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Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

Edited by Rosy Colombo

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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*Founded by Guido Avezzi, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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ELENA PELLONE\*

**Jaq Bessell, *Shakespeare in Action*, London and  
New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare),  
2019, pp. 213**

Abstract

Jaq Bessell's new Arden publication *Shakespeare in Action* is just that. Bessell collates a compendium of invaluable insights from practitioners in the United States and United Kingdom, working at major theatres to bring Shakespeare actively to life on stage. Bessell determines to give access to an understanding of the process, rather than simply the product, of Shakespeare production, interviewing actors and creatives from the major stakeholders of the Shakespeare theatre industry. Bessell intuits a first-hand understanding from her expertise as head of the acting programme at Guilford School of acting, head of Globe research during Mark Rylance's tenure, teaching at the Shakespeare Institute and her extensive work on both sides of the Atlantic. An engaging resource for anyone with an interest in Shakespeare performance, the politics of who can speak Shakespeare, how to speak Shakespeare, whom Shakespeare belongs to, and the alchemic transformation from words on a page, to actions on a stage.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; Stanislavski; performance; actions; verse speaking; Globe; Royal Shakespeare Company; American Shakespeare Centre; Shakespeare directors; Shakespeare actors

Jaq Bessell's new Arden publication *Shakespeare in Action* is just that. Bessell collates a compendium of invaluable insights from practitioners in the United States and United Kingdom, working at major theatres to bring Shakespeare actively to life on stage. This book offers "new insights, and different ways of reading Shakespeare performance, from the inside out" (1). Written primarily for "non-practitioners with an academic interest" (1), but also availing a rich resource for creatives and students. Bessell determines to give access to an understanding of the process, rather than simply the product, of Shakespeare production, from the "major stakeholders in the Shakespeare 'industry'" (3). The interviews, with actors and creatives, are framed by an in-depth introduction on the provenance and premise of the book and an analytical conclusion correlating the "patterns in the wallpaper" (177) of Shakespeare theatre practice, with resources and suggestions for further reading. Bessell intuits a first-hand understanding from her expertise as head of the acting programme at Guilford School of acting, head of Globe research during Mark Rylance's tenure, teaching at the Shakespeare Institute and her extensive work on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Bessell curates a representative range of experience, although predominately, as one would expect, from the perspective of actors and directors. The interviews are divided into two sections, "Cast" and "Creatives". The "Cast", primarily identified as actors, focuses on nuanced individual experience of process. The interviews are organised by various sub-headings, several re-occurring to give a sense of primary concern for text, voice, actions, verse speaking, character building and internal subtext. The "Creatives", a mixture of directors, designers, heads of music, dancers, a voice coach, choreographer and director of events, give a far more eclectic insight into the concerns of mounting a Shakespeare production. The subheadings are rarely repeated, allowing one particularly to appreciate the breadth of individual visions of directors, which make up a third of the "Creatives" section.

The interviews capture "informal, lively conversations" (9). Bessell wishes them to be a "conduit for an altogether more direct conversation between reader and respondent" (10), and they most certainly are. Each interview is a short vignette or an appetiser, and as a collection it both whets and appeases the curiosity to gaze within the creative process.

The overarching question given to each respondent is to "describe their 'action' in or on a Shakespeare play" (8). For Bessell "action" is the "lingua franca of the many creative processes" (8) and therefore a necessary tool in the evaluation of Shakespeare productions. It investigates the varied functions and manifestations of "action" in rehearsal. This gives the work a strong focus on the principle of "action", a Stanislavskian technique of "psycho-physical actions" (4) breaking down scenes into units of "what you are trying to do to the other person" (3) and what a character wants. It is notable from the outset that Stanislavski techniques appear invaluable to actor and directorial process, even though they were developed for a particular moment in theatrical history, trying to enhance naturalism and subtext in Russian theatre, particularly for Chekov's plays. This anachronistic approach to Shakespeare performance is the thrust of both the creative energy behind the book and also the work of main stage practitioners. The corollary is that Bessell proposes "[d]esigners and directors can give full consideration to the sequence of actions that make up the shape of a production as a whole, whereas performers necessarily concern themselves primarily with single actions and reactions" (4). This is a somewhat homogenised view of Shakespeare performance, although main stage productions are deeply entrenched in these late 19th century and early 20th century power structures and rehearsal processes. This book offers a wealth of first-person perspectives on this process, but at no point does it interrogate the value of this process and whether this approach to embodying Shakespearean text produces the strongest work. Indeed, Bessell acknowledges that, although it would be unthinkable for literary criticism to rely on a book written in 1936, the Stanislavski system focused on actions endures "and continues to have value in modern actor training" with its "proven ability to be adapted and applied in a diverse range of contexts" (6).

