

Julian Curry

SHAKESPEARE ON STAGE

Volume 2

*Twelve Leading Actors
on Twelve Key Roles*

Foreword by Nicholas Hytner



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Foreword

Nicholas Hytner

A novel can tell you everything you want to know about what it's trying to say, but plays are by definition incomplete. They are instructions for performance, like musical scores, and they need players to become music.

Working on *Hamlet*, Rory Kinnear and I repeatedly found that Shakespeare simply left stuff out – stuff that would have made the play last as long as *War and Peace* if he'd put it in. What, for instance, are we supposed to think has really gone on between Hamlet and Ophelia before the play starts? That things *have* gone on is plain from the pile of letters she returns to him. 'I did love you once,' he says, though he never says why he's stopped loving her; and I have seen this done so sardonically that it's impossible to believe. And a couple of lines later, he says, 'I loved you not.' Which doesn't make it any easier to know whether he did, though it's the kind of contradiction lovers go in for. In any event, it feels like there's a missing scene near the start of the play that shows you how they are with each other before things start to go wrong.

But the genius of the play, as opposed to, say, *War and Peace*, is that it implies multitudes as much as it contains them. Shakespeare was an actor, and he leaves a lot of the work to his actors. The text forces any Hamlet to ask questions which he answers through the way he delivers it. What did he feel for Ophelia? What does he feel now? What does he want from her? What – within himself and in Denmark – makes it impossible for him to trust himself or trust the world around him? A play's meaning is conferred on it by the act of playing it. In the way he said 'I did love you once,' Rory Kinnear told you in five words what might have taken Tolstoy five chapters.

Simon Russell Beale is fond of describing acting as three-dimensional literary criticism. And in my personal experience, the most mind-expanding insights into Shakespeare have come from actors in the rehearsal room, usually

without the long introductory preamble with which directors generally preface even the most banal of suggestions. As a tribe, we can barely ask an actor to move to the left without making a speech about it – but actors just get on with it. One day in rehearsal, without warning, David Calder – who played Polonius in *Hamlet* – approached the end of his speech of advice to Laertes and flinched. He seemed to dry. And then, under the heavy weight of what felt like deep personal shame, he said: ‘This above all: to thine own self be true, / And it will follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man.’ From the heart, like many fathers, he wants his son not to make his own mistakes. Mired in a corrupt court, he is incapable of dealing truthfully with others, and of being true to himself. And David Calder’s Polonius knew it.

It would be equally plausible to present the Polonius of tradition, a man incapable of self-knowledge, puffed up with self-regard. But I was electrified by David’s illumination of three lines worn thin by their relentless repetition, out of context, usually by public liars wishing to burnish their credentials as truth-tellers. I knew immediately that the Calder Polonius had helped Claudius assassinate the old King, and was tortured by his own treachery. I started to think that the old King was probably a disaster for Denmark, that – like Richard II – he had to go. This was the real Shakespeare: an actor who provides for other actors an infinite myriad of ways of telling his stories and of being his characters. His intuitive openness to interpretation is mistaken for complexity. His relish for ambiguity is taken as a challenge to those who would pin him down. But they are functions of his calling: he writes plays.

This struck me with particular force when staging *Othello*. It has often been noted that Iago’s ‘motiveless malignancy’ in fact comes, in his soliloquies, with a superfluity of motives, as if he himself has difficulty locating the source of his depravity. What Shakespeare has done, of course, is to pay his fellow actor the compliment of trusting him to complete Iago for himself. He provides the actor with a solid enough starting point: Iago is consumed by the promotion of Cassio. But thereafter, the play works overtime not to lock Iago down, and seems to invite the actor to allow himself to be surprised by what happens to Iago: a man driven by envy and hatred, who isn’t fully in control of what happens next (as none of us are), to whom the action of the play occurs spontaneously (as life happens to all of us).

The desire of literary critics over four centuries to solve Iago as if he were a puzzle seems to me to be missing the point. The solution is the actor. The playwright writes from the premise that the dots can’t be joined on the page, and writes with the confidence of an actor who knows that, if they are any good, his colleagues will do the rest of the job for him. This book gives some of the very best of Shakespeare’s twenty-first-century colleagues an opportunity to share the insights that can only come from playing him.

