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0521368170 - *Players of Shakespeare 1: Essays in Shakespearean Performance* by Twelve  
Players with the Royal Shakespeare Company

Edited by Philip Brockbank

Excerpt

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## Introduction: abstracts and brief chronicles

PHILIP BROCKBANK

**S**HAKESPEARE'S PLAYS were written by an actor, and in a rich variety of senses they are actors' plays. It is the more surprising, therefore, that the present gathering of essays, studies and spontaneities appears to be the first of its kind. Readers and theatre-goers, whether critical or uncritical, ignorant or informed, have dominated the history of Shakespearean commentary, and actors have commonly had more opportunity to read about their own performances than to write about them. Not that innocent distinctions can for long be made between the play as read and the play as performed. All the players here have read and sometimes assiduously studied the plays and parts they acted, and they know better than most students or onlookers that a Shakespearean play is the sum of many possible readings and many possible performances.

Acting is necessary to life. The term 'role-playing' that sociologists have had to borrow from the language of the theatre recognizes the ubiquitous need to perform real or assumed social functions. Public suasion, in parliament or in the streets, Queen Elizabeth addressing the Commons or Antony in the Roman market-place, is invariably a form of theatre. And we keep the old Greek word for playing a part to describe the pervasive *hypocrisy* of society. 'Assume a virtue if you have it not', says Hamlet to Gertrude, inviting her to what we might call creative hypocrisy. Theatre has itself played a continuing but changing part in those processes of civilization that invite us to enjoy the game of assuming and anatomizing 'virtue' – the properties of being human.

There have been moments in Shakespearean history when it has been felt that knowledge and understanding could be stabilized and Shakespeare studies brought to an honourable end: editors could reconstruct authoritative texts, scholars recover the original conditions of the plays' creation, actors fully realize them in performance, and critics accurately tune the public's responses. While we must keep trying, we know we can't make it. At best 'we meet the past half-way' and what we

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make of its art, even of its facts, depends on what we are and are becoming. Thus Tony Church, playing Polonius over a span of decades, finds the role changing as he returns to it with different preoccupations, domestic and political. Changes are not always in a direction away from the past, however. It may well be that our present experience of Shakespeare's plays is closer to that of the audiences of his time than it has been for many generations. The masterpieces of art, including those of Greek and Renaissance theatre, keep recalling us to the understandings of the past. We now have a keener respect for Shakespeare's text than was usual on the stages of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and our radical impulses in relation to the plays often turn out to be very conservative. Current interest in Shakespeare's self-conscious theatricality ('the art that displays art'), and in what is sometimes called 'meta-theatre', takes us back to pre-Shakespearean days when Erasmus wondered about the difference between a 'real' king and a player-king, and imagined the Olympians looking down on the human world, 'good god, what a theatre!'

Many have talked in recent years of 'the director's theatre'. In Shakespeare's time it is unlikely that there was such a presence as we now understand it, although the book-keeper might have assumed some of his minor functions. It is more appropriate to distinguish authentically between the actor's perspectives and the playwright's, and to see the relationship between actor and director as a reflection of that which in the days of the King's Men would have flourished between Shakespeare and the company. The players in the present collection usually speak affectionately, and only occasionally resistingly, about their directors. Since the directors have usually chosen their casts, this is unsurprising, but the courtesies do not disguise occasional tensions and divergences of purpose that no doubt had their counterpart in Shakespeare's own experience.

The actor's understanding of a play is likely to be very personal, that of the playwright less so. For the actor a character has an almost autonomous life, for the playwright a number of functions in a large design. Several players here (Rees, Pasco, Brenda Bruce) speak of their 'journey through the play', a metaphor (I am told) to which Peter Hall gave a certain currency. The actor needs a compass; the playwright makes a map and the director must read it. For the actor a play is a process to be lived through; for the playwright a structure to be assembled. But, as creative thinkers in the wake of Erasmus understood, if we think of characters as people then we must think correspondingly of the playwright as creator, designer, manipulator – disconcertingly like a god. Sometimes the invisible

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playwright and sometimes a visible *deus ex machina* descends to find solutions to human predicaments in the last act. Some people, of course, get away with behaving as if they were gods. Thus it happens that certain characters in Shakespeare's plays are allowed not merely the abilities of the actor but also some of the functions of the playwright. Richard of Gloucester, for example, who 'can change shapes with Proteus for advantages', is also, in effect, the principal plotter of his play, until Shakespeare and history see to it that he is over-reached. Similarly Edmund makes Edgar play a part in his play in *King Lear*, and Iago, another actor/playwright, dominates the plot of *Othello*. Two characters, the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, and Prospero in *The Tempest*, keep the play-maker's privileges to the very end, and their parts (one likes to think) could have appropriately been performed by Shakespeare himself.