The book recognizes the tension between text driven (attention to textual clues, rhetorical tropes and verse speaking) and character driven (investing in a back story and inner emotional life) approaches to performance, and it is of interest to see varying levels of engagement with these processes in individual practitioners, with complimentary and contradictory claims. Almost immediately, however, we glean

how closed the circuit of this book is, many practitioners interviewed having influenced each other, contributors being referred to by other interviewees, and Bessell herself being acknowledged and thanked as an influence and teacher. The downside to it being a snapshot of a coterie of artists is that it can seem backward, rather than forward, looking, concerned mostly with a passing generation, and does not document any of Michelle Terry's new vision and work at the Globe, or Erica Whyman's at the RSC. This is finally not a limitation of the text, but rather an actualisation of the aims of the book, which has set out to capture a particular time, a particular focus on process, and an assemblage of practitioners and playhouses that cross over, collaborate and cross-pollinate.

The first interview is by actor Jade Anouka who begins her investigatory process into Shakespeare's text purely from her character's point of view. Anouka, following Stanislavskian principles, ascertains what her character says to and about others, and how her character relates to them, in order to determine who the other characters are. A director she worked with early in her career at the RSC, Tim Carroll (who also contributes an interview), imparted a valuable exercise on verse speaking—throwing up a ball on the last word of each verse line, to make sure the energy is sustained rather than dropped, disabusing an idea that observing iambic pentameter is difficult or cumbersome to an actor (21). With Phyllida Lloyd, Anouka has recently been working on minutely actioning the text—another Stanislavski technique (22).

The second contribution is from actor/dancer Ankur Bahl who comes to Shakespeare performance through a physical theatre tradition. Using the discipline of a dancer, she applies this to acquiring and consolidating acting techniques with Shakespeare: "a dancer starts his or her everyday life with an hour to an hour and a half of training . . . fine tuning your craft . . . being in rep at the RSC proved the perfect place to apply a dancer's approach to continual development"; working the muscularity of the text, the line endings, the punctuation, the pronouns, verbs, trusting that in performance the work would have embedded itself like a dancer's exercises in the morning (25).

Eve Best approaches Shakespeare from the words, using a technique taught to her by Ian McKellen at Oxford, a version of a Stanislavski exercise adapted by Mike Alfreds (who also contributes an interview), in which lists are compiled around what your character says about yourself, what your character says about other people, what other people say about you, what you say about the world, the weather, etc. (This character foraging must show limitations with Shakespeare's text where there are many incongruities and inconsistencies with time, weather, no naturalistic concept of teleological character development or backstory, and where early modern actors would have worked from cue scripts rather than full texts). Best places the words in her body by learning lines whilst stomping up country lanes, following the verse clues and "being directed very clearly, by the greatest writer of all time", discovering a verse that is like "real speech and real life" (29).

Sandy Grierson postpones doing character work and lists until she gets into the rehearsal room. Her approach in the early stages is to "read the play more generally" and begin with an "overall gist" (31). Grierson comes into the rehearsal room flexible, as interpretation depends on "who else is in there with you, who is in the

scene with you, what the director's vision is" (30). Her major influences and mentors are from a physical-based tradition of the Polish theatre director Tadeusz Kantor. She also draws on the work of academic Jan Kott. Grierson trusts her gut instincts, which are not gleaned from the text but "tend to work in a spatial sense" (34).

The American actor John Harrell, who has been in every one of Shakespeare's plays, begins by taking a stack of blank note cards and copying his cues on one side and lines on the other (36) (this is almost like making an early modern cue script). He uses this to "consider the sinew of the text in small detail" (36), investigate verse rhythms and anomalies, semantic and syntactic sense, learn his lines, clarify what he is saying and also to determine if any of it is funny. Harrell believes that "Shakespeare is under appreciated as a comic playwright" (37). In American theatre, the business of rehearsal is "often the identification of objectives (what a character wants) and actions (what she does to get what she wants)" (38), but Harrell does not have the same faith in Stanislavski. "This is a non-useless relic of abiding mid-century faith that the warp and weft of conflicting vectors of desire can constitute the fabric of a play. Some actors are more fundamentalist about this approach than others . . . believing that a single-minded pursuit of objectives is their best course" (38). Harrell does not take issue with this fundamentalism, but he does not share it, fearing that approaching each character as the hero of its own story may lead to intense but "not necessarily deeply textured performance" (38).