Introduction

Julian Curry

Much of the brilliance of Shakespeare lies in the openness, or ambiguity, of his texts. As Nicholas Hytner points out in his foreword, whereas a novelist will often describe a character, an action or a scene in the most minute detail, Shakespeare knew that his scenarios would only be fully fleshed out when actors perform them. He was the first writer to create character out of language. Falstaff has an idiosyncratic way of speaking that is quite distinct from Juliet, as she does from Shylock, and he from Lady Macbeth. An actor receives subliminal clues about their character, merely by the way they express themselves.

George Bernard Shaw wrote long prefaces and elaborate stage directions; his texts are littered with instructions to actors and directors as to how his plays should be done. This can be helpful, but as often as not it's limiting, even annoying. Shakespeare, conversely, wrote hardly any stage directions. The best known is '*Exit, pursued by a bear*' in *The Winter's Tale* – which incidentally is far from proscriptive: is some unfortunate actor bundled into a bear costume? Or is the bear surreal, an effect of sound and lighting? Directors have carte blanche. The only solution rarely adopted is to put a live bear on stage. On occasion Shakespeare does give a precise indication of stage business. In the courtroom scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, Gratiano says: 'Not on thy sole but on thy soul, harsh Jew, / Thou mak'st thy knife keen' [4.1]. Then the actor playing Shylock understands that he should take out his knife and sharpen it on the sole of his shoe. Other stage directions take the form of implicit but less precise suggestions. When Hamlet says to Osric, 'Put your bonnet to his right use; 'tis for the head' [5.2], the actor playing Osric knows one thing for sure: his hat is not on his head. How else he is using it is up to him.

There are times when the actor may decide to do the opposite of what the text seems to indicate. For instance, when King Lear exits saying to Goneril and

Regan, 'You think I'll weep? No, I'll not weep... this heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or ere I'll weep' [2.4], the suggestion appears to be that the actor will remain dry-eyed. Ian McKellen immediately burst into convulsive sobs. I found this very moving.

Shakespeare doesn't tell his actors how to play their parts; he gives hints but leaves the decisions up to them. My interest in writing this book, and the companion volume that preceded it, is the myriad options available to performers of Shakespeare's texts, and the choices they make. Theatre is written on the wind. Even the most brilliant performances exist only in the moment, and will endure nowhere but in the memories of those present. Actors are notoriously reluctant to define and discuss how they act, but luckily they are often willing to talk about their past performances.

In 2011, the first volume of *Shakespeare On Stage* found itself on a shortlist of nominees for the annual Theatre Book Prize. It focuses on thirteen of Shakespeare's leading roles, therefore covering roughly a third of his plays. This left plenty of uncharted territory. I was delighted when Nick Hern Books agreed that we should continue the voyage of discovery.

As with the earlier volume, my guiding principle was to approach excellent actors who had played leading roles in memorable Shakespearean productions, and to ask them if they'd be willing to reveal if not *how they acted*, at least *what they did*. I also wanted to know how the show was set, what they wore, and what went on around them. Having been lifelong in the business, many of my intended targets were friends who were easily accessible, and most generous with their time.

Preparing for each encounter was a labour of love. Of necessity it involved a thorough refresher course, going back to the plays and spending long hours with nose in text. I also read critical studies and pestered archivists for back copies of reviews. I was determined to approach the interviews as well briefed as possible, in order to frame productive questions. At times it felt like the work of a barrister. The difference is that whereas a barrister's questions are designed to steer the witness towards a desired answer, mine were simply intended to get juices flowing and tongues wagging. I concentrated on mechanics rather than theory. As far possible I made the question 'What did you do?' rather than 'How did you do it?'