It remains true, however, that characters can in some degree assume a momentum or life of their own, and take the playwrights or the director by surprise. Playing in his own plays, Shakespeare must have enjoyed this source of creative enterprise and tension (as when Barnardine refuses to die in *Measure for Measure*). The life of a part as distinct from its significance, is the prime responsibility of the actor, and actors have traditionally been suspicious of theory or analysis, ascribing the creation of character in performance to decisions instinctively made, perceptions unconsciously arrived at, fine discriminations mysteriously achieved. 'Analysis', said Michael Redgrave, 'does not come easily', and Roger Rees tells us that 'the act of making a character is a delicate thing, there are no rules'. The actor feels exposed and vulnerable, both in preparation and performance, feeling that his own personality and human resources are always on the line. In a sense it is so. Even spectators to a play or readers of a story are under imaginative pressure to find characters inside themselves, and are apt to come up against the boundaries of their own humanity. Hence a certain nervousness about type-casting – Roger Rees, for instance, feeling that his professional trajectory will take him from one character of 'failure' to another, from Aguecheek to Gayev in *The Cherry Orchard*. The actor's personal capacities and limitations are on display whether (to use a distinction made by Louis Jouvet) he is the *acteur*, moulding a character within the bounds of his own personality, or the *comédien* who by a protean creative process (perhaps in this respect like the author) becomes what he is not. Most of the actors represented here see themselves as *comédiens*, not so much subduing their personalities to a part as transcending them. Yet the sense of emotional and psychological risk remains acute. Thus Roger Rees,

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attempting a soliloquy for the first time in his career, in the role of Posthumus, experienced a not uncharacteristic panic. Michael Pennington is witness to the greater strain on the actor's own personality in attempting *Hamlet*. 'The main challenge', he writes, 'is to express fully the deep crises of the part through your own spirit.' 'This is where the part shakes you like a rat', he says of one moment in the play, and 'I was beginning to taste the famous isolation of the part, feeling the emotional tides of a man adrift from the behaviour, the humour, the very language of his neighbours: a disorientation that in some equivalent way was beginning to separate me from colleagues and friends.'

The sensitivities of the actor, therefore, are likely to become entangled with the complex stresses created in the character. And *Hamlet* is, of all Shakespeare's plays, the one that most searchingly anatomizes the actor and is most intimately engaged with 'actions that a man might play', with (as we have had reason to notice) the hypocrisies of the kingdom, the truth that a man might 'smile and smile, and be a villain'. The capacity to act out the killing of the king waits not only upon 'occasion' or outward circumstance, but also on 'that within which passes show'. Not Shakespeare alone, but also a literary tradition and the experience of the live theatre of his time, made the play *Hamlet*, and it is about the possibility of transforming a 'rotten' Denmark not only by 'acting' appropriately but also by making plays that 'hold the mirror up to nature'. *Hamlet* too is an actor turned playwright, seeking to make a play that contains his own role in a larger scene. But ironically, as many have observed, and as many playing the part must have found out for themselves, *Hamlet*'s surgery exposes himself as well as the society. It is, for example, an ironic truth that in his 'mouse-trap' play *Lucianus* is both *Hamlet* ('nephew to the king') and *Claudius* (pouring poison in the king's ear). Renaissance art was very sensitive to the relationship between structures of society and structures of the 'self' (although this is a modern way of putting it). Michael Pennington, rehearsing and performing *Hamlet*, is not only turning himself over, he is re-enacting a phase of history.

