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978-0-521-67122-4 - Performing Shakespeare's Tragedies Today: The Actor's Perspective

Edited by Michael Dobson

Excerpt

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Introduction

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The massive persistence of Shakespearean tragedy as a popular source of live entertainment is surely one of the oddest phenomena in the history of Anglophone culture. Four centuries after their composition, plays often seen as the expressions of a distinctively Renaissance understanding of mortality and its relation to social hierarchy continue to fascinate audiences otherwise long ago seduced by the rival claims of middle-class social realism, of post-modern minimalism or of sheer escapism. In 2004 and early 2005, for example, when nothing else seemed able to fill West End theatres except musicals, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) packed the Albery and the Trafalgar Studios in London with an entire season of Shakespearean death and dismay – an *Othello*, a *Hamlet*, a *Romeo and Juliet*, a *Macbeth*, a *King Lear* – and in 2004 and 2005 the English theatre also saw another major *Othello* (mounted by Cheek by Jowl on a national and international tour that finished at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith), three more prominent productions of *Hamlet* (one at the Old Vic, one by Yukio Ninagawa at the Barbican, and one by English Touring Theatre), two important stagings of *Macbeth* in Islington alone (one at the Almeida and one at the Arcola), and another world-class *King Lear* (at the Minerva in Chichester). This book brings together the reflections of a number of major contemporary classical actors on what it means to perform Shakespeare's Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies in the modern theatre, and on how these works can most powerfully be realized there for today's audiences. Concentrating on the plays identified by A. C. Bradley a century ago as the 'great' tragedies – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* – it offers the sorts of insights into some of the most demanding and rewarding roles in world drama that can only be obtained by playing them. Ten perceptive and articulate performers reflect on their experiences of ten major roles: the Ghost, Gertrude and Hamlet; Iago, Emilia and Othello; Lady Macbeth and Macbeth; Lear's Fool and King Lear.

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These essays are necessarily, and valuably, subjective – recording something of how it felt to these different actors to be rehearsing and playing these parts in the early twenty-first century, and providing a peculiarly intimate set of trade secrets about what techniques, ideas and memories their performances used – but between them they canvass a wide range of our current perspectives on Shakespearean tragedy as a genre. The business of acting necessarily includes the activity of literary criticism – since performers have to read and interpret texts as part and parcel of performing them – and it should not be surprising, despite a long tradition of academic disparagement of the theatrical profession and its claims to intellectual insight, to find that these assorted tragedians have often been consciously engaged in trying out in theatrical practice some of the ideas currently exercising Shakespeare studies in the seminar room.

One of these, almost notoriously, is the extent to which our present-day readings of Shakespeare's plays should be conditioned by a sense of their original historical and cultural context, and the volume begins with three essays on *Hamlet* that together constitute a set-piece debate on how the pastness of Shakespearean tragedy should be negotiated in the present tense of current theatrical performance. Appropriately, the actor most committed to preserving what he sees as the primal, atavistic power of this play, and most convinced that this should involve the theatrical re-creation of the late sixteenth-century mental and spiritual world to which it originally belonged, was cast as the Ghost, the embodiment of a terrifyingly reanimated archaic past. Greg Hicks appeared as Old Hamlet, the Player and the First Gravedigger in Michael Boyd's RSC *Hamlet* in 2004–5, a production which deliberately sought to stage the ideas about *Hamlet* explored by the most celebrated academic exponent of the New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, in his book *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001). One of only two productions among the nine remembered in this volume to have opted for Elizabethan or Jacobean dress, Boyd's *Hamlet* was explicitly interested in matters of religion and the afterlife. Its Hamlet (Toby Stephens) was an athletic, virile, Renaissance prince, whose resistance to his uncle's regime was thwarted at every turn by the efficient apparatus of security and surveillance maintained at Claudius's sumptuously Counter-Reformation Elsinore. In the context of this theocratic court, where the first entrance of Claudius and Gertrude was heralded by a choral Mass, Hamlet's will was in any case comprehensively puzzled