Alex Hassell, the actor who started the experimental company The Factory with director Tim Carroll, is passionate about verse, using the score as a key to performance, breaking at the end of each line and paying close attention to the irregularities of the iambic "pattern" (40-1). Nonetheless, Hassell does not believe the audience should register they are hearing verse, "they should just think they are hearing clear erudite thoughts", stipulating "there should be a barely perceptible difference" to prose (41). (This perhaps is incongruous with Shakespeare's deliberate textual shifts between verse and prose, although it has often been remarked that Shakespeare writes prose bordering on verse and verse bordering on prose. If we are to take a textual clue from *As You Like It*, early modern audiences would have aurally registered these two distinct forms – Jacques and Rosalind are conversing in prose when Orlando enters, greeting Rosalind in a single verse line. Jacques' immediate response: "Nay then, God be wi' you, an you talk in blank verse" (Shakespeare 2009, 4.1.34) as he leaves, suggests a resistance to the change in the mode of address which must strongly herald its differing function). For Hassell, it takes an "enormous amount of work to get really good at speaking verse" and it is important to evolve from delivering it sing-song, with formulaic emphasis, as if one is hitting it with a hammer. Only once you have worked past that point "can you really reveal and live up to the full profundity and weight and worth and value of Shakespeare" (41). The difficulty is that many actors cannot "bother doing all the work it takes" (42). Although Hassell uses the Stanislavski concept of actioning, he does this by carefully observing the verse, using specific clues as to "what you are trying to do to the other person" (43). The character is revealed through the play, and should not be hemmed in by rubbish that is your own invention, the only difference between being an actor and a normal human

being is that “as an actor your thoughts are being replaced by ones that have been pre-written by a genius” (45).

This segues smoothly into Amer Hlehel’s reflection on Shakespeare’s genius, not only as a great poet, but one who “knew about us . . . knew about humanity” (46). Hlehel’s first steps with a script is to understand the meaning and “how Shakespeare sees my character” (46). Using a different focus to Hassell, who resists a notion of character, Hlehel essentially reveals the same concern, to make Shakespeare’s character “rich in human experiences and conflicts, full of oppositions . . . to make it human” (46-7). He goes further than Hassell in that “what is brilliant about Shakespeare – any question that you want to know about your character exists in the script, but after that, it’s yours to do with as you wish” (48). Hlehel relies on his Stanislavski training, but believes there is “a missed part of Stanislavski’s theory” which is how to put the methods of what “you’re feeling, what you’re living, your thoughts” on to the stage (47). Hlehel does not “believe in *feeling* things . . . in *living* the character . . . With Stanislavski you need to see things . . . If you see things, your body will feel” (47-9).

Colin Hurley wishes to learn his lines before starting rehearsal, which frees him to be “looking up” (50). Hurley finds actioning useful: “‘Squash them’ or ‘Dazzle them’ with your words . . . that *is* helpful. It gives me something to *play*” (50). But he does not get too bogged down with Stanislavski’s approach, not wanting to show the audience his homework: “Tools not rules” (51). Hurley also uses the “Mike Alfred’s ‘lists’”. Tim Carroll is mentioned again, who Hurley states is “the most enabling director” he has worked with, teaching him to be on “‘Receive’ as well as ‘Transmit’” (51). Working with Mark Rylance at the Globe, the emphasis was on “actor-solutions” to the space, with Dominic Dromgoole it was on “design-solutions”, as directors tend to spend more time working with designers rather than actors (52). Whereas, “Tim’s work seems very much about getting out of the way of the play, to let the actors and the audience meet each other” (54).

T.R. Knight leans heavily on the crutches of his “well-loved *Shakespeare Lexicon* by Alexander Schmidt (1874) . . . volume A-M under one arm and N-Z under the other” (54).

Knight focuses on the small details of stresses in the verse lines, antitheses, ideas bouncing, giving clues to character’s emotional state and actions in the scene (55). For Knight the language then comes alive when approached from a physical level and for this he draws on the work of Rudolf Laban and Jerzy Grotowski (55). “Your responsibility to this audience is to take them along with you; when a 400-year-old text can feel like it was written yesterday, full of passionate longing or murderous rage, this journey can be genuinely thrilling” (55). Knight is grateful to have been taught by “Cicely Berry, John Barton and Jaq Bessell, who helped demystify language in such a humble and honest way” (56). Again, we hear from Knight that “Shakespeare is for everyone, to be spoken by everyone, no matter your education or dialect” (56).

Andrew Long again starts by considering rigidly the verse form: “You can hear the sense of the speech just by saying the first and last stress of each line” (60). For Long “the plays are hardy and sturdy and they can take almost anything that somebody wants to do with them” (56). Long takes us through working with the

great director Sam Mendes on *Richard III* at The Old Vic. Mendes “worked on text line by line”, he counted out the verse saying which words should be stressed for every single part (56). He works with all the rhetorical devices, but also with physicality, “where his gestures begin from or what shoes he has on” (58). His work is a symbiotic “combination of gut and technique” (58). Long has worked on a lot of the plays with large companies and in large houses but feels it would be exhilarating to tackle a play with a small company in a black box with the audience so close to you, freeing you to perform epic poetry even in a whisper (59).