The same might be said of Patrick Stewart playing *Shylock* or Richard Pasco taking on the related role of *Timon of Athens*. But some actors are more aware than others of the nature of their engagement with the 'self' and with the 'past'. Stewart gives a very precise account of reactions to historical and stage traditions of the theatre *Jew*, and is prepared to offer details of the solutions he found to the actor's moral, psychological and technical problems. Pasco keeps in retrospect at a certain distance from his

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own performance, preferring to give a general account of the play and of his responses to it. In practice his performance, like Michael Pennington's, varied through the course of the production – sometimes quiet and intense, sometimes more aggressive and shrill. Much depends upon what comes back from the audience.

The tensions generated by the actor's committed self, living the part in performance, taking off from the moment, finding the audience and the other players, were familiar to the great actors of the past, and they stirred the spectators to an answering experience:

Though pit, gallery, and boxes were crowded to suffocation, the chill of the grave seemed about you while you looked at her; there was the hush and damp of the charnel-house at midnight . . . Your flesh crept and your breathing became uneasy.

Perhaps Sheridan Knowles, who reported Mrs Siddons as Lady Macbeth, had been reading too many Gothick novels; 'Well sir', he goes on, 'I smelt blood! I swear I smelt blood!' But Mrs Siddons's creative communion with the character remained in some way detached, and was made by rigorous discipline, careful preparation and even by discursive analysis (see her 'Memorandum on the Character of Lady Macbeth' in Campbell's *Life*, 1834). Yet Fanny Kemble could claim later that Siddons's true analysis was in the performance, not in the memorandum. It is good now to have the one when we can no longer have the other; but both have a contribution to make to our understanding. We have to accept that the transient occasion will elude systematic account, for as Pennington says:

An individual performance . . . is a live thing, with its own conditions and unpredictability; and to an extent the actor, given a base of discipline and control, must allow himself to be carried by the prevailing winds. Everyone wants the occasion to be special; everyone, including the actors, waits for lightning to strike.

The lightning strikes only when the appropriate charges induce it. The conditions of the special occasion are created by exhaustive preparation both of the text and of the actor's self (or selves), while the audience waits in its own state of preparation and alertness.

An unacknowledged presence behind virtually all of the actors' accounts here, thoroughly assimilated, it would seem, into the English tradition, is Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*. He puts the essential point a little romantically:

Our type of creativeness is the conception and birth of a new being – the person in the part. It is a natural act similar to the birth of a human being.

'Creativeness', he says, 'is not a technical trick . . . It is not an external portrayal of images and passions.' But Stanislavski was aware that tech-

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niques must nevertheless be acquired. Sometimes we think we know when an actor is merely mechanical in his effects; but it is also likely that we are often deceived into supposing spontaneous or improvised, effects that are carefully calculated (see, for example, John Bowe's account of his fall into the auditorium from the wrestling in *As You Like It*).

For all the tuning to the high and special occasion, and the arduous personal preparation required from the actor, there are strong continuities of acting tradition, and particular productions often reach a poised (though still lively) state, in which many performances bring few surprises. Theatre depends upon meeting expectations as well as on frustrating them. As audiences we wish to be reassured of our own convivial humanity as well as to be hurried on to new possibilities. It is both satisfying and exciting to be suspended on the boundaries of the predictable and the unpredictable. That tension is a little like that between actor and playwright. When, in *The Tempest*, Trinculo and Stephano are distracted by 'glistening apparel' it is as if Shakespeare has diverted his players to the wardrobe, just as they are out to stop him having everything his own way. The 'trumpery' in Prospero's house (Shakespeare's theatre) is 'stale to catch thieves'.

Chaucer's characters, said Blake, 'are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps'. It is an extravagant expression of the truth that we are quick to recognize, and to conform to, certain types known (as in the *Canterbury Tales*) by their physiognomy, their humours, their professions or callings, or even by their characteristic diseases. It is possible sometimes to see an actor composing his character from what is, after all, a limited stock of possibilities. Thus Donald Sinden's Malvolio is 'vertical', with a domed head and a military demeanour; while Geoffrey Hutchings's Lavatch is given a physical handicap (a stoop, after trying a hump) which dramatizes his alienation. An actor, particularly a comic actor, has often to contend with a strong tradition of stage characterization which he can best use by resisting. Thus Patrick Stewart is up against audience expectations of Shylock:

So strong is this image of the Jew with the raised weapon that in rehearsals I had to resist the impulse to menace Antonio in this way, and throughout the life of the production I felt secretly guilty that I was denying the audience their right to see this traditional tableau.

