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978-0-521-63022-1 - Performing Shakespeare in the Age of Empire

Richard Foulkes

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PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE IN THE AGE OF EMPIRE

During the nineteenth century the performance of Shakespeare's plays contributed significantly to the creation of a sense of British nationhood at home and the extension of her influence overseas, not only in her own empire but also in North America and Europe. This was achieved through the enterprise of the commercial theatre rather than state subsidy and institutions. Britain had no National Theatre, but Shakespeare's plays were performed up and down the land from the fashionable West End to the suburbs of the capital and the expanding industrial conurbations to the north. British actors also travelled the world to perform Shakespeare's plays, while foreign actors regarded success in London as the ultimate seal of approval. In this book Richard Foulkes explores the political and social uses of Shakespeare through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century and the movement from the business of Shakespeare as an enterprise to that of enshrinement as a cultural icon.

With the prospect of the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death in 1916 the campaign for a Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre gathered pace. This was promoted as a benefit to the whole English-speaking world and the equal of the state theatres of Europe, but it fell victim to the outbreak of war, which coincided with a decline in traditional Shakespeare and exposed the nation's lack of any institutional stage.

The achievements of leading Shakespearian actors, managers and directors, not only from Britain (Macready, Phelps, Irving, Tree and Granville Barker), but also Europe (Saxe-Meiningen, Modjeska, Bernhardt, Salvini) and North America (Forrest, Cushman, Aldridge and Booth), are set in the context of national and international events, alternative forms of patronage and the forces of nationhood and imperialism to reveal the intricate and fascinating story of the performance of Shakespeare's plays across the globe during this period of apparently limitless British ascendancy.

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*To the contributors to Shakespeare and the Victorian Stage
and the memory of Gareth Lloyd Evans and J. C. Trewin*

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