT   The Royal National Theatre, London
RSC   The Royal Shakespeare Company
SFC   Stratford Festival Canada, Stratford, Ontario
SSC   Shakespeare Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, California
TOP   The Other Place