Not only the need to cultivate the kind of innocence from which fresh responses can be generated, but also the drive towards novelty and originality of interpretation, invites the actor to break the moulds of the past.

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Yet it cannot be easy for an actor to distinguish, even to his own satisfaction, between tradition and innovation. Many of the effects that Donald Sinden played for in his 1969 *Malvolio* (the rotation on the word 'revolve' when he reads the letter, and his unaccustomed and laboured 'run' at Olivia's command) have long been, and continue to be, moments of audience expectation. His shocked repetition of the word 'run', however, and his witty play with the stage properties were innovations strictly for the occasion.

There is little trace in these essays of the belief the French have sometimes entertained in '*la seule inflexion juste*'. The English would appear to be confident that there can be new, valid readings, that the text is open to many alternative possibilities, and that there is no definitive reading or production. Much of this confidence is owed specifically to the open mystery of Shakespeare's art, which is rich in ambiguous effects, resonances and references, often refusing to let the language say one thing at a time. The term 'subtext' was used by Stanislavski about 'the inwardly felt expression of a human being in a part, which flows uninterruptedly beneath the words of the text, giving them life and a basis for existing'. Many contributors here use the method and some use the term, but in differing degrees and ways. Gemma Jones, for example, spending her time in the super-market or on a London bus 'thinking pregnant' as she approached the playing of Hermione, was in search of the subtext. Donald Sinden, who uses the word, keeps up (once for the sake of the playing, now for the sake of the exposition) a running commentary of unspoken words and thoughts. He reports that Trevor Nunn allowed him to vocalize the word 'run' (once vetoed by John Barton) with the remark, 'it *is* in the subtext'. Brenda Bruce and David Suchet comb the text to find in the roles of others, as well as in their own, the clues and the evidence that assist their re-creations. Brenda Bruce uses an angry speech by Capulet to serve as her 'subtext', and David Suchet from a dozen points of the play assembles his figure of Caliban. 'Subtext' should not, I suspect, be used to elicit words which ought to be in the text and aren't, but 'the flow beneath the words' is probably an indispensable dynamic in the actor's achieved performance. Some cultivate it (or its illusion) in their own lives outside the theatre, or in the imagined life of the character outside the play (see Sinden on *Malvolio* and Hutchings on *Lavatch*). In Shakespeare's plays, however, there is another mode of 'subtext' generated by the turbulent obliquities of the language. When Claudius, for example, tells Laertes of Hamlet's return to Denmark he says, 'But to the quick of the ulcer Hamlet comes back'; the

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phrase means 'to get to the point', but at a changed pace it tells us that Hamlet returns to the centre of corruption. The performances of Michael Pennington and Richard Pasco showed them sensitive to such verbal latencies.

From the evidence before us it would seem that some actors are more attentive than others to relationships between characters and to the play as a whole. Sinead Cusack, for example, who enjoyed imagining scenes outside the play, gives a lot of attention to her relationships with Shylock and Bassanio, finding herself more satisfied with her playing of the bond-plot than of the love-plot. She also shows herself more than usually aware of possibilities other than those which the production brought to life. There is always a performed play in each production and a number of unperformed ones remaining on the page. Sinead Cusack, after successfully realizing a melancholy and anxious Portia, is left eager to play a more buoyant version.

While there are many possible performances, there are also impossible ones, and diverse potentials are worked out within real, if hard to define, boundaries. The criteria of characterization are not merely subjective, they can grow out of historical understanding and out of analysis of the public world. Tony Church, playing Polonius in 1965, tells us that he had one eye on Burghley, Shakespeare's contemporary, and the other on Harold Macmillan, his own. This openness, and the player's alertness to our contemporary world, help to transform theatre history from the inert weight of custom it might otherwise be into a rich inheritance. New performances can take off from the old and can change their significance. Tony Church's larger view of the play and its changing cultural contexts affects the detailed realization of particular speeches:

At the end of the advice Polonius says: 'This above all, to thine own self be true: And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.' In the 1965 production I had delivered those lines as a direct appeal to naked self-interest; in 1980 I spoke them as a simple moral truth which I knew my son would share with me.

