



Shakespeare: A critical analysis

Shakespeare's audience

Speaker:

How do contemporary audiences experience Shakespeare? Terence Hawkes:

Terence Hawkes:

I haven't seen a performance of Shakespeare in the last 20 years that would make me want to switch off my television set, pay a lot of money put on my best suit and go out and watch it. It's a deeply uncomfortable experience and I think Shakespeare would have felt the same. The nearest a modern audience gets to Shakespeare is when it watches a football match. When you when they used to allow you to stand on the terraces, to make cat calls to say the sort of thing you would never dream of saying in public. To cheer your own side, to say rude things in a loud voice to scream at the referee and, because you're standing literally cheek by jowl with somebody else, to feel that weight of your individual personality lifted from you, and you become one with a large crowd of people, it's a wonderful and a dangerous experience, and that's why in the early days of the Elizabethan theatre, the authorities were jolly afraid of the theatre they didn't like crowds they didn't like this experience. You don't get that in the modern theatre, if you give any sign at all in the modern theatre that you're an individual human being, if you rustle a sweet paper if you cough, if you make a noise with any of your orifices, you are immediately told to shut up or removed bodily from the theatre. Who wants to pay £10 £15 £20 for that?

John Drakakis:

There's a sense in which of course every academic who teaches Shakespeare has a pristine view of a performance in his or her mind. And then of course we go along to the theatre and we see something that either does or something that either does or approximate to our ideal view. Now, that's the kind of position of course that produces the sort of disgruntlement as you come out of a theatre you say yes you know, this particular speech was cut, this particular effect was produced that was wrong etc. I mean we're very summary in our judgements there. I've changed my view on that. I think that a Shakespearean text is there to be plundered, and I think some of the best performances of Shakespeare that I've seen have been in the parodies that we find in popular film

Catherine Belsey:

A lot of academics have been very deferential towards the stage and have felt that they're just kind of second rate because they can't act or perform or produce or put on plays, and that's where the real event happens. Now I think nothing could be further from the truth I don't mean to say I want to reverse the values and say the real thing happens when you read the play, and the performance is neither here nor there. It simply seems to me that there are two quite different projects here one, the performance one, is to fill the theatre and give people a good time, and these people could be schoolteachers but they might equally be people who just popped in, because they didn't have anything else to do. There are cinemas in Stratford, or they could be Japanese tourists or who knows what, and it seems to me therefore that theatres have to interpret Shakespeare in the light of modern concerns, they have in almost to allegorise Shakespeare and say 'this is the way it's relevant to you now'. That's fine with me, I find it very interesting and I'm happy to watch it. But for the project I have in mind which is cultural history, what I want exactly is to know more about its period, and to know more about ways in which it might have been perceived in its own time.

Russ MacDonald:

There are few sources in the world of such extraordinary pleasure, because to experience one of these plays in a brilliant production, and to have a minimal apparatus for understanding and appreciating and enjoying that play, is to afford yourself a kind of joy that you can't get any place else.