

Drábek, Pavel

John Russell Brown. Studying Shakespeare in performance

Theatralia. 2012, vol. 15, iss. 2, pp. 194-196

ISBN 978-80-210-5571-1

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/124423>

Access Date: 04. 12. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

To sum up, *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* is a book that provides a quick overview of the European theatre at the end of the millennium. As many directors featured in the book are still active and the world of theatre has not changed drastically, the book makes a good departure point for the understanding of contemporary theatre trends.

REVIEWS



Pavel Drábek |

John Russell Brown. *Studying Shakespeare in Performance*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
231 pp.

John Russell Brown is one of the key figures in both late twentieth-century Shakespeare and theatre studies and British theatre, having worked as Associate Director of the Royal National Theatre in London. Among his numerous publications are *Shakespeare Dancing: A Theatrical Study of the Plays* (2005), *Shakespeare and the Theatrical Event* (2002), *New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, the Audience and Asia* (2002) or *William Shakespeare: Writing for Perform-*

ance (1996). On a personal note, the last two books have inspired the present reviewer profoundly, and it was only the exorbitant price for publishing rights that prevented a Czech translation of the 1996 book from materializing (despite the author's intervention). J. R. Brown has been admirably active as an editor for *The Shakespeare Handbooks* and *Theatres of the World* series, the *Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre* or the brace of *Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare* (2008) and *to Actors' Shakespeare* (2012; this collection is reviewed in this issue). It is far from an exaggeration to see Brown as the founder of a new discipline of Shakespeare in performance studies with a generation of (by now well-established and recognized) scholars.

At first sight, the present volume pretends, perhaps over-modestly, to be little more than a compilation of previously published lectures, articles or book chapters, coming from a period of more than half a century (from 1960 to the present). The reality, however, is different. They have been carefully rewritten, meticulously brought up to the present, especially the first half of the volume, interlaced with references to recent works, and – symptomatically – enlivened by J. R. Brown's characteristic polemic. It is this belligerent feature of permanent fencing with intellectual opponents that gives the book a thriller quality. It is also worth noting that

Brown at times opposes his own previous views too. The resulting volume holds together well thematically in presenting Brown's *summa* of studying Shakespeare in performance – dividing individual chapters into five parts: (I) Study, (II) Words and Actions, (III) Productions, (IV) Directors, and (V) Audiences. The thematic throughline is rather simple in formulation though difficult in practice:

To study Shakespeare's plays in performance is an endless task because it varies with each change of cast and production. The entire theatrical event should come into reckoning: the occasion, location and context for performance, the composition and expectation of the audience, the form and equipment of the theatre building, the skill, training and experience of the actors. (1)

Besides, the verbal formulations in writing about performance always fall short of capturing the essence of the theatrical event. The simple question "How is the theatrical experience made and used?" metaphorically breaks all hell loose. The influential studies of Marvin Rosenberg (1912–2003) on actors' renderings of key moments in Shakespearean tragedies (*The Masks of Othello* (1961), *The Masks of King Lear* (1972), *The Masks of Macbeth* (1978), *The Masks of Hamlet* (1992),

and posthumously *The Masks of Anthony and Cleopatra* (2006), completed by his wife Mary Rosenberg), are the targets of Brown's criticism in Part I, in that they follow star performances, singling out individual moments without taking into account the entire organism of not only the production but also of the theatrical event – with all that makes it happen.

Part II (on Words and Actions) is not only a scholarly polemic but also a useful tool for the actor (and the scholar) to find ways of understanding the possibilities the play-texts offer. The essays in Parts III to V are less of a polemic with a concrete authority but react to theatre practice – on one occasion referred to as "traditional, lazy, intrusive or inept" – perhaps continuing in advocating Peter Brook's criticism of the *deadly theatre* in his 1968 'prophetic' book *The Empty Space*. In the second half of the present volume, Brown appeals for an active, open-minded and innovative theatre that does not find complacency in run-of-the-mill solutions. For all its urgency and holy zeal, backed up by Brown's experience in the theatre, I found myself almost being preached at, though I considered myself converted already. It seems the polemic discourse fires back at its author: general points about productions, directors or audiences come across as disembodied and eventually void. It is on concrete material and problems – the first remove from the dialectics of the theatrical event – that

Brown makes his point most clearly. General observations come in vain. This is perhaps a performative dimension of the book's mission.

REVIEWS



Pavel Drábek |

**John Russell Brown (ed.)
*The Routledge Companion
to Actors' Shakespeare***

London and New York: Routledge, 2012.
276 pp.

John Russell Brown's newly edited collection of essays is dedicated to twenty remarkable Shakespearean actors and actresses of today. Each of the chapters is authored by one scholar, which provides a fresh and inspiring variety of approaches to the equally varied talents of the individual actors. The performers included range from stars (Judy Dench, Ian McKellen, Vanessa Redgrave, Antony Sher), through well-established and celebrated actors (Simon Russell Beale, Greg Hicks, Kevin Kline, Marcello Magni, Pyotr Semak) to performers that have won acclaim but may still be thought of being in the early years of their careers (Mariah Gale, Rory Kinnear, Jonathan Slin-

ger, and even Adrian Lester). Though the selection of personalities may be surprising at first sight and would perhaps call for a more pronounced justification, the unifying moment of the volume is the stress on live theatre, a leitmotif of J. R. Brown's criticism over the decades. Since that mission is the main topic of my review of his *Studying Shakespeare in Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), one brief quote from the latter book will suffice for this purpose. Brown's collection documents twenty different ways of the actor's engagements with Shakespearean roles, in his own words:

[T]he actor's response to his or her whole journey through a play, which involves changes in relationship to other characters and actors, and in self-awareness. How any one moment is arrived at will always be part of that moment in theatre performance.

(*Studying Shakespeare in Performance*, 11)

A like consistency is in Routledge's project. *Actors' Shakespeare* is a companion piece to *The Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare*, edited by John Russell Brown (Routledge, 2008), a similarly conceived collection of 31 directors from late-nineteenth-century figures (Henry Irving and William Poel), through leading theatre-makers of the mid-twentieth century (Max Reinhardt,