The Open University

Shakespeare: A critical analysis

Shakespeare and performance

Speaker:

How are Shakespeare's plays represented in modern-day performances? Stephen Regan on one of the famous theatre companies in the world: the Royal Shakespeare Company?

Jerry Brotton:

I mean it's very interesting to think about the way in which obviously as an institution the RSC has been so important, it's made huge developments really in our perception of Shakespeare, but I think it's worth bearing in mind of course that there are dissenting voices there are critical traditions which have a different take on the effectiveness of the RSC.

Terence Hawkes:

They tend to present Shakespeare from high to low as if they're presenting us with wonderful gifts. We the people should be grateful for these gifts, although we are the taxpayers who support the company nevertheless, and what is the gift, the gift is an insight into the mind of Macbeth. We understand that ambition is a bad thing, but do we really need to sit for three hours through an appalling performance of Macbeth to learn that. I don't, and I don't suspect anybody else does either.

Penny Gay:

The text is there for actors to pick up and work with, and every performance is - or should be - a new interpretation however slightly nuanced or changed. The very worst thing is an attempt to repeat an old production.

Russ McDonald:

If you're doing a production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, three years after Peter Brooke's famous 1970 production of A Midsummer Night's Dream you're gonna have to do it, I mean however you do it is going to be response to that production. For a few years the standard manoeuvre was to go as far to the other extreme as possible, Ron Daniel's production in 1981 was a huge Victorian extravaganza with flaps and elaborate apparatus that was exactly the opposite from what Brooke had used in 1970 and now with Adrian Noble's production of 1995, it was 1994 actually it was first done, he's gone back to Brooke, but whereas Brooke was all in white he's gone back to Brooke in colour.

Ania Loomba:
Sometimes productions get so carried away by magic in Shakespeare, that they invest everything in making that literal in making that work. In a recent production of Midsummer Night's Dream in India, the director decided that we are a country where people believe we live very close to magic in a very literal sense in the sense that there are shamams or witch doctors in our daily lives, there's a sort of idea that the supernatural and the real world are sort of inter-linked, so that he didn't need any props, and the magic potion in that sense actually appeared for what it was a coercive device because the play this production stripped was stripped of any exciting lighting or any stage effects or anything else, and so you could literally see it as a manipulative thing with actually no other extra connotations.

Terence Hawkes:
In King Lear, where Lear says right at the beginning of the play he's going to unfold his darker purpose, the most serious point in the play, *give me the map there*. And the map is brought forward and Lear proceeds to divide it up, and this is the politics of the play starts from there, *give me the map there* now, on the Elizabethan stage, a huge map would surely be unfurled it would be a map of Britain, with London where we are in the theatre clearly marked, and as Lear divides the map up amongst his daughters, one thing obviously suggests itself to me, that he would stride to this map and tear off a bit and give it to the relevant daughter, there's thy portion. As he tears off Scotland. There's thy portion, as he tears off Wales. This to an audience that has recently been listening to stories of the gunpowder plot, whose aim was to dissolve, to blow up the unity of Britain. Now a modern production of the play works like this, the famous Geilgud production in London in 1940/41, when he came to the line "*give me the map there'*, what he did was simply hold his hand out behind him without looking, and a servant put the map into it, now Geilgud said he did it that way because he wanted to demonstrate Lear's inner conviction that such was the nature of his royal majesty that he would be obeyed without question he'd look a complete fool of course if nobody did anything. *Give me the map there*, he stretches his hand out without looking. The servant puts it in, and he opens it. Now can you see what I'm getting at. The point is that in the in the Globe Theatre, give me the map there is the prelude to a political discussion about what happens when you break up the unity of the United Kingdom. In the modern production of it, it becomes an example of what it's like to be inside King Lear.

Audio extract Measure for Measure - specially shot [in prison] RT: 10"

***Claudio**:*
Now sister, what's the comfort.

***Isabella**:*
Why, as all comforts are …

Penny Gay:
The big question I suppose and the most interesting one is what happens to Isabella at the end of the play, and this is one of the many fascinating silences of women in Shakespeare. The Duke says to her “I have a plan for you, you're going to marry me'. And she doesn't say a thing. Now in recent productions we’ve run the whole gamut from a passionate kiss of acceptance to a slap on the face. We've had Isabella standing on the stage looking desolate that it should have come to this. We've had her walking out, refusing to countenance such an invasion of her integrity, that she has proved that she had during the play. So I think often Shakespeare’s silences, the things that he, he allows a woman to stand there on the stage, which means that he empowers the actress in modern days or the actor the young actor in the old days, he empowers them to decide for themselves what this character is doing in response to the demands of an essentially very powerfully male masculine society, and sometimes that's as useful a thing for an actress to be able to do as for her to have you know yet another eloquent speech she's, Isabella has showed earlier in the play that she can speak. Shakespeare chooses not to let her speak at the end there, but he neither does he neither does he say Isabella kneels and says yes, oh thank you Duke, marry me. That's what I always really wanted.

Catherine Belsey:
It's a cliché that every generation makes its own Shakespeare. So for example Hamlet has been in succession a sort of romantic poet for Coleridge, I have the smack of Hamlet myself if I may say so he modestly says. And for the end of the 19th century a brooding disturbed melancholy figure who can't quite deal with the world around him, and I would say now perhaps a political figure confronting a corrupt world and wondering whether violence is the right way of dealing with it or some other, so I think that re-readability is one of the reasons why Shakespeare stays on the syllabus and has this kind of centrality.

Russ McDonald:
There are lots and lots - both in Britain and America - of little theatre companies who are putting on Shakespeare plays all the time, and putting them on in vital and novel and very And so it would be foolish to pretend that it is a major cultural force in some aspects of society and yet in others it's obviously still vital you get ten people who get together and want to put on a production of Titus Andronicus in a garage.

Penny Gay:

I must say I'm a an absolute devotee of modern dress performances, by which I don't mean specifically street wear, but what I don't like is ye olde medievaly costumes, some pretence that the plays happened a long time ago in another place, or the story happened a long time ago. I like, I mean the plays were written as contemporary for Shakespeare's audience they were dressed in contemporary costume. The issues the story that they tell, the very fact that the plays have survived for this long, suggests that the stories have a universal fascination, and that's why I like to see them contemporary.