Jonathan McGuinness uses the time before rehearsal to keep reminding himself “of the scope and the sense of the whole play, and what the story is”, for when you come to the rehearsal most of the work is about focusing “on your own character and your own scenes” (61). McGuinness describes a typical rehearsal process which begins with a read through, then a focus on design elements, and then a period of experimentation. McGuinness succinctly condenses the main framework of the book: “When it comes down to methods and processes, I think almost all modern actors have been influenced by Stanislavski . . . it’s ingrained through training and experience: we all ask, ‘Why am I doing this?’ and . . . play objectives in some way” (62-6). There does arise the issue of subtext, as Stanislavski is so interested in what is not being said, whereas in Shakespeare subtext generally does not exist (63). McGuinness does not really approach the language technically, and if someone is doing verse well, as Hassell says, he is not really aware of it, as “iambic pentameter is a very natural kind of rhythm” (64). “Shakespeare was an actor, writing for other actors who he knew. You can really tell that when you work on it” (64). For McGuinness “99 percent of rehearsal is about being in the moment with the other actor” (64).

The actor Pippa Nixon likes to have “an idea of a history of who that character might be”, going back to the original source, “before building upon someone’s conceptual ‘take’ on the piece” (66). Nixon refers to the joy she has in working with Hassell, both being “responsive and brave in the choices” they make: “So it is very playful and lots of discoveries are made through ‘play’” (67). For Nixon actions are not about playing a generic word, “it’s about connecting to words that are deeply rooted in the soul of the character. In her three seasons at the Globe she worked with the “wonderful” and “brilliant” Giles Block on verse rules, which she marks comprehensively through her script, but she is finally not a verse fundamentalist as it “has to be about the truth more than the technique” (68). She does not want to be “strictly obedient to the verse, at the expense of investing in the character” (68). Nixon also uses the Mike Alfreds lists, though she attributes them to Katie Mitchell, who must have also adapted this Stanislavski technique. “You do all this work in the rehearsal room, so that in the performance the words can have a life of their own . . . a magic happens where you are completely in ‘flow’ and in the moment . . . That’s what we are in the business for” (70).

Juliet Rylance embarks on “a journey of discovery, with only the script” as her map (71). A great challenge is Shakespeare’s masterful use of blank verse and prose, antitheses and metaphor. Rylance reminds herself that the iamb is the simple rhythm of a heartbeat – “Five heartbeats to a line” (72). Shakespeare’s text is a great symphony “a series of notes, pitches and rhythms” (72), and like musicians,

actors need to learn the score by “repetition with diligence and precision” and “painstaking practice” (72). Finally, “alchemy is created from the fusion of complete dedication and devotion to form, with a complete abandonment in the moment, whatever it may bring” (73). Rylance loved studying Stanislavski at RADA and it is integral to her process. Finally, she lists her teaching influences, including Jaq Bessell and Tim Carroll, again highlighting the coterie of artists that forms the nucleus of the book.

Jonathan Slinger makes sure he understands every syllable of the text in a “very rigorous, very ruthless” way, believing it is when an actor does not know what they are saying that leads to audiences feeling they do not understand Shakespeare. Greg Doran (who also contributes an interview) devotes the first two weeks of rehearsal to text work, “making sure everybody understands every single word” (77). Michael Boyd gets the scene up on its feet more quickly, but still is devoted to working out the intricacies of what the text means. Slinger does not routinely use actioning on every line, but he will turn to that method if something isn’t working. For him the actions, objectives and super-objectives are inherent “in a good piece of writing, and that’s why Shakespeare’s so great to play” (77). Slinger believes that working at the Globe reveals the importance of interaction with an audience and “is the only theatre in the UK which fosters that kind of immediate response” (80).

Emily Taaffe, reminiscent of the first interview, reads the play entirely from her character’s perspective. Feeling this is her responsibility to make the play “as much about my character as possible”, and that, if every actor does that, “all the various points of view join up together” (83). It is then “the director’s job to make sure all the strands come together in a harmonious way” (83). Taaffe also thinks about all the parts of the story that we don’t see. Playing Miranda to Slinger’s Prospero, they talked about what life was like on the island, how long ago the rape had happened and if it was a rape (83). Taaffe will often write a biography of her character and write out her backstory. She then uses Stanislavski’s technique of answering seven questions (like the Alfreds lists) – “Who am I? Where am I? What time is it? What do I want? Why do I want it? How will I get what I want? What must I overcome to get what I want?” (84). Taaffe believes “verse-work can be a really crippling thing if you become too focussed on it . . . because it’s not an academic exercise, it’s a living, breathing thing and I think if you become ‘wedded’ to *that* . . . you risk becoming a slave to it” (86).

The last contributor in the “Cast” section is Yolanda Vazquez, who is both an actor and director. Vazquez finds the visceral nature of the text in the body and mouth distinctive. She creates a vivid film of the play in her mind: “I read in pictures” (87). She goes through the whole text for meaning, then reads it several times to compile the “lists” for her character and any character closely associated to her character. This collation of “facts” helps to discover afresh what may have been inherited in a preconceived notion of the play. She does historical research and relies on techniques she learned at Drama Centre which has become a sort of hybrid and could be described as “Stanislavski via Yat Malgrem and Laban, with a pinch of Christopher Fettes. I also use large doses of Cicely Berry, Giles Block and Tim Carroll . . . added to this a strong fragrance of subversion from Robert David

MacDonald and Philip Prowse . . . all mixed in with my own imagination!" (88).

