

# SHAKESPEARE AND THE THEATRICAL EVENT

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# Shakespeare and the Theatrical Event

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John Russell Brown

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# Contents

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<i>Preface</i>	vii
<b>Introduction: Theatrical Events</b>	1
<b>PART I: AUDIENCES</b>	
1 Playgoing and Participation	7
2 Functions	30
3 Responses	41
<b>PART II: ACTORS</b>	
4 Texts and Techniques	65
5 Persons in a Play	84
6 Parts to Perform	100
7 Actions and Reactions	117
8 Visual Interplay	137
9 Improvisation	150
<b>PART III: CONTEXTS</b>	
10 Stage Space	165
11 Off-Stage Space	180
12 Time	197
<b>PART IV: PLAYS IN PRINT</b>	
13 Reading	207
14 Study and Criticism	211
<i>Index</i>	232

# Preface

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To describe, analyse and assess a single performance of one of Shakespeare's plays as an event taking place through the active co-operation of many people and for the pleasure of many others is a formidable task. To define the potential of any one play in a number of such events is still more difficult. Yet these are necessary steps towards an understanding of Shakespeare's achievements that this book sets out to describe and exemplify. Elements of a theatrical event are considered one at a time, starting with the gathering of an audience, the contribution of author and actors, and the response of audiences. The next section discusses what an actor does on stage in response to a text, the performances of other actors, and an audience's reactions. A third section proceeds to the context of performance, both on stage and in a social and historical environment. In conclusion, a fourth section considers how theatrical events can be taken into account when reading and studying the printed texts.

Although its subject is large, this is a short book, offering not an account of any one play but an introduction to phenomena that need to be taken into account if we are to respond to any of the plays in a manner appropriate to the experience they were intended to give. I have had in mind readers already interested in Shakespeare, hoping to encourage independent study of the plays and to suggest new ways of staging them. Readers who have had little opportunity to see them in performance are offered ways of extending that experience in relation to other plays.

I have tested some of my arguments in conference papers and published articles before developing them here and my indebtedness to those opportunities are acknowledged in endnotes to individual chapters. I have benefited from membership of a working party on 'The Theatrical Event' sponsored by the International Federation for Theatre Research; discussions with fellow

members have greatly increased my awareness of the scope of this enterprise. When the book began to take shape, research grants from Middlesex University supported my travel and supplied funds for workshops in which I was able to explore acting techniques that are no longer in common use.

I have been indebted continually to colleagues and students at Michigan, Middlesex, and Columbia Universities and to actors, directors, and producers with whom I have worked over the last dozen or so years; the contributions of these colleagues have been so pervasive and, by now, so thoroughly digested that I have been quite unable to keep track of them. In chapter endnotes I am able to acknowledge particular debts to printed works but I must ask my many close associates to accept this general acknowledgement by way of thanks; its brevity should not hide the fact that this book could not have been written without their help. Four friends I can thank for the very particular assistance of reading and commenting on the first draft of this book: Dennis Kennedy, Randall Martin, Robert Shaughnessy, and Tony Thorlby. I have tried to benefit from their insights and recommendations without which the book would have been much the poorer; its remaining faults are entirely my own.

At Palgrave Macmillan, Anna Sandeman has guided and encouraged the book's progress and Judy Marshall has been its attentive copy-editor. I am most grateful for all they have done on my behalf.

Unless otherwise stated, quotations and references to Shakespeare's plays are from the edition by Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1951, and many times reprinted into the present century).