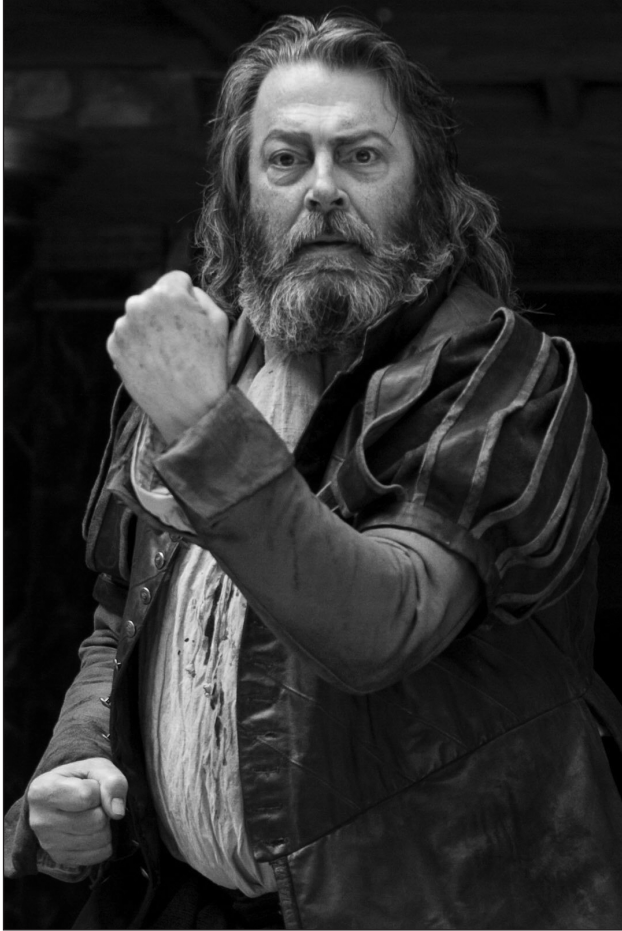
The conversations were tape-recorded, usually at the actor's home. I followed, as closely as was practicable, the following sequence: (1) Put the performance in the context of its time and place, director and designer. (2) General questions about the production and the character. (3) Specific questions about the performance, working through the play from start to finish. (4) Summing up.

INTRODUCTION

Interviews are listed alphabetically by the actor's name. To try to impose any other arrangement didn't seem helpful. The order does not follow a pattern, and chapters can be read at random.

This book is an account of twelve performances, by the actors who gave them. Each interview focuses on a single performance, and the production in which it featured. They span fifty years, from Eileen Atkins's Viola in 1961 to Patrick Stewart's Shylock in 2011. What they have in common is a uniquely personal account of a creative process. I've been delighted by the frequent departures from lazy assumption. For instance, Sara Kestelman describes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in an immaculate white box, devoid of all vegetation, and of infants with wings pretending to be fairies. Simon Russell Beale, who looks anything but lean and hungry, was triumphantly cast as Cassius. Patrick Stewart's Shylock ruled over a business empire set in Las Vegas. Ian McKellen repeatedly questions the assumption that King Lear goes mad, just as Alan Rickman finds the adjective 'melancholy' inadequate to describe Jaques. I'm not aware of any other continuities or recurring themes. On the contrary, each one quite naturally occupies its own territory, and I'm happy with that. It also seems that, as a by-product, the actors have in fact revealed a great deal about themselves and their own working methods. As such, I hope the reader will enjoy the range and diversity of responses, and that it will be of interest to other actors, students and theatregoers alike.

Roger Allam *on* Falstaff



Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2 (1596–8)

Opened at Shakespeare's Globe, London
on 14 July 2010

Directed by Dominic Dromgoole

Designed by Jonathan Fensome

With Oliver Cotton as Henry IV, Sam Crane as Hotspur, William Gaunt as Shallow,
Barbara Marten as Mistress Quickly, and Jamie Parker as Prince Hal



Henry IV, *Parts 1 and 2* were first performed in 1596–8, the source material coming mainly from Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Many people consider them to be among Shakespeare's very finest plays. With their astonishing breadth of scope they are outstanding examples of his genius for juxtaposing diverse dramatic elements. King and commoner, poetry and prose, town and country, war and peace, political strategy and the rumbustious low-life comedy of the tavern – all blend seamlessly into a rich dramatic entity.

The two plays can stand alone or as integral parts of Shakespeare's cycle of eight English history plays, beginning with the deposition of Richard II in 1399, spanning the Wars of the Roses, and culminating with the death of Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. The Royal Shakespeare Company was the first to perform all eight plays, under the umbrella title *The Wars of the Roses*, in 1964.

