Books about Shakespeare the man generally fall into one of two categories – the out-and-out hagiographies, often including references to the Earl of Oxford, and the more scholarly works that use biography as a critical tool to investigate cultural positioning and influence. Given the Bard’s status of Man of the Millennium, there has been in the last couple of years a glut of both types, from John Southworth’s Shakespeare the Player: a Life in the Theatre, via Anthony Holden’s The Drama of Love, Life, and Death in Shakespeare, to Katherine Duncan-Jones’s superb Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life.

Stanley Wells’s contribution to this field can be located, with characteristically idiosyncratic wit, in neither of these categories. A reissue, with some revision, of his Shakespeare: a Dramatic Life (1994), and echoing his earlier Shakespeare: the Writer and His Work, the book is a confessedly personal account of why the doyen of English Shakespeare Studies believes that this particular four-hundred-year-old playwright ‘can still speak to modern readers and playgoers’. Elegantly polemical in part and accessible throughout to a general readership, Wells has achieved the trickiest of accomplishments, in writing a book that is genuinely appealing to both scholars and lay readers.

The re-titling is necessary, since only the first twenty pages constitute an account of the playwright’s life, with the bulk of what follows being devoted to a schematic analysis of his work. As befits the emphasis placed by the co-editor of the Oxford Complete Works on the theatrical life of the plays, a theatrical life of their author is also included, nearly balancing the more conventionally descriptive biographical pages. The analyses themselves are uniformly witty and informative, and are packed with a surprising amount of critical reference, given the space.

There is plenty here for academics of a certain critical persuasion to dispute, particularly in Wells’s reading of the Sonnets, but the value of the book as an unpatronizing introduction for less informed readers is great.

The sections follow the chronological pattern of the Complete Works, and indeed the book itself can perhaps best be thought of as an informal companion to the Wells and Taylor volume, fitting more neatly into the expanding Wells canon than the genre of criticism of which it is a part. S. W. on W. S. is finally concerned as much with this distinctive figure in Shakespeare scholarship as it is with that scholarship’s enduring subject.

Jonathan Holmes

Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman, ed.

Most volumes of collected essays about a Shakespeare play seem to have their sights firmly set on the undergraduate market, but while The Tempest and Its Travels will make excellent course reading for Shakespeare students, it is also addressed to a wider audience. Peter Hulme and William Sherman have assembled an impressive variety of contributors, mainly from England and America – fittingly enough, perhaps, in dealing with a play which has frequently been seen, as Sidney Lee put it in 1868, as a ‘veritable document of Anglo-American history’.

This collection does not ignore the Virginian and Bermudan contexts which have loomed so large in new historical, cultural materialist, and post-colonialist approaches to the play. It does, however, complement that transatlantic focus with others. One main thread within the volume explores the Renaissance Mediterranean context of The Tempest; another examines a range of adaptations, rewrites, and responses to Shakespeare’s play. Some of the established academic big-hitters of American Shakespeare and Performance Studies are here, and luminaries such as Barbara Mowat, Donna B. Hamilton, and Joseph Roach all offer the kind of impressive scholarly contributions one has come to expect from them.

But the real strength of The Tempest and Its Travels lies in the way in which it opens up the debate beyond the walls of the English or even the Theatre Studies Department, offering a stimulating range of perspectives on the play. Its contributors include specialists in Islamic Civilization, Native American Literatures, Cultural Studies (the excellent David Dabydeen), Colonial History, and Art History, as well as playwrights, poets – some of whom are also scholars – dramaturgs, and an NGO worker dealing with refugees and migrants. More books about Shakespeare should be like this.

Mick Mangen
Performing Shakespeare in Japan


Stanca Scholz-Cionca and Samuel L. Leiter, ed.
Japanese Theatre and the International Stage

This is a rich time for scholars of Japanese performance with much new material in English, which these two dense volumes of essays supplement. In 1998, Cambridge published Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage. Hot on its heels comes Performing Shakespeare in Japan. The book falls into three sections – ‘Early Modern and Traditional Theatre Productions’; ‘Modern Productions (post-World War II)’ for which we should also read ‘modern and post-modern’; and ‘Interviews with Directors and Actors’. It is rounded off by Gillies’s Afterword, that debates assimilation, globalization, and the significance of the local.

In its first section, the book overlaps too much with CUP’s excellent Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage, similarly covering shingeki and earlier productions as well as Yasunari Takahshi’s Kyogen adaptation of The Merry Wives of Windsor. It comes into its own when it focuses on post-war experiments and intercultural perspectives rather than historical, literary, or translation issues. Close and knowledgeable attention is given to the performances of Tadashi Suzuki, Hideki Noda, and Norio Deguchi, who, with Yukio Ninagawa and actor Mikijiro Hira, are all interviewed. These interviews add a personal and complementary range of voices that provoke further questions and intriguingly expose rivalries and differences. There are also chapters on the fascinating androgynous Takarazuka Revue and Akira Kurosawa’s Throne of Blood, his film of Macbeth, which sits awkwardly here.

