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978-0-521-56476-2 - English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English Stage in the 1990s

Peter Holland

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Based on Peter Holland's wide experience as a reviewer of stage productions, *English Shakespeares* explores the full extent of Shakespeare performances in England over the last decade.

As a regular reviewer for *Shakespeare Survey* and the BBC, Holland has examined the variety, the strengths and the problems of English productions. His introductory chapter points to themes which are taken up in the detailed accounts that follow: the size and scale of different theatres, the difficulties of over-familiarity, the power of director's theatre, the possibilities of design, the excitement of new actors, the discoveries of regionalism and the variety of playing spaces in which Shakespeare is performed. The main part of the book is a chronological account of productions which charts the work of several English companies, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre, Cheek by Jowl, Northern Broadsides and the English Shakespeare Company. A final chapter compares the English experience with productions elsewhere, including America, France, Germany and Russia.

Peter Holland's reviews are individually thoughtful, provocative and illuminating; cumulatively they show that there is no one English Shakespeare style but a rich and often bewildering variety.

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# ENGLISH SHAKESPEARES

*Shakespeare on the English stage in the 1990s*

PETER HOLLAND

*Director, The Shakespeare Institute, The University of Birmingham*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia  
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1997  
 Reprinted 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in 11/12.5pt Monophoto New Baskerville [SE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*  
 Holland, Peter, 1951-

English Shakespeares: Shakespeare on the English stage in the  
 1990s / Peter Holland.  
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 56405 0 (hardback) - ISBN 0 521 56476 x (paperback)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 - Stage history - England.
2. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616 - Stage history - 1950-
3. Theater - England - History - 20th century. I. Title.

PR3106.H65 1997  
 792.9'5-dc21 97-5758 CIP

ISBN 0 521 56405 0 hardback  
 ISBN 0 521 56476 x paperback

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## *Preface*

Theatre reviewing is an ephemeral and parasitic art. It is parasitic because without the performance there can be no review, and it is ephemeral because the review's meaning is bound up with the performance. But, unlike the transience of performance itself, the review can be returned to and re-evaluated long after the performance is over. Yet reviews are written for a precise context: the daily paper, the weekly magazine, the radio broadcast or the academic journal. Divorced from their circumstances, their meanings change and they seem like documents witnessing an invisible experience.

This book is primarily the product of my moments of pretending to be working as a professional reviewer. Yet I have always been aware as a reviewer of being more an academic than a professional critic. As the academic study of performance has developed by leaps and bounds in recent years so the activity of watching productions, particularly Shakespeare productions, has itself been explored and theorised. The change is exemplified by the difference, within American academic analysis, between the writing in the fine special issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly* in 1985 devoted to 'Reviewing Shakespeare'<sup>1</sup> and that in an equally exhilarating collection put together ten years later, *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance* (ed. James C. Bulman, 1996). The new sophistication witnesses an increased academic anxiety about the possibility of analysing performance at all, and is distinctly self-conscious about its theoretical position. Where the contributors to the earlier collection were comfortable about admitting that they reviewed productions, the later collection is full of disclaimers: Barbara Hodgdon's provocative analysis of reviews of Robert Lepage's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Royal National Theatre opens with a careful definition of her article as one that:



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moves beyond text-centred analyses and takes a contextual and materialist approach which situates historical spectators and their reading strategies as the primary objects of investigation. Consequently, I offer neither a self-referential thick description nor a performance-driven account of the theatrical aesthetics or semiotics of either 'Shakespeare's' or 'Lepage's' *Dream*, except in so far as to note what textual and/or theatrical signs might prompt a particular reading.<sup>2</sup>

Professional reviewers rarely theorise their activity. Irving Wardle's account in his study *Theatre Criticism* (1992) is a rare example of a practising critic analysing that practice. More often critics simply bring together what they perceive as their best columns into a single view of the English stage. I have aimed to do more than that.

My aim in this volume is both to describe in detail (giving what Hodgdon, following Clifford Geertz, calls a 'thick description') and to offer a materialist reading of the circumstances within which Shakespeare production takes place. My ideal of writing about theatre performance is still the work of theatre critics like Beerbohm and Shaw, writers who can describe in such a way as to make the reader see what they saw. It is a style I admire in the work of Richard David and, when a friend wondered whether this book was intended in some way to be a successor to Richard David's *Shakespeare in the Theatre* (Cambridge, 1978), I could only say that I would be proud if it were to prove so.

As Hodgdon understands, 'thick description' is necessarily 'self-referential' and my accounts of productions are, I hope, properly aware of my own position in relation to them. Part of chapter 1 is concerned with the necessary fragmentation of that mythical collective: the audience. My writing about productions is unembarrassedly subjective. If it sometimes seems in current academic practice that other people can read a book for a student, it is certainly the case that no one has been able to see a production for me, even if my response has inevitably been transformed by the other viewers with whom I discussed it or whose reviews I encountered.