There is much in his account, and in others, to suggest that acting, like the life it expresses, calls for a great range of inward and outward observations, some momentous and others apparently trivial.

Brenda Bruce played in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Ron Daniels and clearly addressed to an audience aware of the present condition of Northern Ireland: 'The children, carrying their elders' bitterness and aggression and bigotry into the streets, fight and kill each other.' The problem for Brenda Bruce's Nurse was to meet and stand up to



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the 'leather-clad, greasy-haired, menacing' figures in the street, for the audience 'was not prepared to laugh at the ill-treatment of Nurse':

Since by now we knew each other rather well and trusted each other as actors, we agreed to improvise the next night. The boys were light and frivolous and I *enjoyed* their fun. Instead of using my fan to make a ladylike image, I hit them about their heads. It was a Japanese paper fan and made a sharp noise. The audience laughed. After three slaps they laughed and clapped. After a few performances the fan broke and the prop boys substituted another fan. It was short and the ribs were made of plastic, instead of cane. When I hit the boys the smart crack was missing. The wonderful tingle of comedy-timing disappeared. On my free days I drove to all the Japanese emporiums from Oxford to East Finchley in search of the correct fan, without much luck.

The apparently trifling detail had its place in a performance which made the most of the Nurse's energy and life-delight, and of her ability to cope with a world that keeps pulling itself apart.

The players in *Romeo and Juliet* (and indeed in any of Shakespeare's plays) are engaged not only in living the life of the character but also in demonstrating the processes that are changing a whole community of characters – in this instance, the city of Verona. The audience's feelings are engaged, but not their personal, intimate feelings only, but also collective ones, shared with, and picked up from, our neighbours in the theatre. We have one kind of concern for the lovers and another kind for the city. Looked at one way, the actor and the audience correspond with the individual and the society; but looked at another, the actor is seeking from the audience sometimes a private and sometimes a public response, sometimes speaking man-to-man and sometimes man-to-mass. Bertolt Brecht did much to return European traditions of theatre to public and social modes of thought and feeling, but in England the communal styles have not, from present evidence, displaced those techniques of empathy and illusion practised, for example, by the player of Priam in the court of Elsinore. Michael Pennington's Hamlet, holding the player's mask, nicely expresses the distance, and the nearness, from one mode to the other.

The true test of the players' alertness to their contemporary world is, ultimately, their control of an audience. Sinead Cusack tells a revealing story of the actor's sensitivity to straying attention; but the most measurable of audience signals is laughter for which Donald Sinden, on this occasion, attempts a digital rating. On other occasions (for example, in his performance of *Lear*) Sinden has used his quick audience-rapport to tragic effect. Playing for laughs and playing for effect have their risks, and in the history of Shakespearean theatre some of the loudest laughs and hottest

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splashing tears have been improperly solicited – by intrusions of stage business and even of fake text (see Hamlet’s advice to the players). The keenest and most searching effects, however, are won from the text, often by carefully rehearsed timing. It is important, for example, that Orlando should enter carrying the exhausted Adam, precisely at the line, ‘Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything’.

Some actors concern themselves very fully with the edited text and with the scholarship of the play. David Suchet is very attentive to punctuation, for example, and both he and Geoffrey Hutchings look for historical warrant for their rendering of a character’s appearance. The preparation of a role, even before rehearsals start, can take many weeks. But over the rehearsal period (usually in the Royal Shakespeare Company about six weeks) there can of course be many new and fundamental discoveries, often owed to interplay of character. Hutchings, for example, found that Lavatch’s relationship with the Countess was crucially important. Had another performer played the Countess the effect might have been different; for it is not improbable that his sense of Lavatch’s ‘clairvoyant’ understanding with her was owed to his acting-rapport with Peggy Ashcroft.

There are perhaps a thousand characters in Shakespeare’s plays, including Innogen, wife to Leonato in *Much Ado*, who never says a word, and Isbel, Lavatch’s sweetheart who, it seems, may be a private joke. It is the business of the actor to re-create them, and to entertain us with the prospect of more and richer ways of being human. These essays are intended as glimpses behind the scenes for those who know that illusions are shaped from realities, that feelings are evoked by art, and that hard work informs the actors’ playing of an actor’s plays.