Corresponding to its central thesis, the CUP volume has a more careful balance of voices from East and West than the Brill one, but the latter’s remit is much broader, examining manifestations of Japanese performance in the world well beyond what has been done with Shakespeare. It suffers occasionally from being originally a collection of conference papers presented in 1998, some of which need further editing for the page and updating, but it makes up for this with its comprehensive coverage from twenty-five contributors. These include experts in the field such as James R. Brandon on Kabuki (who also appears in the CUP book, writing on ‘Shakespeare in Kabuki’), Benito Ortolani on Zeami, J. Thomas Rimer on the playwright Kunio Shimizo, Erika Fischer-Lichter with enlightening reflections on Japanese theatre’s impact on the European avant-garde, as well as a few Japanese contributors such as Mori Mitsuya, who writes perceptively on interculturalism and the performance problems that shingeki still faces.

There are fascinating and surprising gems on Shuji Terayama, Buto, Robert Wilson, ‘the French Discovery of Traditional Japanese Theatre’, and the scarcely documented popular theatre of the travelling groups, Tabi Shibai, which tour to spas and community centres. There are further, more predictable but still good, contributions, including chapters on the Takarazuka, surveys of two English-language journals on Japanese theatre, and pieces on technical aspects of Noh. As in the Cambridge book, these are structured in chronological sections that move from the early reception of Japanese work through the ‘modern’ to the West’s recent ‘embrace’ of Japan, and there is an additional section on ‘Folk and Traditional Theatre’.

Forty-five mostly colour photographs support this wealth of material, as does a thorough bibliography. The price of both volumes clearly demarcates them for reference purposes and libraries only, but they will surely enjoy longevity. Each possesses strengths and weaknesses, but both cover a wide range of territory that informs and adds to an ever-growing understanding of Japan’s major contribution to world theatre, offering something for novices and aficionados alike.

Paul Allain

Ros King


All that remains of the writing of Richard Edwards (?1524–66) is one play (Damon and Pythias), some poems, and music, and now all this is available in one volume with full critical annotation, thanks to Ros King. Damon and Pythias was written for performance at court and King gives a brief account of its recent revival in a 1996 production at the Globe Theatre in London (for which King was dramaturg). This production featured an all-female cast, and was updated to the 1950s, with Damon and Pythias ‘as a couple of Scotsmen in kilts’.

As King points out, Richard Edwards was highly regarded during and immediately after his lifetime, and it is clear that she considers his writing worth rediscovery. The Revels Plays Companion Library series aims to provide students not only with ‘carefully edited texts of the major Elizabethan and Jacobean plays’ but ‘to include some important plays from the earlier Tudor and from the Restoration periods’ and ‘to further
This expansion to allow for new developments. Edwards must fall into the last category since he is, despite King’s convincing argument for his works’ merits, undeniably a marginal figure and it is thus difficult to see this book appealing to undergraduates, especially given the thinness of the ‘select bibliography’ (which is not surprising given that so little has been written on Edwards). None the less, this edition will prove useful to any scholar wanting to discover Edwards’s extant though slim corpus or to learn more about the context of his writing.

Joan Fitzpatrick


This remarkable volume of studies had its origins in a conference held at the Centre d’Études Supérieures de la Renaissance de la Université de Tours in 1989. The interdisciplinary, comparative approach of the undertaking necessitated further exchange and absorption of information on a broad spectrum of theatrical genres in a variety of European countries during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Hence the slow maturation process of this impressive publication, which will undoubtedly become a standard reference work on a par with the volumes on Renaissance festive culture edited by Jean Jacquot in the 1950s.

This volume, weighty both in content and size, is a welcome addition to the Renaissance and Baroque scholar’s bookshelf. Its thirty-nine chapters offer some highly informative, succinct surveys of drama, opera, ballet, tournaments, entries, fireworks, and religious festivals in ten European countries. Extensive indexes are useful navigation aids through the wealth of information contained in some 1,500 text columns. However, despite the volume’s title and overall intention, it is arguably too heavily biased towards dramatic literature: a chapter on banquets as a performative art, or on the Italian Renaissance ballet might have made interesting inclusions.

As it is, nearly half the book is reserved for drama, with very little on how the plays were performed, what the stages looked like (illustrations are rarely integrated into the arguments of the chapter), how they fitted into the theatrical system of the country, etc. Given the highly visual, indeed spectacular, nature of the theatre of the period, it seems very odd to have twenty-nine chapters dealing with theatre in the playhouse format, and none dedicated (for example) to stage design and theatre architecture, or to lighting techniques and stage machinery.

