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978-0-521-00798-6 - Rescripting Shakespeare: The Text, the Director, and Modern Productions

Alan C. Dessen

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RESCRIPTING SHAKESPEARE

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 diminutions, 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.

ALAN C. DESSEN is Peter G. Phialas Professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is a member of the Editorial Boards of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Studies in Philology*, and *Renaissance Drama*, and editor of the *Shakespeare Performed* section of *Shakespeare Quarterly*. His previous books include *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters* (Cambridge, 1984), *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 1995), and *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642*, co-authored with Leslie Thomson (Cambridge, 1999).

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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 Firbank, Eunice Roberts, Patrick Godfrey, Jennie Stoller, Clifford Rose. From the RSC, RNT, and other United

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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.

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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