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0521477344 - *Players of Shakespeare 3: Further Essays in Shakespearian Performance* by
Players with the Royal Shakespeare Company

Edited by Russell Jackson and Robert Smallwood

Excerpt

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Introduction

ROBERT SMALLWOOD

READERS of the third volume in a series have a reasonable idea of what to expect. The late Philip Brockbank was able to introduce the first of these collections as an innovation in publishing history, a book that was ‘the first of its kind’. Seven years later it seems entirely unsurprising that we should be interested in the reflections of actors on Shakespearian roles which, over a six-week rehearsal period and a run of perhaps a hundred or more performances (not untypical for an RSC production), they come to know with a very particular intimacy.

The value of such intimacy was perceived at the beginning of this century by the critic whose work represents so decisive a stage in the educational establishment’s appropriation for the classroom and lecture hall of Shakespeare the writer for the popular theatre: A. C. Bradley’s introduction to his *Shakespearean Tragedy* advises his readers, generations of examination candidates over whom he cast so potent a spell, that the best way to understand the plays is to read them ‘as if they were actors who had to study all the parts’. His next sentence, however, begins to drive that wedge between theatre Shakespeare and classroom Shakespeare which has been such a depressing element of the plays’ twentieth-century incarnation: ‘They do not need, *of course*, to imagine whereabouts the persons are to stand, or what gestures they ought to use; but they want to realise fully and exactly the inner movements which produced these words and no other’. The gestures, the position on the stage and in relation to other characters in the play, these and any other considerations of performance ‘of course’ do not matter; all that is significant for the study of Shakespeare is the *words*, their motives, their sources, their meaning. The reaction against Bradley, when it came in the 1930s, and most obviously encapsulated in Lionel Knights’s essay of 1933 ‘How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth’, was in no sense a reaction against this divorce of the words of the text from the performance of the play. On the contrary, Knights reinforces it, informing us early in his blistering attack on the Bradleyan critical

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method that the only ‘business’ of the critic of Shakespeare is ‘with the words on the page’. For a few more decades the academic establishment consigned Shakespeare to the classroom and library, and players of Shakespeare and teachers of Shakespeare were condemned to regard each other with mutual distrust, if not hostility, across an altogether artificial divide.

The bridging of that divide has been one of the principal endeavours of Shakespearian criticism over the last thirty or so years, discernible across a wide spectrum, from editors whose footnotes now spend much more time on matters of staging than on the questions of philology which used to obsess them to an enormous flow of criticism of the general ‘text and performance’ kind. There is undoubtedly a much greater awareness in current school and university Shakespeare teaching of the plays in performance. All this is healthy – healthy enough, indeed, to have itself been questioned (as all new orthodoxies quite rightly should be), though not, I think, seriously to be threatened. Though few have taken literally George Bernard Shaw’s admonition that the ‘simple thing to do with a Shakespeare play is to perform it’ and that ‘the alternative is to let it alone’ – the world would not have been so pestered with Shakespeare books if they had – that typical phenomenon of a decade or two ago, the essay on Shakespeare in an academic journal, or an undergraduate work-file, without the faintest indication of the text’s theatrical origin and destiny, is becoming, mercifully, a rarer event. For the comfortable enterprise of disquisition upon the significance of the ‘words on the page’ (supposing editorial scholarship has been able to decide what those should be) is immediately sabotaged by the process of giving those words to actors to speak. From the moment one sets out to cast the play (how old, for example, is the player one should be seeking for the majority of roles in Shakespeare: there is surprisingly little evidence on this from the words on the page) to the arrival at the last word of all Shakespeare’s plays, the orthographically forgettable but theatrically potent (and frequently volatile) *Exeunt*, the enterprise is a constant process of choice among often equally persuasive alternatives.