The great discrepancies in the bibliographic apparatuses are also regrettable. In some cases, they are truly comprehensive and an excellent aid for further studies, as one would expect from a handbook of this kind. However, for unknown reasons, some chapters contain very limited bibliographic references. Surely, the editors could have imposed more uniformity in this important respect. Equally, contributors were given considerable leeway in how to digest and present their material, which means that some essays have a tendency to favour lists of events and titles of plays over evaluation and critical interpretation of texts and stage processes. Consequently, the quality of the chapters is highly variable: fine examples of up-to-date scholarship stand next to awkward compilations of facts and names that offer little insight into what audiences of the period would have admired on stage. Most chapters, though, are written by competent experts in a dense, informative manner, and are truly useful for everyone except the specialist in the very same field of scholarship.

Günter Berghaus

John McVeagh


Sub-titles like this book’s are always something of a hostage to fortune. It is as if the reader is being invited to judge whether or not the book’s subject should be forgotten. The subject in this particular case was active as a dramatist in London between 1676 and 1709, familiar enough to Restoration scholars but few others. He wrote thirty or so plays, as well as a number of non-dramatic poems. But more interesting than this productivity is the sheer length of his working life: as McVeagh says, he spanned – and apparently altered his views with – several changes of political climate. He was also negotiating his way through changes in theatrical culture from the rakish Hobbesianism of the 1670s, through the moralism of the 1690s, to the emergence of ‘sentiment’.

This has the potential to be an interesting story, for as we see Durfey trying to entertain his audiences, questions are raised about the cultural specificity of pleasure. These are not, however, things that McVeagh pauses over. His method is to begin with a first chapter that is substantially occupied with detailing the people to whom Durfey dedicated his plays. Thereafter, the plays are surveyed, chapter by chapter, in implacable chronological order.

There are two recurrent observations, namely that Durfey was interested in offering entertainment and that he experimented increasingly with...
forms of music drama. This last could have been extremely interesting if articulated in relation to the politics of form in Durfey’s culture. But no in-depth analysis of formal matters is allowed to interrupt the remorseless trudge of chronology. The result, I’m afraid, is to take a supposedly forgotten writer and to make sure that’s how he stays.

SIMON SHEPHERD


This excellent collection of essays on American theatre engages with a variety of subjects under the overarching banner of the construction of nationalism. Divided into two sections, ‘Nation Then’ and ‘Nation Now’, the essays themselves are historically informed, critically precise, and gratifyingly illuminating. The collection begins with a ‘Curtain Raiser’ by Mason and an introduction by Gainor, and is concluded by an ‘Afterpiece’ by Mason. The editors thus work separately, but clearly to the same purpose, as their cogent analyses demonstrate.

In Part One, individual essays range across a variety of fronts. These include theatre as political, republican spectacle; museum as a space of spectacle and ‘theatre’; Augustin Daly’s relationship with Ada Rehan as representative of American frontierism, vaudeville and chautauqua’s incorporation and taming of the ‘foreign’; black nationalism in The Star of Ethiopia, and the paradox of folk theatre as a space for both assimilation and multicultural definition. Part Two includes essays on self-representation in Asian American theatre, especially in relation to gender and body; Cherrie Moraga’s challenges to the Chicano community-based theatre through, again, the (female, queer) body; Suzan-Lori Parks’s use of hyperreality and theatricality in relation to history in The American Play, the construction of American masculinity in autobiographical performance, theorized in contrast and companionship with feminist auto-performance; and Kushner’s Angels in America as a cultural text central to queer theatre in the ways it re-envisioned history and identity through both regressive and radical ideals of nation-building.

The collection’s remit is thus large, yet also surprisingly focused; individual essays, complete in themselves, take on larger resonance when placed within the framework of the book as a whole. The book would thus make a substantial contribution to an upper-level honours degree course on drama, and be equally valuable for postgraduate or other researchers in theatrical history.

HEIDI SLETTEDAHL MACPHERSON


The Cambridge series ‘Plays in Production’ is aimed predominantly at students and teachers in higher education, but does not exclude general readers with an interest in theatre or professional practitioners. Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, given its prominence and frequent revival in the international repertoire, is an obvious choice for inclusion. Bottoms’s introduction provides a brief but cogent overview of the dramatic text before he proceeds to the three main sections of the book, which are ingeniously named after the three acts of Albee’s text: ‘Fun and Games’, ‘Walpurgisnacht’, and ‘The Exorcism’.