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by the intervention in his affairs of a Ghost that apparently made its visitations from precisely that Purgatory which his Protestant tutors at Wittenberg would have told him did not exist. Returning in the guise of the Player and then the Gravedigger, Hicks's devastatingly original and traumatic Ghost haunted a production whose simple set – a round acting area, confined at the rear by wooden panelling, with a trapdoor in its centre – seemed to imprison its characters around an inescapable grave. For Hicks, the scenes between Hamlet and his dead father are more akin to Greek drama than to the mundane realism of our own age, giving us emotional access to a fiercer and more religious world, and he writes vividly of his desire not just to resist 'the banality of the modern' in terms of setting (p. 20) but to build his performance as the Ghost from a starting point of expressionism and physicality rather than from personal psychology. Where that expressionism mandates any deviation from the specifics of Shakespeare's text – as in the case of Hicks's reduction of the Ghost's 'complete steel' to a single, outsized, Sisyphean burden of a broadsword – Shakespeare's undead authority must be carefully placated: 'we bought the right not to take those lines about full armour too literally', writes Hicks, '... by summing up the meaning of that armour in this one, overwhelming ... symbolic prop' (p. 21). This was emphatically a bid to recapture an imagined Elizabethan response to ghosts rather than an attempt to translate the convention of the stage spectre into something more contemporary and familiar.

The other two productions of *Hamlet* discussed here took a very different line from Boyd's in terms of setting and design, but for wholly different reasons: as Imogen Stubbs and Samuel West explain, their respective performances, although each was sharply distinguished from Hicks's by being given in modern dress, were informed by two quite distinct understandings of Shakespeare's relations with his own cultural context and with ours. To Stubbs, who played an unconventionally young and pretty Gertrude in Trevor Nunn's production at the Old Vic in 2004, the archaism of the Ghost needed to be smoothed out rather than exploited, and indeed Nunn's Ghost – played by Tom Mannon, who doubled the role of Claudius – wore a modern ceremonial uniform rather than any armour at all. As the double-casting of Mannon may suggest (despite Nunn's insistence that it was motivated by economy as much as by Freudianism), this production was interested above all in the prince's psychology, prepared to treat all the

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text's Elizabethan conventions (including that of the stage ghost) as so many means towards the end of engaging a contemporary audience emotionally with the story of a particular crisis in a particular family. Hence Nunn silently cut any lines suggesting that Hamlet might be older than a present-day undergraduate, casting a youth to play a youth (Ben Whishaw, a nineteen-year-old fresh from RADA), and the main prop discussed by Stubbs, rather than a symbolism-laden sword, is the series of ever-dwindling heels by which her increasingly alcohol-dependent Gertrude literally diminished in stature during the course of the play. Cast in this predominantly naturalistic production, Stubbs understood her function as an actress to be the plausible enactment of Gertrude's personal story as it might appear in an immediately recognizable present-day social context. Her account of Gertrude, accordingly, cites not Greenblatt and the post-Reformation theological controversy about the afterlife but *Hello!* magazine and the modern media's depictions of Princesses Grace and Diana, charting Stubbs's discovery of Denmark's under-written queen as a 'Yummy Mummy'. To Stubbs, the role of Gertrude exhibits a pampered aristocrat enjoying the new glamour and informality of life as Claudius's consort rather than Old Hamlet's, in between failing adequately to deal with her loved, spoiled and, ultimately, neglected son. Taking an altogether more insouciant view of Shakespeare's authority, Stubbs is prepared to dismiss as instances of authorial failure those passages in the play which do not lend themselves to this form of intimate psychological and social realism. Her hilarious account of her struggles to find an adequate motivation for Gertrude's famous, and famously protracted, account of Ophelia's drowning provide an object lesson in the potential mismatch between Shakespeare and Stanislavsky.

Samuel West, having directed the play himself during the RSC fringe season in summer 2000, played Hamlet in Stephen Pimlott's RSC production of 2001–2, which also used modern dress but with rather different priorities. On a vast, off-white stage traversed by security cameras, West played a Hamlet whose relationships to the characters around him were often less important than his relationship to the audience, the play at times almost becoming what he calls 'a one-man stand-up tragedy routine occasionally interrupted by bits of narrative' (p. 44). Although Pimlott was similarly prepared to overrule Shakespeare's script when it came to the question of Hamlet's age (and was similarly prepared to deprive the Ghost of armour), West regarded this

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production as motivated primarily by a fidelity to the play. However, it sought primarily to be faithful not to this text's supposed interest in theology or to its dramatization of family life but to its scepticism – about power, about religion, and even about tragedy itself. The modernity of Pimlott's setting – an Elsinore of besuited interns and name-tagged security personnel, which beautifully articulated the play's late Elizabethan politics by reimagining them in contemporary terms – was designed not to familiarize and prioritize the personal relationships within the play, but to show as clearly as possible the pressures towards conformity against which Hamlet defines himself, as his soliloquies and asides guide the audience through the court's depressingly familiar Machiavellian world of doublespeak and spin. For West, the important rehearsal exercises leading up to his performance were not individual but collective, as the whole cast considered the sort of world, both political and mental, which the play's dramatic personae inhabit, and the exact constitutional events which have conspired to shape the ambiguous position of the Prince, who, formerly heir apparent to his father, finds himself at the start of the play as heir apparent to his uncle instead. (Hence, as he describes, they found themselves re-enacting the controversial election of Claudius a matter of days after the controversial election of George Bush Jr.) West's approach to the famous soliloquies, correspondingly, owed less to Stanislavsky than to Brecht. This Hamlet had the authority to stop the whole play in order to discuss whether 'To be, or not to be'; he was able to step completely outside the action to discuss not just his own but the audience's mortality, and his questing consciousness realized at once the occasionally clichéd futility of the tragedy in which he found himself and its ability, nonetheless, to tell urgent truths. Despite what West perceives as both the prince's and the play's lapse into a Calvinistic determinism in the last act, his essay provides a forceful defence of a secular political reading of *Hamlet*. If Hicks sees Shakespeare's tragedy as desirably atavistic, and Stubbs sees it as in need of occasional cosmetic updating to make its supposedly timeless emotional drama accessible, West sees it as proleptically modern, always already new, and hence to be treated in practice as a new play in a slightly unfamiliar idiom rather than a familiar play in an old one.

Touched on in West's discussion of whether an actor playing Hamlet should be exclusively preoccupied with 'personal tragic grief and depth' (p. 43), the question of the centrality or otherwise of

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characterization to the proper working of Shakespearean tragedy informs all three of this volume's essays on performing in *Othello*. The two productions involved – Greg Doran's for the RSC in the Swan in Stratford and subsequently at the Trafalgar Studios in London, and Declan Donellan's for Cheek by Jowl on world tour – shared a good deal in terms of setting, since both dressed most of their male characters in post-war British army uniforms. (What a godsend to designers working on *Othello* the long-term involvement of British troops in the affairs of Cyprus has been, whatever views may be taken by Greeks, Turks or Cypriots!) They differed profoundly, however, in their overall approach, with Doran's situated in a familiar RSC mode of naturalism-plus-direct-address-to-the-audience (with a set that in the Cyprus scenes erected a high barbed-wire fence across the stage to underline the production's interest in the mind-set of the military), while Donellan's deliberately exploited techniques that looked fresh from the rehearsal room, if not still in it (on a set that consisted solely of five brocade-draped wooden boxes, equally suggestive of ammunition crates or of coffins). Antony Sher, describing his performance as Iago in Doran's production, sees Shakespeare's depiction of this mesmerizing villain as primarily an exercise in novelistic characterization, given its force and energy through being placed in a sort of one-sided dialogue with the audience. He follows a well-established line of approach to the role, as much literary as theatrical, that starts from a consideration of Iago's motivation: taking issue with a famous remark by Samuel Taylor Coleridge ('Iago's soliloquy, the motive-hunting of a motiveless malignity – how awful it is!'), Sher finds in Iago a completely full and consistent portrait of a man who is himself obsessively jealous and whose self-destructive project in the play is to draw Othello into the same pathology. For Sher, drawing in rehearsal on the experience of apartheid South Africa (which he shared, from a different side of its central division, with Sello-Maake ka Ncube, Doran's Othello), Iago's racism was comparatively incidental, another reserve of brutality rather than a central fixation. What is perhaps most striking about his essay, however, is his description of watching and implicitly challenging the audience throughout his performance, seeing them view Iago at first with an involuntarily delighted complicity and then with increasing disgust, until in the last moment of the production – as Iago, seated and handcuffed, head down, at the front of the stage, suddenly raised his eyes to meet theirs once again – Sher's reproachful

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and aghast face silently demanded why they had not intervened to interrupt the fatal chain of events to which Iago had throughout made them privy. It was a disconcertingly metatheatrical moment in what had already been an overpoweringly intense and claustrophobic production.