It is interesting to view them in the wider context, both for their historical sweep and for the development of characters. The two parts of *Henry IV* reverberate backwards to *Richard II* and forwards to *Henry V*, most notably in the theme of Bolingbroke's usurpation of the crown. His remorse sets in the moment after Richard II's assassination. That play concludes with Bolingbroke announcing 'I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land / To wash this blood off from my guilty hand' [5.6]. The vein runs through both parts of *Henry IV* and it is echoed by Henry V in his prayer before the Battle of Agincourt: 'Not today, O Lord, / O not today, think not upon the fault / My father made in compassing the crown' [4.1].

King Henry IV himself is hardly recognisable from the vigorous, confident and astute Bolingbroke of *Richard II*. Over the two plays he becomes increasingly frail and fretful, sleepless and haunted by his sin. He eventually dies, as sick in soul as in body. Conversely the upwardly mobile Prince Hal sheds his youthful playboy image, ruthlessly rejects Falstaff, and evolves into the dashing and heroic King Henry V.

Bestriding the action, literally like a colossus, is Sir John Falstaff. He is old, grossly fat, disgraced and totally unscrupulous. He eats, drinks, lies and steals, suffers from verbal diarrhoea and celebrates his way through life... when not snoring. He towers over both plays and is arguably the best loved and most colourful of all Shakespeare's great characters. He appeals as rogue, wit, anarchist, reprobate, life force, raconteur, bon viveur, philosopher. Even his cowardice is endearing. His final rejection by Prince Hal ends *Part 2* on an

almost unbearably harsh note: 'I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers. / How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!' [5.5]. However, such was his popularity that, according to legend, Queen Elizabeth begged Shakespeare to bring him back, resulting in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The critic A.C. Bradley wrote 'In Falstaff, Shakespeare overshot his mark. He created so extraordinary a being, and fixed him so firmly on his intellectual throne, that when he sought to dethrone him he could not.'

Both plays have large casts with a wide diversity of characters. Opposing the Lancastrian King Henry IV and his army are the Yorkist rebels led by Harry Hotspur, an individual so fiery and charismatic that young leading actors have often chosen to play him rather than Prince Hal. The dotty old justices Shallow and Silence, reminiscing in their Gloucestershire orchard, are glorious original creations. There is also a gallery of colourful smaller roles. Francis the tavern drawer who says little but 'Anon, anon, sir!' can be fun to play, as can Falstaff's country bumpkin army recruits. My only involvement in the *Henrys* was as the warriorlike Earl of Douglas in an undergraduate production with the Cambridge Marlowe Society. As a fresh-faced nineteen-year-old from Devonshire, I was ill-equipped to play the 'hot termagant Scot' [5.4]. I wore a ginger wig and big bristling beard in an effort to look butch and fearsome, and struggled with the accent. The director John Barton did his best to squeeze highland ferocity out of me. We worked tirelessly until the line 'Another King? They grow like Hydra's heads!' came out, as I recall, something like 'Yanitherrr Kung? Tha-grrroo-lak Heedrrra's heeds!'

Roger Allam had a huge success when he played Falstaff at Shakespeare's Globe in 2010. His performance won that year's Laurence Olivier Award for Best Actor. I interviewed him at his home in South-West London the following year. I discovered that Roger is not only a superb actor but a fine cook, who effortlessly rustled up a very tasty lunch before our talk.



Julian Curry: You've done a lot of Shakespeare. How do you rate these two plays?

Roger Allam: They're amongst the very finest, I would say, some people think *the* finest. You get such a broad canvas, with a wonderfully complete picture of England: the court and the countryside, the rebels, the aristocracy and the low life of the tavern. Even the smallest parts are written with reality and humanity, they're magnificent. And the Shallow and Silence scenes in *Part 2* are almost Chekhovian.

What was it like working at the Globe?

I'd been one of those people who was instinctively against it, I guess due to having spent a long time with the RSC, where they became quite neurotic about the Globe.

Why was that?

There was the notion of it being kind of 'thatched cottage' Shakespeare – I remember that phrase being used – and anti-intellectual. I suppose the same kind of suspicion happened in music when it became fashionable to play authentic period instruments. So I wasn't enormously sympathetic to it as an idea. I went to something in the first season that I thought was utterly awful and confirmed all my prejudices against the Globe, and I never went again. In retrospect that was rather foolish, because I missed a lot of Mark Rylance's work, which I now wish I'd seen. I didn't go again until the year before I played Falstaff, when I saw a friend of mine in Trevor Griffiths's play [*A New World*] about Tom Paine. And I was very impressed, particularly with the audience they'd built up. This slightly rambling play, which I think had been adapted from a film script, was packed with 1,500 people watching it.

