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978-1-107-63401-5 - Shakespeare in Stages: New Theatre Histories

Edited by Christine Dymkowski and Christie Carson

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Introduction

Christine Dymkowski and Christie Carson

At the moment, the history of Shakespearean performance is very well served at its two extremes. A number of volumes, such as *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage* and *The Oxford Illustrated History of Shakespeare on Stage*, offer a valuable historical overview of the subject, while series like Cambridge's Shakespeare in Production, Manchester's Shakespeare in Performance, and Arden's Shakespeare at Stratford concentrate on the performance history of a particular play. However, no individual volume or series offers an in-depth consideration of the stage histories of a number of plays, chosen for their particular significance within specific cultural contexts.

The present book, *Shakespeare in Stages: New Theatre Histories*, aims to address this gap, steering a course between the Scylla of homogenising generalisation on the one hand and the Charybdis of eclectic and unrelated essays on the other. The original case studies that comprise the volume explore significant anglophone performances of particular plays, as well as ideas about 'Shakespeare', through the changing prisms of three different cultural factors that have proved influential in the way Shakespeare is staged: notions of authenticity, attitudes towards sex and gender, and questions of identity. Ranging from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries and examining productions of plays in Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, the studies focus attention on the complex interaction between particular plays, issues, events, and periods, carefully linking changing perceptions of the meanings of Shakespeare's plays not only to particular theatre practices but also to specific social, cultural, and political forces.

The first part of the volume, 'Notions of authenticity', focuses on the complex idea of authenticity and its influence on how Shakespeare's

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plays have been understood and performed. Andrew Gurr explores current understandings of Renaissance theatre spaces and the ways in which they shaped original performances of the plays. Elaine McGirr, through a study of Cibber's adaptation of *King John*, investigates the complex realities underlying eighteenth-century bardolatry, literary reputation, Shakespearean adaptations, and Whig politics. Lucy Munro, examining William Poel's 'inauthentic' 1931 *Coriolanus* and setting it within the context of his other productions, highlights changes in his theories and methods that other commentators usually overlook. Neil Carson, focusing on *Richard III*, examines the effects of Tyrone Guthrie's experiments in 1953 with a practicable Elizabethan stage in Stratford, Ontario. Abigail Rokison, comparing the work of Shakespeare's Globe and Edward Hall's Propeller with special reference to 21st-century productions of *Twelfth Night* by both companies, considers alternative approaches to the issue of 'authenticity'.

The second section, 'Attitudes towards sex and gender', first looks at the presentation of women on the Shakespearean stage and then concentrates on how changing attitudes towards them, not only within the theatre profession but also within society, have subsequently opened up new meanings for Shakespeare's plays in performance. Farah Karim-Cooper examines the relationship between the early modern cultural ideal of beauty and the enactment of beautiful women on the Renaissance stage, a relationship further complicated by the practice of using boys to portray women. Fiona Ritchie, exploring the work of Hannah Pritchard and Catherine Clive during the 1740–1 theatrical season, establishes the artistic, cultural, and economic power of the Shakespearean actress in the mid-eighteenth century, redressing the usual bias towards Garrick as Shakespeare's populariser. Jan McDonald's essay on *The Winter's Tale* examines the ways in which nineteenth-century women writers and actors appropriated the play's women characters to challenge or to reinforce prevalent ideologies of gender. Elizabeth Schafer, unpicking critical dismissal of Lydia Lopokova's performance as Olivia in Tyrone Guthrie's 1933 Old Vic production of *Twelfth Night*, offers three alternative readings, situating it within a theatrical lesbian genealogy, an understanding of the Vic-Wells community, and theatrical management practices. Christine Dymkowski explores the shifts in attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and the relationship between the individual and the state that have made *Measure for Measure* especially resonant with English audiences in a variety of theatrical interpretations since the 1970s.

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The final section, 'Questions of identity', focuses on how Shakespeare has been used in the past and continues to be used today to help to formulate local and national identity; it highlights how location – cultural as well geographical – can shape the interpretation, presentation, and reception of Shakespeare's plays. Christopher Baugh considers how scenographic tropes of spectacle and of antiquarianism became crucial to the staging of Shakespeare during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ultimately playing an important role in the development of national identity and the birth of a national theatre. Susan Bennett looks at how and what Shakespeare means in a very local context, with particular reference to early twentieth-century and contemporary performances of Shakespeare in rural Montana. Kate Flaherty and Penny Gay investigate why *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was Australia's most popular play between 1988 and 1998 and examine how five recent productions made the play meaningful for Australian audiences, addressing questions of the 'cultural cringe', post-colonialism, and the particular concept of 'play' in Australian culture. Lynette Goddard looks at 'Binglish' Shakespeare, focusing particularly on the shifting race and gender dynamics in Yvonne Brewster's 1997 production of *Othello* for Talawa. Brian Pearce examines how British directors, attempting to make Shakespeare relevant within post-apartheid South Africa, can sometimes invert their intended meanings through unfamiliarity with the country's historical context and traditions of performance.