That process of choice-making, the exploration of possibilities through rehearsal and the selection of what seems to work best in the present circumstances of acting relationships and concepts of set and design, forms an important element in the essays that follow. But preceding that endeavour, for most RSC productions at least, lie the larger decisions within which the rehearsal selection process must operate. The apparently limitless freedom of the rehearsal room, if not altogether illusory, is at least confined, for it is contained within boundaries on the one hand of playing

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space, set, and other directorial concepts which have already governed casting decisions – ‘artistic’ considerations in the broad sense – and on the other of available budget, audience expectation (and audience composition), choice of theatre – considerations that are economically driven and in a broad sense ultimately political. To take the choice of theatre first: the Royal Shakespeare Company, from the one large early 1930s auditorium in which it came into being when it was reconstituted at the beginning of the 1960s from the old Shakespeare Memorial Theatre organization, now operates in seven or eight regular playing spaces in Stratford, London, and Newcastle. Annually, or virtually annually, it also sends out a regional tour to distinctly irregular playing spaces, school and civic halls, sports arenas, even covered-over swimming pools. All these theatrical venues are represented in the essays in this volume and in them the huge influence over conceptual considerations and rehearsal procedures of the space for which the production is destined is, inevitably and properly, perfectly clear.

Why the space has been chosen invariably depends on box-office considerations. The RSC’s first *King John* for nearly two decades was played in the studio theatre, The Other Place, because experience (even though limited by infrequency of production) remorselessly proved that *King John* is not a top-selling play; the 150 seats of the Other Place would therefore be easier to sell than the 1,500 seats of the ‘main house’, the Royal Shakespeare Theatre itself. The result of this externally imposed necessity happens to have been a happy one; Nicholas Woodeson, beginning his essay on the title role in the play, declares that play and place were ‘made for each other’, while the director of the production, Deborah Warner, already had an impressive record of artistic success in small and less formal theatre spaces when she began to add to that record with this production. One of those achievements had been with the RSC in the preceding season, when she made of that most neglected and contemned of Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Titus Andronicus*, an overwhelmingly affecting and exhilarating theatrical experience. The venue on this occasion was the Swan, the RSC’s newest auditorium, seating 450 spectators in horseshoe formation on three levels round a thrust stage in a relationship not altogether unlike that obtaining in an Elizabethan theatre. The play’s success in that theatre, public and crowd scenes played out to actors inhabiting spectators’ space, scenes of physical suffering threateningly, inescapably close at hand on the thrust stage, was, of course, a tribute to the skill of director and actors in exploiting the space which they had been assigned; but the assigning

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process was no doubt largely the result of a not unsurprising belief that selling 1,500 seats per performance in the main house for *Titus Andronicus* might not be altogether easy.

The plays represented in main-house productions in this volume nearly all have a certain commercial safeness about them – as play titles that is, though obviously not, invariably, as particular productions. *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, and increasingly *Measure for Measure* (though this is a more recent phenomenon) are titles which can be relied upon to attract audiences from a wide range of the RSC's spectrum of potential customers – tourists in Stratford for a brief visit, the huge population of the adjacent West Midland conurbation, visiting school and academic groups, and so on. Productions of them, therefore, come round rather frequently in a theatre which is choosing half a dozen plays annually from the thirty-seven Shakespearian possibilities. It is no accident, therefore, that essays on roles from several of these plays are not appearing for the first time in a volume in this series. *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*, indeed, have figured in all three, *Measure for Measure* in two. That the same company should, every three or four years, be creating new productions of the same play on the same stage cannot but produce its pressures: the director and designer are almost always different, of course, there is rarely much overlap among the actors, and awareness of the work of predecessors is usually denied, but it is hard to imagine that some care not to be repetitive of earlier choices does not have to be taken, consciously or unconsciously. On the whole, Shakespearian playgoers should be able to regard this situation as a source of pleasurable anticipation rather than regret: the range of performance options (as recent Shakespearian criticism and scholarship in general, and these *Players of Shakespeare* volumes in particular, have insisted) is enormous; it would be absurd to suggest that one choice was in any absolute sense 'right' and exceedingly difficult to prove that another was altogether 'wrong'. That the economic and practical circumstances in which the RSC operates force it, through its constant re-examination of a limited number of play-texts, to explore across a wider range of those choices than any other theatre company, is perhaps not unhealthy, though like all systems of intensive cultivation it needs careful monitoring. My own experience, accumulated over thirty years of RSC-watching, is that the accusation, not infrequent, that production choices have been made solely for the sake of 'being different' is nearly always shallow and ill-judged.