The first of the "Creatives" is Mike Alfreds, a director who has already been mentioned several times as highly influential. This is one of the longest interviews in the book and treats on how to perform and stage Shakespeare well. As a child he found performances of Shakespeare plays incomprehensible, so when he became a professional director, he steered clear of Shakespeare, not wishing to display his ignorance and stupidity (89). The irony is the *impenetrable* language is now the "fount and basis of the work from which all else springs" (91). This means looking closely at the words, discovering "the thoughts that bring them into existence" (91). But the torture of going to Shakespeare as a child has persisted into old age, and it is not because the text is incomprehensible, it is because "most actors playing Shakespeare don't really know what they are talking about" (92), and when they speak there is little evidence of them thinking. "They have failed to make Shakespeare's Language their own"; this is bad acting, and direction that is bent on imposing concepts that do not arise from the text (93). Shakespeare's characters "live on the word . . . For them language is tangible; it is dangerous, fleshy, corporeal" (94). Alfreds asserts there is virtually no subtext with verse in Shakespeare: "Characters say what they mean" (94). Again, he uses the idea of the iamb as a heartbeat. Prose, however, is used to dissemble: "Characters use prose to cover what they really intend" (94). (After criticising a lack in the industry of scrutinising language closely, this is an inaccurate generalisation: consider Shylock's "Hath a Jew not eyes"). Alfreds states Shakespeare's clowns and fools all speak in prose (94). (This is again inaccurate — the fool in *Lear*, for example, speaks in octosyllabic verse, tetrameter, and common meter. Here we see a characteristic of the book, which is capturing artists' thoughts, unnecessarily adulterated by adherence to academic fact.) Alfreds gives sound advice and in-depth analysis of how actors should speak verse and sustain thought through the enjambment, in a world increasingly reduced to sound bites and acronyms (95-9). Unlike the actors who intentionally try to make verse sound like prose, Alfreds states, "it's lazy and reductive to treat verse as if it were prose. Attempts to make the language sound natural by a sort of casual delivery remove its passion and its drive. The actor's job should be to convince us that a heightened form of speaking is utterly natural" (100). Alfreds concludes that it is hard work and specificity that will release the text: "working on Shakespeare requires immense rigour. Only through discipline can actors achieve any creative freedom. Approximation and generalization are deadly. Accuracy and specificity lead to life" (101).

The second interview in the "Creatives" section is director Tim Carroll, already mentioned many times as an inspiration and influence. Here he tells us in his own words how he approaches the text, imagining how it would be performed in the early modern period. The beauty of experimenting with original practice means "you find yourself picturing something completely different from any version of the play you've ever seen" (102). He finds it refreshing to read academics, such as Jan Knott and Northrop Frye, who are unpolled by the practical needs of staging in their analysis and can imagine things in "a very irresponsible way" (103). Carroll believes it is important to respect a distinction between a director of Shakespeare and a literary critic of Shakespeare, challenging "the assumption that literary crit-

ics of Shakespeare *need* to take performance into account” (102). Carroll works from the First Folio rather than the more problematic edited versions. He identifies as belonging to the “Peter Hall tradition and the Peter Brook tradition”; verse is fascistic and rigorous and rehearsal exercises are about spontaneity and playfulness (102). “Play’ is the word, that’s the whole point” (102). He does not get hung up on a misdirected notion of “suspension of disbelief” associated with Stanislavski, but simply permits an “emotional engagement to arise informally”, playing, as it were, the game of *Hamlet*, rehearsing or jamming like a troop of musicians (105). He does not give line readings but line instructions – do not stress a word not in a stressed position. Carroll has three simple rules for rehearsal: “1. We mustn’t ever go too long without practising the verse, like doing scales. 2. We mustn’t ever go too long without checking that we know what the language means. 3. We mustn’t ever go too long without talking about actions” (105). Inspired by Alfreds’ book *Different Every Night* Carroll set-up The Factory “which leaves the actors no choice but to do it differently . . . by responding to different ‘givens’ every night . . . The goal is to get better and better at playing whatever happens on that night, in whatever space, with whatever cast, with whatever objects the audience have brought with them. I think the way The Factory works may be unique” (107-8).

The third interview is from designer Bunny Christie, who finds the best thing about working with Shakespeare is “how free you can be”, and that in the UK “we can happily be quite irreverent” in a way that a Pinter, Beckett or new play would not support (109). You can design Shakespeare several times over without repetition. For design, the style of language does not make a specific difference to Christie’s process, but what is what’s being said does. Christie breaks down the play scene by scene and discusses with the director which world to set it in: “Often that’s contemporary” (109). He creates a model of the theatre in rough white card, with visual and mood references, concerned with working out how to get from scene to scene and “orchestrating the whole evening” (110). Christie also details how the director and design team spend months in development long before the rehearsals. This standard main-stage practice differs from the more experimental work of Carroll and Alfreds, concerned with immediacy and lack of conceptual technological design. Christie sees the role of designer as “production designer, leading on the whole visual look and effect of the piece” (110).