Theatre-going is a complex cultural practice and my first chapter explores intervals, audience sizes and textual cuts as examples of constructions of performance that surround and transform any production and which are themselves defined by materialist circumstances far beyond the control of the individual actor, director or even theatre company. The succeeding chapters

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document, year by year, the Shakespeare productions I saw between late 1989 and late 1995. The first year's stint is divided into two: chapter 2 looks at some of the work in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and the Royal National Theatre; chapter 3 examines the more populist work in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and work in the Swan Theatre. Chapters 4 to 8 complete the narrative and the last chapter explores productions of Shakespeare by non-British companies from numerous countries, especially within the context of their appearance in English theatres. Each year's productions are a richly various group. While each chapter provides a particular focus (e.g. on history in chapter 7), the concerns reappear in every chapter. There can be no single definition of English Shakespeare production; this book both witnesses and celebrates its diversity.

Well over half of the productions I consider in this book were by the Royal Shakespeare Company. From one perspective the RSC's position is dominant and imperialist, a cultural institution whose significance in the perception of Shakespeare in performance is out of proportion to values that might be ascribed to its productions. Although, throughout this study, I am sharply critical of many RSC productions, I am unashamedly an RSC fan. But I have tried to analyse the nature of its practice, the constrictions forced on it as well as its freedoms, as a means of demonstrating that the performances constitute only one strand of the culture of English Shakespeare production.

This book began in 1989 when Stanley Wells invited me to contribute the annual review of Shakespeare productions in England to *Shakespeare Survey*. For six years he put up with the late arrival of overlength pieces and hardly complained or cut a line. Without his invitation and support I would not have found myself trying to see as many major Shakespeare productions as possible year by year, let alone trying to turn my views of them into coherent arguments about the state of English Shakespeare production. I am also grateful for his detailed comments on the first draft of this book. My thanks, too, to Catherine Alexander for help with the annual struggle over photographs, and to Sarah Stanton for advice both throughout my reviewing stint and with the preparation of this book. I was saved from many errors of style and fact by the meticulous and exemplary copy-editing of Helen Southall.

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I am also grateful to a whole host of BBC radio producers for *Kaleidoscope*, *Nightwaves* and *Third Opinion* for inviting me to review productions for them, and to Giles Foden and the *TLS* for frequent invitations, including the long piece on the 'Everybody's Shakespeare' Festival which lies behind my concluding chapter. Jennifer Bowen and Anne Theroux took a shot in the dark in asking me to present a series of six programmes for BBC World Service Radio on 'Shakespeare's Globe'. I hope they were happy with the result since the experience was for me thrilling, taking me to Moscow and Hamburg, Paris and Alabama, and, most excitingly, to Delhi, Bangalore, Lucknow and Bombay, in search of Shakespeare productions.

I am grateful too for the kind friendship of many of the professional theatre reviewers, particularly Michael Billington, Michael Coveney and, especially, John Peter, whom I came to know on the circuit of first nights. Their reviews can be found in that invaluable and indispensable source, *Theatre Record*. If I occasionally quote from them to take issue with their views, I am still lost in admiration for the intelligence and perceptiveness that they bring to bear on their work, day in, day out.

First versions of the *Survey* pieces were given to the RSC Summer School in Stratford – again thanks to the kindness of Stanley Wells and Robert Smallwood and to those most tolerant but expert audiences. Robert, who wrote rival annual accounts of Stratford productions for *Shakespeare Quarterly*, will recognise how often my views as expressed at the Summer School have been tempered in the light of his genial doubt. Early versions of other sections were heard at the meeting of the Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft in Bochum in 1994 (my thanks to Dieter Mehl) and at the meeting of the Société Française Shakespeare in Paris in 1996 (my thanks to Ruth Morse and Richard Marienstrass).

Above all, my thanks go to the many friends who have accompanied me to the theatre, talked to me about their views on the productions and tolerantly listened to mine. If I name some, I have not forgotten others, but I must mention Paul Hartle (and all the students who took courses with me on the University of New Hampshire summer programme in Cambridge), Jean Chothia, Wilbur Sanders, Adrian Poole and Claire Preston (and all the Cambridge students who came to Stratford as part of the 'Shakespeare in Performance' paper), Albert Braunmuller (and

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his UCLA students), Michael Cordner, Anne Barton and, above all, my constant theatre-companion and sternest critic, Angela Ritter. Without her judgement, memory and acuity I would have made many more errors than are left in this book; many of the best ideas ought to be acknowledged as hers, not mine.

Last, but not least, my gratitude to the many actors and directors, especially the members of the RSC whose views I heard in seminars at the Shakespeare Centre each January, for talking with me about their work. I hope they forgive my use of their thoughts so freely offered.

References to Shakespeare throughout are keyed to *The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford, 1986). Reviews cited can be found in *Theatre Record* unless otherwise stated. For other works cited in the text and notes, place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated.