

Players of Shakespeare 5

This is the fifth volume of essays by actors with the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre on their interpretations of major Shakespearian roles. The twelve essays discuss fourteen roles in twelve different productions between 1999 and 2002. The productions covered include three plays that have not featured before in the series: *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The contributors are Philip Voss, Ian Hughes, Aidan McArdle, Zoë Waites, Matilda Ziegler, Alexandra Gilbreath, Antony Sher, David Tennant, Michael Pennington, Simon Russell Beale, Richard McCabe, Frances de la Tour and the late Nigel Hawthorne. The title roles in three of the major tragedies – *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* – are covered and there is also an essay on Iago in *Othello*. A brief biographical note is provided for each of the contributors and an introduction places the essays in the context of the Stratford and London stages.

Players of Shakespeare 5

edited by
Robert Smallwood



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Sources

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Preface

This fifth volume in the *Players of Shakespeare* series follows the basic pattern (with which most readers will by now be familiar) of its predecessors in presenting a series of essays by actors on their preparation for, and performance of, major Shakespearian roles. The twelve essays offered here discuss fourteen performances in twelve productions that were to be seen between 1999 and 2002, all but one of them productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company. The exception is the essay on Hamlet by Simon Russell Beale, a performance given in John Caird's 2000–2001 National Theatre production. Eight of the roles are new to the *Players of Shakespeare* series, and three plays – *The Comedy of Errors*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* – make their first appearance in it. The essay jointly written by Zoë Waites and Matilda Ziegler on the intimately connected roles of Viola and Olivia in *Twelfth Night* takes its cue from the joint essay in an earlier volume in the series on those other intimately connected comedy heroines, Rosalind and Celia. Of the fourteen roles dealt with in the volume, seven are (in the Folio's broad categorizations) from comedies and seven from tragedies, with a sequence of essays in the latter category on many of the major roles in Shakespearian tragedy. That the author of one of these did not live to see his essay in print is a source of profound regret for me, though it remains a great privilege to be editor of the volume that includes the late Sir Nigel Hawthorne's reflections on his last role in the theatre. Those interested in the history plays should not assume that their complete absence from this fifth volume in the series has any sinister implications: a sixth *Players of Shakespeare* collection is nearing completion and will be devoted exclusively to productions of the histories, from the RSC's Millennium 'This England' project, and later. That only four of the fourteen essayists here are women may well reflect (or even exceed) the ratio of women's to men's roles in Shakespeare's plays, but has nevertheless diverged from the editor's rather more equitable

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original intentions: not every invitation, sadly, produces the hoped-for essay.

The essays in the volume appear in the Folio order of plays; quotations and references are, as usual, from the New Penguin Shakespeare, the edition most likely to be issued to RSC actors in rehearsal. There is a biographical note on the writer, with emphasis on Shakespearian work, at the beginning of each essay, and at the end of the volume there is a list of credits for the twelve productions covered.

I am grateful to Susan Brock and Helen Hargest at the Shakespeare Centre Library for their patient assistance with photographs of Stratford productions and for help with many other matters archival, to Louise Ray of the National Theatre Archive for her kind assistance with photographs of the production of *Hamlet*, and to Jane Ellis of the RSC Press Office for her patience in helping to locate one of the photographs of the production of *The Tempest*. Nearly all the essays here derive from question-and-answer sessions between actors and students on the international programme of university courses jointly sponsored at the Shakespeare Centre in Stratford by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the Shakespeare Institute of the University of Birmingham, for the direction of which, until my recent retirement, I was for many years responsible. I am grateful to colleagues in both organizations for their friendship and encouragement; to Victoria Cooper, of Cambridge University Press, for her continued commitment to this series, as well as for her patience with the sometimes attenuated process of bringing these collections of essays together; and, above all, to Sonja Dosanjh, RSC Company Manager in Stratford through the period covered by these essays, who arranged all of the question-and-answer sessions from which most of them derive and whose friendship and support in bridging that – I sometimes like to think – gradually narrowing gap between theatrical and academic Shakespeare has made this volume, and this series, possible.

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