Geraldine Collinge, as director of events and exhibitions at the RSC, declares her job is about “change: changing the artists, audiences and communities the RSC welcomes and works with” (111). She is concerned with “animating the building”, making sure it “belongs at the heart of the town”, “as well as having a national and international profile” (111). Collinge uses the metaphors of the thrust stage and the online digital relationship with Shakespeare for “breaking down traditional barriers, bringing people closer to Shakespeare, changing people’s perceptions of Shakespeare and changing their relationship to Shakespeare (112). Her work is about access, but also changing the kind of artists commissioned, which will ultimately influence the work on the stage by “changing from within” (113). She notes that the “RSC’s history has been for the most part shaped by succession of famous artistic directors” and she wants “to do more projects like Open Stages” (113) (though at the time of writing this review it is difficult to see many of those chang-

es yet taking shape).

The next contribution is from Michael Corbridge, voice coach, who, after hearing so much on the importance of being technically capable of speaking Shakespeare's verse, gives a valuable insight into the process of training the vocal instrument. Corbridge makes a profile of each actor's physicality and how they make sound, working "specifically on an actors voice, colouring the tone, expanding the note range or reducing tension" (114). He has "one-to-one sessions structured into rehearsals" (115). Shakespeare "works with stunning soundscapes" and so Corbridge encourages actors in a "total freedom to investigate the sounds" where "each word becomes its own little architectural sound parcel" (115). For performance at the RSC Corbridge has to "power up the voice and find the stamina required to handle these big spaces" (116). He is careful not to use voice work as a way of directing the actor, he must encourage the voices to work for the benefit of the directorial vision (116). He ends his reflection on the pure magic of Shakespeare that is produced when "you trust the sounds, words, the language, and allow them in, fully and unconditionally" (117).

Gregory Doran, long time Artistic Director of the RSC, immediately launches into the tension between doing something with Shakespeare and simply doing Shakespeare. Having the confidence to trust the plays, Doran's starting point is not how to do them differently, but an exploration which will, by virtue of its being done by different actors and artists, always end up different (117-18). His methodology with text is to do a series of workshops, again considering the iambic pentameter as a heartbeat through the play. He spends a lot of time on text, the company reading around the table, getting each actor to translate their lines into their own words, ensuring personal and group clarity (122). The RSC allows the rehearsal time to explore the text and discover things collectively, permitting "those ideas to percolate over time, rather than having to rush those decisions into production" (122). Doran is sensitive to not restricting but releasing actors with different needs to realise their performance (123). There is a danger to chucking out a previous generation's work – Barton, Hall and Berry, who dug out politics and wit, violence and richness in the language. "I have learnt to allow the subject of the play to speak to you, and to trust it to do more work than you often allow it to do. Somehow when you get actors and an audience and you trust the language, it'll work" (122).

Polly Findlay takes us through her working on *As You Like It* to elucidate three things she would probably do when working on Shakespeare. Firstly, she distils the play into a single sentence: "a lonely Princess obsessed with self-control, then to let go, and in doing so makes the world a better place", which Findlay notes, laughingly, is actually the same plot as Disney's *Frozen* (124). Secondly, inspired by Rupert Gould, she finds a single adjective to describe the way she wants the audience to feel, walking out of the theatre: "delighted" (124). Thirdly, Findlay decides what the gesture of the play is, its social function at the time it was written, and how best to replicate that in contemporary context (126) (unlike Doran). Rather than replicating the conditions of original performance, Findlay attempts to replicate the "sensitivity", which "feels completely respectful of the original gesture" (127). In *As You Like It*, with its sketches of scenes, progression having to do with char-

acter rather than plot, she replicated the energy of a modern sketch show, splicing scenes and borrowing bits from other Shakespearean comedies, to “make the whole thing feel faster, funnier and quicker-cut” (127). Like Doran, Findlay gets her cast to paraphrase their text, which remediates “playing the poetry rather than the jaggedness of the thoughts underneath” (129).

Lindsay Kemp, born in 1938, lost his father in the war, and made his debut dancing for his neighbours in air-raid shelters. Kemp takes us through his theatrical roots, influences and early career breaks. He reminds us that actors these days are “rarely equipped with all the performer’s skills” that once saw Robert Helpman playing Hamlet in Stratford-upon-Avon and afterwards dancing it at Covent Garden (134). Kemp also laments that few performers seem interested in the history of their art form: “if you don’t explore what went before, and learn from that, the present lacks depth and perspective. We see so much today what is superficial, without roots in the heart, or passion. Shakespeare knew what had gone before, and how little human nature changes over the centuries” (134-5).