The Royal Shakespeare Company, then, is a very particular and in many

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ways a rather curious organism. Some reviewers of earlier volumes in this series have said as much, and so criticized the editors for not spreading a wider net. The charge is understandable, and up to a point legitimate; that we here continue on the established lines may thus merit a word of defence. On one level this is inevitably pragmatic and personal. Our academic endeavours in Stratford-upon-Avon bring us into close and regular working contact with this theatre company in a way which is probably unique between any academic institution and a major professional company: these volumes are only one of several results of that co-operation. There are, however, less local and particular reasons: there has been a remarkable increase in recent years in companies concentrating on Shakespeare; no longer does the RSC have competition only from the National Theatre and an occasional local repertory or summer festival production, but such companies as Renaissance, Cheek by Jowl, the Peter Hall Company, and the English Shakespeare Company are enormously increasing the range of Shakespeare productions available to British theatre-goers. Nevertheless, the RSC remains by far the most wide-ranging, the most various, the most experienced, and, in terms of sheer volume of output, the most productive Shakespeare company in the world, employing a wider range of directors and actors than any other (including many who have previously worked for the other companies mentioned), operating in a range of locations and playing spaces as various as any other, and presenting productions which usually have longer lives than any other. A cross-section of its productions over a brief period may thus be said to offer a representative sampling of the current state of Shakespearian production in this country.

The essays in this volume, then, derive from ten RSC productions from the period from 1987 to 1991; these ten productions were the work of eight directors, six men and two women. They were designed for three playing spaces in Stratford (five for the main house, two for the Swan, and two for The Other Place), with one smaller-scale regional touring production that played a wide range of venues throughout Britain. Apart from this last, nearly all of them played for a year in Stratford, followed by a short season in Newcastle upon Tyne and a second year at the Barbican in London in houses requiring a considerable degree of set modification for the move, particularly so for Swan productions moving to the Pit studio theatre, which is considerably less than half its size. There is, then, no shortage of range in this small collection from the work of a single company over a comparatively short period. Some brief discussion of the main features of

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1 'Main House' Shakespeare: a battle scene from *The Plantagenets*,
 directed by Adrian Noble, designed by Bob Crowley, Royal Shakespeare
 Theatre, 1988



each of these productions in terms of set and overall concept may be helpful to provide a context for the more particular perspectives of the essays that follow.

The four main-house productions of comedies from which the first five essays derive present a quartet of representatively contrasted design choices. Bill Alexander's *The Merchant of Venice* placed the play firmly in the sixteenth century; Di Trevis's *Much Ado About Nothing*, though looking occasionally reminiscent of earlier decades, was more or less firmly contemporary; Nicholas Hytner's *Measure for Measure* made fairly specific allusion to the inter-war years, perhaps to the mid-thirties; and John Caird's *As You Like It* looked similarly thirtyish at Duke Frederick's court but energetically modern, in a non-specific sort of way, in the Forest of Arden. Pilgrims to a 'royal' theatre in the town of Shakespeare's birth, coming as if to a shrine or museum, not infrequently suppose that they will be greeted by confirmation of all their doublet-and-hose expectations. This by no means unrepresentative group of productions

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makes clear how comparatively rare it is for those expectations to be satisfied.