Sher and Doran's approach to the play was enormously sensitive to its verbal nuances, as this essay shows, but Doran was quite prepared to make one crucial alteration to the text, discussed both by Sher and by this production's Emilia, Amanda Harris. (Harris won, and amply deserved, an Olivier award for her performance in this role.) This was to have Emilia present at the soldiers' celebration in Cyprus (in 2.3), during which she acted as a sort of mistress of ceremonies, helping to pass around the drinks, flirting with the other officers, and participating enthusiastically (under the sad misapprehension that she was doing so with her husband's approval and enjoyment) in a piece of business which became central to the scene, the debagging of the drunken Cassio. Emilia can seem like a minor role in this play compared to the other two, Iago and Othello, discussed in this volume, but Harris's performance was an object lesson in discovering, in the comparatively few appearances and fewer speeches provided by the script (supplemented by this usefully added incident), a playable, nuanced and affecting portrait of a character whose death seems the more tragic for being contingent and incidental. Harris is intelligently conscious, too, of the potential pitfalls of applying Method techniques to Shakespeare, remembering how in a previous production of *Othello*, in which she played Desdemona, one actor complained to the director that 'I have a problem here – my character just wouldn't say this' (p. 72). Her account of making sense of this apparently scarcely written role, particularly of her understanding of the nature of Emilia's changing attitude to her new mistress, and her description of the ways she and Sher discovered of suggesting how the sickness of Emilia and Iago's marriage came to contaminate that of Othello and Desdemona, contrasts strikingly with Imogen Stubbs's experiences as Gertrude: the comparison further suggests, perhaps, how domestic, realist and feminocentric *Othello* is as a tragedy compared to *Hamlet*, where the female roles can seem less important or consistent in their own right than as indices of the male protagonist's state of mind.

Nonso Anozie, who played Othello for Declan Donellan, is equally preoccupied with characterization, though the approach to the role

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which he describes here is in some ways an unexpected one. Cast as the Moor at the unusually young age of twenty-five (after giving an even more precocious performance as King Lear), Anozie realized, after being bombarded with advice by friends and fellow actors, that his best approach to a part with such an extensive and controversial history of literary and theatrical interpretations was to ignore them altogether and 'approach the play as though it had never been done before, as if it were a new, undiscovered work of Shakespeare' (p. 85). The result was an *Othello* which, from Anozie's own perspective at least, was far less preoccupied with race and with Othello's self-image than some of its earlier forbears on the English stage: as Anozie remarks, 'I am black, so I have, for free, all of those things that white actors had to spend time working on before getting to grips with the story of the play and Othello's relationships with the other characters, and I suspect that this made me a less apparently narcissistic or self-regarding Othello than the anxiously make-up-covered creature offered by some of my white predecessors' (p. 89). What this avoidance of one mainstream tradition of playing Othello freed Anozie for was, quite apart from a performance securely centred on Othello's love for Desdemona, a complete immersion in a rehearsal process so profoundly Stanislavskyan as to be almost structuralist, a rigorous breaking-down of the text into units and binarisms and of scenes into competing objectives that has become one of Declan Donellan's hallmarks. Despite this ruthless process of analysis and definition, Cheek by Jowl's production – which exploited a range of non-naturalistic techniques, such as having characters not nominally present in a scene acting out the incidents or fantasies being described by others – emerges from this account (as it did in performance) as a more fluid one than Doran's, more apt to change from one performance (and venue) to another, and indeed Anozie is noticeably less definitive than Sher when it comes to one important issue in the play's interpretation: according to Anozie, this production's Iago remained an enigma, someone who acted as he did 'for reasons that are never fully revealed' (p. 87).