The American director, Ethan McSweeney, declares, like many of the contributors, that the “beauty of Shakespeare’s language is that it is so informative and so rich that it allows you to mine every line from multiple layers of meaning” (135). Theatre artists, by speaking the text multiple times, exceed the experience of the average member of the public, who only gets to perceive it on the page. McSweeney’s first job was as assistant director at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington DC, where, he discovered that “Shakespeare is a language” (136). McSweeney quotes the Romanian director Liviu Ciulei: “we have a lot to do, and very little time, so we must work slowly” (138). In rehearsal he slows down, working on the smallest units, “moment to moment”, “thought to thought” (137). He spends a week around the table interrogating the text (138). He takes his cue from Hamlet’s advice to the players to speak clearly, speak directly and do not do too much. Like Doran, he notes “there is a big difference between doing something *to* a play and doing something *with* a play” (139). McSweeney is like a conductor who brings out different elements of a symphony without needing a concept (139). In his experience touring his work internationally, Shakespeare truly is universal “and understands so much about our common humanity” (141). Most importantly, McSweeney recalls that Shakespeare was a man of the theatre, working to deadlines, trying to solve staging issues that we still grapple with, writing to the strengths of his company, aspiring for commercial success: “there’s a strong, beating heart of a really practical person confronting eminently practical problems . . . He was a human being, and that’s why you ultimately learn most about Shakespeare by looking within yourself” (143).

The next reflection is Bruce O’Neil’s, head of music at the RSC. Music is an extremely important topic since “Shakespeare plays are stuffed with music”. There is much diegetic, central music, but because of a contemporary accustomedness to cinematic underscoring, O’Neil discusses what “other music might be added by the overall directorial concept” (144). Sometimes form needs modifying, while the function remains the same, such as deciding a particular sound to herald in an army within the design. O’Neil discusses music’s “inductive quality” and how our “lizard brain” reacts to music in a way that “is purely about survival” (145-6), so af-

fecting the audience on a visceral level can be very useful for a director. O'Neil considers the philosophical and psychological aspects, remarking on the Renaissance faith in the music of the spheres, Pythagorean music theory, and how humans respond to the pentatonic scale and its harmonics. Sonnet 8 discusses how strings vibrate in sympathetic resonance, and for O'Neil this opens up many metaphors, resonating with the universe itself and it is why the plays are full of music "because it was a fascination of Shakespeare's, and could be seen as a kind of magic" (147-8).

The famed designer Tom Piper contributes the next interview. Piper begins by reading the play, trying to trick himself it is the first time, not getting bogged down by scholastic stuff, but being aware of prior knowledge from seminal productions "that one cannot escape consciousness of", sketching down moments that inspire him, often completely impractical, but planting "a seed that might bear practical fruit later on" (148). He is not interested in creating a giant expensive painting to be inhabited by actors, but using design as a sculptural medium and creating something that "fulfils its purpose based on the way the actors change it" (149). Piper discusses the big issue and how to set and stage a play and deciding period, collapsing the idea of differing camps: "No matter how you try to avoid it, basically every act of putting a Shakespeare play on stage is an interpretation, even if you decide that the actors are just going to stand there in the ordinary clothes" (150). He also exposes how our own time always infuses design, even if we are setting something historically, and if one is conscious of this, it is possible to play with these layers (151). Piper elucidates the challenges of working with the thrust space, which is less controllable than a proscenium arch, with differing perspectives, working like a sculptor, where part of your creation is the unknown element and variability of the audience who will make up part of what is looked at: "the design is in the community of the space that is one room and therefore, we can share it" (151-2). A policy he has inherited from Michael Boyd "is an avoidance of scene changes . . . in the plays one idea impacts on the next idea", the previous scene as a kind of lingering ghost (154). Piper's work developed by working with Peter Brook on *La Tempête*, seeing how the actors could inform design, and how they were always "running behind the imagination of the actors" (155). Brook always, even with his great experience, would distil an idea to its essence, to create something "much simpler and much more beautiful . . . an image that is witty, that is moving and, that actually is fulfilled by the actors". In all his work Piper tries to remember "that there is going to be an actor at the heart of it" (156).