Mark Thompson's dominating columnar set for Nicholas Hytner's *Measure for Measure* distilled all the most impersonal, alienating aspects of mid-twentieth-century architecture; its central pillars revolved to reveal, unsurprisingly, a prison beyond; only for the final scene did the back of the stage open up to give us a view of sky, and even of a tree, its unashamedly painted backcloth thus suggesting that escape from this remorseless urban world might, at least within the pretences of the theatre, be possible. Escape was never achieved, however; Isabella alone seemed to have the will for it, but, striding determinedly towards that backcloth open space in response to the Duke's final proposal of marriage, she stopped to look back at him before reaching it, and the lights faded on her uncertain glance as she stood poised and still between him and life beyond Vienna. The world of the city, with its silent and anxious civil servants around the Duke and later Angelo, its drug-pushers and rent boys hanging round the public lavatories of the suburbs inhabited by Mistress Overdone and the street-wise young delinquent Pompey, was an overwhelmingly modern, secular environment in which Roger Allam's Duke tried to face up to his own and his subjects' neuroses, sexual and political. The threatened violation of Isabella, though she wore a black headcloth and long black dress throughout, was of the woman more than of the nun, brutally physicalized as Angelo threw her across the desk from which he was allegedly dispensing justice, the corrupt white male in authority, tyrannizing over the defenceless black woman in subservience. Few productions could more vividly make the point that putting on a Shakespeare play is a matter of choosing among options: a whole critical (and to some extent theatrical) tradition of examining the play in the light of sixteenth-century Christian theology, with Vincentio as a sort of Christ figure, seemed to go out of the window to produce this sharp, intelligent, secular vision of *Measure for Measure*, centring on Roger Allam's worried, muddled, improvising, and altogether ungodlike Duke.

Also presenting a radical re-examination of the play's recent theatrical tradition was Di Trevis's modern-dress *Much Ado About Nothing*. The director clearly started from the premise that the society of Messina is rich, effete, selfish and unsympathetic, the opulence of its costumes, and the lazy decadence of its hotel-swimming-pool-patio society deservedly vulnerable to the misunderstandings which come close to destroying it. Mark Thompson's set presented Leonato's house in some late twentieth-century

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republic (Central American, perhaps) where the rich are very rich and the motives of the revolutionaries, even if led by the malevolent Don John, are perfectly understandable. The overwhelmingly lavish costumes (Beatrice and Hero never appearing twice in the same garments, and Hero's marriage dress putting *Tatler* wedding photographs to shame), the elegant sun-lounging furniture, the patio fishpools, the apparently shallow and superficial people with nothing to do, all combined to present an image of a society riding for a well-deserved fall. Don Pedro and his party arrived on stage (partly from above) to the sound of helicopters from a war (just out there in the real world) that has never seemed closer, one of those up-country flare-ups that explain why precarious governments need to keep ruthless standing armies. Press reviews of the production were on the whole energetically hostile – partly, no doubt, because its shock tactics had succeeded, but more seriously (where seriousness was discernible) because it was felt that little of new revelation of the play had emerged from the onslaught on accepted readings. The production's reappraisal of the play extended to Beatrice and Benedick, who were portrayed with a great deal more of an age gap than is customary between themselves and Hero and Claudio. They presented what seemed in many ways an ill-assorted couple and were given a perhaps harder task than usual to convince audiences that the growing evidence of their commitment to each other was anything more than a reason for laughter. That ultimately it was in fact much more emerges in Maggie Steed's description of her Beatrice's tentative and hesitant journey towards that final commitment.

Where Nicholas Hytner's *Measure for Measure* pushed religious issues into the background, Bill Alexander's *The Merchant of Venice* highlighted them – literally so, for on the back wall of Kit Surrey's set hung on one side an icon of the Madonna and on the other a Star of David, alternately lit according to the scene currently taking place beneath them. The play was treated primarily as a study in sectarian and racial hatred, its twentieth-century overtones not in the least diminished by its sixteenth-century costuming. In the trial scene, before Portia forbade the spilling of blood, Shylock prepared for the moment with prayers in Hebrew while the Christians prayed in Latin. Much offence was given to both religious communities by this aggressive depiction of the excesses of sectarian confrontation. At the end of the play, in that infinitely variable final *Exeunt*, the last two characters left on stage on this occasion were Antonio and Jessica, she searching for the little cruciform jewel, Lorenzo's first gift, which she had lost and which Antonio had found. Our last image was of his

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holding it out to her, he the head of the Christian community, she the last survivor in the play of the Jewish community, and between them the symbol of her defection from her inherited faith, proffered yet withheld, reached out for but not grasped, as the lights went out.