That's the capacity of the Globe?

Yeah. And they were really lively. I thought: My God, if you put this play on in the Olivier auditorium at the National it would empty the place. One of the things Dominic Dromgoole has done tremendously well is to start commissioning and encouraging authors to write for that space, to build up a repertoire.

So they do other work besides Shakespeare?

Well, they do at least one, possibly two new plays a year. It's brilliant, because it means writers can have quite a large cast, which they don't often get at other

addresses. It stops the place becoming purely a Shakespeare house. And it helps writers, I suppose, to examine a more Shakespearean style.

There's no artificial lighting, so you have to perform in daylight. Was that a problem?

No, actually, no. It's something you get used to. Of course it means you can't achieve all the effects you can in other theatres, such as standing in a spotlight surrounded by darkness doing your soliloquy. But you're always engaging with the audience. After seeing that Trevor Griffiths play, when they offered me Falstaff I realised it's the perfect part to play there, because he never stops talking to the audience. Another great thing about the Globe is that you can get in for a fiver if you're prepared to stand, and that's half of the house. Seven hundred people pay five pounds. There's no other theatre like that in the land. You get a totally different feel when there are seven hundred enthusiasts. Well, of course they're not necessarily all enthusiasts, because the other great thing about it only costing five pounds is that people who might not be normal theatregoers can think: Well, I'll just pop in and see whether it's any good or not, and I can bugger off if I don't like it! And that's wonderful. I've quite frequently kept my seat in the stalls because I've thought: This has cost me fifty quid, so I've got to stay! The only drawback to that theatre is the placement of the pillars, which are a permanent fixture. There's nowhere you can stand on the stage where every single person in the audience can see you. Absolutely nowhere. So really, I guess, the pillars should be six or eight feet further upstage.

What was the weather like during your production?

We were quite lucky, we only had two really bad days. There was one afternoon when Ian McKellen came to see *Part 1*, and it just rained and rained and rained from beginning to end. Amazingly there were still two hundred groundlings, as they're called, in the pit.

Was that the time when you segued into King Lear's 'Blow winds and crack your cheeks'?

No, that was the press show, which was also torrential.

A part which spans two plays is quite a luxury, isn't it? Gives you a longer journey.

Yes, I guess so. Actually you're not so much aware of that because you just think: Well, there's *Part 1* and then there's *Part 2*, which is such a different beast. *Part 1* has a natural momentum that *Part 2* lacks.

Did you rehearse both plays at once, or singly?

At first we rehearsed both at once, then we left *Part 2* alone and got *Part 1* ready to open. While we were previewing *Part 1* we went back to rehearsing

Synopses of the Plays



As You Like It (1600)

ACT 1 Orlando is being persecuted by his elder brother Oliver. Rosalind's father, Duke Senior, has been banished and had his Dukedom usurped by his younger brother Frederick. However, Rosalind has remained at court to be with her cousin Celia, Duke Frederick's daughter. Rosalind meets Orlando after watching him defeat Frederick's prizefighter, and they fall instantly in love. 'Sir,' she tells him, 'you have wrestled well and overthrown / More than your enemies', but Orlando is tongue-tied. When the psychotic Frederick peremptorily banishes Rosalind, Celia promises to go with her. They head for Duke Senior's refuge in the Forest of Arden disguised as boys, with Rosalind calling herself Ganymede and Celia Aliena. They are accompanied by Touchstone the clown.

ACT 2 Orlando is also forced to flee, along with his ancient servant Adam, under threat of death from Oliver. We meet Duke Senior and his pastoral court, which includes the melancholy Jaques. The exiles arrive independently in the forest. Rosalind and co meet an old shepherd, Corin, and buy his cottage, while Orlando and Adam are welcomed and fed by Duke Senior. Jaques extemporises on the seven ages of man: 'All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players.'

ACT 3 Back at court, Duke Frederick rages against the various disappearances, and orders Oliver to find Orlando – who by now is busy pinning love poems to Rosalind on trees in the forest. Rosalind discovers the verses, and