The first is, as Bottoms states, a ‘nuts-and-bolts history’ of the first staging, subsequent important stage productions, and the film version. The second is a tracing of the critical response to the play contextualized by historical moments of key points of cultural production. The third examines production and performance choices in several seminal performances from 1962 to 1996. The emphasis is on scenographic considerations, directing decisions, and the acting of the key roles, the last having sections devoted to Martha and George individually and a single section on Nick and Honey. The overall arrangement of the material makes for an interesting and readable text, but possibly at the expense of a sense of continuity through the play’s performance history and ease of tracking detail of any one single production. The volume is scholarly and judicious, and is a welcome addition to works on Albee and the ‘Plays in Performance’ series.

IAN CLARKE


It is surely a paradox that the twentieth century, which is characterized by electronic media and cultural industries (film, television, and radio), has seen such an explosion of theatre, a medium which is both traditional and distinctly ‘non-mass’. Can any other century boast so many innovative playwrights, directors, and actors? And how do you select just fifty examples of text-based drama to represent them?

In their excellent pocket-sized guide, Stephen Unwin and Carole Woddis point out that their selection is not a list of the fifty ‘greatest’ plays, but a collection of ‘significant’ work that reflects the era’s ‘diversity’. Ambitiously, the range is
international, although the authors apologise for their focus on Britain, Ireland, and the United States. But since their target audience is the theatregoing public, their choice reflects ‘plays that audiences are likely to encounter’. So, after a rapid history of the century’s main social, economic, and political highpoints, each of the plays is placed in its theatrical context, summarized, and given a brief performance history.

Starting with Schnitzler’s La Ronde, Strindberg’s The Dance of Death (arguably less common than Miss Julie), and Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard, the book takes in Githa Sowerby and R. C. Sherriff, as well as classics by Pirandello, Brecht, and Lorca. All the big names – from Beckett and Pinter to Churchill and Wertenbaker – are there; recent drama is represented by Sarah Kane, Patrick Marber, and Conor McPherson. In all, six plays are by women and three by black writers, but, given the difficulty of compressing a century into fifty episodes, this is a brave attempt.

Some might question the inclusion of Ena Lamont Stewart, Hecht and MacArther, Dürrenmatt, von Horváth, or Frank McGuinness instead of Feydeau, Brighouse, Wesker, Barker, and Berkoff, never mind Arden, Anouilh, or Arrabal. However, generally speaking, the selection is remarkable for its width and variety, and students will find the plot summaries and contextual material extremely useful, even if their teachers might hotly dispute the choice of plays. One of the book’s most engaging features is its chronological list of a thousand twentieth-century plays, which provides a context for the selected ones, and plenty of food for thought. One complaint: David Greig, one of the best and most underrated writers of the 1990s, is only mentioned once.

ALEKS SIERZ


As a participant in several courses run by the former actors from Grotowski’s Teatr Laboratorium, I have always been interested in the contribution made by Grotowski’s work to the theatre rather than the work as spiritual quest. I was anxious to see what analysis The Grotowski Sourcebook would offer, and whether it would lift some of the veils of mysticism (‘you can’t understand it unless you have a personal experience’) and reveal some of the roots of the Grotowskian artistic phenomenon. Fortunately, it does.

This is a collection of essays and reviews from a wide range of contributors – academics, practitioners, and critics from across the world. Some write in guru-worshipping terms (of ‘pilgrimages’, ‘miracle actors’, etc); others (e.g., Bentley and Marowitz) are critical. Grotowski had the final veto on what went into the book (not long before he died in 1999), and excluded material about himself that he considered too personal. None the less, some autobiography, biographical information, and description of experiences of participating in the work does balance the more academic essays.

The book traces four main periods: the work of the Teatr Laboratorium, 1957-69; Paratheatre; Theatre of Sources, 1969-82; Objective Drama at the University of California-Irvine, 1983-86; and Art as Vehicle from 1986 in Pontedera, Italy. Photographs are included, as is a bibliography, and as such the book is for anyone interested in Grotowski’s life and work, be they practitioners or academics. Discussions on politics are certainly interesting, particularly Jan Kott’s assertion that in the repressive conditions of Poland in the 1950s Grotowski took the decision to be uncompromising, artistically and politically, but this meant the replacement of politics with metaphysics.

Other commentators raise issues of the work’s ‘masculinities’ and Grotowski’s ambivalent attitude to Catholicism. The book’s title refers to Grotowski’s term ‘the Theatre of Sources’ – not the sources of theatre, but ethnographical studies of performative sources, ‘the organism in action’, like yoga, shamanism, martial arts. Grotowski’s explorations of the surviving traditions of ancient theatres from many cultures of Eastern and ancient religions are named, and parallels with the work of artists, philosophers, and spiritual leaders drawn.

The book raises issues for continued debate, for example between Marowitz’s contention that recreating age-old rituals is reactionary and futile, and Grotowski’s belief that to ‘re-find freedom we should re-find allies’ who are perhaps in the past. And whatever the debates, it is notable that even the severest critics here write of being moved or impressed by the performance work.

ROSE WHYMAN