The director Renato Rocha approaches Shakespeare by "identifying how this story is still relevant nowadays . . . finding the contemporary parallels in Shakespeare's works" (156). This is the only interview that strays out of the well-defined coterie, even though Rocha is working with them. It is slightly out of place, and either draws attention to a lot the book has to necessarily miss about different approaches to Shakespeare performance, or else it satisfies some need for a different voice, adding a dissonant note among the dominant ones. Rocha discusses the passing need to make real difference with art during the dictatorship in Brazil, but for Rocha this is still a burning question, not being preoccupied with being the best artist, but using art "to comment on people in society" (156). Rocha created a

theatre company in Brazil *Nôs do Morro*, where, like artists in Japan, there was no distinction between the different disciplines, defining them not as actors but artists (157). Cicely Berry invited *Nôs do Morro* to come to the UK to take part in the Complete Works festival. Deborah Shaw also invited Rocha to work with young people as part of the World Shakespeare Festival and the LIFT festival. He used “all media and all skills to actually create more accessible and universal piece of theatre that doesn’t concern itself so much with narrative”, doing something “that they really wanted to speak about, that they really connected with” (158) Rocha believes “an image on stage can touch someone more profoundly than a page of text”. Once he met Peter Brook who stated what Rocha continues to practice: “research needs to be tested in practice; how essential it is that our questions echo and reverberate fully, and overflow into an image of the wider world, making visible the invisible” (160).

Claire Van Kampen, senior research fellow and founding director of music at Shakespeare’s Globe, understands the needs of the spaces Shakespeare wrote for: “the music you write for a Shakespeare play has to be inclusive, and it has to be understood by the audience, on a deep, experiential level” (161). Kampen also opened the Sam Wanamaker theatre and found, even with a roof, the spaces were not all that different: “you’re not telling the audience something, you’re not showing them something, you’re not doing something *for* them, but doing something *with* them and experiencing the play together” (162). This is the reason Kampen is wary of doing anything that occludes Shakespeare’s text and makes sure the musical choices are grounded and understood by the audience (162). She tries to serve the play rather than the director. Music can help transition scenes simply, but “what you *don’t* need is a lot of emotional description. You don’t need *any* of that, in a play . . . ever!” (163) It causes some tension with directors wanting to underscore monologues, which, unlike O’Neil, Kampen thinks only creates generalities and emotional washes rather than “let[ting] the words do it” (163). Because of film culture, Kampen thinks music has been rendered too subservient or intrusive, and “has not yet been given its proper place in Shakespeare, as part of the narrative culture of the play” (165). Kampen knows there is no need “to slather on music all over the text in order to tell a modern audience what is going on”, and is concerned that we do not show more respect for the plays as written, but that we are stuck in culture of critics coming to see what will be done with a play. “Sadly, these conceits and interventions just put up barriers between actor and the audience . . . These days, my instincts are to have absolutely no music at all once the play has begun, other than what is specified in the texts themselves. Why would you need it?” (166).

The final contribution is from Sian Williams, a choreographer, who begins by working with a director to understand their vision of the play and what they want, ascertaining if dance within the play is conventional or something more modern. Working with Dominic Dromgoole on *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Williams enjoyed choreographing some evocative linking-scenes, which he wanted danced (this contrasts with Kampen’s resistance to superimposing unscripted music). At the end of every Globe production, based on a belief in its historical accuracy, there is a jig. Williams has worked on many of them, which provide a catharsis, a celebra-

tion, a crescendo, and “take in all of the audience and acknowledge them all, in this unique space” (170). She always works with her experience and ideas, in “line with what the director is hoping to see” (171). The actors do not need to look like experts, but it is crucial that “they own the dance they are doing . . . a gift that welcomes and inspires the audience” (172). The interview is concluded by Williams’ final sentiment, which fittingly summarises all the contributions, that whether with verse or with movement patterns, “using structure to find freedom is always exciting” (174).

In the conclusion Bessell wonders *if* the way we make Shakespeare today is changing, and how slow the evolution appears to be in the larger Shakespeare-producing houses (175). Although Bessell affirms that this does not imply stagnation, she reiterates that it does underpin the disjunction between literary analysis, which responds to plays read in “constantly changing political, cultural, social context”, and creative practice, which primarily maintains a Stanislavskian system (176). She summarises the two traditions of “heightened language” and “naturalism”, which came together with the John Barton legacy of “playing Shakespeare” (1984), and still holds popular sway, having established itself as a pedagogic standard in the industry. Bessell finally hopes the collection of interviews shows “the ‘living tradition’ of Shakespeare in action in a celebratory light” (196).

Bessell has composed the work carefully as a snapshot of contemporary practice, informative in the detailing of “compositional elements of Shakespearean performance” (7). Although the gaze is sometimes inward and backward looking, it is overall an enriching contribution to the academic study of a particular generation of Shakespearean theatrical practitioners. An engaging resource for anyone with an interest in Shakespeare performance, the politics of who can speak Shakespeare, how to speak Shakespeare, whom Shakespeare belongs to, and the alchemic transformation from words on a page, to actions on a stage.

Bessell very aptly concludes her introduction with the words of John Harrell:

I know nothing about Shakespeare. I think it’s important to reassert that every now and then, because humility in the face of such an artist totality is indispensable. What I believe about Shakespeare is always subject to revision. His plays continue to confound us all, which is why we continue to produce and to write about him (39-40).

Hear, hear!

## Works Cited

Shakespeare, William (2009), *As You Like It*, ed. by Juliet Dunsinberre, London and New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.