

Drábek, Pavel

**John Russell Brown (ed.) The Routledge companion to actors'  
Shakespeare**

*Theatralia*. 2012, vol. 15, iss. 2, pp. 196-199

ISBN 978-80-210-5571-1

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

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/124424>

Access Date: 16. 02. 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.

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,

Harley Granville Barker, Tyrone Guthrie, Orson Welles or Ingmar Bergman, Peter Brook and Giorgio Strehler) to contemporary and recent directors (Declan Donnellan, Robert Lepage, Mark Rylance and Julie Taymor). Currently, another volume in the series is underway, *The Routledge Companion to Designers' Shakespeare*, co-edited by John Russell Brown and Stephen Di Benedetto, forthcoming in 2013.

This book's approach is extremely useful to academic Shakespeareans. In a kind way it justifies as well as corrects some of the interpretive hypotheses of scholarship. Though most actors included in this volume take academic scholarship into account, their own work provides yet another source of knowledge. The *New Yorker* columnist Adam Gopnik, who brought together Kevin Kline (then rehearsing for Falstaff) and Stephen Greenblatt, summed up some of the practical theatre misgivings about academic knowledge:

They had a lively and happy talk, though of course ultimately the kinds of things that preoccupy Steve and the like – who might have been the model for Falstaff, Lords of Misrule, Oldcastle and Falstaff – aren't of much help to an actor. It's certainly the case that Kevin has an appetite for scholarship, and for reading about his roles, that in my experience is unique in an actor of his gifts. (129)

This is not to say that academic scholarship proffers little help to theatre practitioners. Rather, this is to suggest the radically different qualities of epistemological endeavours when it comes to theatre practice. Acting as an epistemological endeavour is also how Jonathan Holmes treats Adrian Lester's acting in his fascinating and incisive chapter:

Lester has appeared in only three Shakespeare productions on stage, yet each has been a landmark event in the history of staging those plays. [...] In discussing this trajectory in interview, it becomes clear that for Lester in particular the experience of playing Rosalind [in Donnellan's Cheek by Jowl production of 1991 and 1994, PD] at the age of 22 continues to influence his subsequent approach to Shakespeare, and in particular to the notion of character. (132)

The actor engages in an intellectual, emotional as well as physical effort that transforms one's (the actor's, the co-actors', the spectators') notion of reality by mediating an unprecedented epistemological moment. This is a dimension that is unique to the theatre – it's playful as well as game-like nature (cf. Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938)). In Lester's own words, “[y]et, it's a play, but actually it's not, because we will use you” (141).

Such profound insights into both the art of acting and Shakespeare's

theatre are far from rare in this volume. I take this as the greatest achievement of the individual contributors and their sensitive and articulate approaches that help mediate this understanding. In so doing, some of the essays surpass their genres and purpose: they are not only portraits of remarkable Shakespearean actors and actresses but also encounters with the *genii* – outstanding and rich personalities that have the talent to make our lives richer by engaging in the ‘knowing’ that theatre makes happen. This is certainly true of Carol Chillington Rutter’s brilliant chapter on Simon Russell Beale analyzing his work after decades of watching as well as interviewing him. This essay aims at the core of Beale’s work – his analytical intelligence and interest in psychology, combined with comical talent. Another such essay is Clare Smout’s essay on Mariah Gale, an actor prodigy – energetic, highly intelligent, earnest and experimenting: a rare combination of a willingness to risk and a tactfulness in seeing and analyzing the outcomes. Jonathan Holmes’ brilliant chapter on Adrian Lester has already been mentioned and deserves highlighting. So does Paul Prescott’s Rory Kinnear with its fascinating search for possibilities – “discovering/inventing” (114) ways of acting, which are both inconclusively tentative and obliging in how they are acted. Prescott has a masterful sense of listening to and mediating Kinnear’s talent, intellect and in-

tuition. Kevin Ewert’s portrait of the Canadian actor Colm Feore comprises mostly *a priori* and *ex post* reflections on what actually happens on stage. This is a feature of the entire book – more explicitly pronounced here than in other chapters: the text captures the *technē* only – though refined and in minute detail; the *dianoia* – here, the “mystery of acting” – eludes us along with the transitory performance. From this perspective, the book may be read as “a survivor’s guide to acting Shakespeare” – asserting one’s space as an actor in negotiation with the director and the audience, even to the point of advocating (or defending) cynical maxims such as “Fake it till you make it” (60). Darren Tunstall’s fascinating portrait of Patrice Naiambana ventures into a new sphere too: an actor finding a place and a voice (literally, not only metaphorically) in British theatre and simultaneously admitting and not denying one’s cultural roots (Sierra Leone). Naiambana throws new light on rhythm, music and storytelling in Shakespeare.

A number of the essays trace processes – Ben Naylor’s chapter on Greg Hicks documents the actor in the process of rehearsing *King Lear* with David Farr at the Royal Shakespeare Company (100–104). Martin White’s brilliant essay on Antony Sher captures him in search of his character, finding his own ‘livable’ interpretation, while at the same time being haunted by his own anxieties.

James Loehlin's portrait of Kate Duchêne is rather straightforward – though based on observation and one interview (and Duchêne's only Shakespearean role), it is inspiring in pointing out how Duchêne's experience with Avant-Garde theatre informs her Shakespearean acting. Maria Shevtsova's "Pyotr Semak" and David Pellegrini's "Kate Valk" are not only actors' portraits but also portraits of theatre companies, Maly Teatr Moscow and Cheek by Jowl (Shevtsova) and The Wooster Group (Pellegrini). Especially the latter says little about "actors' Shakespeare" though it ventriloquizes the cultural ghosts of John Gielgud's 1964 Broadway production of *Hamlet* with Richard Burton.

Some of the volume's essays relay on the reader's knowledge of the actor (actress). That does not necessarily coincide with the fame of the individual artists, famous stars such as Judi Dench, Kevin Kline, Ian McKellen, Vanessa Redgrave or Antony Sher. While many of the essays communicate the uniqueness of their personalities without depending on one's memory of experiencing them as actors, some of the generally lesser-known actors' portraits reach the limits of whether one knows their work or not (this is true of Shevtsova's Semak, Pellegrini's Valk or Jeremy Lopez's John Harrell). This, however, does not alter the fact that *The Routledge Companion to Actors' Shakespeare* is an enjoyable and inspiring read – a refreshing change to

actors' portraits in that it procures to the reader the opportunity of meeting outstanding people and glimpsing the mastery and mystery of acting.



Christian M. Billing |  
**Marie Zdeňková, and Josef Vomáčka. *Miroslav Melena: Scénograf a architekt (Scenographer and Architect)***

Published in Czech with a (mostly) parallel English translation.

Prague: Arts and Theatre Institute, 2011.  
 240 pp.

This book is a very welcome addition to the existing bibliography on post-war Czech and central European scenography and theatre design. It offers for the first time a comprehensive account of the work of Miroslav Melena as both a practicing scenographer, and as an architect whose work in temporary and permanent theatre structures constitutes some of the most interesting explorations of stage space and actor–audience interrelation in the theatre of the Czech Republic (and also in the former Yu-