
This is a big handsome book, written to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Bell Shakespeare Company, although it is mostly an overview of John Bell’s fifty years as an actor/director. It contains twenty-seven photographs of Bell Shakespeare productions, with a grand picture of John Bell as Richard III on the dust jacket, and with chapter headings that make clear where other matters break into the chronological and other sequences. However, were this work called *My life with/in Shakespeare* or *John Bell’s Shakespeare* it would more exactly represent what it is about, as it is not so much *On Shakespeare* as a theatrical autobiography of an actor/director who loves Shakespeare, who acted in the United Kingdom, set up the Bell Shakespeare Company after his return to Australia and who gives us his opinions of other actors and directors, of Shakespeare himself, his contemporaries and the times in which he lived, and on how directors and actors should approach playing Shakespeare, but who also has a distinctive idiosyncratic view of how the plays should be staged.

The main autobiographical flow takes John Bell from Sydney University to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School in 1964 with a scholarship from the British Council, and acting with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-upon-Avon for five years, before returning home to Australia. It gives the reader an insight into Bell’s lifelong fascination with Shakespeare and his own very personal slant on staging the works.

Bell believes that when Shakespearean plays are performed in Australia they need to be translated into the Australian idiom, be in modern dress, in an Australian setting, to help Australians identify with the characters and understand the implications of the storyline. This is, in fact, his main theme. For example, in 1998 he set the two parts of *Henry IV* (conflated into one production) in a deprived housing estate with characters dressed in ‘second-hand cast-offs … [to] examine Australian attitudes to monarchy, war and family’ (137). Perhaps less introspective was his *Much Ado About Nothing* for Nimrod twenty-three years earlier when the whole play was performed in ‘“greengrocer” mock Italian accents’ (239). He says, ‘that deliberate cocking a snoot at tradition … became an important part of my work from then on.’

There are inconsistencies in Bell’s argument about how Shakespearean plays should be staged. At first he says that there should be an almost empty stage with no setting, as he believes would have been the case in Shakespeare’s day at the Globe, although he notes that more stage scenery and candles were used later at the indoor Blackfriars theatre, where performances took place after dark. Then he talks about how he Australianised plays, such as the two mentioned above, with all sorts of settings and costumes. As the chapters progress he changes his attitude somewhat. At first he says, ‘if you dress [the characters] as Fascists or French revolutionaries … you are telling the audience what to think’ (295). Yet the Australianisation seems to this reviewer to be similarly influencing the audience. Later, he tells how *Antony and Cleopatra* was set in a casino (289), and describes how he referenced ‘Japanese costume, dance and movement’ for his 2009 production of *Pericles* (363). Another influence that he notes is how the colour palette and tone of a production can be taken from a painter’s work. Fred Williams’ paintings, he says, provided ‘an Australian reference for *As You Like It*’ (282). Bell sets out his position as a director when he writes: ‘I try to start with a clean slate and wipe out memories of past productions: what does the play need now – at this
Author's interpretation of Shakespeare's plays

The bulk of the book is taken up with overviews of Shakespeare’s plays grouped into chapters entitled The Histories, The Tragedies, The Comedies, The Romans, and The Romances. Some plays, however, are not included within any group but get a chapter of their own. Romeo and Juliet is one of these, despite being described elsewhere as a tragedy, and Troilus and Cressida and Timon of Athens also have separate chapters. For every play Bell details his own and other directors’ productions, plus which roles he has played and where, and his opinion of other performances. Thus, all these chapters continue to be partly autobiographical.

Known historical information about Shakespeare and his contemporaries is presented in the form of imagined interviews (with Ben Jonson, Robert Greene, etc.) interspersed throughout the work. These are pleasantly readable, although sometimes intrusive, such as when a chapter on ‘Shakespeare’s Books’ – in the form of an interview with Shakespeare’s long-time friend, the printer and publisher, Richard Field – unexpectedly comes between The Comedies and The Romances.

There is a graceful chapter on the Sonnets, and, even if there are no new insights, it sets out the accepted theories on whether ‘the story they tell [is] a fiction or … autobiographical’ (314) and tells how the poet ‘breathed such life’ into the sonnet form (322). Surprisingly, there is no mention of the other long poems.

With it being fashionable nowadays to express doubt concerning the authorship of Shakespeare’s plays, this is a timely publication. Bell has no doubts about the authorship, offering confirming facts throughout the book and including an appendix that contains writings on Shakespeare by his contemporaries. Like Michael Wood, in his In Search of Shakespeare television series¹ (which Bell quotes as a chapter heading), Bell recognises Shakespeare’s use of Warwickshire words, and sees the scene in The Merry Wives of Windsor, where a young scholar called William mimics his Welsh tutor, as overturning any possibility of the Earl of Oxford having been the playwright. Only Shakespeare could have written this scene, he says, as ‘One of young William’s tutors [at the Stratford grammar school] was a Welshman, Thomas Jenkins’ (22).

This is ‘not a book for academics’, as Bell says; rather, he believes it could ‘encourage students and other interested readers to delve further’ (x) and thus it might make a suitable introduction, although the information contained therein is, of course, available elsewhere also. However, your reviewer is wary of this work being considered suitable for general readers, as Bell’s interpretation of the plays encompasses a particular viewpoint. For example, he sees The Tempest from a post-colonial perspective, with Caliban as the innocent native, whose attempt to rape Miranda is dismissed by Bell as Caliban’s ‘natural impulses assert[ing] themselves’ (374). Bell goes on to state that neither is his book for ‘theatre buffs’, whereas theatre buffs, and especially theatre historians interested in Australian theatre productions over the past forty or more years, would find much of the content of interest to them.

In fact, the whole of On Shakespeare is quite an entertaining read; the jumping about from a chapter on Stratford-upon-Avon to advice on Acting Shakespeare, via An Interview with Robert Greene, etc., without any logical sequence, can be negotiated fairly easily. And there are succinct descriptions, such as when Bell says that tragedy ‘is achieved when you, ¹ Michael Wood, In Search of Shakespeare (BBC Books 2003) and Time Life DVD.
the audience, can see a way out of a dilemma but the characters can’t’ (295). There are also some lovely moments. Such a one occurs when Bell compares Shakespeare’s work to Mozart’s, saying, ‘Like The Magic Flute, Shakespeare’s Dream is a perfect gem and you can’t cut a note or a line without damaging the fabric’ (229). Later, of Twelfth Night, he says, ‘it carries echoes of … the exquisite sadness of Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro and Cosi Fan Tutti’ (245).

The final chapter, which concerns the Bell Shakespeare Company, has just five pages, because, as the author explains, much of the history was included in his previous book, The Time of My Life. Here, in On Shakespeare, Bell emphasises the work that the Company does introducing school children to Shakespeare through the Actors at Work programs, which have become increasingly popular over recent years. It is here, at the end of the book, that he makes the remark quoted above about starting ‘with a clean slate’ when he directs a play, considering what the play needs ‘at this time, in this space, for this audience’ (383).

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