Approaching the task of playing Lady Macbeth, another part with an intimidatingly rich tradition of theatrical and critical interpretation, in Dominic Cooke's RSC *Macbeth* of 2004, Sian Thomas followed almost exactly the opposite procedure to this, devouring all the relevant literary criticism she could (Coleridge and all), and taking a

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rather less disciple-like attitude towards her director. Her account of playing Lady Macbeth, as well as being an estimable piece of literary criticism in its own right, provides a case history in the sensitive subject of to whom a performance belongs: was this *Macbeth* Shakespeare's, the cast's or the director's, and if some blend of all of the above, in what ratio? In other words, how thoroughly was Thomas's work as Lady Macbeth solely her own? As her essay gently makes clear, her conception of the role of Lady Macbeth did not at all correspond to that with which her *Macbeth* arrived in rehearsal, nor did her sense of how the rehearsal process should be structured correspond with that of the production's director. (Dressed in approximately nineteenth-century, Russian-looking clothes late in rehearsals, Thomas had a more tricky relationship still with the costume designer, who originally intended the nightdress in the sleepwalking scene to be distractingly transparent.) In marked contradistinction to Anozie, Thomas, in less easy sympathy with her immediate colleagues, found herself consciously following in the footsteps of a previous player of this role, Sarah Siddons, and her essay provides the sole instance in this volume of a performer avowedly and consciously experimenting with readings and pieces of business known to have been used to good effect in the past. Despite this, hers makes the fullest use in this collection of the familiar modern actor's metaphor by which the performer seeks to identify and inhabit the personal 'journey' supposedly traversed by a character through a play (a notion which, however successfully it may sometimes be applied to the task of making these plays speak today, it is hard to feel Shakespeare can have shared, not least because it draws on a tradition of Protestant spiritual autobiography that would not find full literary expression before the time of John Bunyan). It is perhaps appropriate to this fine performance's context that Thomas's eloquent reading of Lady Macbeth should be centred around the character's unstoppable urge towards a self-realization which she can only accomplish by overcoming her husband's opposition.

Simon Russell Beale played Macbeth at the Almeida theatre in early 2005, in a production directed by John Caird which chose, unlike Cooke's, to minimize any discrepancy between the verbal and the visual language of the show by dressing the characters in Jacobean costumes – mutedly and unshowily Jacobean, to be sure, but Jacobean just the same. Like Thomas, Beale, though just as literary a reader of the text, seeks to vindicate the need felt by performers to ask that

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much-ridiculed question about how many children Lady Macbeth might have had before the events shown in *Macbeth*: for both players, one of the remarkable distinguishing features of Shakespeare's dramatic writing is his ability to convince us of a reality preceding and exceeding the events shown on stage, of which the play we see appears to offer only a glimpse. The subtle and original reading Beale offers here of the play's text was given expression on stage in one of the slowest, most meditative interpretations of *Macbeth* of recent times, a dimly lit portrait (played on a plain, circular acting area lightly marked with a pentagram and surrounded by foggy footlights, so as to resemble a circular raft adrift in Hell) of an isolated consciousness intently watching its own progress into a world of desolation and meaninglessness. Like Thomas, who played Lady Macbeth in repertory with Gertrude, Beale, whose previous Shakespearean role was Hamlet (also directed by Caird, at the National in 2000), draws illuminating comparisons between Macbeth and Claudius: one of the most distinctive and unusual touches in his Macbeth was the usurper's brief and thwarted desire to cherish Fleance as an heir apparent, just as Claudius at first does Hamlet. This was, as far as I know, an unprecedented way of playing Macbeth's short interview with Banquo in 2.1 (in which Macbeth denies any particular remaining interest in the witches' prophecies but promises to discuss the matter with his colleague at a later date), usually understood simply as an instance of Macbeth hypocritically playing for time, but it is characteristic of this actor's approach that his argument that Macbeth would genuinely like to spare Banquo and Fleance (if he could do so while still retaining the crown) is based above all on a minute examination of the text's verbal details.

For John Normington, cast as the Fool in Bill Alexander's RSC production of *King Lear* in 2004, the business of identifying the character he would embody (alongside Corin Redgrave's Lear, in a production that was one of the highlights of the company's 'Tragedies' season) was less akin to academic literary criticism than it was to criminal investigation, and accordingly he writes his lyrical evocation of the uncanny process by which an actor temporarily intuits and inhabits another self in the manner of Dashiell Hammett. In what turns out to be a remarkably fruitful analogy, the Fool, poignantly and mysteriously absent from the play after the storm scenes, here becomes a missing person, a cold case which Normington must reopen and at least provisionally