The set for this production was Venetian throughout, a bridge (of sighs) spanning the stage and a wooden landing-platform in the foreground. Belmont had more elaborate floor coverings and curtains, but the basic playing space remained unchanged. Costumes were colourfully sixteenth century, Shylock in a flowing purple robe and multi-coloured turban, the Christians in ostentatiously wealthy dress, particularly Portia, whose silks and jewels were constant evidence of her having been 'richly left'. Shylock might, at a certain point, have had the ready money, but the Christians had the real wealth, and it seemed somehow fitting that the final moment of the production's exploration of racial tensions should crystallize around a jewelled crucifix. That this was held by the leader of Venetian society's dominant religious orthodoxy was complicated by the fact that Antonio was also presented as the leader of its subordinated sexual community, for Portia's victory over Shylock in the trial scene had also been a victory over Antonio's desire to die at Shylock's hand, as a martyr to his love for Bassanio. Antonio, presented as a depressive homosexual, aiming, through death, to achieve an unbreakable hold over Bassanio's emotional loyalties, needed to be defeated by Portia at least as urgently as Shylock if her marriage to Bassanio was to have the faintest hope of success; the grimly energetic determination of her expedition to Venice and her performance in the trial scene restored the dominant heterosexual orthodoxy at the same time as it was restoring Christian social and political supremacy. Again the choices made by the production were highly selective and partial, and the result intelligent, stimulating, and disturbing.

Deborah Findlay looks at the play from the point of view of its principal victor; in Gregory Doran's essay, on the other hand, we catch a rare glimpse of a Shakespeare production from one of those notorious 'bit parts' of which the plays are so full and which require such skill and commitment in the playing if the larger roles are to be properly sustained. Solanio, part of that male coterie attached to Antonio in this version, is not a large part, but its loyalties and affiliations chart the flow of prejudices which the production was highlighting.

Sophie Thompson came to the role of Rosalind at the RSC from a recent performance as Celia for the Renaissance Company, the complex inter-relatednesses of the roles thus asserting themselves in this third volume of

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Players of Shakespeare as they did in the second. John Caird's Stratford production was designed (by Ultz) very much for the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, its set being a continuation of the decor of the theatre's auditorium and foyer to present an elaborate (some thought over-elaborate) gloss on the play's assertion that 'all the world's a stage'. The aim of the design was to blur and obfuscate the boundaries between our world and that of the play. One entered the theatre to encounter a replica of the highly distinctive foyer clock, telling the right time, dominating the stage; however early one got there the actors were there already, as at a court dance, their evening costumes in keeping with the 1930s design of the theatre itself, moving freely between stage and auditorium, theatre ushers and court ushers indistinguishable. Duke Frederick made his entry through the stalls and sat in one of the dress circle boxes for the wrestling while the theatre audience was required to stand, with the onstage court party, for the ducal anthem. (Did unwillingness to do so constitute inadequate surrender to the fiction, or, on the contrary, a thoroughly committed involvement leading to a very proper refusal to stand for the usurper?) Since all of these early scenes were set forward of the proscenium arch and played in front of huge wooden doors reproducing the panelling of the auditorium, it was not until Rosalind led the entry into Arden by pushing open one of these doors, that the play moved to what, when the theatre was opened in 1932, would have been thought of as the *stage*. And then, as the door swung open, breaking the great clock in two (for there is, of course, no clock in the forest) there was an empty (or virtually empty) space beyond, the magic world of Arden, alias a theatre stage, a place to play in. The role-playing games pursued in that space, and the discoveries and self-discoveries that come from them, are explored in Sophie Thompson's essay.

Two hugely contrasted styles in the production of Shakespeare's history plays are manifested in these essays. Adrian Noble's version of the first tetralogy (*The Plantagenets*) was on the grand scale of main stage ostentation; Deborah Warner's *King John* offered studio theatre simplicity at its most quintessential. Interestingly (and perhaps ironically), they played in Stratford and London simultaneously. In contrast to the massive cutting of *The Plantagenets*, Deborah Warner's *King John* played every line of the text – which seems likely to have been the first time such a thing had happened in the professional theatre since the play first saw the light. Court and battle scenes notwithstanding, the production confined itself to a 30-foot square in the centre of the tin hut which was the original Other