Christie Carson concludes the volume by addressing the role of Shakespeare in building identity through education, examining the work of the education departments of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and of Shakespeare's Globe. In so doing, she again raises the question that all of the other essays ask either implicitly or explicitly: when we respond to a performance, when we try to understand its context, when we decode its meanings, when we feel it addresses or reflects or ignores our concerns, who are 'we'? Meanings are multiple, dependent on answers to that question. For that reason, we, the editors and contributors, do not offer a general narrative overview of the history of how Shakespeare has been presented on stage, but 'thick descriptions' of the many ways in which particular plays have created local meanings in specific places, periods, and communities: a plurality of new theatre histories that document – even celebrate – temporal, geographic, and cultural complexity.

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PART I

Notions of authenticity

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CHAPTER I

*The move indoors**Andrew Gurr*

Over the last five hundred years there have been many changes in the character of theatre venues in England. The range is wide, from the outdoor bowl on a hillside on the flanks of Shrewsbury where schoolboys staged their shows in the sixteenth century, or the inns that offered either their galleried yards or great rooms upstairs, to the proscenium-arched stages and theatres-in-the-round of this century. Theatre venues are always changing, and playwriting changes with them. Every performance event differs too. The venue may be the same, but the actors and audience will always brew their own distinct chemistry. It is never easy to identify the elements stirred into those brews, but it should not be impossible to see how the physical character of any particular building used for a play affects the nature of the performance staged in it. For the decades up to Shakespeare's time, transient venues at guildhalls, schoolrooms, and churches used by itinerant bands of players were the norm. Between 1575 and 1609 in London, however, we can see the basis of modern theatre developing, and audiences made their key choice of the forms that came to dominate English theatre thereafter. For nearly seventy years from 1576 till 1642 the choice between indoor and outdoor venues was in the balance. It seems appropriate that a book devoted to the ways in which the social and cultural experiences and expectations of an audience inflect the meanings of a play should begin with a look at how the decision to prefer the indoor venues was initially made and how that preference helped to shape the writing and reception of the plays themselves.

Theatre audiences are always affected by the auditorium they occupy. An outdoor setting, whether for a play or a sporting event, prompts the feeling that you are a member of a crowd gathered for the same purpose, responding to what is offered you in ways influenced by the other reactions you hear or see or feel around you. On the other hand, in the confinement of an enclosed space where you feel comfortably freed from any effect of weather and have your own passive sitting space, you can much

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more easily feel yourself an individual, separate from the others around you, conscious of your identity as a free and perhaps sceptical observer of the events you have paid to witness. That is particularly the case when you sit in the dark. Outdoor arenas have the feeling of being public spaces, whereas an indoor hall offers an intimacy more like that of a private house or a venue designed for at most a small and intimate community. The dark helps you to feel private and passive, like an eavesdropper. For something like thirty years in the Shakespearean period, after the distinction became a false one, they used to call indoor playhouses 'private' while the outdoor theatres were called 'public' venues. Jacobean and Caroline playgoers paid money to attend plays at either kind of venue, but publishers and others continued to insist that the hall playhouses were private or exclusive, in deliberate contrast to the common nature of the outdoor venues. These terms echo the different feelings activated by the two types of venue. When playgoing gentry attended a play of the Shakespeare company's in the summer while the company abandoned its superior playhouse the Blackfriars for the sordidly 'public' Globe, their choice entailed a calculated acceptance of the more populist and lower-class environment.¹

A seated audience at an indoor venue is always likely to behave more politely and to be more docile and passive in its responses than an audience that is on its feet surrounding the stage that the actors are walking on. When you add to the difference between the inherent dispositions of the two kinds of audience the fact that access to small indoor venues is always likely to cost their customers much more than for large arenas open to the sky, the division between the two kinds of behaviour patterns intensifies. The groundlings who got to know their Shakespeare at the outdoor Globe had a quite different mindset from those who later came to enjoy his plays at the indoor Blackfriars. And since all the theatres built after 1660 cater for only the indoor and more passive kind of audience, that difference is significant.

At one end of the social spectrum in early modern England, the rich had ample experience of enjoying plays staged at indoor venues. The court always held its entertainments late at night, with only candles to illuminate the intimate event. That made it clearly distinct from public events, whether indoors or out. They were always performed in the afternoons,

¹ Several comments from the time express surprise when large numbers of gentry appeared at the Globe, as they did for *A Game at Chess* in 1624 and *The Late Lancashire Witches* in 1635. For a survey of the general picture, see Gurr, *Playgoing* 89–94; note the citations in Appendix 2, 148, 191 and 211.

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the indoor playhouses making use of such daylight as their high windows provided to supplement the candelabra suspended across the stage and auditorium.² Every courtier at a royal performance, too, knew, prized, and flaunted his or her individuality, whether as an English aristocrat and dignitary, as a senior prelate or court officer, or as an ambassador for one of the eminent European countries. In utter contrast, the crowds of *Rables*, *Apple-wives* and *Chimney-boys*³ who attended the open-air venues in the 1630s well knew how anonymous they were individually amongst the jostling hordes similarly dressed that they stood and reacted with.

Such a difference and its impact on the range of playgoers in playhouse venues was a feature of the vast social divisions in early modern England throughout Shakespeare's time. Today we have to look into the fragments of evidence – the passing remarks by Grub Street writers, gossipy anecdotes about scandals, and incidental references by would-be poets of the time – to identify what effects the two distinct types of theatre venue had on the hordes of Londoners who attended plays up to 1642. As with any broad social distinctions, generalisations are easy but they soon become more of a vague assertion than a clinical conclusion. Since the distinction between the open-air playhouses like the Globe and the fashionable indoor halls like the Blackfriars started the long process of popular playgoing that still features in London's nightlife, it is useful to look carefully at the key elements of English society that generated the difference between the two types, and that eventually determined the complete triumph of the indoor over the outdoor kind of playhouse for the subsequent centuries.

London's first theatres, both those with outdoor and those with indoor stages, opened over a remarkably short span of time in 1575 and 1576. The two types continued in use till the general closure of 1642, except for the decade of the 1590s, when no indoor theatres were allowed for commercial use.⁴ The huge stages of the open-air amphitheatres were distinct from the indoor stages chiefly in their much larger size and the pair of massive stage posts that upheld the 'shadow' or 'cover' protecting the stage and the players from London's rain and snow. The indoor or hall stages needed no stage posts, and the much smaller capacity of their stages was restricted even further during performances by the presence of up to fifteen gallants who sat round the flanks of the stage itself. Such eminences paid to watch the plays sitting on stools at both sides, in front of the flanking stage

² For a careful and thorough analysis of the effect of candlelight in these auditoria, see Graves.

³ See Gurr, *Playgoing* 298–9 (Appendix 2, reference 212).

⁴ Civic opposition to all playing was at its strongest in this decade and led to a ban on playing in city inns; see Gurr, 'Henry Carey'.

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boxes, or across the line by the tiring-house doors at the back of the stage. As a result of this radical difference in stage capacity, access to daylight, and the intrusion on stage of the gallants at the indoor playhouses, we usually assume that the presentation of plays on these two kinds of stage was quite distinct. But it may be that the key differences came more from the character of the two types of auditorium and the consequent behaviour patterns of their occupants than on the different stages.

The assumption that several decades of writing for the indoor stages up to 1642 created a social as well as a practical differentiation in what was written for the two types of playhouse is now generally accepted. So is the assumption that it led to the demise of Shakespearean, meaning open-air, staging at the Globe in London. But the story can be nothing like so simple or so directly a sequence of cause and effect as that. The evidence for the changes that developed in the early forms of staging and in performance through the Jacobean and Caroline periods needs some careful sorting out.

At a conference some years ago I tried to use the evidence about where each play was first staged to make a fairly comprehensive survey of the differences between plays written for the indoor and those for the outdoor playhouses once the King's Men started using both types of playhouse after 1608.⁵ In broad terms I looked at all the plays that could be identified as written specifically either for an indoor or for an outdoor venue, and also at those known to be performed at both types of venue. Characteristic of its time, this account concluded in general terms that, while we cannot easily generalise, on the whole the companies using the outdoor playhouses preferred to stage plays with battles and noisy sword-and-buckler fights, whereas the companies at the indoor playhouses favoured smaller-scale duels with rapiers and emphasised wit-play rather than sword-play. That conclusion took the question into the equally broad and even more specious territory of the so-called 'citizen' plays like *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Tamburlaine*, both of which Jonson said in 1614 were out of date but which persisted at the outdoor playhouses, the Fortune and the Red Bull, all the way until 1642. The question of how far this dismissive characterisation of the 'outdoor' plays for the citizenry was more than a transient vogue and the dismissals a manifestation of the literary snobbery inherent in Jonson and others needs further consideration here. Who besides Jonson said they were old-fashioned, and what companies at what playhouses were characterised in this way?

⁵ See Gurr, 'Playing'.